In memory of Ross Langmead (1949–2013)
colleague and friend
conversation partner in ecological theology, intercultural
and interfaith engagements, and biblical reflection
song maker
lover of wild places
Contents

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Much of the work for this volume was carried out on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonwurrong (Bunurong) people of the Kulin nation. We acknowledge their custodianship of the land and pay our respects to the elders past and present, in hope for the flourishing of generations to come.

Begun in hope, this volume is part of a larger and ongoing project bringing religious and theological perspectives to questions concerning where ecology and warfare intersect. The project began with a symposium on 28 September 2015 at Trinity College Theological School within the University of Divinity in Melbourne, Australia. We are grateful to the presenters at the symposium, several of whom are published in this volume, and to the participants who shared their passion for peace-making and Earth care on the day, especially the keynote speaker, Dr Jenny Grounds, a General Practitioner working in a rural practice, past-president of the Medical Association for the Prevention of War. In 2015, the University of Divinity supported the project with a small research grant which made initial work on this volume possible; in-kind support was also received from Trinity College Theological School, Whitley College and the Yarra Institute for Religion and Social Policy. We extend our thanks to our colleagues in these bodies. Recently, the University of Divinity has launched a Centre for Religion and Social Policy taking over and extending the work of the Yarra Institute, and we look forward to working with the Centre as our project continues. We are grateful to each of the contributors in the volume, as well as to the anonymous peer reviewers of the essays published here. Particular thanks go to our colleague in the UK, Professor David Horrell, for his generosity in reading all the essays and writing the closing essay by way of response. We thank Vagabond Press for permission to reproduce verses from Ali Cobby Eckermann’s important poem ‘Intervention Payback’ in Anne Elvey’s essay.

Much work goes into the preparation of a manuscript and we want to thank our colleague and research assistant on the project, Dr Deborah Guess, for her work on the bibliography and Mr Steven Tucker for his assistance with the Hebrew script. Penultimately, we thank colleagues at
the University of Divinity, particularly the faculty of Whitley College, and also our partners Lynne Dyer and Greg Price for their ongoing support of our work that presses into time that might be spent otherwise. If at the outset we acknowledged the people of the land on which this work took shape, here we recollect the Earth that is our dwelling and its shaping of our work as context for the flourishing of more-than-humankind and for the making of peace among us.
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

2 En. 2 (Slavonic) Enoch
AB Anchor Bible
ABD Anchor Bible Dictionary. Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols.
New York, 1992
ABR Australian Biblical Review
AeJT Australian eJournal of Theology
AsJT Asian Journal of Theology
ArBib The Aramaic Bible
AYB Anchor Yale Bible
Oxford, 1972
BEATAJ Beiträge zur Erforschung des Alten Testaments und des antiken Judentums
BibInt Biblical Interpretation
CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly
CBR Currents in Biblical Research
CBSC Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges
Colloquium Colloquium: *The Australian and New Zealand Theological Review*
COS *The Context of Scripture*. Edited by W. W. Hallo. 3 vols.
Leiden, 1997–
CurTM Currents in Theology and Mission
Gen. Rab. Genesis Rabbah
Geogr. Strabo, *Geographica* (*Geography*)
HBT Horizons in Biblical Theology
HS Hebrew Studies
ICC International Critical Commentary
Int Interpretation
JAAR Journal of the American Academy of Religion
JANES Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society
JFSR Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion
JNES Journal of Near Eastern Studies
JSNT Journal for the Study of the New Testament
JSOT Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
**List of abbreviations**

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<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tr>
<td>JSOTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series</td>
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<td>JPSV</td>
<td>Tanakh Hebrew-English: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text</td>
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<td>JSPSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha: Supplement Series</td>
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<td>LXX</td>
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<td>MT</td>
<td>Masoretic Text</td>
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<td>Neot</td>
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<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>Oriental Institute Communications</td>
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<td>SBL</td>
<td>Society of Biblical Literature</td>
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<td>SCE</td>
<td>Studies in Christian Ethics</td>
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<td>Sefer Ha-Yashar</td>
<td>Sefer Ha-Yashar: the book of Jasher referred to in Joshua and 1 Samuel</td>
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<td>Sir.</td>
<td>Sirach</td>
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<td>SNTSMS</td>
<td>Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series</td>
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<td>Targ. Ps.-J.</td>
<td>Targum Pseudo-Jonathan</td>
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<td>Targ. Neof.</td>
<td>Targum Neofiti</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAV</td>
<td>Unmanned Aerial Vehicle</td>
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<td>VJTR</td>
<td>Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection</td>
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<td>VT</td>
<td>Vetus Testamentum</td>
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<tr>
<td>WBC</td>
<td>Word Biblical Commentary</td>
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<td>Wis.</td>
<td>Wisdom of Solomon</td>
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Attempting to address ecology, war and biblical texts from both Testaments in one collection of essays is at least ambitious, and possibly foolhardy. Not to attempt to address them in today’s world would be short-sighted and dangerous. For some in Western politics and academies, religion is seen as a major cause of contemporary wars and ecological disasters; biblical and theological voices are suspect as ‘part of the problem’. This is understandable, perhaps, but even if the charge is true, avoidance of the causes is inadequate to address the realities that confront us.

So we have made a beginning with a group of scholars who care as passionately about contemporary ecological justice and peace as they do for the beloved texts they study and teach, and perhaps more so. Are the sacred texts themselves to blame for the catastrophic legacy we have inherited and compounded? Is it rather the centuries of androcentric interpretation and misappropriation of those same texts to shore up imperial and colonial exploitation of the planet and its peoples that we should excoriate? And what of our own location as Australian commentators in a settler colonial nation that has enthusiastically supported every overseas war embarked on by our allies, but won’t even admit to the only war we have engaged in on our own soil – against the Indigenous inhabitants of this land?

Even as we write this introduction, the dominant voices in our Government (said by some to be the ‘Christian right’) are not persuaded by the evidence that human activity affects climate change, and are supporting the opening of a huge new coal mine next to the Great Barrier Reef. Their key text may well be a certain (mis)reading of Gen. 1.28: ‘God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth”.’

These same voices are amongst those who have turned our Customs agency into a Border Force to keep out asylum seekers (especially Muslim ones) arriving by boat, and who have been advocating that we commit troops on the ground in Syria (not just jets and drones above the ground). The relationship between religion, environment and war in this ‘most secular of nations’ urgently requires our attention, even if we are not sure how to do it or where to start.

Such are the imponderable questions we wish to begin addressing. These are not just questions for the Jewish and Christian traditions to wrestle with, as in this collection of articles. They are significant in different and related ways for other religious communities in Australia, and extend beyond just the legacies of sacred texts and their (mis)interpretation. There is a companion volume to this collection that begins an inter-religious dialogue at a theological and philosophical level, and both volumes have emerged substantially from a conference entitled ‘Ecological Aspects of War: Religious Perspectives from Australia’ held at Trinity College in Melbourne on 28 September 2015. But the research project, the discussions and the practical engagement of the participants continues and deepens. We cannot afford for it not to do so.

In this book Australian biblical scholars engage with texts from Genesis to Revelation. With experience in the Earth Bible Project and the Ecological Hermeneutics section of the Society of Biblical Literature, contributors address impacts of war in more-than-human contexts and habitats, in conversation with selected biblical texts. Aspects of contemporary conflicts and the questions they pose for biblical studies are explored through cultural motifs such as the Rainbow Serpent of Australian Indigenous spiritualities, security and technological control, the loss of home, and ongoing colonial violence toward Indigenous people. Alongside these approaches, contributors ask: how do trees participate in

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war? how do we deal with the enemy? what after-texts of the biblical text speak into and from our contemporary world? David Horrell, leader of the University of Exeter’s Uses of the Bible in Environmental Ethics project, responds to the collection, addressing the concept of *herem* in the Hebrew Bible, and drawing attention to the Pauline corpus. The volume asks: can creative readings of biblical texts contribute to the critical task of living together peaceably and sustainably?

In addressing these and related questions, the essays in this collection overlap and intersect in unexpected and surprising ways, and especially in relation to the underlying assumptions and legacies of our interpretive traditions and the context in which we now find ourselves. These connections, and the inevitable *lacunae* in the texts and issues tackled, are explored and exposed with precision and eloquence by Horrell. That was the brief given to him, and we are very appreciative of the rigour and insight he has brought to the task. Why should we go to someone in Britain – the place from which the colonizers set sail – to comment on our attempts to understand our postcolonial situation? That is a fair question, but we have long since moved beyond reactionary anti-colonial and anti-imperial rhetoric and embraced the truth that the settler–colonial context we inhabit, with all the hidden evils of the past, has shaped this ancient continent for good and for bad, for life and for death, and we must take account of it. It is no accident that the Earth Bible Project emerged in this complex context under the editorship of Norman Habel in South Australia, with an ear to Indigenous knowledges; and most of the contributors to this volume have been involved in the Earth Bible Project in one or more ways. Horrell offers another perspective, one we value as a collegial and sometimes critical counter-voice to our own multiple voices, a view from ‘outside’ or at least ‘beyond’; we hesitate to say ‘above’. Yet, there is a sense that we practice our own interpretations if not from the ‘below’ of the colonized then from ‘within’ the complexities of colonial history in Australia and the ongoing struggle to be accountable to our situation here. In saying this, we begin already to use some of the perceptual insights of Carolyn Alsen’s contribution, ‘Drones Over Sodom: Resisting the Fantasy of Security’; so to this, and the other essays, we now turn.

Alsen re-views the Sodom and Gomorrah story of Gen. 18–19 in light of the increasing use of drones for surveillance and warfare in the Middle East today. The resulting analysis not only challenges the controlling imperial gaze from above – and its recurring iterations in the Persian period and every Empire since – but raises sharp questions about our own identification with the divine ‘eye-in-the-sky’ of the narrator of these events and the resulting judgement of Lot’s wife (Ado) for looking back
rather than up in her longing for security. Readers are invited to ‘embrace the possibility that the earth should be seen not from above, as controlled, but from below, by collective members of the earth community’ (p. 00). So, too, are we challenged to rethink a ‘top down’ theology of power and control and to consider a biblical affirmation of Abraham and Ado for their critical engagement with the powers and their advocacy for change.

A ‘top down’ interpretation of a text in Genesis is also called into question in other ways by Jeanette Mathews in her essay “‘A Bow in the Clouds’ (Genesis 9.13): Yhwh’s qešet and the Rainbow Serpent as Metaphors of Life and Destruction’. Showing in great detail that qešet invariably means ‘bow’ (the weapon used in warfare) in the Hebrew Bible and other intertestamental literature, she challenges our preference for the translation ‘rainbow’ for the same word (in Gen. 9.8–17 and Ezek. 1.28 only within the canon) as a warm and fuzzy symbol of something far removed from warfare and violence. Mathews makes a much more honest and realistic appraisal of the divine warrior language in the traditions, and even in the name Israel (‘El does battle’). There are many texts that suggest that Yhwh alone does the fighting, and breaks bows as much as uses them, but there can be no simplistic assumption that the (rain)bow in the sky is innocent of any connection to the weapon.

Yet in the Gen. 9 account, the bow is placed in the sky as a reminder of an everlasting covenant with all creation (explicitly, and with connections to Hos. 2), not as a top-down threat to earth, but an upside-down sign that Yhwh is vulnerable to a covenant relationship with creation. Mathews argues that this ambiguity – the bow ‘as a symbol for God’s destructive action and God’s creative or restorative action’ (p. 00) – is paralleled in some Australian Aboriginal Dreaming stories of the Rainbow Serpent. The Rainbow Spirit / Serpent has also been subject to ‘Disney-fication’ in order to make it more palatable for white culture and Christian theology, but Mathews’ survey shows that it carries the potential for both creation and destruction, since the Indigenous writers she quotes speak of ‘the need for respect in the presence of a Rainbow Serpent, and the need for action when her laws are transgressed’ (p. 00), especially in relation to the abuse of the land.

Both Alsen and Mathews juxtapose their chosen texts in Genesis with other realities and traditions (drones and Rainbow Serpents) in order to facilitate mutual interrogation and raise questions that inform and transcend more simplistic assumptions about violence and war, religion and the environment. Anne Elvey and Michael Trainor make analogous juxtapositions between their chosen texts in Luke’s Gospel and Australian
prose and poetry (in Elvey’s case) and a photograph in the media (in Trainor’s case). The results are equally challenging and powerful.

Elvey uses the notion of ‘entanglement’ (the interconnectedness and embeddedness of all being, not just human) to ensure that her juxtapositions of an early Second World War text (H. Drake-Brockman’s ‘Magnificat’) and a recent Indigenous account (Ali Cobby Eckerman’s ‘Intervention Payback’) with the Lukan Magnificat, are much more than just interesting parallels or evocative pieces of writing. These accounts must be read and felt rather than summarized here. The power of both pieces of writing to evoke the torment and passion of being a parent (a mother and a father) in the context of war / intervention and suffering children, ensures that Mary’s Magnificat in Luke can never be read with pious sentimentality again. The passion is already present in the pregnancy.

Elvey goes on to conclude with her own powerful eco-poetic re-reading of the Magnificat, in a way that relates the cosmic, political and social dimensions of Mary’s song to the entangled self in the more-than-human world today – a very Australian world of country to which Indigenous people belong; of aging parents in nursing homes; of roadkill and despoiled reefs and other habitats. These in turn evoke the entanglement of us all in contexts of conflict that have been exacerbated by our nation’s policies towards asylum seekers, overseas conflicts and Islamaphobia, systemic injustice towards the first inhabitants of this land, and an unwillingness to confront our contribution to climate change and our despoiling of that corner of the globe in which we live. The list is depressing, but somehow the honest passion of the suffering parents and entangled souls provides a thread of hope through the prose and poetry.

Trainor begins with the graphic photo of a small, drowned Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, lying face down at the water’s edge of the Greek island of Kos, a photo – like the later one of an injured Syrian boy waiting in the back of an ambulance – that flashed powerfully but briefly around the world’s media outlets. For a moment, that boy was one of our children, and our demonization of those who flee violence and seek asylum was forgotten.

Trainor goes on to describe a second image, that of the Barrier (or eight-metre-high temporary wall) that divides Jewish settlements from Palestinian villages, greatly complicating the lives of any who live near it and increasing the fear of ‘the other’. These images that inhabit our memories, and evoke and challenge our assumptions about the ‘other’ and our enemies, are brought into dialogue with Luke’s accounts of Jesus’ attitude towards enemies, and his revoking of violence even in his own defence. The focus is on the final scenes of Jesus’ life in Luke – in
particular the final meal and the prayer and arrest on Mt Olivet – but Trainor demonstrates his familiarity with the entire narrative of Luke as he argues for a non-violent and an ‘earthy’ Jesus. The close relationship of Jesus to material culture and the earth itself is highlighted using many examples from the text, and Trainor argues that there are implications in this for the development of an ‘ecologically contemplative spirit’, especially in the midst of rising tides of violence.

Marie Turner, ‘The Death of Absalom: The Forest Is Mightier Than the Sword’, and Elizabeth Boase, ‘Desolate Land / Desolate People in Jeremiah and Lamentations’, explore the role of creation (land and forests) in warfare as both victim and participant. Turner focuses on the text in 2 Sam. 18.8 where it is said that ‘the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword’ – including the life of David’s son Absalom, entangled by his own hair in the forest. Turner outlines the wider context of the narrative of the decline of the house of David after his adultery with Bathsheba and the killing of her husband Uriah, leading to the fearless words of Nathan in 2 Sam. 12.10. The rape of Tamar, the murder of Amnon and the battles surrounding the revolt of Absalom fulfill Nathan’s prophecy and lead eventually to the bizarre death of Absalom caught hanging in the oak tree. Turner asks how we are to interpret this involvement of Earth in the bloody wars of humankind. Is the forest fully complicit in the battle – either in protest against the humans who invade its space or willingly taking sides as ‘warrior trees’ to achieve justice – or is it an innocent victim of human violence?

Turner points out that whereas warriors were often seen as honourable in the ancient world, neither David nor Absalom are portrayed that way in these accounts. There is a relentless inevitability about the downward spiral of their stories, and the forest is drawn unwillingly into the resulting human violence. A ‘domain that was never meant for warfare’ (p. 00) provides the setting for the grotesque conclusion to the whole sorry saga. There is no triumph of justice to be found here, only the grieving and guilty father.

Boase explores the destruction of place (notably, Jerusalem and surrounding villages and farms) as a military strategy to demoralize and incapacitate the enemy. She cites detailed archaeological evidence that Jerusalem and its environs was ‘made desolate’ in the sixth century as a consequence of the Babylonian invasion of Judah. She explores in detail the semantic domain of the desolate / desolation word group in Jeremiah and Lamentations to demonstrate the effects of this destruction of place on the Judeans. Boase makes use of the term ‘solastalgia’ (coined by Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht to express the
distress of losing place, of being home-sick in a destroyed home), in order to interpret the laments and prophetic oracles in the Jeremiah traditions. Here the environment is used as a pawn in the hands of the military, which in turn has devastating consequences for the well-being of its inhabitants.

Methodologically, the detailed linguistic work of Boase is similar in nature to that of Anne Gardner, ‘Violence and Destruction in Opposition to Judgement and Righteousness’, who explores these terms in the prophetic and apocalyptic traditions in Ezekiel, Joel and Daniel. Beginning with Ezek. 45.9, Gardner surveys in detail the opposition between the word pairings of violence and destruction, and of judgement and righteousness (justice). The destruction of ecosystems comes not just through human armies, but also armies of locusts – or maybe they are sometimes one and the same – and these calamities are visited on the people as a consequence of their wrongdoing. Gardner argues that where the system of judgement and cleansing seems to break down, and the unrighteous thrive and the righteous suffer and die, the hope for a transcendence of death and justice on the ‘Day of the Lord’ emerges, as seen developing in Joel 2 and 3, and particularly in Dan. 12.1–2.

Two threads from the work of Boase and Gardner in the Hebrew Bible are found also in the final essay on the book of Revelation. A similar military and imperial abuse of the environment as described in Boase’s work on Jeremiah and Lamentations is explored in Keith Dyer’s analysis of ‘The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse and the Consequences of War (Rev. 6.1–11)’. ‘Sources close to the Divine Throne’ (Rev. 6.6) lament the artificially inflated grain prices and issue the command, against the Emperor Domitian, not to harm the olive groves and vineyards (trees explicitly banned from harm under various ‘rules of military engagement’). This is seen as a justice issue (Rev. 6.6b ‘unjustly’) as oil and wine are not only for the elite but are essential ingredients in the Mediterranean diet for the poor as well (cf. the vine and fig tree in Gardner’s analysis of Joel 1.7).

So the issue of the relationship between justice / righteousness and violence / destruction (of the environment as well as of humans) explored by Gardner in the earlier apocalyptic literature continues through Dyer’s essay. The point is made that despite popular interpretations of Revelation and an abundance of military imagery, war is never enjoined on the saints nor described in detail, and the major battles towards the end are over before they begin, won by the sword in the mouth (rather than the sword in the hand) and marked by the blood of the lamb / rider on the horse, rather than the blood of the conquered. The argument that Revelation envisages a conquering Christ as the new Emperor only more powerful and violent is challenged.
Again, we are only too aware that these essays do not provide a comprehensive coverage of the major issues, nor all the key texts. But we offer them as a beginning and a resource for others who may take the analysis of the intersections between biblical texts, war and violence, and the fragility of our planet much further than we have been able to here. There are two key questions for such engagement. One is the way context and methodology are engaged in biblical interpretation. In our twenty-first-century context where colonization, war, climate change, deforestation, extinctions and many other manifestations of social and ecological injustice are entangled in complex ways, our readings of human texts need to be situated in relation to – and as – more-than-human enterprises. The second question concerns what we do with our readings. How do our biblical interpretations and their related theological reflections inform our actions, even our activism, for peace on and with Earth? The questions we bring to the texts are more than an intellectual exercise.
‘A Bow in the Clouds’ (Genesis 9.13):
Yhwh’s qešet and the Rainbow Serpent as Metaphors of Life and Destruction

Jeanette Mathews

Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ‘As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.’ God said, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.’ God said to Noah, ‘This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.’ (Gen. 9.8–17 NRSV)

One of the animations in Disney’s Fantasia 2000 is the Genesis story of Noah’s Ark set to the music of Elgar’s Pomp and Circumstance Marches. In the Disney version Noah commissions Donald Duck as an assistant to load and care for the pairs of animals. As the music alternates between a frenetic tune to be played allegro con molto fuoco (‘with much fire’) and a stately march, the animation matches the mood so that the pandemonium of gathering animals and life within the ark forms a profound contrast to the ordered and majestic ranks of animal pairs boarding and
disembarking. Donald’s own ‘pair’ – Daisy Duck – gets lost amidst the chaos and they only reunite as the last animals leave the ark. As they follow the rest of creation down the ramp and into a new future, the arch of a rainbow glows above them.

Disney’s sentimental use of the bow in the clouds is a far cry from the mythic and biblical origins of this symbol. The bow belongs, rather, in the ‘drama of divine omnipotence’, the subtitle of Jon Levenson’s classic Creation and the Persistence of Evil. In the first part of this essay I will study the word רֶשֶׁת (qešet, ‘bow’) as it is used in the Hebrew Bible, noting that its overwhelming use is as a weapon of warfare. References to the bow as a divine weapon necessitate the discussion of the biblical representation of Yhwh as a warrior, a metaphor shared with other ancient Near Eastern deities. The Hebrew Bible, however, uses the symbol of the bow for both destructive and restorative actions by Yhwh, most often demonstrating this power through manipulation of natural forces.

The essay will then turn to the Australian Indigenous symbol of the Rainbow Serpent which can be understood to have a similar dual function as both a creative and destructive force. Both manifestations of the rainbow are intimately connected to the natural world, raising the possibility of the Rainbow Serpent as a powerful and uniquely Australian symbol in the exploration of the intersections between war and ecology.

The Bow in the Hebrew Bible

The Hebrew word that is translated ‘rainbow’ in Gen. 9.8–17 is רֶשֶׁת (qešet) with variations on this same noun found in many other Semitic languages, a word usually translated simply as ‘bow’. In the theophanic poem of Ezekiel – a passage shot through with cautious descriptions – the phrase ‘like the appearance of the bow which is in the cloud on a rainy day’ (Ezek. 1.28, my translation) is used as a simile to describe the divine presence. These two passages come from exilic sources, but the word is used in almost all other 72 instances in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the bow as an instrument for war or hunting, or figuratively as a symbol of power and authority. Two books amongst the apocryphal literature refer to the rainbow using the Greek word also more commonly translated ‘bow’ (τόξον, toxon). In the Wisdom of Solomon, imagery that is clearly intended to represent the meteorological rainbow is nonetheless
described as one of the weapons used by God to combat enemies: ‘shafts of lightning will leap from the clouds to the target, as from a well-drawn bow’ (Wis. 5.17). Only Sirach presents an unambiguously positive image when referring to the rainbow encircling the vaulted sky as a testimony to God’s work as a creator:

Look at the rainbow, and praise him who made it;
it is exceedingly beautiful in its brightness.
It encircles the sky with its glorious arc;
the hands of the Most High have stretched it out. (Sir. 43.11–12 NRSV)

In Sirach’s second use of the term (Sir. 50.7) the High Priest Simon is compared to a rainbow along with other natural phenomena, but this use is probably intended to evoke power and authority as well as beauty.

Archaeological evidence for the use of bows in the ancient Near East shows that simple convex wooden bows were used throughout the second millennium, while ‘composite’ bows consisting of wooden laminae bound or glued together and reinforced with sinew or horn were in use in Palestine in the Late Bronze Age. The Hebrew Bible refers to a ‘bow of bronze’ (קשת נחושת, qešet neḥûšāh, 2 Sam. 22.35; Ps. 18.34) but no archaeological evidence has been found for non-wooden bows other than a few clearly intended as votive offerings. This is unsurprising as metal or horn bows would not have the elasticity required for effective functioning. The phrase is used to indicate God-given strength rather than descriptive of weapons: ‘He trains my hands for war / so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze’ (Ps. 18.34 NRSV).

 közön (qešet) is frequently paired with other weapons: sword and arrows being the most common pairing; but we also find bow and quiver, bow and shield, bow and spear, bow and sling, bow and javelin, bow and chariot. Sometimes this pairing reflects poetic parallelism, with enough examples to allow for consideration of ‘sword and bow’ as a word pair, but the variety of combinations suggests a widespread use of the word beyond poetic formulations. The constructions ‘bend the bow’ and ‘draw the bow’ are also prevalent, reflecting the physical use of the actual weapon. An unusual use of the word is the reference to the ‘Song of the

6. 2 Sam. 1.22; Isa. 21.15; Pss. 7.12; 37.14; 44.6; 76.3. For an explanation of word pairs see W. G. E. Watson, Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques (Sheffield: JSOT, 1984), 136–43.
Bow’ in 2 Sam. 1.18 where the vocalisation of the noun is altered to qēšet (qāšet). The Hebrew in the Masoretic Text (MT) has no qualifier that could be translated ‘song’ or ‘tune’ and most commentators understood the word to be a title for the lament composed upon the death of Saul and Jonathan. In a brief article Otto Eissfeldt suggests that the word in its context should be interpreted ‘teach the sons of Judah [the] bow’ or ‘make fit for war’. Its association, therefore, remains with warfare.

Amongst these references to qēšet (qešet) in the Hebrew Bible there are eleven texts that describe the deity’s use of the bow as a weapon against his enemies. Some refer to the enemies of Israel / Judah: Babylon (Jer. 50.14), Elam (Jer. 49.35), Gog (Ezek. 39.3), Greece (Zech. 1.13) and Judah’s unidentified enemies (Zech. 10.4–5). Israel (Hos. 1.5) and Judah (Lam. 2.4; 3.12) are also named as the target when the warrior god wields the bow. In Psalms, the generic ‘wicked’ will be punished by God (Ps. 7.12), as will the king’s enemies (Ps. 21.12). Perhaps most troubling, the theophanic vision of Hab. 3 describes the earth itself as the recipient of Yhwh’s action (Hab. 3.9), although it is possible to understand the natural phenomena as symbolizing mythical deities in this poem. We have noted already that Yhwh God is acknowledged as preparing his faithful warrior for combat by training the hands for war (2 Sam. 22.35; Ps. 18.34). The prophetic tradition in particular claims that Yhwh deliberately raises armies to punish his people or their enemies (e.g. Isa. 5; 13; 41; Jer. 6; 50; Hab. 1). In Hos. 1 the assurance that Judah will be saved by means other than a sword, bow or war is undermined by the preceding threat against Israel: ‘On that day I will break the bow of Israel in the valley of Jezreel… But I will have pity on the house of Judah, and I will save them by the LORD their God; I will not save them by bow, or by sword, or by war, or by horses, or by horsemen’ (Hos. 1.5–7 NRSV).

This brief survey indicates that the overwhelming use of the word qēšet (qešet) is as a metaphor for warfare. It raises the question of whether the bow of Gen. 9.13–16, often translated ‘rainbow’, is better understood as a weapon of war, and, if so, what function it has in the Genesis narrative.

Israel’s Warrior Origins

The Hebrew Bible is heavy with reference to violence and war, a fact that is troubling to many interpreters. The significance of war for Israel was articulated by Julius Wellhausen: ‘The name “Israel” means “El does battle”, and Jehovah was the warrior El, after whom the nation styled itself’. The poetic sections of the Hebrew Bible that are often identified as the earliest Israelite compositions (Exod. 15; Judg. 5; 1 Sam. 4–7; Nah. 1; Hab. 3) celebrate a divine warrior, and in these poems El and Yhwh become fused as one deity. In Hab. 3, for example, the poem begins with a description of the appearance of אֱלֹהַי (elōah), followed by the parallel term קדושׁ (qādoš, ‘[the] holy one’, Hab. 3.3), but by v. 8 the name Yhwh is used for the deity. Similarly, in Exod. 15 the names Yah, El (God) and Yhwh are used interchangeably:

Yah is my strength and my might
And he was for me salvation.
This is my God and I will praise him
The God of my father and I will exalt him.
Yhwh is a man of war
Yhwh is his name. (Exod. 15.2–3, my translation)

The names Yhwh and El are also combined in the theophanic poems of Deborah’s song (Judg. 5), Ps. 68 and Nah. 1.

These poems are clearly associated with warfare traditions, especially Judg. 5 and Exod. 15, and other early traditions attest to the presence of the Ark of the Covenant as a concrete representation of Yhwh’s presence in battle (Num. 10.35–36; Josh. 6; 1 Sam. 4–7). These theophanic poems, however, often use natural imagery to describe Yhwh’s warlike activity as control over the forces of nature. Similar references to gods participating in cosmic battles can be found amongst ancient Near Eastern parallel literature. Theodore Hiebert points out that this use of natural imagery in Israel’s divine warrior poetry has its roots in the archetypal ancient Near Eastern conflict myth, such as the Babylonian Enūma eliš, in which the cosmic powers are represented by deities who battle each other.

Each of the ancient hymns of the Hebrew Bible referenced above uses the language of nature to describe the action of Yhwh as Israel’s warrior

god participating in their historical battles. Earthquakes, rainstorms, floods, lightning and thunder are all signs of Yhwh’s presence. Indeed, natural phenomena and weapons of war are often equated. Lightning bolts are arrows, thunder is the voice of Yhwh, wind is the blast of Yhwh’s nostrils, churning waters are the horses and chariots of Yhwh’s army, the shaking earth is the marching feet of Yhwh and his retinue. Many commentators suggest that any military victory for Israel described in these poems comes about through natural forces: enemies being swept away by floods or swallowed by earthquakes.\(^\text{12}\) Recognition of this correlation between Yhwh’s power and control of natural phenomena enabled Mennonite scholar Millard Lind to claim that the bible favours non-violence, since human action is not necessary for battles to be won.\(^\text{13}\) The question of God and violence has been widely debated amongst scholars in the decades since Lind’s work. Levenson presents an argument that God has controlled, rather than violently eliminated, the primeval chaotic forces, keeping them in check out of respect for the covenant made with humankind (Gen. 9.8–17). The liturgical tradition includes poems of lament that recall this power over chaos and goad God into renewed action on behalf of creation.\(^\text{14}\) A recent article by Ben C. Ollenburger critiques Richard Middleton’s argument that passages celebrating God’s control over forces of chaos enshrine violence as divine action.\(^\text{15}\) Ollenburger asserts that God’s divine action equates to creation and salvation, and draws attention to the use of the word as the controlling force in God’s creative and destructive power. Humans are exhorted to trust in God’s power over their enemies, both primordial and historical, but not to see such actions as paradigmatic for the exercise of human power.\(^\text{16}\)

Nonetheless, there are biblical traditions that attribute human forces as the instrument of judgement carried out by Yhwh against Israel and Judah and the surrounding nations, but even in these the natural world is present. In the first chapter of the book of Habakkuk, probably written later than


\(^{13}\) M. C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior* (Scottsdale: Herald, 1980).

\(^{14}\) Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil*, 50.


the third chapter already cited, the prophet describes a vision of a human army, the Chaldeans, who will sweep across the land with devastating and destructive purpose (Hab. 1.5–11). Despite a more vivid picture of actual warfare with reference to violence and captives, metaphorical language is used to liken the army to leopards, wolves and vultures. The poetry of Isa. 13, an oracle against Babylon, is another that equates the action of Yhwh with natural forces, describing the darkening of the stars, sun and moon (Isa. 13.10) and the shaking of heaven and earth (Isa. 13.13), but this poem also allows for violent action at the hands of human armies:

Therefore, I will make the heavens tremble,  
and the earth will be shaken out of its place,  
at the wrath of the Lord of hosts  
in the day of his fierce anger …  
Whoever is found will be thrust through,  
and whoever is caught will fall by the sword.  
Their infants will be dashed to pieces  
before their eyes;  
their houses will be plundered,  
and their wives ravished…  
Their bows will slaughter the young men;  
they will have no mercy on the fruit of the womb;  
their eyes will not pity children. (Isa. 13.13–18 NRSV)

As this brief survey has demonstrated, texts that relate to violence in the Hebrew Bible frequently attest to a god who sanctions violence, but whose own power is evidenced through manipulation of natural forces.

‘Breaking the Bow’ – A Metaphor for Reconciliation

The word נשק (qešet) occurs in a small number of texts claiming that Yhwh’s intention is to bring an end to conflict by breaking or abolishing the bow. Despite their differing textual origins, it could be argued that these texts have intertextual connections with Gen. 9:

He will cut off the chariot from Ephraim  
and the war horse from Jerusalem;  
and the battle bow shall be cut off,  
and he shall command peace to the nations;  
his dominion shall be from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Zech. 9.10 NRSV)
He makes wars cease to the end of the earth;  
he breaks the bow, and shatters the spear;  
he burns the shields with fire. (Ps. 46.9 NRSV)

I will make for them a covenant on that day with the animals of the field,  
and with the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground;  
and I will break bow, sword, and war from the earth; and I will make them  
lie down in safety. (Hos. 2.18, my translation)

There is a striking similarity between the Hosea text and the establishment of the covenant through the sign of the bow in Gen. 9.8–17. The unit that forms Hos. 2.16–23 (מִי 2.18–25) is ‘a collection of sayings rather than one continuous unit of speech’,17 marked by a variety of subjects and changes in personal pronouns. Many translations follow the Septuagint in harmonizing the pronouns, so that the whole speech is read as an address to the wife of Hosea (e.g. NRSV). But when the original pronouns preserved in the Masoretic text are followed, the covenant that is prophesied is addressed to non-human life: the animals of the field, birds of the heavens, and creeping things of the ground. Similarly, the covenant in Gen. 9 was made with Noah and every living creature. In both passages the covenant will have implications for the whole earth, including a renewal of fertility.18 In Hosea the sign of the covenant was the breaking of the bow, while in Genesis the sign is the setting of the bow in the clouds. Both actions can be understood as a deliberate cessation of violence by rendering the weapons unusable.

Gunther Plaut, like many others, has followed Wellhausen’s proposal regarding the origin of the rainbow: ‘In ancient mythologies a rainbow represented a weapon used by gods in battle. The bows would be hung in the sky as symbols of victory.’19 Mark Brett offers a different nuance when he suggests the bow is a deliberate putting aside of the weapon as a divine promise and a symbol of divine memory, ensuring that there will be no more war between God and humanity.20 Paul Kissling draws on the creation motif by arguing for a ‘triple entendre’ in the symbol: it is the literal rainbow, the symbolic cessation of God’s battle with creation, and

18. Against Mays who claims Hosea’s use of כְּלָבָד (‘ères) refers to “Land”…the place of Israel’s residence [and] not the whole earth’ (Hosea, 49). Notably כְּלָבָד (‘ères) is used in all four passages in which the bow is abolished (Gen. 9.10, 13, 16, 17; Hos. 2.18; Zech. 9.10; Ps. 46.9).
the re-establishment of the bow-shaped dome holding up the heavenly waters that had been part of the first creation story (Gen. 1.6–8). Tryggve Kronholm argues against this view of the mythological origins of the bow, claiming its use in the P tradition is ‘nothing more than a natural phenomenon after rain’. My survey of the widespread use of קשת (qešet) in the Hebrew Bible as a weapon of destruction, however, gives greater credence to a connection between the bow in the clouds in Gen. 9 and the weapon or hunting implement most often implied in the word. When the narrative places the words, ‘I have set my bow in the clouds’ (Gen. 9.13), in the mouth of God, the choice of the verb נתן (nātan – to give, put, place) implies deliberation on the part of the deity. God has not just seen a natural phenomenon and been reminded of the covenant, God has intentionally placed the bow in the clouds to serve as a reminder of the covenant and a reminder of the promise to refrain from destructive action towards the earth. This allusion forms an intertextual link with the three passages quoted above: in each instance the bow is made unusable as a weapon for war. The bow as a ‘sign’ therefore functions as a metaphor for reconciliation between God and all flesh on the earth.

Thus the bow in the Hebrew Bible can function as a symbol for God’s destructive action and God’s creative or restorative action. As a sign of the covenant (Gen. 9; Hos. 2), it takes on significance as a metaphor for reconciliation. With this potent term in focus, I now turn to Australia’s own powerful rainbow symbol.

The Rainbow Serpent – the ‘Giver and Taker of Life’

The Rainbow Serpent is one of the most widely recognized figures from the diverse traditions of Aboriginal Dreaming stories. Anthropological studies from the early twentieth century have continued to influence academic and popular understanding of Rainbow Serpent mythology, and it has taken on iconic status across many social, political and spiritual arenas. In Christian theology there have been attempts to

Ecological Aspects of War


Anthropological studies have shown the presence of a Rainbow Serpent figure in the dreaming stories of many different Aboriginal language groups, but especially in the northern and western areas of Australia. It is well recognized by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across the country. Rock paintings of the Rainbow Serpent that date to 6000 years indicate that these stories are among the world’s oldest continuous religious traditions.

In an article describing sources and resources for Indigenous theology, Evelyn Parkin writes:

For thousands of years, the existence of God in the shape of the Rainbow Spirit (known by many names) made itself known to some Aboriginal people of this vast land. The oral history handed down by the Ancestors tells of the songlines and joint ownership of the Rainbow Spirit story from one end of the country to the other. These stories tell of the Rainbow Spirit making its way through the womb of Mother Earth, creating all things – its people, the rivers, the mountains, trees and whole landscape, finally arriving at the centre of this country.

The importance of the land for Indigenous spirituality is underscored in the Dreaming stories which describe the time when spiritual beings


from the subterranean world emerged through the surface of the earth, creating land forms, animals and humans. ‘Dreaming’ is a broad concept encompassing past, present and future. The creative beings, their acts of creation and the ongoing relationships emanating from these creative acts all belong to Dreaming. Points at which the creative beings emerged or submerged are significant, and through their laws and ceremonies Aboriginal people continue the role of the spiritual beings.\(^{29}\) The whole earth is considered sacred: ‘Holes or caves are analogous to wombs – the places of origin for all life. Earth is the initial mother and, by virtue of being original, is now and forever the mother of everything. All the different kinds of living beings, and all knowledge, are ultimately born of earth.’\(^{30}\)

Although there are significant differences in the many incarnations of the Rainbow Serpent, some common features emerge from the stories. Usually the being is a creator figure whose undulating form means it is associated with waterways, either subterranean waterholes, rivers or the rain in the sky. This connection with water, an essential resource in the driest continent on earth, gives explanation for the symbol of the rainbow due to its curving form, its shimmering reflection and connection with the rain. The wet scales of a snake shimmer in the light as prisms, forming a rainbow appearance. Its forked tongue is associated with lightning. Like a rainbow, this being creates a bridge between the land and the sky. Anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose speaks of the origin of the rainbow in the thought of Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory:

> The great seasonal forces are for Aboriginal people expressions of the power of on-going creation; they are part of the eco-cosmology. Wet season and Dry season: Rain and Sun. The great life-shaping powers wrestle back and forth, Rain and Sun, Sun and Rain… Sun and Rain wrestle it out, and where they meet and join, there you see a rainbow.\(^{31}\)

In some myths the Rainbow Serpent lives in the sky and can be manifest as a whirlwind;\(^{32}\) in others it resides underground, or both

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It is a figure connected with fertility, both for the land and for humanity. Despite these positive characteristics, the Rainbow Serpent is also portrayed as a dangerous figure, lurking in waterholes and ready to swallow the unsuspecting. By its connection with water, which is ‘considered to be spirit-filled, conscious and living’, the Rainbow Serpent has the capacity to be destructive as well as creative, just as a deluge can threaten communities and spread disease. Rose describes the necessity for balance that is represented in descriptions of the seasons by the Yarralin people with whom she lived. Lack of food due to drying vegetation causes flying foxes to move to permanent waterholes, alerting the slumbering Rainbow Serpent to rouse itself and spurt out lightning and rain. This begins a series of events that result in more rain until the floodwaters rise, causing whirlpools in which careless people and animals can fall and be drowned. The Rainbow’s potential as a destructive force is brought into check by the return of the sun, burning off the Rainbow and calling on the wind to clear the skies. Rose writes, ‘the whole emphasis of the world shifts from water to land, from rain to sun, from river resources to land resources. When the country dries out, the white gum trees blossom and the flying foxes return. Cold weather recedes as the sun takes over the sky and heats up the earth, and the whole cycle begins again.’

Interestingly, in this description the Rainbow Serpent is the bringer of the rain, unlike the Genesis account in which the rainbow marks the cessation of rain. The Rainbow Serpent’s role as the generator of fertility is thus heightened alongside its potential for destruction. The key is to keep the forces of sun and rain in balance. Rose speaks of the possibility of humans influencing these natural cycles, but only in localized areas. She also describes an incident illustrating the principle that harming a snake or its eggs is an invitation to disaster by flood, requiring songs and actions to prevent such destruction. One of a group of Lingara people shot at a snake but missed it. Within a week unseasonable rains had begun. A tribal elder asserted: ‘the snake had been a rainbow; the unseasonable rains had come as a direct result of it being “humbugged”…it had been a

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33. K. Kime, personal communication, 21 December 2015. I am grateful to Rev. Karen Kime for her thoughtful comments on a draft of this essay.
34. Rose, Dingo Makes Us Human, 98.
35. Rose has also written of localized versions of the Noah’s Ark story, adopted by Indigenous communities but reinterpreted so that every country has its own Ark. See D. B. Rose, Nourishing Terrains: Australian Aboriginal Views of Landscape and Wilderness (Canberra: Australian Heritage Commission, 1996), 42.
mistake to have shot at it’. Relief was expressed at the fact that the shot had missed, preventing any greater harm to the community.

According to Jeremy Gadd, a ‘Tribal Elder’s’ teaching holds a similar caution: ‘But remember this warning. The Rainbow Serpent was the great creator…who gave the people Law and taught them their ceremonies. If the Rainbow Serpent’s taboos and rituals are not observed and abided by, then the Rainbow Serpent will become angry. And once her fury is aroused, she will seek vengeance. And the Rainbow Serpent is all-powerful.’ Kenneth Maddock introduces a volume aptly named \textit{The Rainbow Serpent: A Chromatic Piece} (1978) by concluding that the variety of myths make it impossible to draw together a single description of the concept. Rather, ‘[t]he “rainbow serpent” is a partial, concrete, and zoomorphic rendering of what might more abstractly be conveyed in some such expression as “totemic essence”, “life principle”, “spirit”, or “divinity”… It follows that it is better to address oneself to this thought complex than to focus on one of the many transitory shapes.’

When we lift a single abstract expression from stories, both in anthropological research and in Hebrew Bible Studies, we risk missing the complexity of the traditions. The Rainbow Serpent myth in Australia has frequently been reduced to a colourful, unifying metaphor akin to the rainbow in popular renditions of the Genesis flood narrative, more suited to animation than theological scrutiny. By focusing on the common principle of creation in the various myths, the perception of the Rainbow Serpent figure in Australian culture has primarily been viewed as positive. As Shino Konishi observes:

\begin{quote}
Taken out of the particular contexts of each language group’s Dreamings, the Rainbow Serpent has been stripped of its numerous ambivalent symbolisms and iconographic forms, and frequently reduced to a single entity – a benevolent mother / creator-figure in the form of a brightly coloured snake… It could be argued that this new rendering as a benevolent snake is a process of intellectual colonisation, for the settlers have domesticated the Rainbow Serpent, making it comprehensible and palatable to Western ideas.\end{quote}

Konishi therefore claims that the Rainbow Serpent has been ‘altered’ and ‘domesticated’: ‘Towards the end of the twentieth century this symbolism was increasingly being called upon to provide a symbol of the nation – representing Australia as a whole – by groups of non-Indigenous Australians who believed it offered a depth and richness of symbolic meaning that more conventional symbols had lost (or perhaps never had)’. Yet, as I have noted, in its portrayals in Dreaming Stories this symbol of Indigenous spirituality has both unifying and threatening aspects and so, like the Hebrew Bible’s קשת (qešet), the Rainbow Serpent is a metaphor that combines both creative and destructive power.

This dual nature of the metaphor is picked up in a poem entitled ‘The Rainbow Serpent’, written for the World Expo 88 in Brisbane and performed in the ‘Rainbow Serpent Theatre’ in the Australian Pavilion. Though this context suggests the work had been co-opted by the nation, careful attention to the poem reveals some challenging aspects. Authorship of the poem is attributed to Oodgeroo Noonuccal and Kabul Oodgeroo Noonuccal, her son. The poem reveals that Oodgeroo’s own totem is Kabul, the Carpet Snake, ‘my tribe’s symbol of the Rainbow Serpent’. It is as if not only Oodgeroo’s son but also her totem is co-author, acknowledging the wisdom of the elders in their own creative performance. The poem refers to Kabul as ‘that wise one’ but also describes Kabul as ‘the giver and taker of life’. Oodgeroo relates Rainbow Serpent myths to encourage a greater respect for the environment. Despite the warm, conciliatory tone of the poem, it holds a veiled threat:

…the animals of the
Earth Mother come to say
more than this. They come
to say that our creator, that
Rainbow Serpent, she get
weak with anger and grief
for what we are doing to
this earth.42

The listeners and readers of the poem are encouraged to notice the signs left by the Rainbow Serpent, such as the rainbow-coloured opal that

40. Ibid., 201.
42. Noonuccal and Noonuccal, The Rainbow Serpent.
suggests ‘the fire of knowledge’, or the ‘good water’ that carries strength for the journey in this world. In the poem the land’s shape and its creatures are reminders of the need to protect the earth:

…to help us take time.
To remember. To care
for her special things.43

The Rainbow Serpent as a Metaphor for Our Time and Place?

The rainbow has been used in many cultures and socio-political movements to represent peace and diversity. I suggest that despite its mythical origins represented in Gen. 9 as a weapon hung in the sky by God, in popular perception the rainbow has become disconnected from its dual representation of violence and restoration, existing primarily as an attractive, sentimental symbol. Few would recognize the bow-shaped phenomenon as representative of a weapon – perhaps we need to translate the passage using the term ‘rain-gun’ or a ‘rain-missile’ to hear the message of a deliberate decision on the part of God to cease from violence.

Given this, and bearing in mind the risk of domestication and co-option of an important cultural symbol, I want to suggest there is potential for the Rainbow Serpent to function as a powerful icon reminding us of the threat of violence against each other and our environment. Both in Indigenous traditions and present day experience, snakes are viewed as dangerous but not sinister. They are viewed with respect and are protected species. We are expected to take care to preserve them without harming ourselves. The Indigenous writers quoted in this article speak of the need for respect in the presence of a Rainbow Serpent, and the need for action when her laws are transgressed. The link between the Rainbow Serpent and the creation of the world serves as a warning against destruction of our environment. As a distinctly Australian version of the rainbow metaphor, could the Rainbow Serpent actually function as a more appropriate and potent image of the intended portrayal of the rainbow in the biblical flood narrative? As such, the rainbow can provide a bridge between the writers of Genesis and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians through their respective traditions concerning violence and the natural world.

43. Ibid.
Introduction: Visions of Power and Security

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen. 18.16–19.29 is often considered in ahistorical contexts of intra-national politics and hospitality that consider the post-exilic coexistence of Israelite and non-Israelite people. In this essay, the Cities of the Plain can be considered archetypes of a mimetic desire for control experienced by those regions under imperial power, such as Israelites under Persian domination. Yet they can also function as a narrative countersign to the sojourner and proto-Israelite motif of the Abrahamic cycle, especially in areas such as justice and the ethical treatment of others. Through these two intersecting narrative approaches, the literary world of the text can illustrate how the forces of colonization, androcentrism and displacement influence the characterization of people and space.

1. If Genesis is concerned with peaceful coexistence and more universal Yahwism than nationalism, it must also deal with the legal and social sin of non-Israelites. See D. Lipton, *Longing for Egypt and Other Unexpected Biblical Tales* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 130–1.

2. Postcolonial criticism has used René Girard’s ideas of mimetic desire and scapegoating in the analysis of סרה in Deuteronomy with its resultant ethnic stereotyping and rationalization of violence; see M. G. Brett, *Decolonizing God: The Bible in the Tides of Empire* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 88–9.

For the current essay, Lot’s wife can be read as a kind of scapegoat character. See R. Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 142. I assume in this essay that editing and compilation of Genesis occurred during the Persian period.
The method of reading I employ uses the trope of seeing and its representation in narrative analysis, surveillance and risk as well as the ethics of military UAV (or drone) strikes by nation states and their allies which operate through assumptions of universal sovereignty. Using the motifs of vision or blindness, common in Genesis narratives, it is argued that a search for security is indicated in the poetic language of top-down seeing from a position above and from ground level; seeing inside or outside; spectating upon and investigating others; covering from sight; and a different kind of ‘looking-from-below’. A postcolonial feminist reading of the narrative examines political manoeuvring, seeing others, and the supposed choice between resisting colonization by violence and engaging mimetic desire in pursuit of an anti-colonial or anti-imperial nationalism. The legal or social norms assumed by applications of exceptionalism to justify drone strikes can be critiqued by the use of these means. This is relevant given the religious motivations of recent US presidents and the political and social outcomes of their use of biblical texts.

Read through a postcolonial feminist imaginary, the text is an example of an Israelite response to empire building, security and identity. The

3. The word security comes from the name of the Roman goddess Cura who is the guardian of humanity. Jupiter will take back the spirit and Tellus the body after death, and Cura will possess the creature while alive. Humanity is only truly secure after death separates the body from the anxiety of living. J. T. Hamilton, Security: Politics, Humanity, and the Philology of Care (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013), 4–5.


5. Modern examples of anti-colonial nationalism include the Sikh idea of Khalistan, French-Canadian Quebec or Palestinian self-determination. A. Appadurai, ‘The Heart of Whiteness’, Callaloo 4 (1993): 798. Some Pakistani governments have been allied to the United States and their drone strikes so as to try to control areas of tribal separatists that do not want the alliance.


7. The imagination is not an unfettered fantasy, but uses critical scholarship to read and counterread, or more exactly, to see and look again. R. S. Sugirtharajah asserts that postcolonial criticism is no longer seen as merely the next chronological step away from colonialism, or reversal of power structures, but an analytical set of ‘critical possibilities’. R. S. Sugirtharajah, ‘Charting the Aftermath: A Review of
‘look’ of Lot’s wife (in some traditions named Ado)\(^8\) represents the returned gaze of the voiceless *subaltern* (mass populations and marginal groups that are not included or represented in political structures)\(^9\) to the colonizing use of the eye in the desire for security. Androcentric and imperial power can be described together as *double colonization* (comprised of a double layer of subordination by both imperial and androcentric ideologies).\(^10\) The fantasy of security rests in the assumption that ultimate safety is achievable for a particular group, upon the identification of others as enemies or allies. This fantasy is uncovered – using a visual search – when multiple groups in the narrative compete for security.

There are two areas of focus in this essay. First, I will point out the legal logic of stretching jurisdiction in the process of investigation and creating combatants. The ethics of war, just or unjust, and the use of drones as weapons is a modern application of the study in the philosophy of technology, in particular the use of robots as weapons.\(^11\) In contrast, the biblical text does not discuss the ethical or just use of weapon technology in war. Justice is located in the divine in the biblical text, whereas in modernist and post-enlightenment thinking, justice is an abstract concept. Once this is acknowledged, the biblical interpreter can then proceed to study such texts as the question of Abraham – ‘Will not the judge of all the earth do right?’ – as rhetorical in mood,\(^12\) and then explore the divine character as more complex in other parts of the narrative. Secondly, this tension can be considered – through the ethics of seeing – in both contemporary and ancient biblical contexts, particularly Genesis. Using these ways to discuss military drones and the biblical text renders them

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8. Sefer Ha-Yashar 19.52.
as conversation partners to provoke questions concerning the tension between nationalistic concerns and humans in the environment.

The mediated seeing that participates in a search for security is likened here to the function of UAVs (commonly called drones), which are mechanistic carriers of vision. Many contemporary military UAVs monitor targets for the United States through visual or other data maintained by facilities such as Pine Gap in Australia. Drones are neither human combatants nor perfect, omniscient electronic vigilantes. Military drone technology is used in response to data concerning who is guilty and who is a bystander. However, this is never fully reconciled with an exclusivist separation of ‘us and them’ which influences this knowledge. Reading Genesis with this in mind creates a reading experience that grapples with the covenantal politics of living in a multi-ethnic, multi-religious world under imperial domination. A postcolonial question for the reader is how the text reads as a microcosm of an ancient globalized imperial context in which to express the predicament of Israelite populations squeezed between powers. Through mediated visual information, the desire for security is communicated through seeing in the narrative. Furthermore, feminist readings of the biblical text can uncover interpretive assumptions through positing different strata of elite male scribal schools and their ideal Israelite male reader. In this way, feminist postcolonial readings can undermine dichotomies such as victim / oppressor or colonized / colonizer. Such readings do not de-traumatize the subaltern while ignoring the antagonistic nature of both sides of asymmetrical power structures.

The gaze here represents desire. In many philosophical traditions, desire itself comes from both a lack and a presence that produces action.\footnote{13} The desire for security illustrates the problem of cultural difference that either creates mimicry of another culture or uses a death drive to resist it.\footnote{14} A drive for security in the ‘West’ and the regions which mimic it seeks to protect against those that do not identify with them: those who neither produce nor consume. Those groups can resist attack by hatred and violence, political action or even self-destruction. Alternatively, they employ mimetic desire to gain the spoils of power from those who rule. Groups that engage in these tensions are driven by the same core desire for the other or rejection of the other, as hybrids of each other mix and


\footnote{14}See A. Badiou, Notre mal vient de plus loin: penser les tueries du 13 Novembre (Paris: Fayard, 2016).
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To a Persian era reader, the messengers of Yhwh or the men of Sodom in Gen. 18–19 might resemble the contemporary imperial state gathering intelligence and hovering over citizens for security; the colonized can resist or try to tap into that power. In the narrative, Ammon / Moab spars genealogically and spatially with the line of Abraham through the narrative, while an imperial eye looks on. Military drones symbolize this ocular drive as disembodied objects which observe and attack, but never encounter this other. Societies naturally seek security through knowledge and representation, but ‘what does need to be questioned, however, is the mode of representation of otherness’. My reading uses a kind of contrapuntal ethical reading between drone warfare and the text, undermining the ethics of drone use and imperial interests.

The Ethics of Military Drone Use

UAVs are colloquially called drones both because of the engine buzz and because a drone is a male honey bee that does no direct work, except fertilize the queen. Used militarily, they are often detected by the sound of a low hum, but are neither announced nor communicate. One criterion for the military use of UAVs is to combat problems from regions designated as ‘failed states’ – regions considered to have partial or no rule of law which might allow for the detection of threats. However, the mediated nature of the representation of targets can result in gaps in data collection and interpretation. Some intelligence is gathered on the ground, including through local informants, and strikes are sighted through proxy means. The US government claims that its efforts to improve surveillance and the interpretation of visual data are for the purpose of developing more ‘discriminating weapons’ to justify war.

15. The political situation would have included monitoring the governing administrative persons and other local populations by anonymous others who were the mediated ‘eyes and ears of the king’. This was a Persian practice, but it was later carried on by Greek powers. L. S. Fried, Ezra and the Law in History and Tradition (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2014), 13.
19. Ibid., 8.
However, the asymmetrical power structure of this warfare is described by Joseph Pugliese as ‘necropolitical’, that is, an attack through automated, mechanical means on anonymous and dehumanized targets that have no access to legal processes. The visual lines between identifying enemies and friends from above and below are blurred.

The US domestic policy regarding the use of military UAVs against states with which it is not at war is one of ‘anticipatory self-defence’ against a perceived threat to sovereignty. This is a more euphemistic Obaman redaction of the Bush administration’s ‘pre-emptive war’ policy. The idea of protecting a homeland or maintaining security is the nomenclature for expanding into proxy observation and destruction through ‘targeted killing’ in certain areas. Drone attacks are justified in Yemen while never in Paris or London. It is through this totalizing and flattening of geophysical features that the Orientalist logic of military drones is made clear. The subjective nature of Orientalism is to characterize others as guilty or innocent, demonized or romanticized, depending on the ideological need of a dominant culture. For these reasons, UAVs are a useful analogy for any mediated visual means of calculating guilt or innocence in the biblical narrative.

As there is little legal context for military drone targeted killing, it is often couched in ethical questions of risk. Decisions are made based on data collected and what is chosen to be extracted from the information. ‘Targeted’ in this context means that the utilitarian calculus is employed in order to find and destroy particular individuals, and that the exact location of these individuals is not always known, even afterwards. For example, all military aged men in a designated region are considered combatants. However, it is often after a targeted attack that many are proved innocent posthumously. The risk in ancient West Asia also involved the constant reshaping and territorial changing of the landscape, driven by larger empires, smaller kingdoms or clan-based communities vying for survival.

In my reading of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the backdrop of an

21. A proverb used for a similar reason in Afghanistan since the Russian invasion is: ‘Look at the sky then choose your turban’. Deborah Storie, Executive Director, International Assistance Mission (IAM), Afghanistan (personal communication).
ancient Persian imperial rule of parts of West Asia – and security in this context – is brought into conversation with the idea of warfare using drones, and the control of risk.27

**Extralegal Investigations**

The story of Abraham, Lot and the destruction of Sodom employs a kind of mediated divine and human visual data collection and investigation. The narrator builds a sense of suspense and dread.28 In Gen. 13, Lot moves to the plains of Sodom, where the narrator foreshadows the destruction saying, ‘the men of Sodom were evil; great sinners against Yhwh’ (13.13). Later, Lot is taken away by war with the rest of the population by city-kings in Gen. 14 and then rescued from general catastrophe in Sodom, again foreshadowing a final annihilation. Although Sodom does not appear again until Gen. 19, it remains backgrounded in the landscape. The narrator sparingly reveals information in a piecemeal fashion which gives the only basis for characterizing the city of Sodom. The narrative begins after three messengers announce the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah (18.1–15), before the messengers move to the city. Then Abraham petitions Yhwh for the safety of Sodom. The city is destroyed, after warnings to Lot, Abraham’s nephew, and his wife and family in the city. Lot and his daughters finally escape, but not before a scene of panic and destruction leads to a legacy of violent death and family dysfunction.

Characters use distance and knowledge through seeing to build a sense of investigation through a visual jurisdiction for the destruction for Sodom. The messengers of Yhwh start out for Sodom in 18.16. They ‘look down’ (שׁקף) on Sodom, but this is not close enough, so they move in the general direction of the city. It is not clear as to whether these messengers are identical to Yhwh’s eye, but they investigate in a similar way: by looking down. The ambivalence means that they are proxy visual perceivers. Their purpose is to check out the situation on the ground while Abraham stands before Yhwh (18.22), looking out at Sodom from

27. The shift in the Neo-Assyrian and Achaemenid administrations was from imperial military enforcement to maintaining watchful control. See P. Dubovský, ‘Sennacherib’s Invasion of the Levant Through the Eyes of Assyrian Intelligence Services’, in *Sennacherib at the Gates of Jerusalem: Story, History and Historiography*, ed. I. Kalimi and S. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 279.

a distance. The same vocabulary for looking down (שָׁקֵף) is employed in Abraham’s gaze over Sodom after the destruction in 19.28.

This invokes a literary type-scene in which a character ‘stands’ (18.22) before a deity, and a plurality of quasi-divine figures is indicated by the interchange here between the words for ‘men’ (אנשׁים) and the divine name. This, together with the later use of ‘messengers’ (מלאך) for these figures, engenders the sense of a divine council or meeting to decide on an issue.29 The three figures in Gen. 18–19 are one of the few examples in the Hebrew Bible that represent divine messengers as neither evidently male nor divine.30

At this point of the plot, the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah is not set. In 18.20, Yhwh is concerned with the cities as a whole, and so will investigate a serious ‘outcry’ (זָאָקָה) which is known by way of a reported ‘cry’ (צעקה) in v. 21. Yhwh will go down to see (ראה) if this is legitimate. If not, Yhwh will know (ידע). These words would indicate to Abraham that the destruction is not a set decision, but is dependent on gathering knowledge, and investigative activity.31 Yhwh’s gaze seems to be blocked by a ‘black site’ over Sodom that hinders legitimate visual access.32 The divine judge challenges this visual barrier. Yhwh also must ‘go down’ and ‘see’ (הֵן) in order to understand the political and social activity in Babel (Gen. 11.6).33 Yhwh makes a decision that is based on building diversity rather than committing a punitive act. It is not clear from whence and when this knowledge comes: whether through messengers in Lot’s house (המלך in 19.1) or through the direct gaze of Yhwh, or both. Either way, immediately proceeding with a legal judgement is not possible due to a lack of evidence.

This narrative is a subtle subversion of the frequent judicial process in the Hebrew Bible beginning with a ‘cry’ (צעק/צעק) to the judicial

32. Black sites are special regions for interrogations that are blocked from satellite view. One such site is called ‘The Salt Pit’. See Pugliese, *State Violence*, 164–5.
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authorities and any subsequent procedures.\textsuperscript{34} There is no description of the transgression because the characters are in the process of analysing this cry.\textsuperscript{35} Moreover, the cry comes from Sodomites, but it is not directed to Yhwh, who picks up the cry.\textsuperscript{36} Throughout the petition of Abraham and the confrontation in Sodom, the mirative\textsuperscript{37} particle of seeing with is used: a construction that denotes change and urgency in other parts of Genesis (see 18.27, 37; 19.2, 8, 19, 20; 27.2). Given the lack of legal charges, the use of visual covering and uncovering, knowledge gained through visual data, and assumptions of guilt, this episode can be described as an extralegal investigative operation, on the cusp of legal processes, but at this point more related to exploration. The eventual destruction is based on data collected by a mysterious third party or mechanistic system which relays this cry of complaint or suffering from the cities (18.20–21; 19.13).

The legal investigative formula is further nuanced by the prelude to the dialogue between Abraham and Yhwh in 18.17–19. The particular point of interest in this section is in the use of ‘cover’ (כסה) in the soliloquy of Yhwh. This proscription appears, by the use of כסה as a piel conditional plus preposition attached to a subordinate clause. Deuteronomy 13 uses this vocabulary as it outlines the fallout from prophetic, familial and city-wide apostasy from Yahwism. An individual who incites worship for

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{35} As van Wolde (‘Outcry, Knowledge and Judgment’, 83–4) states, ‘Most biblical scholars tend to read the story backwards: it is the lack of hospitality or the sexual assault which they qualify as the Sodomites’ crime in the first place. Yet, this crime has not yet been committed in the narrative of Gen 18.’
  \item \textsuperscript{36} This is in contrast to Exodus. See van Wolde, ‘Outcry, Knowledge and Judgment’, 83.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Instantaneous mirativity pertains to the literary technique and how it illumines psychological or social mental processes in time, progress in society or in the development of knowledge or epistemology. It is not necessarily related to evidentiality (the difference between first-hand knowledge and hearsay), but is generally accepted as an indicator of new or unexpected knowledge. See C. L. Miller-Naudé and C. H. J. van der Merwe, ‘Here and Mirativity in Biblical Hebrew’, \textit{HS} 52 (2011): 56–7.
\end{itemize}
other deities is to be executed on the spot: ‘you will not yield to him, and
not listen to him, and your eye (עיןך) will not pity him, you will not spare
him or cover (תכסה) him’ (Deut. 13.9). Bernard Levinson argues that this
process maintains the public legal process of requiring more than one
witness, and infers a public viewing and testimony before death.\(^3^8\) The
idiom using the negative piel plus preposition לע suggests the condoning
of wrongdoing or forgiving. This is contrary to what the legislator in
Deuteronomy wants.\(^3^9\) Levinson sees this use of כסה as an imperative
call for the survival of the community against outside oppression.\(^4^0\) In
the Priestly use of כסה, the pursuit of survival balanced with universal
conciliation alludes to those deliberations over justice that are retributive
and atoning, rather than purely punitive (Lev. 16.13).\(^4^1\) The desire for
preserving Israelite (Abrahamic) identity is clashing with the desire for
universal power.

Yhwh is deciding to cover the situation from witnesses who may not
begin to judge the situation legally until a case is established. The ‘thing’
Yhwh may be covering is the investigation, not the possible end result for
Sodom and Gomorrah. The deity ponders the possibility of forgiveness
through making a thorough investigation before judgement.\(^4^2\) This is a
logical introduction to the dialogue of Abraham which uses the same
process. Therefore, a translation of 18.17–19 might be rendered:

Yhwh said, ‘Why am I covering what I am doing from Abraham? After
all, Abraham is to become a great and strong nation; and all the nations
will bless themselves through him. I know that he will tell his children and
household in the future to keep the way of Yhwh by the right and just way,
so that the things promised from Yhwh to Abraham will certainly come.’
The problem with Yhwh’s investigation is that the exact nature of the crime of Sodom is opaque. In a petition through vv. 23–33, Abraham opens with bold negotiating for calculating risk. He is concerned about the ‘righteous’ (צדיק) individual citizens of Sodom. At least Lot and his family must be in his mind. This is in contrast to the narrator who only describes a community ‘sin’ (המאתה) which elsewhere in Genesis is used of latent individual choices (of men). It is important to note again, that at this stage, Yhwh has not started looking and gathering data.

This is not a utilitarian discussion, as the presence of any number of righteous people is an argument for peace. Despite the source-critical claim that the destructive incident in Gen. 19 existed prior to the petition of Abraham, it is not framed as a corrective of a fated, set decision by Yhwh. Moreover, the messengers wait until 19.16 to announce the decision to Lot. Unlike an evil eye or causative, fixed words of curse or blessing, Abraham sees Yhwh’s eye as possessing a rationality not swayed by sweeping generalizations.

By using a familiar legal device, the text critiques and subverts the fear of outsider negative influence. From the petition of Abraham, an assurance of the enduring, universal presence and strength of the Yahwist religion is enough to delay or restrain destruction. In 18.25, Yhwh is the judge of the ‘whole earth’. The possible ‘righteousness’ (18.23–32) in Sodom is a basis for the claim that the presence of Yahwism will spread and not need protection from outsiders at all. Sodomites are seen to be part of a universally valid moral standard, mimetically stretching the imperial vision from Persia to Adonai. Universal legal jurisdiction in Genesis is anachronistic in the storyworld, which provides a clue as to a Persian period compilation and editing. The petition is based on Yhwh’s perception of Abraham as a worthy conversation partner, to be a part of this council or ‘intelligence service’ that is currently investigating the city. After sending messengers to Abraham to announce an important birth and make covenants, should not the situation in Sodom be made clear to him as well? The eye is a tool of public investigation, judgement or mercy, based on both the proximity of the data collected on the person(s) and an accurate interpretation by appropriate members of the Yahwist community. The difference is that the seeing is ground level, investigative and not totalizing. This does not

43. Gen. 4.7; 20.9; 31.36; 39.9; 42.22; 50.17.
promote the imperial top-down gaze and the legal logic of imperial claims on universal jurisdiction.

**Competing Security Operations**

When the three messengers arrive at Sodom, they encounter Lot from his position at the gate, and reluctantly respond to his insistence to stay at his home (19.1–2). They recognize Lot’s spatial position at the city gate as the political and social status of a male קִנֵּסָה. Lot lives up to his name: ‘to envelope / wrap’, not only by hiding others in his home but by facilitating a surveillance operation that can watch others but not reveal the watchers. However, Lot is not in a position of authority. The reluctance of the men to stay with Lot may not be only a customary gesture, but an intention to resist his self-appointment as an unauthorized citizen guard. The messengers could more efficiently carry out their mission by staying in an outside space. Lot sees הראה them in v. 1 and begins a series of changes to their plan.

The Sodomites will certainly abuse their power, yet Lot usurps the power of the Sodomites first by inviting the messengers into his home. Having previously been at war, the ancient nation-state carefully examines any newcomers. The men of the city surround the house and wish to ‘know’ the visitors inside. This group acts as male competitors for honour and security by the pursuit of knowledge. In general, the act of knowing in Genesis is the purview of men upon women. Power- and security-seeking men are not to be known themselves but are the knowers. Lot takes this to mean that they desire to know the messengers as if they are women. He mistakenly follows this androcentric logic to offer his daughters.

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46. See ‘枣庄ו BDB, 532, and 1 Sam. 21.10; 1 Kgs 19.13; Isa. 25.7.
47. As a ger, he does not have the right to show hospitality without the sanction of the authorities of the city. R. C. Heard, *The Dynamics of Diselection: Ambiguity in Genesis 12–36 and Ethnic Boundaries in Post-Exilic Judah* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 49.
effect on the women is not only the result of a fear of imperial power, but the exercise of sexist ideology which doubly colonizes them.\textsuperscript{51} Lot offers his daughters in panic (覚え), possibly as hostages and a guarantee that the visitors are not malevolent.\textsuperscript{52} It is either a vote in favour of their integrity or an unbelievably cruel bluff. Either way, it is a plan which they refuse. The plot is now reaching its climax, as the watchers (the visitors to Lot) are being watched. The men outside the house use ambiguous spatial and visual terms, asking the men inside the house to ‘stand back’ and ‘come closer’.\textsuperscript{53} They attempt their own countersurveillance and so are struck blind.

The question of who has ultimate power in knowing and interpreting the unknown becomes a mutual problem in the growing tension of the story. All the men of the city surround the house and notice that Lot insists on breaking protocol and security by bringing in unknown visitors. The city has just had a war, and is no doubt conducting its own type of intelligence services and security measures. Security is the basis for the famous ‘known unknowns’ that perpetuate intelligence gathering. The immediate reaction of Lot is to block this visual knowledge. The fact that Lot does not explain who the messengers are and why they are there is a possible covert danger to the city. It is not surprising, then, that the men threaten them all with destruction.

It is appropriate to ask who the ‘men of the city, the men of Sodom, young and old; all the people from every place’ (19.4) represent, or what sort of bargaining is going on using Lot’s daughters (19.8). However, the legal or moral attempts to categorize through seeing are merely speculative actions of the narrator and the seeing characters. This is reflected in the logic of drone warfare and the way in which categorizing occurs on each side. Each party is tested for the ethical decisions to do ‘what is good in their eyes’, after which both disrupt the sense of social order.\textsuperscript{54} While elevation and the descending action of a gaze can indicate surveillance which could be cruel or benign, the narration ultimately makes the

\textsuperscript{51} See Musa Dube’s description through South African literature. M. Dube, \textit{Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible} (St Louis: Chalice, 2000), 112–14. I suggest that these layers of cultural exceptionalism and misogyny can also account for homophobic interpretations of this story.

\textsuperscript{52} Morschauser, “‘Hospitality’”, 474.

\textsuperscript{53} Christopher Heard argues linguistically for ‘come closer’. C. Heard, ‘What Does the Mob Want Lot to Do in Genesis 19:9?’, \textit{HS} 51 (2010): 103. The ambiguity can stand either way as a statement on visuality.

\textsuperscript{54} Morschauser, “‘Hospitality’”, 480.
decision on the morality of this seeing. Descending to ground level, seeing illustrates the attempt to adjudicate the control over surveillance and the power of vision. However, the Sodomites respond to the perceived surveillance of Lot with countersurveillance, wishing to dominate those who threaten them. They accuse Lot: ‘this man came to live among us as a foreigner, and now he judges us! We will treat you worse than them’ (19.9). They resent foreigners on the ground trying to re-define justice.

What these men of Sodom are seeking to know from seeing the messengers (and for Lot, his daughters) is influenced by the narrative motif that the gaze configures both social relations and the resulting safety and security. The desire for security through a gaze must be the prerogative of the powerful, not the surveyed; therefore, the men should be kept from gazing on the messengers. If there is no security, the threatening parties are to be eliminated. The two parties are now clashing in their use of vision; they are aware that they are watching each other. This leads to a more frenzied search for data on each other. This demand is denied and the city begins to implode on itself visually. Lot’s ‘security’ door is closed, the men of the city outside are struck blind, and the family of Lot begins to disappear, before the rest of the city is flattened. There cannot be two competing modes of visual monitoring, where the one watched looks into the face of another gaze. The return of the gaze upon itself is an artistic mode of questioning the traditional cultural mores and expectations of others. This style of narrative art seeks to ask who has the authority to capture and interpret the vision of another and give it meaning.

55. Mieke Bal describes a change in a character from mastery to empathy, both as the result of top-down seeing. ‘In a narratological sense, seeing differently, and seeing difference turns the fabula around, makes the character different. The turn around is…to see individuals instead of the devastating, de-humanizing bureaucracy of numbers…this is emphasized by seeing from top down, which is usually – in the discourse of Western culture – a mastering, colonizing gaze. These are two extremes of the top-down gaze.’ M. Bal, Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 20. See also S. Ryan, ‘Elevation and Surveillance’, in The Cartographic Eye: How Explorers Saw Australia (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 91–3.


Lot’s Wife Stares Down the Violations

Ado (Lot’s wife) acts in response to this destruction with an uncompromising look (נבט). Rather than other vocabulary for sight, נבט is used in 19.17 to command Lot’s family not to look and in 15.5 for Yhwh’s command to Abram to look and consider with a kind of wonder. This is looking with agency, as a conversation, to ‘endure to see’ or ‘look with consideration’ as a human subject. Daringly, Ado takes up that agency. Gen. 19.17 reads: ‘And when they had brought them out to the street, they said, “Flee for your life; do not look (נבט) behind you (masculine singular) or stand still in the valley; flee to the hills, or you will be swept away’.” A little later, the text reads: ‘But his wife looked (נבט) behind him, and she became a pillar of salt’ (Gen. 19.26). Ado has a chequered history of interpretation; from compassion, to aggression, to misguided loyalty. Characterized and orientalized as loyal and a dissenter, Ado nevertheless questions the earth and human destruction with a look. She joins the gaze of Yhwh and Abraham considering the nature of the information gained to justify destruction.

Ado is aware of her staring, that it is untenable. This is a stare of maximal proportions, of complete wonder, which Rosemarie Garland-Thomson

58. The ‘look/regard’ (נבט) for Moses was one of dread or a powerful exchange of a gaze (e.g. Exod. 3.6; 33.8; Num. 21.9).
59. ‘נבט’ BDB, 613. The difference between looking and seeing is here pertinent in the description of different modes of visual power.
60. ‘look behind’: JPSV, 34.
61. ‘his wife looked behind him’: JPSV, 34.
62. In midrashic tradition she looked back to see if her other two daughters were following, in compassion: ‘…the wife of Lot looked back to see the destruction of the cities, for her compassion was moved on account of her daughters who remained in Sodom, for they did not go with her. And when she looked back she became a pillar of salt, and it is yet in place unto this day.’ Sefer Ha-Yashar 19.52–53.
63. Genesis Rabbah adds an argument she has with Lot when she refuses to give salt, a token of hospitality, to the three visitors. So her punishment is ‘because she sinned through the argument about salt’. Gen. Rab. (2) 51:55.51, 226.
64. Targumic tradition is ambiguous, but often blames her ethnicity, characterized as Sodomite. ‘His wife looked behind the angel to know what would be the end of her father’s house. She was one of the daughters of the Sodomites, and because she had sinned through salt by publicizing (the presence) of the afflicted ones, behold she was made into a pillar of salt.’ Targ. Ps.-J. (1) 19.26–7, 71. Targum Neofiti adds: ‘until the time the dead are brought to life’. Targ. Neof. (1) 19.26–27, 109.
labels ‘baroque’: defying any consequences of the stare. The look is described by Kaja Silverman as singular, related to the individual eye, as the mastery in the eye of the subject which leaves itself open to anxiety and change, gain and loss of power. For the reader who identifies with Ado, a ‘look’ is appropriate for passionate and defiant action, rather than an emotionless and powerful ‘gaze’. This look is employed by those who carry out counter visibilities in response to a mechanistic gaze, or those that are hybrids, existing in between groups categorized as ‘righteous’ or ‘wicked’. All the men are combatants, but the text does not include women and children. Ado uses the look as a response to the inhospitable essentialization of persons in Sodom. The narrator annihilates her, but the Priestly influence over the text characterizes her as an atonement and retributive warning. Additionally, she becomes part of the landscape to challenge the toxic effects of war on the land and provide an enduring reply to the foreshadowing rhetoric on both sides.

The prohibition to look is connected to the tendency of other characters to look and try to know. It is a power struggle, a fantasy which tries to colonize by suggesting that ultimate knowledge and power can be gained by epistemological certainty. By turning to look, Ado decides on protesting the engagement in this fantasy of security by both the Sodomites and Lot, leaving a trace of the subaltern, below the struggle between ‘gentlemen’s agreements’ of war and the colonized / colonizer struggle. Her annihilation is a mirror of the human and earth destruction that occurs beneath this. The letter of the law in the prohibition to look is interpreted by Ado to highlight the phantasmic unwritten rule of social order in which she is not included. She is not mentioned, and possibly not present, when Lot hears the masculine singular command to leave in 19.15 (literally: ‘stand and take’).

65. ‘Unconcerned with rationality, mastery, or coherence, baroque staring blatantly announces the states of being wonderstruck and confounded. It is gaping-mouthed, unapologetic staring.’ R. Garland-Thomson, Staring: How We Look (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50.
70. Masculine singular imperatives are also used in address in 19.17 for ‘flee’ (אל־תבונ) and the prohibition of looking (in 19.17. L. Sjöberg, ‘The Empathetic
She questions the desire for security and the destruction through a Lacanian-type empty gesture. Regarding this gesture, Slavoj Žižek considers that ‘the truly subversive thing is not to disregard the explicit letter of the Law on behalf of the underlying fantasies, but to stick to this letter against the fantasy which sustains it’.  

Writing in terms of sexual justice, Stephen Sprinkle sees Ado’s gaze as a postcolonial act of resistance: ‘The suicidal turn of Lot’s wife denudes the sexual ideology of the center/edge dichotomy, and turns her from a cipher with no name into a pillar of salt standing in perpetual witness, exposing the inadequacy of the unitive center as a colonial fantasy whose authority passes away even as it destroys dissenters’.  

The reader is in a dilemma: whether to look away or read with the intention to also employ this look.  

Consciously, she has made her decision, even in choosing destructive trauma to herself, in contrast to the unconscious and passive behaviour of Lot. She does not take up any of her Sodomite privilege to withdraw from challenging the conflict, nor does she claim a mimetic desire for the imperial gaze in a nationalistic struggle. This has led to many misunderstandings and silences in her interpretation through reception history.  

Turning to a twenty-first century context, I note that many people in the vicinity of drone strikes are outside the parameters of what the


71. Žižek, Fantasies, 38.


73. As in a theatrical model that positions the spectator inside the spectacle, Ado is a symbol of the refusal of the subject to be demolished. This is in contrast to outside positioning, for example viewers of a totalitarian political rally that have expression but no rights. M. Harries, Forgetting Lot’s Wife: On Destructive Spectatorship (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 23–4.

74. Jesus in Luke 17.32 compares sacrificial death and consequent preservation of life with Ado, in solidarity. Lot, however, seeks to preserve his life through bargaining and incest and so fails to preserve his name. Harries, Forgetting Lot’s Wife, 32, 125 n. 118.


76. Ranajit Guha uses a methodology of seeking to re-read the subaltern in historical texts in a similar manner, as their representation is lost because of the ‘ordinary apparatus of historiography’. P. Gopal, ‘Reading Subaltern History’, in The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies, ed. N. Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 140.
United States would call a combatant, and they are not necessarily directly supportive of those toward whom the strikes are aimed. As most of these people are not represented or defined, and they themselves are diverse, their representation as a monolithic group of ‘collateral damage’ is inadequate. As for Ado, her presence is a real example of the results of witnessing damaging and traumatic scenes and yet being outside of the power structures that cause the conflict. As she turns to the salt that is part of the landscape, outside the confines of the ‘camp’ of Sodom, she joins in solidarity with the destruction of the non-human world as the frame for being outside of structures. Ado invites the spectator to look with her, if we dare to have empathy with her vision. She participates in over-conformity to the law which ultimately subverts the fantasy on which it is based: that of absolute security.

Not forgetting Yhwh’s promise, Abraham later returns, in 19.27–29, to a place where he again looks down and sees (ראק / שׁקף) Sodom and the cities of the plain. Sodom is now not a place where people lived, but is changed to a simple focalized point in space with הנה. This expression can indicate a counter-expectation of anticipated information. Abraham perceives, with the narrator, that it is the former Sodom, but interprets the phenomena differently, in a metaphoric comparison with troubled agitation. There is instability caused by the destruction itself: ‘So it was when God destroyed the cities of the valley, God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, to overthrow (both ظفح) the cities in which Lot lived’ (Gen. 19.29). Given the previous characterization of Yhwh as possessing a generous surveillant eye, the integrity of the data becomes increasingly unstable. In the mind of Yhwh, this is an embrace of the pain of uncertainty. Barbara M. Leung Lai describes the repeated language in the Hebrew Bible of Yhwh at war in heart, turning and recoiling from intense sorrow. The knowledge sought by Yhwh is now questioning the epistemological certainty of security. A kind of change or reversal (הפך) in the middle of the scene mirrors the inner tumult within the character. Walter Brueggemann comments, ‘what had been done to Sodom and Gomorrah is now done to God’s own

77. This extends the semantic range of the particle from that described above. Miller-Naudé and van der Merwe, ‘הנה and Mirativity in Biblical Hebrew’ , 60.
78. Barbara M. Leung Lai uses the idea of Brueggemann on Hos. 11.1–9 to suggest that the divine character can not only probe for answers from humans, but also may wish to know answers. B. M. Leung Lai, Through the ‘I’-Window: The Inner Life of Characters in the Hebrew Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011), 162.
79. Ibid.
There is also a self-emptying of the divine character that, rather than seeing with dominating omnipotence, uses seeing as exploration. I link this to the limits of vision: seeing all does not preclude change and suffering. The divine character must also wait for the data to be processed in human spheres and calculate this based on hope.

The status of enemies and allies is therefore problematized. The theme of exclusive or inclusive rights to blessing is complex in this narrative, as it is concerned with those who are non-Israelites and do not use Abraham’s name for blessing. The transgressions of Lot and the men of Sodom occur at a later stage, on the ground, during the build-up and furure of the escape. Sodom is judged first, but Lot is judged by later actions and his disconnection from Abraham. Remembering Abraham and the larger context saves such people as Lot’s daughters and wife. The Sodomites and Abraham / Lot fall under the same covenantal expectations, due to the expanding reach of Yahwism. However, both the Sodomites and Lot have one problem that leads to their destruction. This is to pursue ultimate security, which negates hospitality.

**Conclusion: Critical Readings of Security**

The warring parties in the Sodom narrative desire security, illustrated by the use of seeing, and this causes the escalation and destruction. Biblical reading communities can approach this story as a demonstration of a clash between the place of human safety and the priority of the more-than-human world. Abraham and Yhwh contemplate the implosion of the cities and landscape while Lot (Israel) and the Sodomites (Ammon / Moab),

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83. Warner describes the resonance of הָיוּ (‘find’) in 19.15 to describe Lot’s wife and daughters as ‘the ones found’, corresponding to the petition in 18.23–32. Verses 27–28 were at one time the ending of the narrative, while v. 29 is a Priestly addition taken from 13.11b–12. ‘I will remember’, 75.
in contrast, struggle for epistemological primacy and security under an imperial gaze. Readers can use the story to embrace the possibility that the earth should be seen not from above, as controlled, but from below, by collective members of the earth community.

Those that are subject to drone attacks have one of two choices. They can follow the mimetic desire to attempt to be as powerful as their attackers, or resist through underground or terrorist tactics. Because those on either side are not innocent, a postcolonial response would be to critique and nuance these two responses, rather than defend one or the other. Biblical editors lived in a world where they were given similar choices. In a colonized Persian province, the compilers and editors of Genesis would have been facing the same challenge of finding ways to navigate the dominant cultural dialectic with their own interests. Persian era audiences of Genesis were aware of the connections in the narrative with the destruction of Jerusalem. Brueggemann likens this to contemporary post-9/11 ideology which responds to the grief of loss and dislocation with a scramble for security and moral, theological and ethical justification for such action, based on the idea of the West as an exception from corruption and the law.

The point of change and hope for biblical readers seeking to understand difference and covenant is neither through a despair of Western culture nor an assumption that any particular culture is violent. I suggest that hope lies in avoiding the uncritical acceptance of ideology. This is where the characterization of Lot and the people of Sodom are instructional. These characters pursue security due to their assurance that they are correct. In contrast, the task of Abraham and Ado is to inspect the evidence and advocate. Yhwh remembers Abraham as a carrier of universal covenantal blessing for these characteristics, while Ado is a herald of this tradition in biblical literature. Seeking security in a postcolonial world involves self-critique and acknowledgement of flaws in every exercise of power. The drones of fear humming above are merely the symbolic

84. Naomi Klein sees the ‘top down’ look of photographs of the earth from space as leading to a paternalistic, mechanistic idea that the earth is to be controlled, rather than a grounded look that sees humanity as dependent on the earth. N. Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 285.


hardware of presuppositions. When these assumptions disappear, communities can continue prophetic traditions of reading biblical narratives for peacemaking.
Dethroning the powerful and uplifting the powerless: this image of reversal close to the centre of the Lukan Magnificat situates the song’s speaker in a space of, and responsive to, first-century CE socio-economic and political conflicts. This situating of the biblical song opens a space for reading the Magnificat in dialogue with contemporary contexts of conflict. In particular, I am interested in the way such readings move from an anthropocentric focus on human conflicts to an ecological focus that embeds human relationships (including conflictual ones) in wider more-than-human interdependencies and relationalities for which ecological thinkers are now using the term entanglement. Entanglement is a term borrowed from Quantum physics by writers in the ecological humanities, to describe the way beings are interconnected or enmeshed with one another.¹ This is a useful term because it allows for the complexity of relationships of both damage and sustenance that play out between creatures – including humans, with their particular potentialities for ecological destruction on a global scale in the Anthropocene.

In this essay, I focus on two contexts of conflict as situations for reading the Magnificat in Australia: the Second World War and the Intervention, of which I will say more below. I consider poetic and narrative responses to these conflicts and, in conversation with these creative responses, I propose interpretive keys for reading the Magnificat in its context and ecologically today. This entangled play between contexts, poetry, narrative and biblical texts can be framed as the beginning of an

¹. See, for example, T. Morton, The Ecological Thought (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 15. See also, E. Johnson, Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 98. Elizabeth Johnson draws on Darwin’s image of ‘an entangled bank’ to refer to the interrelationships of biodiversity.
eco-aesthetic hermeneutics. The bases for such a hermeneutics are: (1) a recognition of the role of literature (and the arts in general) in responding to and addressing its contemporary contexts; (2) an affirmation that every human work is already embedded in more-than-human networks of matter and material agency; (3) a critical understanding of the roles of biblical literature in shaping and protesting human uses and abuses of power through the centuries. The interpretive move is to draw from selected contemporary texts, hermeneutic keys for looking again at an ancient text, in this case the Lukan Magnificat. Biblical scholars may object that to do so is anachronistic, but so is every contextual reading to a greater or lesser extent. The emerging hermeneutic keys, if not universal, are applicable across time: protest, cultural density, the maternal and, for a Christian hermeneutics, the cross. The Australian writers I engage are H. Drake-Brockman and Ali Cobby Eckermann. I end with reflections on my own ecologically oriented rewritings of the Magnificat with ideas of cultural density, protest and entangled-self in mind.

Two Australian Contexts of Conflict

World War II

Despite, or perhaps as part of, the repression of the conflict involved in the European invasion of Australia, in this island continent’s cities and suburbs there is ‘a veneer of peace as we have no war on our shores and much-reported terrorist incidents remain infrequent here in practice’. Australia has, however, been engaged officially in wars on many occasions since 1945 ‘(including Korea 1950–1953, Vietnam 1962–1975, Iraq 1990–91, Afghanistan 2001–present, Iraq 2003–2009, and Iraq [Operation Okra] 2014–present), in addition to being a partner to the United States in the Cold War with the USSR (1945–1991)’. As ANZAC Day commemora-


tions attest, both the First and Second World Wars remain part of the Australian cultural imaginary.⁶

Turning to writers of the day offers a different insight into the experience of war from that taken up more popularly, even where the ‘popular’ tries to nuance glorification of heroes with the tragic realities of war. My father’s diary written between 1943 and 1948 carries an untitled poem penned on the island of Morotai on 15 August 1945, the last day of the war in the Pacific, where at the age of 21 he asks: ‘Can we explain the interminable gulf / Between this the quiet hour and that gone before?’; ‘Can we reconcile the worth of the deed / With the youth of the spirit thus used?’ The poem continues:

Only those who harbour deep
The cherish of the past
May in the lonely listening night
Know how to walk with limbless heart

and closes ‘We hope, we hope – that not again – / But knowing not, we walk for now’.⁷

An aesthetic response: war, protest and the maternal: H. Drake Brockman’s ‘Magnificat’⁸

At the other end of the war, when it is in sight but not yet formally declared, H. (Henrietta) Drake-Brockman’s ‘Magnificat’ appears.⁹ The short story is published in January 1939 on the same page of The West Australian as a reprint of an article by Winston Churchill, PC, MP, ‘Dangers in Eastern Europe: Poland and the Balkans’, where he writes ‘All Eastern Europe spends the Christmas in deep fear. Against whom

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⁶ Dyer, Elvey and Guess, ‘Ecological Aspects of War’.
⁷ J. Elvey (1924–2011), Wartime Diary, privately held.
will the next blow be directed?" 10 Drake-Brockman’s husband Geoffrey born in 1885 was a civil engineer. Part of the Drake-Brockman family, descendants of Geoffrey’s great grandfather William Locke Brockman’s nephew James Groves, were Western Australian establishment and held property, kept Indigenous people parochially, and featured contentiously in Sally Morgan’s *My Place*. 11 Geoffrey Drake-Brockman had fought in World War I. Henrietta was born in 1901 and married Geoffrey in 1921. Her two children were born around 1924 and 1927, so by the time she was writing ‘Magnificat’ she was herself a mother of growing children. 12

Beside the threat of Nazism and Churchill’s hope that Eastern European states would unite against it, and in so doing engage the support of Western democracies, Drake-Brockman tells a story of a mother and son whose apartment is bombed in an air strike. The precise location remains unspecified. While likely Czeckoslovakia, Poland or the Balkans is meant – and despite the Euro-centric focus of its non-Indigenous Western Australian author – there is a universal theme to the mother–son narrative. A woman rouses herself after the terror of a bombing and thinking her son is dead finds him still breathing: ‘And then she saw that he was breathing. / She crawled over the splintered floor. He was alive! Her little son was alive! *My soul doth magnify the Lord.* She had opened her eyes, and behold, her son, whom she had thought dead, was alive!’ 13 But his legs are severed. Deciding to spare first herself, and incidentally her son, the pain of wakening as he bleeds to death, she uses a cushion to smother him. While she hopes to avoid the look he will give her – charging her with the betrayal that war is of the life she gave him in his birth – in death his open eyes seem nonetheless to accuse her. The


repetitions, short sentences, exclamations and ellipses work to heighten the drama. The descriptions of her bodily experience, the vivid colours, the trembling of her hand, together situate the experience of the violence of war as embodied – a sensory corporeal experience in which sensation is saturated. The references to birth at the moment of his dying evoke the life–death nexus and place it at the cusp of the maternal: ‘That first cry of his, that moment when they had said to her: “You have a son!”’ Dear Mother of God, it had been like standing on a high mountain and seeing spread out the glories of earth and the wonders of heaven… Life! To give life, to hand on the spark… Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.’14 A coda, after a series of asterisks, shifts the focus to a bomber, someone’s equally celebrated son, returning to base, satisfied with his work: ‘Every bomb a bull’s-eye. Those new carriers worked like a dream.’15 The story becomes at one level a protest at the impending war, or at least at the inevitability of the harm it will occasion, a harm which in the narrative undoes a basic trust not only between mother and child, but between creator and creation.

A central trope of the story is the sense of sight mediated by the eye. After the bomb hits, the narrator tells: ‘Behind her closed lids the blood raced back in showers and sparks of colour, fireworks sending her dizzy’. The woman is reluctant to open her eyes: ‘It was very silent. Presently she would open her eyes.’ Then, ‘Mother of God, she must open her eyes!’ What will she see when she opens her eyes? ‘If she opened her eyes, now, she’d see the sky up through the wrecked roof, and the joists torn, and twisted, and the beams fallen. And she’d see the child.’ The narrator tells that the child is lying on his back and writes ‘and his legs…’, leaving the condition of his legs unstated. The reader is invited into the woman’s thinking, to see through her eyes. Again, ‘Mother of God, she must open her eyes!’ Then, ‘She opened her eyes: the picture was complete.’ The next reference to seeing comes soon after: ‘And then she saw that he was breathing’. A little later, the seeing shifts: ‘Presently he would open his eyes’.16 She has a moment between her seeing and his, in which to act:

Quick! She must be quick! She glanced at his face. The whitening lips. … Presently he would open his eyes. He would look at her. The child she had brought to life would look at her. She would have to meet his eyes, those

14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
trusteing eyes, she would have to see them darken with agony, to see them fill with terror, to watch them empty of faith.\footnote{17}

There is a momentary shift from sight to hearing: ‘She would have to hear him cry…’ that prompts her to recall his first cry in birth when she recollects, ‘seeing spread out the glories of earth and the wonders of heaven’. But now she fears his seeing: ‘When he opened his eyes he would look at her. Trusting eyes would darken in agony, grow blank in fear.’ And ‘If he opened his eyes and looked to her for help, she must go mad!’\footnote{18} The narrator tells:

There was a cushion lying on the splintered floor. If she put it gently over his eyes they need never open. She who had given him life, need not meet accusing eyes …

Very gently, she kissed his eyes, very gently she put the cushion over his eyes, over his face, tenderly as she tucked him to sleep at night.\footnote{19}

Yet, her hope of peace is shattered: ‘But when she took the cushion away, his eyes were wide open. They began to glaze, staring at her…’ Then comes the coda, where the bomb dropped by someone else’s son is a ‘bull’s eye’.\footnote{20} For Drake-Brockman, there is an interrogation of seeing: a kind of maternal seeing and being seen is contrasted with a military seeing.

Drake-Brockman’s short story arrives in a colonial context where the Magnificat, recited or sung daily, captured the imaginations of settler Australians as an important part of their colonial and religious heritage, and it formed a kind of template for exploring experiences of the sacred sometimes in a more-than-human frame.\footnote{21} The issues of death and life central to the Lukan Magnificat, and the way in its performance the song itself can be empowering for life, inform its varied rewritings in colonial Australia.\footnote{22} In this tradition, Drake-Brockman’s short story ‘Magnificat’ poignantly juxtaposes the Lukan song with the horror of war, as protest at the coming Second World War.

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17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
22. See ibid. for the further discussion of creative responses to the Magnificat in late nineteenth and early twentieth century settler Australia.
The Intervention

The Second World War occurred at a time when Indigenous Australians could enlist in the Army but were not counted as citizens. Despite the intervening years and changes to the Australian Constitution in 1967, and other successful Indigenous campaigns, notably the Mabo verdict in 1992 and the National Apology to the Stolen Generations in 2008, many Indigenous communities suffer serious disadvantage in the areas of education, health, life expectancy and access to goods and services; and racism, both overt and more subtle, continues. One recent event of concern has been called The Intervention.

On 15 June 2007, a report from the Northern Territory Government Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse was released. The report, entitled Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: ‘Little Children are Sacred’, ‘brought attention to alleged serious problems of sexual abuse, and other abuse, of Aboriginal children and highlighted the failure of governments over decades to provide basic services to address the growing problems in the areas of health, rehabilitation, education and housing’. Significantly, the report noted that abuse of children was not limited to Indigenous communities and set abuse in the context of wider issues of disadvantage and policy failures. It offered ‘empowerment’ of local communities as a keynote of its recommendations. Although the report made 97 specific recommendations, including consulting with local Indigenous communities, the Federal Government instituted the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER), or Intervention, announced only six days after the report appeared. The Racial Discrimination Act was suspended and seventy-three ‘prescribed’ Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory were subject to ‘special measures’ including income management and five year leases, as well as alcohol and pornography restrictions, licensing of community stores, control over publicly funded

27. This Is What We Said, 6.
computers, establishment of Government Business Managers in each community and special law enforcement measures.\textsuperscript{28} The Intervention was put into effect under the supervision of the Australian Defence Force (ADF) which, between 2007 and 2008, was involved in its implementation.\textsuperscript{29} The NTER has changed name and departmental responsibility since its inception in June 2007, and as ‘Stronger Futures’ was extended in 2012 until 2022. In 2014 it came under the heading ‘Closing the Gap in the Northern Territory’, administered by the Department of Social Services, and in 2016 somewhat modified ‘Intervention’ measures continued under the ‘Closing the Gap’ policies administered by the Indigenous Affairs Group within the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet.\textsuperscript{30}

Lack of consultation with communities, the use of the ADF, income management ‘whereby 50\% of welfare monies were quarantined and controlled through the use of a basics “card”’ and ‘five-year leases whereby

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.


the government compulsorily’ took over people’s land on lease were the most problematic and disempowering aspects of the Intervention.31 While some Indigenous people approved of aspects of the NTER and its policy successors, many Indigenous people raised significant questions: of equality, infantilizing, fear of another Stolen Generation, fear of governmental land grabs and the failure to foster self-determination through community-based solutions, rather than a ‘one size fits all’ approach.32 The Laynhapuy Homeland Leaders at Yirrkala said: ‘We should not be subjected to special measures that separate us out or impose things on us without agreement’.33 Although the most recent Prime Ministerial report on Closing the Gap suggests some responsiveness to Indigenous critiques of the program, there is evidence that The Intervention project has failed on many levels.34 Moreover, while the early involvement of the ADF was to assist with the logistics of implementation rather than to initiate or respond to conflict, the use of defence force personnel to assist in implementation of the NTER suggests a cultural imaginary in which the unacknowledged contact war with Indigenous Australians continues in subtle and not so subtle ways.

An aesthetic response: Intervention and cultural density: Ali Cobby Eckermann’s ‘Intervention Payback’

Ali Cobby Eckermann’s poem ‘Intervention Payback’, narrated in the voice of an Indigenous man of the Northern Territory, living under The Intervention, speaks to a context of violence to country and kinship.35 The narrator is a father of young children, who with his wife has provided for his family and, through the stories of ‘tjamu and nana’, has kept them in contact with both culture and their elders’ experiences of colonization:

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and from there tjamu and nana tell them the story when
the government was worse rations government make up
all the rules but don’t know culture can’t sit in the sand
oh tjamu and nana they got the best story we always
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31. This Is What We Said, 6.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid, 54.
laughing us mob36

The Intervention occasions fear another generation will be stolen, and income management brings with it problems with buying good food, adequate employment and gambling. The poem opens ‘I love my wife’ and closes on a tense note: the narrator’s wife has taken to gambling her remaining wages – the narrator says:

I ready told you I love my kids    I only got five    two pass
away already    and I not complaining bout looking after my
kids    no way    but when my wife gets home    if she spent all
the money    not gonna share with me and the kids
I might hit her    first time37

With its shocking conclusion, this is a narrative poem which weaves the cultural and the political, both celebrating the survival of culture and warning of the implicit threat the Intervention is to the ongoing endurance of culture and kin. For Robert Adamson, this is a poetry of witness.38 It is also a poem of protest.

Recognizing the way African American and South African songs of protest respond performatively to a situation of oppression (for example, slavery and its aftermaths in segregation in the United States and the regime of Apartheid in South Africa) by enacting a hope for liberation, Warren Carter describes four characteristics of such songs: (1) ‘naming contexts of oppressive suffering’; (2) ‘bestowing dignity’; (3) ‘fostering hope for change’; (4) ‘securing communal solidarity’.39 Carter outlines ways in which the Magnificat in the context of Luke–Acts exhibits these characteristics.40

Cobby Eckermann’s ‘Intervention Payback’ also exhibits these characteristics. The poem names a context of oppressive suffering through the description of the Intervention and the recollection of previous colonial

36. Cobby Eckermann, ‘Intervention Pay Back’, 37. ‘Country’ is the term Indigenous Australians use for the place / land to which they belong. It is used without an article.
37. Ibid., 41.
40. Ibid.
violence such as the policies of Assimilation that created the Stolen Generations of Indigenous children. In this naming, the poem also shows up the way in which the dominant culture refuses to respect Indigenous cultures. The poem bestows dignity on Indigenous men through the voice of its male narrator, who is a rounded character. It fosters hope for change. Although the last line could imply that Cobby Eckermann (an Indigenous woman) agrees with the stereotype on which the Intervention seems to rely, namely that all Indigenous men are potentially abusers of women or children, it has the effect of protesting both the colonial violence that leads to further violence from the colonized, and the potential violence of the man toward his wife. The poem invites the reader into a community of solidarity with the speaker, perhaps so that such violence and its aftermath in Indigenous communities is resisted, and a new possibility imagined.

**Imagining New Possibilities:**
**Toward an Ecological Aesthetic Hermeneutics**

In the deliberate reference to the Magnificat, Drake-Brockman’s narrative opens a space for interpretative conversation between the story and the song, through:

1) the strong maternal thematic which to some extent gets backgrounded (as does the Earth) in Luke’s song (in favour of human issues of justice and liberation, and a male genealogy);
2) the function of both story and song as protest; and
3) the implication that the Magnificat like the story stands in sight of the cross.

But while it does not refer to the Magnificat, the protest poetics of poet Cobby Eckermann adds another dimension to reading the Magnificat as a song of protest – as a resistant and hopeful negotiation of violence and survival. This is the concept of cultural density, exemplified by the


cultural relationships of Indigenous people with country, producing and enacting complex (and inter-) subjectivities or what ecological thinkers might understand as ‘entanglements’.

**Re-reading the Magnificat**

*Protest*

Central and South American, Asian and African, as well as Western feminist, biblical scholars and theologians are among the many who have read the Magnificat (Luke 1.46–55) in its context in the Gospel of Luke as part of a programme of liberation, where reversal of fortunes (expressed also in the Lukan beatitudes and woes and elsewhere: 6.20–26; 16.19–31) is a trope for the liberating reign of God (see 4.18–19). The reversals signal that, as several scholars have argued, the song is a song of protest. While empire studies have begun on the impact of the Roman empire, as a totalizing system that is both reflected and resisted in the gospels, work remains to be done on the nuances of the way imperial rule and its violence (through systems, such as slavery and debt, and local rulers), and the workings of this rule (of so-called peace) affected the lives of poor women and men, and slaves.


44. See, for example, Reid, ‘Overture to the Gospel of Luke’; Reid, ‘Women Prophets of God’s Alternative Reign’; Carter, ‘Singing in the Reign’.

The Lukan language of peace and salvation echoes and, if it does not actively resist, sets up the newborn Jesus in contrast to the Roman emperor, and the rule of God (ἡ βασιλεία τοῦ θεοῦ) in contrast to the provincial (colonial) rule of the empire. But Luke has Mary of Nazareth refer to herself as a slave (1.38, 48), a term taken over from both Jewish and Roman traditions with multiple resonances: practical and metaphorical; economic and religious. This imperial kyriarchal language of κύριος and δούλη stands beside the Jewish tradition of the servant of Yhwh. Ecophilosopher Val Plumwood describes a series of hyper-separated categories (or dualisms) – self–other; human–animal; God–human; culture–nature – as interlocked in a logic of colonization of which the master’s power over, and unacknowledged reliance on, the slave is paradigmatic. The kind of reversal the Magnificat describes, in


46. See, for example, S. Kim, *Christ and Caesar: The Gospel and the Roman Empire in the Writings of Paul and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 79–81.

47. See, for example, J. Byron, *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).


resistance to a logic of human oppressive power, can unsettle such a logic of colonization. In regard to this logic, however, and the apparent human focus of the reversals, a hermeneutic of suspicion needs to be applied to the text to call into question its seeming affirmation of the symbols of mastery, through praise of the divine as κυριός and presentation of the woman speaker as δούλη. ⁵⁰

Suspicion is not an end point, however, for developing an eco-aesthetic hermeneutics; identification of the way a human focus always depends on a more-than-human context and recovery (retrieval) of this context are essential, and this often requires imagination. ⁵¹ An eco-aesthetic hermeneutic develops a reading with these three hermeneutics – suspicion, identification and retrieval – in mind, but operates with and beyond the immediate biblical text in a multi-vocal conversation across texts. From this conversation, further hermeneutics might emerge to inform both a reading of the biblical text and a creative writing of a text, or texts, in response to the biblical text. For the purpose of this essay, such creative writings hold particular conditions of conflict in view.

In allowing an interpretative conversation between Drake-Brockman’s story and Luke’s Magnificat, I might note on the one hand the ways the story sets up the shock of the mother’s mercy killing of her child as a protest against the death-dealing of war, however just or otherwise, and the Lukan song sets up the shock of violent reversals as a protest against the underlying oppressions they symbolize. Cobby Eckerman’s ‘Intervention Payback’ similarly uses the closing shock of the speaker’s potential violence as protest. In this cross-conversation, I might recall that for the Lukan author and early audience, the war of 66–70 CE, the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple (to which the gospel alludes in 19.41–44; 21.5–6, 20–24) occurred in the fairly recent past. Warning and grief seem to be a Lukan response to the desolation of this war, with a sense that the death of Jesus and the destruction of Jerusalem


are held together in a divine purpose. The song celebrates this purpose as already having effected – by way of recovery and restitution – the ‘good news to the poor’ that the Lukan Jesus proclaims as release (ἀφέσις) in 4.18–19, referencing the prophet Isaiah’s day of Yhwh.

In contrast to Luke’s Magnificat and the wider Lukan narrative, Drake-Brockman’s story can be read as a protest against the failures of the God of the song at the point where, in war, creation (human and other-than-human) seems to be betrayed by the creator, as death overtakes life. In Mary’s song God’s promise is spoken as life-giving protest against death-dealing oppression. This song suggests a complex layering of experiences of oppression: humiliation (1.48) (perhaps as Jane Schaberg suggests, due to sexual assault); domination (1.52); hunger and poverty (1.53) – for which the speaker’s self-reference as δούλη is both apt and protest. The song proclaims the overturning of these oppressions. As in Cobby Eckermann’s poem, Mary’s song of protest displays a poetic / hymnic quality of cultural density.

Cultural density
In a context of Roman rule, and its multiple impacts on local peoples and their capacity to flourish in their own places, a Jewish woman situates her proclamation of hope in cultural terms. The song Luke has Mary speak / sing, recalls and reinterprets the earlier songs of Hannah (1 Sam. 2.1–10) and Miriam (Exod. 15.19–20), and the Psalms, and embeds its speaker in a genealogy of Israel, that is both past and future, from generation to generation (1.50), drawing toward the final reference to the ancestors (1.55).

In ‘Intervention Payback’, cultural density appears not in relation to a divine promise or establishment of a divine rule, but in the presence of tjamua and nana, their stories, and the sense of kin and country, family and ceremony, language and land, connected by law, the specific law pertaining to country. The narrator leaves silent the voice of the woman, his wife, potentially the future subject of his violence. The reader hears that she is, through her gambling, enacting another kind of violence on her partner and children by depriving them of the goods needed for survival,


but this is complicated by the way the government has set up the conditions for this violence. Cultural density relates not only to the reception and continuation of the traditions of Indigenous elders but to the ways cultures and histories impinge on one another, with implications for the survival of communities and their cultures.

Returning to the Lukan Mary, a quality of cultural density can be read not only in the interwoven references to Jewish texts, particularly songs such as those of Hannah, Miriam and the Psalms, or even in the name Mary / Mariam / Miriam which evokes the ancestral Miriam and her brother Moses, but also in the entanglements with the powerful, and their culture of ‘peace’ through occupation. The Magnificat protests, and to some extent resists, this culture of dominance through its trope of reversal. Moreover, the song can be read in its own context as an affirmation of survival by a woman embedded in her Jewish culture enacting a complex subjectivity.

The pronouns in the song suggest a movement from the personal to the communal: from the opening first person singular references to my soul, my spirit, and my saviour (1.46–47), to the third person referring to God who acts on behalf of the speaker (his slave, his name, his mercy, 1.48–50), to the third person referring to others (their hearts, 1.51), returning to God and Israel his child (1.52), but then turning to the first person plural (our ancestors, 1.55). The male language for God and the reference to male ancestors reflect a largely androcentric culture which is unsettled to some extent by the active voice of the Lukan Mary, expressing a culturally dense sense of self, that moves from the personal self to the promise-self of the entire community of Israel. While there is no direct reference to land, in the reference to the promise to Abraham and his descendants, the relationship to land is implied, even as this may manifest as a kind of present absence, given the occupation of the land by the Romans.54 A promise-self which is personal and communal will underscore the Lukan understanding of liberation (ἀφέσις) as set out particularly in 4.18–19. For Luke, conditions that promote physical survival (and flourishing) are entangled with participation in the rule of God. Nonetheless, as Drake Brockman’s ‘Magnificat’ attests, and Cobby Eckermann’s poem warns, survival at the levels of individual, community, city or land is not assured.


In sight of the cross
With its focus on a mother witnessing (and hastening) the dying of her son, Drake-Brockman’s story moves us from the infancy narratives, in which the Magnificat is situated in Luke, to something like the crucifixion narrative. The image of the Pieta (albeit with a young rather than an adult child) comes to mind. The link between birth narrative and cross is one that appears in Matt. 1–2, especially in the warning of the magi, the slaughter of the children and the flight to Egypt (Matt. 2.1–18), but also in Mary’s encounter with Simeon in Luke (2.33–35). In the birth of the child is the shadow of his death. Both women, the mother in Drake-Brockman’s ‘Magnificat’ and Mary in Luke’s Gospel, will outlive their sons. And Cobby Eckermann’s protagonist, a good father, may abuse his partner.

As Norman Habel has long reminded us, when we face our contemporary ecological crisis, we stand in sight of the cross, with and as part of a crucified Earth, witness to the scorched places human activity has created or decreated. What might be called the contemporary ‘war’ on creation is at this nexus where creation seems to have been betrayed by the creator, because of one part of creation: humankind, and more particularly a large subgroup of usually elite, wealthy humankind who are consciously and unconsciously wreaking havoc, not unlike the bomber.

In our traditions, religious and cultural, the Magnificat, a Lukan song with deep roots in the Jewish scriptures – for example, 1 Sam. 2.1–10; and other women’s songs, Exod. 15.19–20; Judg. 5.1–31; Jdt 16.1–17, and Psalms – offers the possibility of celebrating life and protesting damage. The song is open, then, to the way the gift-like givenness of creation unsettles the death-dealing of oppressive structures based in self–other, master–slave, rich–poor and culture–nature dualisms.

The cultural density evident in Cobby Eckermann’s poem is counter to a culture–nature dualism, because it is embedded in a wider frame where Indigenous community and Indigenous country are enmeshed. Mary’s song is situated in a Jewish scriptural tradition that holds the cultural memory of land and makes it integral to divine–human relationship. These writings of cultural density resist violence through the performance of a non-singular self that survives, perhaps even flourishes. They allow

for the possibility, for example, that the silent woman of ‘Intervention Payback’ might also live beyond the violence in which she is enmeshed. Cobby Eckerman’s poem exhibits what is a keynote of Luke’s programme of liberation, namely compassion, compassion for the man even as he acknowledges his capacity to inflict violence on a woman. For Luke, ἀφέσις, for which compassion and forgiveness are paradigms, has the capacity to disengage such violence. The witness of Cobby Eckermann’s poem should prompt the hearer to participate in such undoing, as should the witness of Drake-Brockman’s ‘Magnificat’. One Lukan trope that is cogent for such an undoing in an eco-aesthetic mode is the maternal; foregrounded and then elided in the Lukan Gospel, the maternal can be invoked in a way that calls into question the problematic economics of oppressive power.

The maternal
Despite its being sung by a woman and unlike the visitation episode in which it is set, the Lukan Magnificat appears to make little direct reference to the maternal. Instead, as I have noted, at one level the song seems to re-inscribe dualisms of rich and poor, power and weakness, oppressed and oppressor, through the (in some cases) violent reversal of these (1.51). While at one point the song refers to generations generically (1.50), later the reference is to the male ancestral line of Abraham and his sons (1.55). Nonetheless, the Lukan Magnificat is framed by the maternal, particularly through the time references to Elizabeth’s pregnancy (1.26, 56; see also, 1.41, 44).

Drake-Brockman’s story uses the Lukan Magnificat to sharpen its maternal protest. The title ‘Magnificat’ perhaps in part evokes the

56. See Elvey, ‘Can There Be a Forgiveness That Makes a Difference Ecologically?’
57. I develop the notion of the maternal through the trope of the pregnant body as a paradigmatic instance of the material given, in Elvey, Ecological Feminist Reading of the Gospel of Luke.
religious heritage of the European woman who several times exclaims ‘Mother of God!’ At first when the son, whom she had thought dead is alive (surely an echo of the joy and perhaps also the compassion of the father in the parable of the lost / prodigal son in Luke 15), the woman prays the opening line of the Magnificat. Later when she recalls the child’s birth and her participation in what she sees as the wondrous life-giving of creation, she exclaims: ‘Behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed’.59

The Earth and the maternal, in particular the body in pregnancy, share a quality of gift-life givenness – a material givenness – that is necessary for human and other forms of mammalian life.60 This quality of givenness is in tension with the kinds of hyperseparations, or dualisms, of which Plumwood is rightly critical: self–other; heaven–earth; spirit–matter; mind–body; master–slave. The last of these supposed oppositions is at issue in the world of Lukan reversals of rich–poor and oppressor–oppressed, where good news means liberation and forgiveness of the kind of debt that keeps people in slavery not only to sin, but also – and it can be argued, primarily materially – to unjust economic, social and political systems.61 At the same time, these issues of death and life are rooted in what Michael Trainor identifies as the underlying biblical story of creation embedded in the infancy narratives of Luke.62 This creation and birth story for Luke stands in tension with the Roman imperial story (2.1–7)63 and offers a different kind of peace on and for – and we might want to add in cooperation with – Earth (2.14). The visiting angels, bringing a message of peace from the skies (also part of the cosmos in which Earth is itself embedded), are part of creation for the first-century CE writer of Luke. In the Magnificat the issues of life and death are evident not only in the

61. Plumwood, Feminism and the Mastery of Nature; Elvey, ‘Can There Be a Forgiveness That Makes a Difference Ecologically?’
62. Trainor, About Earth’s Child, esp. 64–90.
tropes of power and wealth, sustenance and satiation (1.51–53), but also in the divine mercy – both toward the humble or humiliated woman (1.48, 50) and through the covenant with the ancestors toward the people of Israel (1.54–55). This mercy is expressed in Luke in what Brendan Byrne describes as the hospitality of God, evident in the tropes of forgiveness and compassion.64

As Cobby Eckermann’s ‘Intervention Payback’ shows among other things, it is important neither to essentialize nor sentimentalize ‘the maternal’. Nor is this my intention. Rather, the maternal needs to be recovered as one aspect of a material givenness, that might underwrite a cultural density that opens to the interrelationality and entanglement of humans in their more-than-human habitats. Such a recovery of the material given includes, for both writers and readers, a recognition of the materiality and the material performance of texts themselves.65

Rewriting the Magnificat: Entangled-Self

In recent years I have attempted a number of poetic and prayer-like responses to the Magnificat with an ecological framework in mind. What I have tried to do, within the limits of my skill, is not so much to translate or paraphrase for a contemporary context, but to both respect the song and to create, as John Kinsella writes in another context, ‘responses, versions, distractions, takes, adaptations and interpolations’ with an ecologically sympathetic ‘subtext’.66 The notions of cultural density and promise-self suggested above point toward an ecologically entangled-self. Land, community, culture (including literary and artistic inheritances), the more-than-human materiality that makes us human, our religious and spiritual traditions, histories and habitats, all the places and people near and far who sustain us: these shape a self that is entangled in its multiple more-than-human interrelationships and ecological and social impacts.

Cognisant of the problems of eliding the master–slave dynamic in the language of the Lukan Magnificat itself – namely, κυριός and δούλη, and the trope of reversal – I find it difficult to make a twenty-first-century intercultural translation of the text into an eco-poetic vernacular. Instead, in a small chapbook, Bent Toward the Thing, which largely responds to


images and words in the Lukian Magnificat from an ecological perspective, to begin I play on the word μεγαλύνει (it enlarges or makes great), as if it referred to our capacity to magnify to see both ‘the distant’ and ‘the small’ so that praise becomes a practice of attention, ‘a bringing into focus’.67

Hearing the speaker of the song proclaim ‘my soul magnifies’, I have asked ‘What is a soul?’ and suggest a poetics of attentive witness – ‘A soul / pauses to witness / a magpie. Its body // is a lever, its / beak a chisel, / prising bark from the trunk / of a myrtle’ – and moving to: ‘Then / the soul is a prayer / may a great / white egret / lance your skies’.68 I have explored the notion of glory behind ‘magnification’ and ‘praise’, so that ‘hinged on the wind, glory’ becomes an aspect of attentive inter-relationality with things: ‘sky blossoms / with punctuations of light // or glory bursts with rosellas…’69 And I have wondered about the way ‘mercy’ might be thought in more-than-human relations, where ‘After drought // the grass shoots in cracked clay’. 70

The above examples suggest a rewriting that recovers a more-than-human Earth community as presence; there are problematic aspects to this in an Australian frame where place is always another’s place and witness to more-than-human contexts rests on Indigenous inhabitation of country (whether acknowledged or otherwise) and is intertwined with our own interpersonal relations. So I have set the question of what human generations might look like in a more-than-human frame, in the context of an aging parent’s last year spent in a nursing home, where ‘The parent is not / an ancestor’ and:

…This is no monastery.
This chiming life is descended from
the stars; the dying matter of things
is the slow bearing forth of cells,

the astral pulse that falls inward,
the excess of history’s eons in the flesh.71

Turning to the form of prayer and the questions of protest at oppressive power, I have wondered what an ecological reversal might look like in a context where ‘We breathe Earth’s breath’. Shifting from the Magnificat’s ‘he’ for a male God as agent of the reversals to a more open ‘who’, as a word that begins a phrase, subordinate clause or question:

Who has seen the mountaintop removed
and the valley filled with tailings

Who knows the shame of kin torn from country
and has looked on the coral in its reef

Who has scattered the proud
in the thoughts of their hearts

Who has brought down coal magnates
and renewed despoiled habitats

Who has sustained endangered species
and summoned to account the shareholders

Who has slowed the thundering roadtrain and
from the pouch of the prone roo lifted the joey

Who has shaken the foundations of our comfort
and crawled into the burrow of the endling?2

Not satisfied with these responses that work in large part with the grain of the text, I come to a protest, side-on to the text in ‘Un-singing Mary’s song’:

I do not magnify
and yet my soul is bent

not to the invader his hand
on the throat, not to the skin –

his tearing – but toward
the moment: the songs

72. Part of a longer prayer in Elvey, ‘Reading the Magnificat in a Time of Crisis’, 223–5, though in that version the more open-ended ‘who’ is not used. An endling is the last surviving individual of a species.
still keeping
country, a mercy

to come, the unbound
child, the hood

removed, this violence
that would upend

to renovate. Does
the sharp glint

of sun on Hubble
bind sight

to a fantasy or to
ancestries themselves –

migrations, cells, sand
sepsis, rhyme, the metre

of a globe gone
terror-mad

as if a veil were all
it took to shatter

recollected, to elide
the older intervention

that clings to boots?
Wipe, do not wipe it

off. Soft to her cheek
this cloth this child

his breath a promise
that is not already dwelling

on land, which may
or may not own you.

The wind stirs leaves
and limbs as if to say
who, who, who
entangles matter

with generation
surrender with survival.

While it may be more fraught with the potential for failure than is the prose of strictly academic writing, the reading and writing of contemporary responses to the multiple conflicts in which we are enmeshed has a place in ecological engagements with biblical texts, and especially with biblical poetry. In the final piece above, I have tried to listen to and gesture towards some contemporary symptoms of the Australian contexts of military and colonial conflict I considered more closely in the essay – Australia’s involvement in armed conflict in Iraq; our cruel offshore detention of asylum seekers; a rising Islamophobia; our continuing failures to respond to systematic injustices toward Indigenous people; our inadequate response to climate change. As I wrote at the outset, I am interested in the way readings and writings move from an anthropocentric focus on human conflicts to an ecological focus that embeds human relationships in wider more-than-human interdependencies and relationalities which might be called entanglements. The interplay between contexts, poetry, narrative, and biblical texts can be framed as the beginning of an eco-aesthetic hermeneutics of entanglement, where culture is pluri-vocally embedded in and densely entangled with multiple subjectivities, habitats and contexts – a reading and writing toward an ‘environmental culture’ to come which might also be a culture of peace.73

I have two images. The first is a photograph. I am looking at a picture of a small boy. He has short dark hair, recently cut. He seems to be smartly and carefully dressed. He is wearing a bright red T-shirt and blue pants that go just past his knees revealing his white legs. He is wearing dark-blue sneakers. Each shoe has two felt straps that enable him to secure them easily to his feet, a thoughtful addition. I learn that he is three years old. His name is Aylan Kurdi and he is from the town of Kobani, in northern Syria. I cannot see his face. He is lying face-down in sea water; his body on the edge of the beach. His bare arms are listless by his side. He is dead, drowned. I discover that his five-year-old elder brother and mother met a similar fate, as did at least twelve other Syrians in their attempt to seek refuge on the Greek island of Kos.¹ Aylan, his brother and mother are just three victims of the Syrian war. Aylan Kurdi is its human face.

By mid-2015, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) estimated 12,000 children have died through the conflict with 11 million Syrians displaced.² In 2014, UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, estimated that 60 million people have been forcibly displaced worldwide – that number rose considerably in 2015, as we see people, mainly from

Syria, Afghanistan, Iran and Somalia, fleeing across European borders and struggling to be welcomed in places of safety.\(^3\) This number represents three times the population of Australia and the greatest displacement of peoples since the Second World War.

The human cost of what we are witnessing represents the greatest tragedy of conflict, violence and war. But it is not the only one. War touches all interconnected realities on our planet, organic and non-organic, human and non-human. Nature suffers, habitats are destroyed, and ‘ecocide’ – the destruction of ecosystems and landscapes – results.\(^4\) Jurgen Brauer introduces his study on the ecological consequences of war in these words: ‘Every bullet made, every barrack built, and every battleship set to sail consumes natural resources. No one knows how much. Even approximations are difficult to make. Between 2 and 3 percent of measured annual world income is expended on military pursuits, at times more, at times less, in some states much more, and in others much less.’\(^5\)

Brauer investigates several examples of how various components of war affect our Earth. One on which he concentrates is the effect which radioactive fallout has on human beings and the environment. He quotes the work of Steven Simon, André Bouville and Charles Land:

Following the deposition of fallout on the ground, local human populations are exposed to external and internal irradiation... Internal irradiation exposures can arise from inhaling fallout and absorbing it through intact or injured skin, but the main exposure route is from consumption of contaminated food. Vegetation can be contaminated when fallout is directly

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deposited on external surfaces of plants and when it is absorbed through the roots of plants. Also, people can be exposed when they eat meat and milk from animals grazing on contaminated vegetation. In the Marshall Islands, foodstuffs were also contaminated by fallout directly deposited on food and cooking utensils. 6

War destroys our world. It deeply affects human beings, families, peoples and cultures. It has widespread ecological consequences. In less violent but no less serious situations of political tension and unrest there are similar effects.

A Wall
The second image is a wall. I travel to the Middle East and I find myself in Jerusalem. It is a politically and religiously complex, ancient and modern city. At times, it is tense, though many do get on with each other and the differences that surround them. Military and police are ever present, alert to the possibility of violence that erupts from religious extremists. Jerusalem reflects the wider political and military tension that exists between Israel and Palestine. This is seen in an 8-metre-high grey concrete separation wall that snakes its way around the outskirts of Jerusalem. It is intended to follow the 1947 armistice ‘green line’ up to 700 km, but there are significant departures from it.

From the Israeli side, the barrier is described as a ‘temporary and reversible line of defense’ that has lessened the number of suicide bombing attacks on Israel. 7 From the Palestinian point of view, the barrier has meant divided families, restricted freedom with limited access to medical and social facilities with fewer checkpoints.

The wall is seen as a practical response to terrorist acts on Israeli citizens. At another level, it is symbolic of the consequences of war between peoples. Apart from the social impact which the barrier has had on families, there are humanitarian and ecological consequences which reflect, in this part of the world, what is known in other parts where terrorism and violence are more palpable. According to a 2005 United Nations report about the separation wall:

Where the Barrier has been constructed, Palestinians face economic hardship from being restricted from or not being able to reach their land to harvest crops, graze animals or earn a living. Residents have also been cut off from schools, universities and specialized medical care by the constructed Barrier… The damage caused by the destruction of land and property for the Barrier’s construction will take many years to recover and hinder Palestinian development should a political situation allow this … The Barrier also fragments communities and isolates residents from social support networks. Even where the Barrier route does not encircle an area as an enclave, its presence may still impact a community.8

The environmental impact and level of community neglect caused by the barrier is further observable in those Arab neighbourhoods not physically divided but surrounded by it.9 Here, in a situation that might be considered less traumatic than the larger human-refugee crises brought about by wars and conflicts confronting Europe, ecological consequences are still observable.

The movement of peoples from regions of conflicts, the build-up of arms, conventional and nuclear, and the barriers of separation that divide and cut off, introduced above, are the results of one primary factor – the fear of the ‘other’. In these situations, the ‘other’ is the enemy, imaginary or real, that produces fear and causes people to move to places and countries of safety, arm for self-defence or build barriers for protection. These acts inevitably result in human tragedy and ecocide, as ecosystems die and environments perish. Earth is not a neutral object or passive playhouse in which this takes place, but a participant and a victim. It has a voice.


But there is another voice. Situations of global tragedy and violence that lead to ecocide, like the present, require critical and counterbalancing voices to speak, especially from representatives of the world’s religious


9. For an analysis of the effects of the separation barrier in Jerusalem’s Arab neighbourhoods, see P. Cidor, ‘Beyond the Barrier: Somewhere Over the Wall’, The Jerusalem Post (21 August 2015): 16.
traditions. These can offer sagacious insights on how to engage the enemy, the threatening ‘other’.

In this context, I seek to recover the voice of an ancient Christian text, the *Gospel According to Luke*. This gospel, written in the late first century CE to Jesus followers, offers a unique, unconventional and controversial perspective on how to engage the enemy. The writer reveals this in the gospel’s portrait of Jesus who engages the civic and political realities of the late first-century Greco-Roman world encountered by Luke’s gospel household, a gathering of third-generation Jesus followers. This world is typified by stratified social relations, agonistic negotiations and ethnic divisions. It is a world essentially of violence and war, honour and shame. The ‘other’ – whether that is another kinship group, polis, clan or race – is always perceived as the primary threat to a household’s honour.

In what follows, I seek to explore the way that Luke presents Jesus in his response to this threat of the enemy in one particular scene, towards the gospel’s end. In its final chapters, after a long journey that the evangelist packs with discipleship teaching, Jesus finally arrives into Jerusalem, the city that ‘kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it’ (13.34). Opposition against Jesus from the religious authorities reaches a crescendo. They look for an opportunity to arrest and ‘destroy’ him (19.47; 20.19–20; 22.1–6). The occasion comes on the night Jesus gathers with his disciples on Mt Olivet after their final Passover meal (22.39–53). In this scene, as I shall show, the evangelist offers two important insights, one more obvious than the other, and both critical in today’s world.

First, Luke highlights Jesus’ response to the enemy. His physical actions reflect his teaching about enemy love flagged earlier in the gospel. This response is socially and culturally challenging, given the conventional challenge–riposte interaction in an honour–shame Mediterranean society. Luke’s Jesus offers an important counter-balancing response in a world with a penchant for escalating, tit-for-tat violence.

Second, from a contemporary ecologically nuanced perspective, the story also offers a meditation on Earth that counters the ecocidal inevitability that results from enemy hostility and violence. I am not suggesting that Luke was an ancient ecologist. Rather, it is possible to release

10. A representative and iconic example of this ancient Mediterranean ethnic separation and agonistic cultural superiority can be seen in Aphrodisias’ Sebasteion, where Rome’s divinised history and deified emperors are displayed vanquishing tribes, nations and races.

the ecological resonances present in the scene, unnoticed by biblical commentators formed by more conventional anthropocentric interpretative premises. The evangelist and the householders addressed by the gospel were immersed in the natural world around them. They had a variety of relationships to nature and their environment according to their position on the social ladder and their dependency on Earth’s gifts and products. Seed (8.4–21), grain (12.18), plants (13.9), trees (6.43–44; 19.3–5; 21.28–32), animals (14.5; 8.26–39; 9.58), birds (3.22; 9.58; 12.22–24), pigs (8.26–39; 15.15–16), fish (5.6–9; 9.13, 16); water (5.2; 8.26–39), wilderness (4.42; 5.15; 7.24; 9.12); mountains (6.12), wind (7.24; 8.24) and oil (7.46) feature in Luke’s gospel. This is the peasant world of subsistent farming and imperial taxation. In the gospel world, Earth is more than a stage backdrop for the real redemptive human drama executed by Luke’s Jesus. Rather, it is the subject of Jesus’ teaching, at certain key moments the focus of healing and even an actor that cooperates in his all-inclusive ministry.

The tendency of most Lukan scholars to view gospel accounts as stories solely about Jesus and his ministry for human beings has skewed our attention away from the ecological and environmental nuances of his ministry. Liberationist hermeneutics validates an exegetical approach that releases or ‘notices’ hidden figures in the gospels, human and non-human.

Further, as one concerned about Earth and its environment, I bring this concern to the biblical text with which I am engaged and the particular story upon which I focus. The ‘intertextual’ engagement that takes place between my ‘text’, my world and its concerns, with the gospel ‘text’, its world and agenda communicated through the narrative, allows for constitutive meaning to surface. This meaning is, in theological terms, the ‘word’ that communicates God’s concern for creation, human and non-human, revealed through Jesus of Nazareth. In other words, I can engage the gospel with an eco-theological sensitivity. Not to do so would be to limit the possibilities which the gospel can offer us today.

Well-honed approaches to biblical interpretation (‘criticisms’) have been helpful in establishing the agenda of the biblical writers. However, we arrive at meaning through an intertextual engagement with the ancient text


13. For more on this perspective, consult N. C. Habel, ed., Readings from the Perspective of the Earth, Earth Bible 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000), and subsequent volumes in the Earth Bible series.

in the light of our own ‘text’. This is the world in which we live today. Such engagement lies at the heart of authentic dialogue.

With these two points of view in mind – the teaching which Luke’s Jesus offers in how to respond to the enemy and the ecological but unnoticed perspective present in the gospel – let me turn now to the story of what happens on Mt Olivet, but first, what leads to it.

**Jesus’ Final Meal Teaching (Luke 22.35–38)**

In a final meal Jesus gathers with his disciples on the night of Passover (22.14–23) aware of the betrayal and suffering that await him (22.15, 22–23). During the meal, a faction fight breaks out among the disciples (22.15–27), perhaps reflecting what is happening amongst the leaders in Luke’s household, and this leads to Jesus encouraging an attitude of service and mission rather than expected benefaction (22.27–30).

As the meal concludes, Jesus forecasts Peter’s failed though rehabilitated discipleship (22.31–4). Just before Jesus’ passion proper unfolds and his aggressors make their appearance, Luke offers a final summary about authentic discipleship (22.35–38). This teaching pulls together key threads of discipleship teaching that Jesus offered earlier in his journey to Jerusalem with his disciples – a deliberately extended section in Luke’s narrative. This concluding meal teaching does something further. It sums up and anticipates the two perspectives named above, Jesus’ response to the enemy and the role which Earth plays in this. These unfold in the scene that follows.

Jesus asks his disciples,

> ‘When I sent you out without money purse or bag or sandals did you lack anything?’ They replied ‘Nothing!’ He said to them ‘But now, the one who has a money purse must take it, likewise a bag. And let the one who has no sword sell their cloak and buy one. For I say to you that this scripture must be fulfilled in me, “And he was reckoned with the lawless” for also what is written about me has its completion.’ And they said, ‘Lord, behold there are two swords here’. He said to them ‘It is enough!’ (22.35–38)’

At first glance it seems that in Luke 22.35–38, Jesus encourages his disciples to gather their possessions (indicated by the ‘money purse’ and the ‘bag’) and be ready for armed conflict (by purchasing a ‘sword’). This text, however, must be placed against Luke’s earlier teaching about enemy love and the accumulation of possessions. This, in turn, will temper

15. Unless otherwise indicated, I offer a translation of the Greek text.
any tendency to literalise what Luke’s Jesus seems to be suggesting in 22.35–38.

**Dealing with the Enemy**

The gospel’s central teaching about how to deal with the enemy appears in Jesus’ ‘sermon on the plain’. This occurs early in his public ministry in 6.27–36. It is prepared by a series of blessings and woes (6.20–26), characteristic of the biblical prophetic tradition. Jesus invites disciples (and Luke’s householders) to recognize their blessedness despite what seems contrary: poverty, hunger, sorrow and being hated by others (6.20–23). He urges them to ongoing conversion lest they become trapped by wealth, self-satisfaction and social status (6.24–26). One of the beatitudes explicitly addresses those who experience hatred, rejection and revilement: ‘Blessed are you when humans hate (μισήσωσιν) you and when they set you apart (ἀφορίσωσιν) and revile you and cast your name out as evil on account of the Human One’ (6.22).

Here Luke identifies the real enemy. That enemy is a collective of human beings who ostracize, oppress, hamper, hate and revile Jesus’ disciples whom they regard as evil and in need of exorcism. The meaning behind the Greek verb ἀφορίζω suggests that this public act of humiliation separates, divides and isolates the Lukan householders as they become socially demonized.17

The naming of these dishonourable attitudes exhibited towards Jesus’ disciples by their ‘enemies’ leads to 6.27–36 and his explicit teaching about how to respond to such demonization. His teaching stands in clear contrast with what is expected in Luke’s socially acceptable retaliatory world, where maltreatment and dishonour met their response in kind. The ancient Greek orator Lysias (445–380 BCE) offers the clearest expression of this attitude when he writes, ‘I considered it established that one should do harm to one’s enemies and be of service to one’s friends’.18

Jesus’ teaching is different. It begins with an explicit ‘but’ to indicate its cultural distinctiveness. He addresses those who are ‘listening’, those

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16. There are parallels in Luke’s ‘sermon on the plain’ with Matthew’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’. Obviously both draw on the Q tradition, a hypothetically constructed sayings-source available to both evangelists.


open to this instruction; obviously, not everyone who follows Jesus wants to hear what he has to say!

But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate (μισοῦν) you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse (ἐπηρεαζόντων) you. To the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from the one who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs you, and of the one who takes away your possessions do not ask them again. (6.27–30)

Jesus’ words concern how to respond to the enemy. They explicitly connect to the earlier beatitude about those who experience revilement. The verb ‘hate’ (μισέω) found in the beatitude teaching of 6.22 recurs here, thus linking the two statements.

There are four things to note about this instruction. The first concerns the plurality of the wrongdoers and the social context of those encouraged to respond positively. Taken with the beatitude of 6.22–23, the enemy is not a singular individual but a collective that hates, rejects, isolates and demonizes. The plural, ‘enemies’ and the repetition of ‘those’ in reference to the revilers confirm this. The social nature of these enemies meets its counterpart in Luke’s Jesus household. The evangelist is not encouraging a private or individualized spirituality but a communal response reflective of the Greco-Roman world of kinship networks evident within the Jesus household. What affects one, touches all. This is particularly important, especially given a possible tendency to interpret the teaching as encouragement for the hurt or abused to ‘forgive’ the assailant or abuser singlehandedly in a private interchange that must be accompanied with affection. The communal context of the saying, however, moves the response to the enemy away from a private act of psychic affectivity, usually impossible for the individual abused, rejected or reviled. The response to the enemy comes from all members of the Jesus household, not just one.

Second, the response is active, not passive. The gospel householders are not to be victims but agents that disrupt the expected tit-for-tat interchange of reciprocal conduct. They are told to ‘love’, ‘do good’, ‘bless’ and ‘pray’ (6.27–28). They are not to be passive in the face of violence but active agents who break the cycle of violence and hatred. The words that Luke uses here are significant. The ‘love’ word in 6.27 is not φιλία (‘friendship’), ἔρος (‘passionate possessiveness’) but ἀγαπάω – a response that reflects the care of God for the other.19

The plural imperative of the verbs (‘love’, ‘do good’, ‘bless’, ‘pray’) further confirms that the response is not an affective emotional communion that the grieved individual might be expected to have towards her enemy, but a communal one that invokes the presence of God in the interaction. The deeply religious nature of the response is also supported by the other actions of ‘doing good’ and especially ‘blessing’ and ‘praying’ for the hating and abusive enemy. These explicit theological expressions suggest practical responses rather than inappropriate or unreasonable psychological dispositions. They allow God to be the agent towards the enemy, to subvert the expected cycle of violence and to expose the enemy to an encounter with a God who welcomes, invites and forgives.

Third, these divinely located communal actions, of loving, doing good, blessing and praying, are externalized in personal conduct or individual actions. From 6.29, the pericope moves from the plural to the singular ‘you’. Jesus suggests a number of individual responses – again, all proactive. The first is bodily. ‘To the one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also’ (6.29).

In reference to the parallel saying in Matthew’s ‘Sermon on the Mount’ (Matt. 5.39), Hans Dieter Betz has this to say about striking the cheek, regarded by the ancients as the seat of shame:

Turning to the striker the other cheek as well is a provocative invitation to receive a second strike. To do this is by no means a sign of weakness, but… one of moral strength. The gesture exposes the act of the offender as what it is: morally repulsive and improper. In addition, it doubles the renunciation of violence by the person insulted; and finally, it challenges the striker to react with comparable generosity. A person who would ignore the gesture and strike again would reveal that person as an uncivilized brute. Thus the turning of the other cheek is a highly provocative challenge demonstrating the *ius talionis* in reverse by taking the initiative in accordance with the Golden Rule (Mt 7:12).20

Fourth, the individual response also involves the use of Earth’s gifts to change the stance or attitude of the enemy. It is here that an ecological sensitivity to Jesus’ teaching can highlight for the auditor the way that

Earth can participate in the act of non-retaliatory forgiveness and disarmament. The aggrieved party is invited to give away their shirt when their outer cloak is taken (6.29c). Clothing of the ancient world did not come from fabricated materials but were Earth’s natural products. These Earth’s gifts which the disciple wears, can be shared, not in an avaricious but generous manner. Here, the giving of the extra shirt creates an unexpected vulnerability that would surprise. This deed also allows Earth to be an agent of transformation and conversion. A similar action occurs when the disciple responds to the beggar and to those who take their ‘goods’.

**Dealing with Possessions**

This brings us to consider further Luke’s teaching about ‘goods’. For authentic disciples these possessions (‘goods’) also come from Earth. They are not the creation or invention of the disciple, but God’s gifts to be shared with all in an act of unexpected benevolence. Kindness, rather than greed and possessiveness, typifies the disciple. This spirit concludes this important teaching and anticipates what will occur later on Mt Olivet when Jesus gathers with his disciples on the night of his last meal, a scene to which we shall shortly return.

Jesus concludes his teaching about enemy love: ‘But love your enemies, and do good, and lend expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be much, and you will be children of the Most High who is kind (χρηστός) to the ungrateful (ἀχαρίστους) and evil. Be compassionate (οἰκτίρονες) as your father is compassionate οἰκτίρμων’ (6.35–36). Luke’s play on words is obvious. The kindness (χρηστός) of the disciple who follows the Christos subverts the lack of gratitude (ἀχάρίστος) of the enemy. And this χρηστός is not simply anthropocentric, but embraces all creation. It is ecologically comprehensive and reveals the χρηστός of God who is also compassionate (οἰκτίρμος). The Greek οἰκτίρμος will become expanded in the next scenes of the gospel (7.13; 10.33 and 15.20) where Luke employs another expression related to compassion – σπλαγχνίζομαι. These words

underscore the kind of generative God revealed through the disciple’s deeds of kindness and generous attitude in the liberality displayed for all Earth’s gifts, including clothing and possessions.

If we were to trace further Luke’s teaching about wealth and possessions, it is clear that Jesus encourages his disciples to live simply without a spirit of possessiveness or wealth. This theme emerges especially in the gospel’s journey narrative as disciples are encouraged to ‘watch and keep guard from all greed; because one’s life is not determined by the excess of one’s possessions’ (12.15). In Luke’s world, greed resulted in wealth and was expressed in meanness. In a limited economy society, the wealthy accumulated possessions at the expense of the poor. From an environmental perspective, the accumulation of wealth is also a sign of ecological irresponsibility. The gospel illustrates this in several places, especially in the parable of 12.16–21, as Jesus responds to a request to adjudicate over the division of family inheritance. The parable concerns a rich landowner who greedily presumes that Earth’s fruits are his. He wants to hoard them selfishly for future enjoyment and leisure. Rather than the landowner having a long life of gratification, the parable ends with his unexpected death and the dispersal of his accumulated wealth (12.20). Jesus finally encourages disciples to orient their lives towards God (12.21) and live with ecological restraint and trust (12.22–13.5). For this reason, when Jesus sends the Twelve out on mission he invites them to take nothing for their journey but to rely on what hospitality is offered to them (9.1–6). A similar injunction is given later to the seventy(-two) that he sends out (10.4).

With these two insights in mind, Luke’s teaching about enemy love and possessions, we return to 22.35–38, Jesus’ interaction with his disciples that concludes their final meal.

It is clear that 22.35 (‘When I sent you out without money purse or bag or sandals did you lack anything?’ They replied ‘Nothing!’”) is consistent with what Luke teaches earlier. The disciples know that they did not need to accumulate Earth’s goods. They were in need of nothing, without reliance on money purse, bags or sandals (22.35), symbols of wealth, possessiveness and material dependency. The beneficence of God was transparent in their missionary encounters that they lacked nothing.

The Symbolism of the ‘Sword’

In light of this, the words that Jesus next addresses to his disciples are highly symbolic rather than literal: ‘But now, the one who has a money purse must take it, likewise a bag. And let the one who has no sword sell their cloak and buy one’ (22.36). We know already that the disciples do not own money purses, bags or extra sandals, given Jesus’ teaching about possessions on the journey and the manner that he sends them on mission (9.1–6; 10.4).

The hyperbolic nature of Jesus’ statement in 22.36 suggests that circumstances are going to change for them. They, like the one they follow, will experience rejection. Rather than accumulating possessions for self-protection in this new period, they are encouraged to be ready and not surprised by what is about to unfold and prophetically anticipated by Jesus. The important point, which Jesus states symbolically, is that they need to be aware and ready for the danger that awaits them, without resources to draw upon. In a symbolic sense they must purchase a ‘sword’. As Luke Timothy Johnson suggests:

The Greek [in 22.36] is ambiguous; it could mean either that a person who had no purse should sell a cloak and buy a sword, or (as here) that the one who had no sword should sell a cloak to get one. In either case, the hyperbole of the statement should be obvious. Selling one’s outer garment for a sword has not a literal but a symbolic point: they are entering a state of testing in which they will be without external resources and in danger.23

Clearly, this symbolism is lost on the disciples. They literally produce a sword, not one but two! That they further misunderstand Jesus’ message becomes clearer in the next scene as Jesus gathers with them to pray and prepare for what will transpire. One of them will become a sword-wielder who acts violently.

On Mt Olivet

As they move from the table, Jesus goes to Mt Olivet ‘as was his custom’ (22.39b). Customary for Jesus is his communion with Earth’s topography, Mt Olivet. Only after the mention of Jesus’ regular visit to the Mount itself, to this explicit physical location, does Luke then note that the disciples follow him (22.39b). The presumption is that this is also his usual setting

for prayer, but the central point is his environmental solidarity which, as the scene unfolds, becomes the setting of divine encounter. This place is explicit in the story. It is a prime actor, not an after-thought or stage prop for what takes place. This hilly landscape is central as the means for Jesus’ communion with God and mediator of the divine presence. God speaks within and through the setting, not above or beside it. Mt Olivet is the Earth’s sanctuary for prayer. This is clear from the next verse: ‘And coming upon the place, he said to them, “Pray that you may not enter into temptation”’ (22.40). The place draws Jesus into prayer which he encourages in his disciples as they resist ‘temptation’, to give up hope in the face of aggression and to act with violence towards the enemy. That they have not prayed as Jesus encourages soon becomes obvious.

Jesus’ communion with Earth is further noted: ‘Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed’ (22.41). Earth bears and companions Jesus in prayer. It is in solidarity with him, while his disciples remain ‘a stone’s throw’ away. They are close, observing him in prayer, as he kneels upon Earth’s soil allowing it to be his focus of contemplation and the means of his communion with God. He struggles with what will unfold and seeks out God’s presence in this moment of earthly communion.

If what happens next is original to the gospel then the appearance of the heavenly angel confirms Jesus’ communion with God and God’s presence to him:24 ‘And there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly. And it happened that his sweat became like drops of blood falling upon the Earth’ (22.43–44). Jesus embodies the solidarity of heaven with Earth in his agony, symbolically represented as his blood literally ‘falls upon the Earth’ (22.44c). Creation is present to Jesus, mediates God’s communion with him. The image of his blood mingling with Earth accentuates the co-mingling energies of human life with Earth and Earth’s reception of this suffering – a scene played out through history as Earth bears the struggles and bears the pain of all who suffer. Ecological intimacy is palpable and strengthening.

Jesus arises from his earthly prayer. He returns to his sleeping disciples (22.45). Again he encourages them to pray (22.46). This is the antidote to aloneness, disappointment and violent aggression that abuses Earth’s gifts. At this moment the enemy and violence enter the scene led by Judas with an arresting party (22.47). Anticipating what would follow,

one of Jesus’ disciples takes the sword and slashes off the right ear of the high priest’s slave: ‘Those about him seeing what would take place, said, “Lord, shall we strike with the sword?” And one of them struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his right ear. Jesus responded, “Enough of this!” and touching his ear, he healed him’ (22.49–51).

There are four things to note in these few verses. First, the question addressed to Jesus gives him the title ‘Lord’ – a post-Easter title. The confrontation and the violence that results continue to be part of the ethical dilemmas facing Jesus households in every generation, in the post-Easter period. The scene becomes a window into Luke’s world, and also ours. Violence seems to beget violence.

Second, without waiting for Jesus’ answer – the gospel audience and the questioning disciples would already know the answer from his teaching earlier in the gospel – a sword-wielding disciple violently responds. The sword, a composite of Earth’s products, is used against one of Earth’s creatures by one presumably sensitive to Earth’s gifts and an agent of ecological freedom. Not only is this an act of violence against another human being, it is profound violation of Earth itself and an abuse of its resources. Violence has ecological consequences. It is a failure in discipleship and ecological asceticism.

Third, in the action, the slave’s right ear is removed. At a symbolic level something else is happening. The ‘right’ is the culturally more honourable side of a person. The deed is a more serious act of human degradation and an attack on someone representing the social and religious elite. In removing an ear, the act has also removed an organ of hearing symbolically representative of the capacity to contemplate – and so to understand and sympathize with – Earth. Symbolically, the ability to be ecologically contemplative has been compromised.

Finally, Jesus responds in a way that he has done throughout the gospel. He touches and heals the slave’s ear. This is an act that brings wholeness to a member of the Earth household. It also allows for the re-establishment of a potential ecologically contemplative spirit symbolized through the ear. To listen and to contemplate also invites a response. Love and compassion for the aggressor counterbalance violence and Earth’s destruction. Acts of healing and care are the only appropriate rejoinder from Luke’s Jesus in a world of violence and environmental degradation. The scene ends with Jesus addressing his captors and inviting them to disarm themselves from swords and clubs, symbols of violence and Earth abuse (22.52). On these

words, the power of darkness rolls on and the rest of Luke’s story of Jesus’ passion, death and resurrection continues.

Conclusion

In a world saturated with violence and war there is always a victim. This is our planet, Earth, in which human beings live and seek peace and happiness. War and ecological damage are synonymous. Placing this experience against one of the most important texts in the Christian collection of writings opens up new vistas of insight.

Luke’s story of Jesus offers contemporary auditors a way of reflecting upon the ecological implications of living in a time of seemingly increased global violence and hostility. As I have suggested, the gospel is ecologically resonant. Jesus is concerned about human and non-human creation. This concern spills over into his instruction to potential disciples about the way they are to deal with the enemy. Luke 6.27–36 explicates this teaching. Jesus encourages disciples to respond in a proactive, non-realtoratory, disarming, communal spirit, as they share with their enemy Earth’s gifts, symbolized in clothing and their detachment from an obsession with accumulated wealth. The essence of this teaching becomes acted out in the gospel’s final chapters as Jesus confronts his enemies.

In Luke’s story of Jesus’ suffering and death, a key moment occurs when Jesus gathers with his disciples on Mt Olivet (22.39–53). In the evangelist’s scene of prayer, refashioned from Mark’s originating story, Jesus is about to face his enemies and the unfolding of their scheme to have him executed. This is anticipated by his table instructions to his disciples to be ecologically attuned and resist the temptation to violence (22.36). His disciples miss the symbolism of his message and presume a literalness in being prepared for armed conflict. The ‘sword’ becomes that symbol. This also needs to be heard against Luke’s teaching about possession, material wealth and love of the enemy expressed earlier. These two central themes of Jesus’ teaching become the interpreting context for his table instruction to the disciples and what unfolds on Mt Olivet.

On Mt Olivet, Jesus’ prayer is ecologically framed as he encounters his God and prepares to meet violence: he prays on this mountain, kneels upon it and, if the disputed vv. 43–44 are authentic, allows the sap of his being to mingle with Earth’s. This prayer with its ecologically evocative images and resonances prepares him to meet the arresting crowd led by one of his twelve disciples. An act of intimacy, a kiss, becomes an act of betrayal, violence erupts, and an official of the arresting party is wounded. A healing touch from Jesus subverts an expected train of events
that would lead to an escalation of violence. Jesus’ actions, his ecological connectedness with Earth and God, reinforce earlier teaching about how to deal with the enemy.

This scene in particular and Luke’s Gospel in general offer a counterbalancing word to Christians today seeking to respond to the rise of violence in our world. Healing compassion rather than reciprocal aggression disarms. The image of the limp body of the three-year-old Aylan Kurdi carried by a Turkish police officer away from the water’s edge iconically expresses the need for such compassion.

The invitation to ‘pray’, ‘bless’ and share Earth’s resources with the enemy destabilizes aggression and places the aggressor in another frame of reference. These attitudes will remove barriers of separation, disarm mistrust and befriend the other. If Earth is a communicator of the divine presence, which is one of Luke’s central motifs in the scene of Jesus on Mt Olivet, then the sharing of Earth’s resources in an open and non-violent manner exposes the aggressor to God’s goodness, indeed to God’s very being. This exposure subverts the cycle of violence and allows a sacred perspective to enter the encounter. This is the teaching from Luke’s Jesus in dealing with the enemy.
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THE DEATH OF ABSALOM:
THE FOREST IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

Marie Turner

Introduction

It is difficult for a twenty-first-century reader, faced with the current atrocities being committed in the Middle East and Europe, and being confronted every day with images of displaced families fleeing their homes in fear of unimaginable violence, to think of war in any terms other than brutality. We cannot presume, however, that this was the prevailing mind-set of the ancient Near East Iron Age, the time of David and Absalom. There are clear references in the books of Samuel which indicate that warriors were revered; at the same time, true to the ambiguities that pervade these books, there are indications that the writer or writers responsible for the anti-monarchic strand evident in 1 Sam. 8 comprehended the exploitation and horrendous violence that was the ubiquitous companion of military power in the ancient Near East. When the text of 1 Sam. 8.11–20 is studied, the reader cannot help but notice the warning in the repetition of the word ‘take’ in reference to all the demands the king will make when he engages in war against the neighbouring nations.

Against this background, this present essay explores the role that the Forest of Ephraim plays in the battle between Absalom and David from the point of view of ecology. Is the statement in 2 Sam. 18.8, ‘The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the Forest claimed more victims that day than the sword’, a note of celebration of a warrior Forest? Is it an account of Earth’s sentence upon those who would bring violent death into the Forest’s natural domain? In other words, is the Forest complicit in the violence of war, or a victim of the slaughter brought into its realm? Or is there a third perspective wherein an honourable warrior Forest brings about a deserved sentence of death upon dishonourable human beings?
The books of Samuel are notoriously ambiguous. As well as the generally acknowledged pro-monarchic and anti-monarchic strain as noted particularly in 1 Sam. 8, the books depict a flawed David, yet the final version of the books end on a positive note, with the Lord answering David’s supplication and averting the plague from Israel (2 Sam. 24.25). It is unlikely, therefore, that a facile answer can be given to the above questions. The purpose of this study is not to revisit ground upon which scholars have written copiously; rather, the purpose is to focus on the place and role of the Forest of Ephraim, an integral part of the Earth community, in the slaughter of Absalom’s followers.

A timeless caution for the contemporary reader can be heard in the irony of 18.8: ‘The battle spread over the face of all the country (ארץ); and the forest claimed (אכל) more victims that day than the sword’. When the battle spreads over the ארץ, which has been the provider of nourishment for the soldiers, it is the Forest (יער) as an integral part of Earth community which becomes the one who devours / eats (אכל) those who have spilled blood on its earth. The verse recalls the earlier verses in chs. 16 and 17 where it is David, rather than Absalom and his followers, who is the one in focus. On the way to the Forest to engage in battle with Absalom, David is nourished and refreshed by Earth and its produce (16.1–2; 17.28–29); he is also cursed for the blood of the House of Saul which he has spilled on the ground (16.7–8). Earth community, therefore, is ambivalent in the text of 2 Sam. 12–18, at times bringing life to the warriors and at times on the side of death, condemning those same warriors. The battle at the Forest of Ephraim is the culmination of Nathan’s prophetic word of judgement to David in 2 Sam. 12.10: ‘Now therefore the sword shall never depart from your house, for you have despised me, and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife’. In the final moments of Absalom’s life, it is the terebinth or oak in the Forest which holds him suspended long enough for Joab and his retinue to finish him off with their swords.

A central issue for a ‘war and ecology’ reading is the interrelationship of Forest and sword, and the role the Forest plays in bringing death upon the ground of the Earth. Is the Forest guilty of violence in the ‘devouring’ of the fighters, or is it the victim of a war brought uninvited into its domain? For contemporary ecology the issue becomes the universal problem, not

only of the destruction brought upon the human victims of warfare, but also the devastation of the ground where the battles are fought.

The Story

The narrative of 2 Sam. 11–18, which leads from the death of Uriah to the slaughter in the Forest, is well-known. It can be described as a classic story of an over-indulgent father and a son who loved power more than he loved his father, the king. The spiral of violence, which began with Uriah’s death and continued with the rape of Tamar (2 Sam. 13), takes on a new intensity near the Forest of Ephraim when Absalom puts into action his plan to kill his half-brother, Amnon. He asks David to allow Amnon and ‘all the king’s sons’ to come to a feast at sheep-shearing time: ‘Absalom made a feast like a king’s feast’ (2 Sam. 13.27). Food here is a symbol of the betrayal which is an undertone of the narrative: the constant rivalry which marks the succession ambitions of the Davidic line. It was the request for food which set the scene for Tamar’s tragedy (2 Sam. 13.4–9), and it is the wine served during Absalom’s feast which makes Amnon vulnerable to the final strike:

Then Absalom commanded his servants, ‘Watch when Amnon’s heart is merry with wine, and when I say to you, “Strike Amnon”, then kill him. Do not be afraid; have I not myself commanded you? Be courageous and valiant.’ So the servants of Absalom did to Amnon as Absalom had commanded. Then all the king’s sons rose, and each mounted his mule and fled. (2 Sam. 13.28–29)

The narrative is ambiguous, leaving the reader to question whether Absalom’s motives are altruistic or self-serving. Absalom uses the word ‘valiant’ (חיל) of the assassins, suggesting that either he is duplicitous, or he has a genuine conviction that he is acting righteously. The reader suspects that his motive is not as altruistic as the avenging of Tamar would be. The designation of the invitees as ‘the king’s sons’ identifies them as heirs to the throne and therefore obstacles to Absalom’s ambition. There is a gap in the text, since we are unaware whether Absalom would actually have killed the rest of the king’s sons had they not fled. Notwithstanding Absalom’s intentions, he kills Amnon, his elder brother, and thus the scene is set for the assault on the throne. Speaking historically, Baruch Halpern ascribes an honourable motive to Absalom, seeing him as leader of a group of the northern Israelites seeking to free themselves from an
increasingly oppressive Davidic dynasty.² Shimon Bar-Efrat, on the other hand, claims that as a rule the narrator stays more or less aloof from his history.³ In the context of the narrative, there is no clear answer, but in view of what follows, the reader is undeniably left with the suspicion that Absalom’s motives are at least mixed.

The main human protagonists in the drama following the slaying of Amnon are David and Joab, Absalom and his adviser, Ahitophel, and the various ‘bit players’ who play a role in either cursing or blessing. But woven into the account is another character, the consistently present landscape. The first act of violence against the landscape comes when Absalom burns Joab’s field of barley (2 Sam. 14.30), and in the end, as the Forest, the landscape becomes the one who inflicts violence when it becomes the nemesis of Absalom.

**War Ideology**

In her essay, ‘Fighting in Writing: Warfare in Histories of Ancient Israel’, Megan Moore poses the confronting question, ‘Should war usurp religion as the prevailing social reality or condition that defines life and community, both the big events and daily existence, in histories of ancient Israel? Is war in fact the common thread of Israelite unity, religious or political?’⁴ The question subtly presumes a dichotomy between war and religion. In the same collection of essays, however, J. L. Wright writes from the perspective of a theology of the warrior ruler in which the warrior king and the divine, in David’s case Yhwh, fight simultaneously on the battlefield.⁵ From this perspective there is no dichotomy, since war and religion are inseparable in the histories of the ancient Near East. In an article dealing with the constructed form of revered masculinity in the social reality of the ancient Near East, David Clines points to the prestige David gains as a warrior. As Clines says, ‘The essential male characteristic in the David story is to be a warrior, a man of war (אישׁ מלחמה) or

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mighty man of valour (חיל גבר). Throughout the story, all the principal characters are warriors who spend a lot of their time fighting and killing.  

Early in his career, David is revered as a mighty warrior. The portent that he will take Saul’s throne, presumably honourably, occurs in a text which presumes that David is revered by the public (1 Sam. 18.6–9). The women sing, ‘Saul has killed his thousands, / and David his ten thousands’ (1 Sam. 18.7). Saul knows the import of the song: “They have ascribed to David tens of thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?” So Saul eyed David from that day on’ (1 Sam. 18.8–9).

In an era when it was believed a protector God had to be able to defeat the gods of other nations, warrior kings had to uphold their own role on the battlefield. As Wright points out:

one of the reasons why ancient kings were so fond of depicting themselves as great warriors is that their power-bases commonly viewed victories on the battlefield as divine confirmation of the king’s rule. Enemy attacks, along with famine, plagues, and other catastrophes, were accordingly dangerous for a ruler insofar as these same power-bases could interpret them as punishment for the king’s failure to comport himself in keeping with the expectations of a deity or deities…

Such ‘theological’ motivations for the emphasis on military prowess must be balanced by a consideration of other factors that are more socio-political in nature. The power-base of a ruler was usually already convinced that secure borders and access to resources abroad constituted the preconditions for domestic prosperity.  

In this world-view, we can understand the danger of David’s perceived weakness when he hears of the death of Absalom, and the necessity for Joab to ‘bring him to his senses’.

The role that warriors play in the narrative needs to be understood against the background of warrior nations, allowing at the same time for the clear direction of the narrative in terms of dishonourable conduct on the part of the protagonists. Nathan’s parable (2 Sam. 12.1–15) leaves us in no doubt that the house of David is one in the throes of dishonourable conduct. The parable clearly connects David’s sin against Uriah, and the taking of Bathsheba, with the sword upon his house. Thus, theologically


speaking, Absalom’s revolt is the outworking of God’s action because of the ‘thing’ which David did. Conspiracy rather than honour is the narrator’s focus. As the battlelines move towards the Forest, Ahitophel is named a conspirator (בקשׁרים) with Absalom (2 Sam. 15.31). Sword and conspiracy go hand in hand. To engage in warfare in the text would be a neutral act, neither moral nor immoral per se; to engage in warfare with dishonour is reprobate. It is clear that at least from Nathan’s parable on, the narrator is focused upon the warfare as the outcome of dishonourable conduct. Viewed from this perspective, it is unlikely that we should see the Forest as a warrior engaged in an honourable battle. The emphasis is on the slaughter in a shameful episode in the lives of a decadent family, and a Forest is drawn into the spilling of blood on its ground.

The Landscape

The Forest of Ephraim where the battle takes place is most probably the rocky, wooded stretch of country east of the Jordan, settled by the tribe of Ephraim. David leaves Jerusalem and moves across the Jordan, with Absalom in pursuit. The connection of this location with the territory of the tribe of Ephraim is not clear. Probably, Ephraim once extended farther to the east but this area was lost by the tribe after its defeat when 42,000 fell to Jephthah and the Gileadites (Judg. 12.1–6). The terrain was most probably a blend of high trees, deep undergrowth and rocky ground, not the most suitable battleground for anyone riding on a mule, as it proves for Absalom. The choice of terrain perhaps reflects favourably on David as a superior military strategist, possibly luring Absalom into the disaster ahead.

Into this complex narrative – ‘chimerical’, Halpern names it⁸ – come the Earth and the Forest. Two episodes connected with Saul’s house occur on the way. The first is the action of Ziba, servant of Mephibosheth, whom David has treated with generosity for love of Jonathan his father. Ziba brings transport and provisions to David: ‘a couple of donkeys saddled, carrying two hundred loaves of bread, one hundred bunches of raisins, one hundred of summer fruits, and one skin of wine’ (2 Sam. 16.1). When David enquires of Ziba why he has brought them, Ziba answers, ‘The donkeys are for the king’s household to ride, the bread and summer fruit for the young men to eat, and the wine is for those to drink who faint in the wilderness’ (2 Sam. 16.2). Here wine is a life-giver instead of the means of a violent end, as in the case of Amnon (2 Sam. 13.28–29). The

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food offered symbolically plays its part in the betrayal of Ziba’s master, Mephibosheth.9 When David accepts the food from Ziba, he is accepting the loyalty of this member of the house of Saul. When Ziba denounces Mephibosheth because of his divided loyalty towards David, David accepts the judgement and grants Ziba Mephibosheth’s possessions.

In the other episode involving the house of Saul, Shimei uses the dirt and stones of Earth to hurl his curse at David because of his treachery towards Saul. David is a ‘man of blood’ (2 Sam. 16.13), the usurper of Saul’s throne. From Shimei’s perspective, Earth has already been soaked with the blood that David has spilt in the battle for Saul’s throne.

Earth again nourishes David’s troops when they have crossed the Jordan as they advance towards Mahanaim. In 2 Sam. 17.27–29, David’s allies bring him ‘beds, basins, and earthen vessels, wheat, barley, meal, parched grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from the herd’. There are enough provisions here to be fit for a feast. There is irony in the abundance, for Absalom, too, offered provisions fit for a feast for the sheepshearers when he embarked on his plan to kill Amnon (2 Sam. 13.27–29).

**The Battle**

As the battle commences over the ‘face of the all Earth’, the Forest ‘devours more than the sword’: ‘The men of Israel were defeated there by the servants of David, and the slaughter there was great on that day, twenty thousand men. The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the Forest claimed more victims that day than the sword’ (2 Sam. 18.8). Presumably, the warriors become entangled in the branches or are struck from their mules. The narrative gives the impression that the Forest deliberately rises up against the warriors. The English translation, ‘the Forest claimed more lives than the sword’ is actually ‘devoured’ (לأكل) in the Hebrew. This is the same word that David used in 2 Sam. 11.25 when he urged Joab not to let the death of Uriah the Hittite trouble him. David said to the messenger, ‘Thus you shall say to Joab, “Do not let this matter trouble you, for the sword devours (לأكل) now one and now another.”’ As well as the sword on David’s house, the Forest also plays its part in carrying out the judgement of God on Absalom, in an eerie echo of David’s treachery.

Absalom’s fate is spelled out in a farcical scene:

Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak. His head caught fast in the oak, and he was left hanging between heaven and earth, while the mule that was under him went on. A man saw it, and told Joab, ‘I saw Absalom hanging in an oak.’ (2 Sam. 18.9–10)

Absalom does not receive a soldier’s death at the point of the sword in the thick of the battle. Instead, the oak tree holds him by his luxuriant hair while Joab thrusts three שֵׁבְטִים, variously translated as spears (NRSV), javelins (NIV), darts or sticks, into the middle of Absalom, leaving it to the ten soldiers with him to actually carry out the execution. Thus, as Absalom is suspended, embraced by neither Earth nor heaven, terebinth, spear and finally, presumably, swords, finish him off, with the troops responsible. The only one who is not ostensibly responsible in the narrative is David. Yet the death of Absalom is clearly the outcome of David’s violence against an honourable soldier, Uriah. The authenticity of Nathan’s word of judgement is seen in the pathos when David hears of the death of his beloved son. It remains now only for the Forest to ‘devour’ Absalom, because he is given a burial in the Forest, and a great heap of stones is placed over his burial place.

**Honourable Warrior or Victim in a Dishonourable War?**

Neither David nor Absalom can lay claim to be honourable warriors. Absalom is the rebellious son, killing the brother who stands between him and the throne, either out of revenge or ambition. As he leaves Jerusalem and heads across the Jordan to Ephraim, David is treated in the text with dignity, and Earth supplies his nourishment and refreshment. But the reader cannot be unaware that the battle is the final drama predicted in Nathan’s parable of judgement against David. Shimei’s curse is a reminder that he is seen by the Saulides as ‘a man of blood’ (2 Sam. 16.8). But in the end it is not David who will die by sword or Forest, but the beloved son who betrays him. This is a deeper cut for David than that of the sword.

The Forest partakes in the violence, but not by choice. It is only when we read this account of the battle that the full import of Nathan’s parable becomes clear. The violence is not confined to the humans who have instigated and continued it, but draws the very Forest, and the wider country into it. The warfare is brought into the Forest by the competing forces, and twenty-thousand corpses soak its ground with blood. The Forest yields its mighty final judgement, not by the sword but by its own formidable terrain, never meant for battle. The vision of Absalom, left hanging by his luxuriant locks in the branches of the terebinth while Joab musters...
his troops to bring the episode to a bloody end, gives no evidence of any honourable warrior but only the pathos of a grieving father, a loyal but ruthless commander, an errant son, and a Forest drawn into the whole farcical and blood-soaked mayhem. The Forest is last mentioned in 2 Sam. 18.18, where it embraces the body of Absalom in death. As if to emphasize that the issue of responsibility for violence is between Absalom and the Forest, an ironic postscript is added in 2 Sam. 18.17: ‘Meanwhile all the Israelites fled to their homes’. Underscoring the solitary connection of the two, a heap of stones ensures that Absalom is tied inexorably and forever to the Earth of the Forest.

**Absalom and the Forest: An Ecological View**

While the Forest has the final word, and it is a word of overwhelming violence, the evidence of the text is clear about who bears the responsibility. David sets the events in motion with his slaying of Uriah and his appropriation of Bathsheba; he does not hold Amnon to account for the rape of Tamar; Absalom in turn exacts a bloody revenge; then the avenger becomes the intended usurper of David’s throne. David holds on to the throne at the expense of the blood of his son. In the whole sordid family drama, there is no chiaroscuro-esque light and darkness. There is only the unmitigated darkness of murder, rape and the absolute corruption of power.

The Forest is implicated, however unwittingly, in this atrocity. Any contemporary reader who does not respond with a chill at the words of 2 Sam. 18.8, ‘The battle spread over the face of all the country; and the forest claimed more victims that day than the sword’, is either oblivious of the context of violence which engulfs these chapters, or is attuned to a culture of ‘mighty warrior’, as explicated by Clines. In keeping with the ambiguity of these books of Samuel and the story of David, either of these assessments could be validated.

The language of ‘devouring’ indicates a shift from the previous chapters where the Earth has been a nurturer, a symbolic gesture of betrayal, loyalty and judgement, and a means of entrapment in the case of Absalom and Amnon. The action of the Forest in ‘devouring’ the warriors suggests the symbolism of the warriors as food. Seen in the light of the various symbolic functions that food plays in these chapters, the act of ‘devouring’ takes us into ominous territory.

When we look at the language surrounding mention of the Forest in 2 Sam. 18 it is unremittingly violent. The army ‘goes out into the field’ and the ‘battle is fought’ (18.6); the slaughter ‘there’ is great (18.7); the
‘battle spread over the face of all the country’ and ‘the forest claimed more victims’ than ‘the sword’ (18.8). The next mention is of the oak tree of the Forest, among whose branches Absalom is trapped (18.9). In response to the report of Absalom’s state, Joab enquires of the messenger, ‘What, you saw him! Why then did you not strike him there to the ground?’ (18.11). The reward for this would have been ten pieces of silver and a belt. The messenger rejects Joab’s sentiments, describing such would-be action as ‘treachery’ (שׁקר). Despite the messenger’s reminder that David would know of such a thing, Joab puts the matter to an end by killing Absalom. Neither treachery nor fear of the king deters him: he acts decisively to enact upon the traitor his rough justice. Absalom is thrown into a pit in the forest and over him is raised the great heap of stones (18.17). His followers now depart to their homes, leaving the violence behind.

At this point, and true to the ambiguities of the text, the events in the Forest take a new turn. The heap of stones thrown over Absalom’s grave in the Forest now evokes an event remembered in the tradition. According to 2 Sam. 18.18, ‘Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar that is in the King’s Valley, for he said, “I have no son to keep my name in remembrance”; he called the pillar by his own name. It is called Absalom’s Monument to this day.’ The statement itself contains gaps and incongruities. It is Absalom himself, rather than loyal followers, who has earlier raised the monument; it speaks of Absalom’s lack of a son and heir to keep his memory. Alone in the Forest, he lies under a pile of stones which evokes a solitary memorial. This is no honourable ‘remembering’ as in other biblical traditions: the twelve stones of Josh. 3, or the Passover ‘remembering’ as the story of salvation is recited. Instead, Absalom’s monument attests to a sad figure with no child to mourn him; there is only a grief-stricken father mourning a rebellious son who died a pathetic death in the oak of the Forest.

For the contemporary ecological reader, however, the very concept of ‘forest’ calls up visions of environmental destruction. We are mindful of the destruction of forests for palm oil, of the gradual disappearance of the Amazon forests. In my own home, my house narrowly escaped a bushfire at the start of 2015; while some bushfires are a natural outcome of the Australian terrain, and indeed are necessary for the seeds of some particular gum trees to break open and reproduce, most fires are the outcome of arson or human carelessness. Surveying my neighbourhood in the wake of the fire, the desolation which left so many gum trees blackened and barren was striking in the most horrific sense. From a cursory reading of the texts of the Bible, forests do not seem to be valued greatly except for their functional use, as in building projects and for
charcoal. The need for arable land, and the value placed upon the cultivation of figs and olives, resulted in deforestation.¹⁰

In this text, the personification of the forest speaks a powerful message of the destruction brought into its domain by the violence of humans. In whatever light the warrior was regarded in the culture of the times, there is too much of overreaching ambition and abusive power running through the thread of this narrative to be ignored. When we ponder the role the Forest plays in the final moments of Absalom’s death, we cannot accuse the Forest of simply being compliant in the violence of war, nor of celebrating the culture of the honourable warrior. Absalom dies an ignominious, almost farcical death, caught by his hair in the branches of the oak, while his father’s followers complete the deed. There is no clear indication in the text that the battle proceeded according to some strategy of David, but 2 Sam. 18.9 suggests that Absalom was fleeing from David’s warriors when he met his demise: ‘Absalom happened to meet the servants of David. Absalom was riding on his mule, and the mule went under the thick branches of a great oak.’ When we take into account all the subtleties of the narrative, the conclusion seems clear that the personified Forest acts in judgement, bringing a deserved sentence of death upon Absalom. David, too, has been identified as a ‘man of blood’ (2 Sam. 16.8), and thousands of fighters on both sides of the divide died that day in the Forest. Food from the Earth has played a significant role in these chapters, but in the end the act of devouring by the Forest has brought judgement upon those who would exploit Earth’s produce for violent ends. The Forest has the last word in its own domain, a domain that was never meant for warfare. For the contemporary reader, it is a powerful word against the violence that brings so much destruction on the Earth in the battles of our own time.

They have made it a desolation; desolate, it mourns to me. The whole land is made desolate, but no one lays it to heart. (Jer. 12.11)¹

War can be described as ‘the occasion of highly organized, premeditated, and collective acts of devastation and killing’.² In the endeavour to gain control and power over an enemy other, acts of war target communities and their means of support, with destruction of place enacted in order to force surrender and submission. The intentional destruction of place functions as a multivalent act, at once destroying the actual means of human survival (food supply and shelter) and at the same time disrupting the cultural and psychological attachments to place that frequently bind communities together. The destruction of place targets all aspects of human wellbeing – the physical, the cultural and the emotional – in the quest for power and domination.

Land and the physical environment are inevitably implicated in the destruction. While cities are the most frequent target, other environmental damage and devastation also occurs. This damage may be considered as either collateral damage, the land being decimated as a result of the movement and actions of combatants over the land, or as the direct target of intentional acts of destruction.

Within the Hebrew Bible (HB), descriptions of the decimation of land / the environment through warfare are an all too frequent occurrence, enacted both by and against Israel and Judah. Under the empires of both

¹. All biblical references are from the NRSV unless otherwise stated.
Assyria and Babylon, Israel and Judah endured repeated episodes of invasion and widespread destruction. The Assyrian king Sennacherib, for example, rerecorded his tactics against Judah in 701 BCE as follows: ‘As for Hezekiah, the Judean, I besieged forty-six of his fortified walled cities and surrounding smaller towns, which were without number. Using packed-down ramps and applying battering rams, infantry attacks by mines, breeches, and siege machines, I conquered them.' While the Assyrians failed to conquer Jerusalem in 701 BCE, the Babylonian army succeeded in doing so in 586 BCE. The description of the defeat in 2 Kgs 25 is terse and concise, focusing on the fate of Jerusalem and saying nothing of the consequences for the environs of the city or the remainder of the land. Given what is known of ancient warfare, however, it is evident that there would have been significant environmental destruction. Archaeological evidence supports widespread decline in much of the region.

Two central texts for understanding this time are the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations. Within Jeremiah the fate of the land is a significant motif, seen especially in those texts where the land is personified as a victim of human action, described as mourning and desolate (Jer. 4.5–31; 9.9–10; 12.7–13). Lamentations, however, is much more concerned with human mourning and desolation (Lam. 1.4, 13, 16; 3.11; 4.5), and references to the fate of the land beyond the city are harder to discern. In their differing ways, however, both texts attest to the reality of the destruction of both the built and the ‘natural’ environments and the impact of this decimation on those human communities against whom war was targeted. That environmental destruction had an impact on the residents of cities / nations, and was thus an effective weapon in ancient warfare, is attested to through the language used to describe the state of both the land and its human inhabitants. One such word is שׁמם and its derivatives, a word whose closest English equivalent is desolate / desolation. As in English, שׁמם can denote both geographical and physical destruction as well as psychological states.

3. *COS* 2.119B: 303
4. Throughout the discussion I am concerned with Jerusalem as place rather than Jerusalem as a term which refers to the people who live within the city.
6. *TDOT* 15:239. Examples of physical destruction include Pss. 69.5; 79.7; Isa. 33.8; 54.3, while psychological states are clearly implied in 2 Sam. 13.20; Ezra 9.3, 4; Job 16.7; Pss. 40.15; 143.4; Isa. 59.16.
That שׁמם is able to denote both a human response and geographical / physical destruction speaks to the commonality of material existence shared between human and other-than-human. The discussion which follows builds on presuppositions concerning the centrality of both embodiment and emplacement for human being. Martin Heidegger argues that ‘place is where humans dwell and encounter the other, human and nonhuman alike’.7 There is a deep intertwining and interconnection between being and place such that ‘[p]lace situates the self, and the self brings meaning to the place. Place and self are indelible in the formation of their intertwined, reflexive identity.’8 The writers of texts are embodied and have their being in a particular place, a place that is interpreted through the metaphors and narratives attached to place.

The interconnectedness in the various uses of desolation in Jeremiah and Lamentations to describe the impact of destruction in both the physical and emotional realms speaks of the inseparability of being and place. The mirroring of language can be read as an implicit recognition of the permeable boundaries between people, place and land which, in the context of the present discussion, is able to point to the effectiveness and, I would suggest, the extent of, the physical destruction of the city and its environments as one of the tools of Babylonian warfare.

In this essay, I will examine the use of שׁמם in selected texts from the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations in order to explore something of the ecological impact of war. As well as drawing on historical and archaeological evidence concerning siege warfare and the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians in 586 BCE, I will introduce the term solastalgia, a neologism coined by Australian environmental philosopher Glenn Albrecht, to describe place-based distress.9 I will argue that the community who survived the destruction of Jerusalem experienced solastalgia due to the decimation of both the city and its environs. As an effective tool in the geopolitical power dynamics of ancient war, the destruction of place, both urban and rural, was used as a means of gaining and maintaining submission of the conquered peoples.

8. Ibid., 255.
Solastalgia

Arising as they do from the context of war, both Jeremiah and Lamentations provide a window into the impact of war on the community and their environment. Both books originate during the period of the Babylonian Empire and in their different ways concern the consequences of Babylonian invasion and warfare, including the destruction of the capital city Jerusalem. Both collections address the needs of those who survived the catastrophe, and function as meaning-making texts in the face of the trauma of destruction and warfare.

In both books there is a focus on suffering. A significant aspect of the suffering can be attributed to radical alteration of both the built and natural environments. That human health and well-being is intimately tied to place and the identity gained through an association with place/s is finding renewed emphasis across a range of disciplinary fields. Arising out of his work with a number of communities within Australia whose home environments had been radically altered through industrial ventures such as coal mining, Albrecht introduced the term solastalgia to describe what he calls earth-related mental illnesses. Albrecht defines solastalgia as ‘the emplaced and existential melancholia produced by the lived experience of negatively perceived transformation of a loved home environment’. Solastalgia refers to the place-based distress that people feel in the lived experience of profound environmental change. It reflects an experience of severe distress, both physical and psychological, due to the disruption of

10. In linking Jeremiah and Lamentations in this way I am not implying common authorship, only common rhetorical context.
11. With Kathleen O’Connor, I would argue that for the readers of the book of Jeremiah the disaster was in the past. Jeremiah and Lamentations can both be read as responses to the disaster of 587 BCE. K. O’Connor, Jeremiah: Pain and Promise (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2011), 32.
a sense of place and identity. A sense of powerlessness and helplessness is often associated. It is a profound sense of ‘home-sickness’ while still at home.

Lying behind the term solastalgia are the words desolation and solace. Desolation can refer to ‘both a personal feeling of abandonment (isolation) and to a landscape that has been devastated’.14 Psychologically, solace refers to ‘the comfort one is given in difficult times (consolation)’, and is also associated with that which ‘gives comfort or strength’.15 This, argues Albrecht, might be a place, a landscape, a special environment. Drawing these threads together, solastalgia can be defined as ‘the pain or sickness caused by the loss of, or inability to derive solace from, the present state of one’s home environment’.16 When home – one’s physical environment – is desolate, solastalgia is a lived experience of dislocation when still at home.17

**Desolate Land, Desolate People**

Reading the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations through the lens of solastalgia, it is significant that both the land and the people are described as being desolate. Like its English equivalent, the Hebrew root word שָׁמִם and its variants (שָׁמַם/she'mah), as has been noted, can be used to describe both psychological states and geographical / physical destruction. In its primary usage שָׁמִם is most commonly applied to places and things, and usually refers to the desolation caused by a great disaster.18 A variety of ‘natural’ and built environments can be described as desolate: cities, arable land, the land in its fullness, mountains, the inheritance of Israel, roads. Verbal forms are rarely applied to people, occurring only in Lam. 3.11 and 1.13, along with limited references in Isaiah (54.1; 62.4). Two nominal forms occur: שָׁמָה (devastation) and שָׁמָה (waste, horror, appalment). The word שָׁמָה ‘in most passages stresses the horror caused by the desolation of judgement. It is frequently used with words such as “curse,” “reproach,” “byword,” “object of hissing.”’19 With שָׁמָה, ‘the stress is usually on the desolation itself’ – ‘an inner response to an outward scene’.20

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 2:937.
In Jeremiah there is a particular concern with the decimated land / Earth, which is present as subject.21 Here we encounter a theology of land in which a symbiotic relationship exists between God, people and land such that human behaviour is understood as being consequential for the health of the land.22 The impact of war (and of sin) on the land is a recurring motif.

The land / Earth is not present as subject in Lamentations, whose central focus is on the pain and suffering experienced by the community in the aftermath of destruction.23 The descriptions reflect an ongoing state of suffering, with chs. 4 and 5 in particular emphasizing that a significant component of the present distress is grounded in the ongoing deprivation that was being experienced, a deprivation due in part, I will argue, to the desolation of both the city and its environs.

Rather than examining all the uses of שָׁמָם, שָׁמַה, שָׁמָה in Jeremiah and Lamentations, I will focus on particular passages from both books.

Desolation in Jeremiah

**Jeremiah 4.5–31**

Within the book of Jeremiah שָׁמָם is used most commonly in reference to the destruction of the land (e.g., 10.25; 12.11; 33.10), but is also applied to humans (e.g., 4.9; 18.16).24 In Jer. 4.5–31 it is applied to both humans and land (priests v. 9; land vv. 7 and 27). This passage has been the focus of a number of ecological readings because of the clear attribution of

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21. Earth is capitalized in the recognition of Earth as a character and in keeping with the Earth Bible project. See, for example, N. C. Habel, ed., *Readings from the Perspective of Earth*, Earth Bible 1 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000).


23. Dating of Lamentations is notoriously difficult. Although there is an immediacy to the descriptions, particularly in Lam. 2, which is frequently identified as the earliest of the poems, it is likely that there is some distance between the actual events and composition. There is broad agreement that the poems emerge during the Babylonian period, prior to the rise of the Persian Empire and the return from exile. For a full discussion see F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, ‘Linguistic Evidence for the Date of Lamentations’, *JANES* 26 (1998): 1–36.

voice and agency to Earth.\textsuperscript{25} The passage announces the coming of an army from the north, marching at the behest of God, and includes the presence of various voices (God, the prophet, the community and the Earth).\textsuperscript{26} Concomitant descriptions of the destruction of the land are used, giving a vivid description of the extent of devastation at the hands of the Babylonian forces.\textsuperscript{27} There is also a range of descriptions of associated human responses.

The passage opens with a series of imperatives, announcing a coming army, and commanding the people to gather in the fortified cites, places of supposed safety (vv. 5–6). Verse 7 describes the enemy as a lion and a destroyer (שׁחת) coming to ‘make your land a waste (שׁמּה)’. The cities will be ruined (נצה) and without inhabitants. The people are commanded to put on sackcloth, lament and wail – that is, to go into mourning (v. 8).\textsuperscript{28}

Verse 9 describes the response of the leadership ‘on that day’. The courage of king and officials will fail and the priests shall be appalled / desolate (שמם), the prophets astounded. Reflected here is a lack of insight in both civil and religious leadership and their failure to understand the coming consequences. The desolation of the priests echoes the desolation of the land (v. 7).

Verses 11–18 contain further descriptions of the coming judgement including descriptions of the army (besiegers, נצר, v. 16), indictments of the people (vv. 14, 18), and a report of the people’s response (‘woe to us, for we are ruined [שדד]’, v. 13). Ruined (שדד) is used twenty-six times in Jeremiah (out of fifty occurrences in the HB), making this a significant motif in the book. Like שעם it can be used of both people and the land.\textsuperscript{29} It recurs twice again in v. 20, where the consequence of war is described: ‘Disaster [שבר] overtakes disaster [שבר], the whole land is laid waste


\textsuperscript{26} See Wurst, ‘Retrieving Earth’s Voice’.

\textsuperscript{27} The extent of this pericope is commonly debated, with several commentators arguing that this is a composite unit. For a rationale for treating these verses together, see K. M. Hayes, ‘The Earth Mourns’: Prophetic Metaphor and Oral Aesthetic (Atlanta: SBL, 2002), 69–72.


\textsuperscript{29} W. Holladay, Jeremiah 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 157.
Suddenly my tents are destroyed, my curtains in a moment.’ Once more, there is a mirroring of descriptors of both the land and the people.

Verse 27 again describes the land / Earth (כָּל־הָאָרֶץ) as a desolation (שֶׁמֶמה). Verses 23–26 contain a haunting description of creation being undone. In language which echoes the creation account of Gen. 1, the earth is described as והוה והוה (waste and void) and lacking light. Mountains and hills quake and move, humans are absent and the birds have fled. The fruitful land is described as a desert (מָדבר) and the city in ruins / pulled down (נתן). The description culminates with God declaring that the whole land shall be made a desolation (v. 27), and that as a consequence the earth shall mourn / dry up (אבל) and the sky grow black. For the readers of the written text this description would well recall the ruin and decimation of war. The picture is one of a destroyed and shattered landscape, with familiar landmarks erased, agricultural lands decimated and wildlife (i.e. birds) having fled.

Throughout these verses there is a mirroring of both place and people through the use of common language for both. Land and people are described as desolate and ruined. The people are called to go into mourning, a mourning already in process in the land. A direct link is made between the state of the land and the state of the people, portraying both as victims of war. In this passage there is a greater emphasis on the destruction of place than there is of people, but the interconnectedness of both is clear.

**Jeremiah 9.9–10 (9.10–11 NRSV)**

A similar accumulation of references to human emotion and the destruction of land and city occurs in Jer. 9.9–10. In v. 10, it is announced that the towns of Judah will become a desolation (שֶׁמֶמה) without inhabitants. Jerusalem itself is singled out to become a heap (גֵל), the lair of jackals. Desolation here clearly speaks of the destruction of place.

The preceding verse introduces elements of weeping and lamentation, the destruction of the land and the loss of animal and birdlife. There is ambiguity as to the speaker in v. 9. The verbs are first person and announce the speaker’s weeping and wailing over the mountains and lament over the pastures of the wilderness. The Septuagint and several versions read the opening verb as an imperative, making this a command to the people to lament. If the first person is maintained, however, it is either God or Jeremiah who speaks. Although it is often argued that the

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30. For a discussion of this verb, see Hayes, ‘The Earth Mourns’, 12–13.
speaker is Jeremiah, there is some support for God as speaker given that God is the speaker in v. 10.

The land is described in images similar to those in 4.23–28. The mountains and the pastures are described as רצפת, literally as being burned. While William McKane argues that this represents a ‘scorched earth policy’ of warfare, several of the versions amend the text to reflect either נצח (be destroyed) or נצחם (be desolate). As William Holladay notes, however, the verbs are virtually synonymous and are used in similar contexts within Jeremiah. What is portrayed is a decimated land in which both domesticated and wild creatures are absent.

Within this passage there is again a mirroring of desolation between humans and the fate of the city and its environs. Although שְׁמַמְתָּה is only used of the city, desolation is again associated with the emotions of loss and mourning.

**Jeremiah 12.7–13**

Within the lament of Jer. 12.7–13 there are four uses of שְׁמם or its derivatives (vv. 10, 11 [×3]), with the passage concerning the destruction of God’s heritage (נחלה), a term which can apply to both the land and the people. Throughout this passage the use of metaphors, wordplay and figurative language holds together both land and people in such a way that it is, at times, difficult to differentiate between the two. A description of the land as desolate stands at the centre (vv. 10–11), thus creating emphasis. Throughout the passage a number of words which refer to both land and people are used and reused.

Verse 7 opens with God’s announcement of the abandonment of people / land into the hand of the enemies. Three metaphors are used: my house (ביתי), my heritage (נחלתי), and the beloved of my heart (נפשׁי את־יודדות). While commentators frequently advocate for a single referent for one or all of the metaphors, Katherine Hayes argues that it is possible to hear both referents at once, at the same time acknowledging that the people

33. McKane, *Jeremiah*, 204.
36. Hayes, ‘*The Earth Mourns*’, 108.
may be the primary focus.\textsuperscript{37} נחלת נחלות is repeated in vv. 8 and 9, with the focus shifting to the people in v. 8. God’s people (נחלות) are said to have become like a lion in the forest that has roared against God. As a consequence, God hates (שׂנָה) ‘her’. In v. 9 the question is asked ‘is the hyena greedy for my heritage (נחלות) at my command?’,\textsuperscript{38} with ‘heritage’ here open to being read as either land and / or people. The surrounding images (vv. 8c, 9bc) concerning the approaching enemy – described as both birds of prey and animals coming to devour – are suggestive of warfare. In war both land and people are impacted.

In vv. 10 and 11 the land is more to the fore, although both land and people can again be held together. The imagery shifts from wild beasts to shepherds, who are said to have destroyed (שׁחת) God’s vineyard (כרם) and trampled God’s portion (חלקה).\textsuperscript{39} The pleasant portion (חלקה) has been made a desolate wilderness (שׁממה). There is strong assonance between heritage (נחלות, vv. 7–9) and portion (חלקה, v. 10), with Holladay arguing that they are virtually synonymous, although portion is more strictly a designation for allotted land.\textsuperscript{40} The desolation of the land can be seen as the outcome of war, with Jack Lundbom noting that in war the land is frequently left ‘a veritable waste’.\textsuperscript{41}

Three variants of שׁממה occur in v. 11 alongside a reference to the land mourning. The verse opens with the phrase שׁממה עלי אבלה לשׁממה שׂמה (‘they have made it a desolation; desolate it mourns to me’).\textsuperscript{42} The verbal form can connote either drying up or mourning, as argued by Hayes, that the figurative language in these verses evokes both the people and the land, mourning is the more likely sense intended here, in keeping with the use in 4.23 and 4.28.\textsuperscript{42} The verse ends with a further reference to desolation, this time clearly specified as land (כל הארץ). The verbal form

\textsuperscript{37} Hayes, ‘The Earth Mourns’, 109. So also Lundbom, Jeremiah 1–20, 654. Holladay (Jeremiah 1, 386) argues that the poem beings with a referent to the people (vv. 7–9) which then expands to include the land by v. 10. McKane (Jeremiah, 269) argues for the reference to be to the people.

\textsuperscript{38} There is significant debate as to the translation of this verse. For discussion, see Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 383, 387–8, and Lundbom, Jeremiah 1–20, 654–5.

\textsuperscript{39} Shepherds could refer to either the Judean leadership or the foreign invaders; see Lundbom, Jeremiah 1–20, 656.

\textsuperscript{40} Holladay, Jeremiah 1, 388.

\textsuperscript{41} Lundbom, Jeremiah 1–20, 656. The final verb (נתן) is often amended to a plural, but is in the singular, thus reading ‘he has made my pleasant portion a desolate wilderness’. Lundbom suggests that Nebuchadnezzar may be the intended referent here.

\textsuperscript{42} Hayes, ‘The Earth Mourns’, 110–11.
is passive, suggesting ‘the work of a destructive will, which arouses terror in those affected – to the extent that they are thought of as having emotions’. Both physical destruction and its emotional impacts are again held together here, with emotion being attributed to the land.

Verse 12 continues the war imagery attributing the destruction to both the enemy (spoilers upon the bare heights) and to God (the sword of the Lord devours). Both land and people are implicated in the reference to the destruction ‘from one end of the land to the other; no one shall be safe’. Although the preceding verses are descriptive of warfare, v. 13 is more ambiguous given its reference to failed harvest and shame. Hayes notes, however, that elsewhere ‘tired out’ (חלה, sickened) is used in association with mourning and can connote an emotional response.

Throughout this passage there is a mirroring between the land and its human occupants in such a way that it is evident that both bear the brunt of the destruction in the material and emotional / psychological realms. Both are portrayed in similar language and the symbiosis between land and people is reflected in the multivalent language. Significantly, however, the land is the more passive victim of human actions, the object of destruction at the hands of human enemies because of God’s actions against the people of Judah on account of their sin. Norman Habel identifies that within these verses the land is portrayed as victim.

Summary

In each of the passages considered from Jeremiah, references to desolation occur in relation to both the land and the people in the context of destruction wrought by warfare. There is a mirroring of desolation between land and people such that material destruction and its psychological impacts are seen to be intimately linked. The descriptions include images of a ruined and decimated land, where animal and bird life has fled, agrarian fertility failed, and in which creation is said to be undone. The land and its inhabitants share mourning and grief in response, although it is clear that the land is more consistently responsive.

Historical and Archaeological Aspects of Desolation

If Jeremiah, at least in its literary form, anticipates coming desolation, Lamentations looks back on that same desolation and its present, ongoing

44. Hayes, ‘*The Earth Mourns*’, 111–12.
consequences. Before considering Lamentations, it is helpful to consider something of the evidence for the widespread desolation of city and land at the hands of the Babylonians. What becomes clear is that there was a significant change in the environs of Jerusalem in the early sixth century.

Archaeological evidence supports a significant decline in population and settlement in the region around Jerusalem during the sixth century BCE. In the previous century, Jerusalem went through a period of unprecedented growth, paralleling a similar expansion throughout Judah, where new towns, villages and settlements emerged. Urban growth was especially evident, particularly so in Jerusalem. Hillel Geva notes that ‘[w]ith the growth in area the agricultural hinterland of the city expanded as well. New plots of land were made arable in terraces built on the hill slopes and scores of small farms were established. These provided the economic base on which the city’s growing population and expanding area depended.’ In the wake of Sennacherib’s campaign in 701 BCE, Avraham Faust suggests that the city became a haven for refugees given the widespread destruction elsewhere in Judah. It is likely that the importance of the city as an administrative centre also increased.

While some of the residents of the city were occupied with farming, society was stratified and it is difficult to maintain that the city was rural in nature. Archaeological evidence suggests clear social stratification. It should be noted, however, that only a small proportion of the population lived in urban centres. In the period prior to the destruction of Jerusalem, Odel Lipschits suggests there were unfortified settlements surrounding Jerusalem, with more than sixty farms around the city. The environs of

46. There is almost unanimous support that Jerusalem and its environs were both decimated and depopulated at the beginning of the sixth century BCE. The fate of other regions in Judah is more contested, although it is clear that the area around Mizpah in the territory of Benjamin thrived more than elsewhere. For detailed discussion see Lipschits, *Fall and Rise*.

47. There is significant discrepancy in estimates of population size during this period.


49. A. Faust, *The Archaeology of Israelite Society in Iron Age II* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 95. Faust also notes that there was a corresponding growth in the city’s hinterland.

50. Ibid., 99.

51. Ibid., 40. Archaeological evidence is based on residential buildings, artefactual finds and burial tombs.
the city also included a more remote ring of large villages and an array of forts in a yet wider circle.52

The settlement pattern in the sixth century BCE shows a marked change, especially in the area surrounding Jerusalem.53 Lipschits reports an eighty-nine percent decline in the number of settlements, and a ninety percent decline in occupation levels.54 He states: ‘The implication is that the region closest to Jerusalem suffered a mortal blow at the end of the Iron Age, resulting in the displacement of most of its population. This drop must be related to the Babylonian attack on Jerusalem and the impact that it had on the immediate environs of the city during the long siege.’55 Similarly, Faust reports that there is little evidence of settlement continuity between Iron Age and Persian Period rural sites surrounding Jerusalem. Although it has been argued that the preservation of the countryside would have been in Babylonian interests, Faust notes that the devastation of rural areas was a frequent occurrence in warfare, especially during protracted sieges as occurred in 587/586 BCE. Depopulation may have resulted from residents fleeing into fortified cities for protection but, importantly, because troops would have destroyed the countryside in the search for food, as a means of demoralizing the population and in order to cause long-term destruction. Faust suggests that the longer the siege, the higher the likelihood of destruction.56

Famine and epidemics were also rife during periods of war.57 Following the fall of Jerusalem, which was the administrative centre of the region, further societal collapse would have occurred given the dependency of settlers on protection from Jerusalem.58 The practice of siege warfare would have contributed to the desolation. Siege warfare is described by Israel Eph’al as:

52. Lipschits, Fall and Rise, 210–11, 215–16.
53. There are two schools of thought concerning the land and the impact of the exile during the sixth century BCE. Broadly, these can be labelled the continuity school, see H. Barstad, The Myth of the Empty Land: A Study in the History and Archaeology of Judah during the ‘Exilic’ Period (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1986); and the discontinuity school, see Faust, Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period. What is not debated is that Jerusalem itself was destroyed and that there was extensive depopulation in the areas surrounding the city.
54. Lipschits, Fall and Rise, 217–18.
55. Ibid., 218.
56. Faust, Judah in the Neo-Babylonian Period, 64–5.
58. Lipschits, Fall and Rise, 230.
A form of warfare in which one of the combative sides defends itself within an area delimited by a system of obstacles, while the opponent attempts to penetrate these obstacles to engage in hand-to-hand combat, in which its superiority is assured. Unlike pitched battle, which is generally dynamic and brief and in which mobility plays a significant role, siege warfare is protracted and static by nature.59

Several aspects of siege warfare suggest the likelihood of significant environmental impact.60 The cutting down of trees was clearly practiced for both practical and psychological reasons. The extent to which this practice occurred, however, is less clear (see Deut. 20.19–20). There are various references to the cutting down of trees amongst Assyrian annals. The removal of fruit trees, which is the most frequently attested act of destruction, causes long-term damage, and had significant economic impact in agrarian societies. While it has been suggested that some trees may well have been felled for the purposes of constructing siege works, fruit trees were largely unsuitable for construction purposes.61 Richard Tucker suggests, however, that when the Babylonians besieged Lachish in 588 BCE they burned timber from stripped forests against the city’s wooden ramparts.62 Siege warfare involved the construction of siege ramps and the use of battering rams. Extensive plunder occurred and cities were razed through demolition and burning.

Faust notes that there was a dense concentration of farms around Jerusalem in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE.63 It is likely that many of the farms were abandoned at the beginning of the siege as people moved into the city for refuge. In addition, the movement of troops through the land and the need for them to obtain food supplies could well have contributed to the decimation of agricultural land. Again, however, the extent of the destruction of the land is difficult to support from the archaeological evidence. Eph’al identifies famine as the most common result of siege. Because of the blockade of the city, food supplies inevitably ran short, although the time that this took was dependent on the


60. Much of what is known about the practices of siege warfare in relation to Israel and Judah is known from Assyrian records and pictorial monuments, with comparatively few records being available in relation to Babylonian practices.

61. Eph’al, City Besieged, 54 n. 52.


63. Faust, Archaeology of Israelite Society, 155.
capacity of the city to store food. 64 Ezekiel, Jeremiah and Lamentations all make mention of famine as one of the consequences of the Babylonian siege.

Taken together, what is known from the archaeological data concerning the sixth century BCE and what is known about practices of ancient warfare, we can assume that there was significant impact on the environs of Jerusalem. Brad Kelle notes that common Babylonian practice ‘was to conduct no military operations other than war, and to leave conquered territories devastated and impoverished with only relatively minor governmental structures in a particular chosen area’. 65 The zone of dilapidated land formed a buffer between Babylonia and Egypt.

**Desolation in Lamentations**

Within Lamentations the earth / land is not identified as a subject as it is in Jeremiah. Although שֵׁם occurs six times in Lamentations, it describes either the people, groups of people or aspects of the built environment. References to earth / ground (ארץ) are restricted to generic references to the ground on which other characters sit or to which the city is reduced. Despite this more limited reference, however, reading Lamentations in the wider intertextual perspective of Jeremiah, and in light of the archaeological evidence, it becomes clear that the ongoing suffering can be attributed in part to an experience of solastalgia – ‘the emplaced and existential melancholia produced by the lived experience of negatively perceived transformation of a loved home environment’. 66 The use of שֵׁם evokes the desolation of the environment, and the many references to famine and deprivation within the book heighten the sense of significant environmental change.

In Lam. 1.4, the gates of the city are described as being desolate (שָׁמֵם); this desolation stands in parallel to the mourning (אבל so also 2.5 [Daughter Judah], 2.8 [rampart and wall] and 5.15 [people]) of the roads; the groaning (אנח also 1.11 [people], 1.21 [city-woman]) of the priests; and the grieving (יגה also 1.5 [city-woman], 1.12 [city-woman]) of the young girls. The city-woman is described as being bitter (מר). Lamentations 1.1–7 contains a series of images in which the past glory of the city is contrasted to its present deplorable state. In 1.4 there is an inter-mixing of human and material grieving, with the reference to the

64. Eph’al, *City Besieged*, 57–8.
desolation of the gates holding together both physical destruction and its psychological impact. As seen in Jeremiah, שָׁמַם is used in the context of references to mourning in both the human and non-human realms.

The verb is again used in 1.13 as the city-woman describes her own sense of desolation at her fate (he has left me stunned [שָׁמַם], faint [דֹּוּ] all day long). As a word used to describe both psychological and physical desolation, the use of שָׁמַם in 1.13 is evocative. Within Lam. 1 the personification of the city is multivalent, expanding and contracting in its different usages to encompass the residents of the city, the physical city itself and, when set alongside references to Judah (1.3), the wider geo-physical entity. In addition, by being named Daughter Zion, the city-woman evokes Mt Zion and the varied associations of Zion theology, including the creation and cosmic dimensions of that trope. Traditionally, 1.13 is interpreted as a reference to the desolation experienced by the community within the city; however, given the specific mention of fire and the net, the reality of the material destruction cannot be ruled out. Bones can be representative of the whole person, and can concern vigour or its absence. In Targum Lamentations (Tg. Lam.), ‘bones’ has been interpreted as a metaphor for fortified cities, widening the perspective beyond the walls of Jerusalem itself, and reinforcing the materiality of the reference. The entrapment evoked by the net imagery may also suggest the siege of the city. Desolation, then, may carry a double meaning, referring to the physical decimation of the material world and the psychological response to that destruction.

In 1.16 the children of the city are described as being desolate (שוממים). The city-woman describes her grief and decries the absence of a comforter. The victory of the enemy is the cause of both the woman’s grief and the children’s desolation. Within Lam. 1 both the gates and the children are described using the same form of שָׁמַם, pointing to their shared fate, the boundaries between the physical destruction and its impact being held together.

The next reference to desolation occurs in the mouth of the man in Lam. 3, who personifies a masculine experience of the deprivations of

67. ‘From on high he sent fire; it went deep into my bones; he spread a net for my feet; he turned me back; he has left me stunned (שָׁמַם), faint (דֹּוּ) all day long’ (Lam. 1.13).


69. Although Albrecht (‘Solastalgia’, S96) argues that the absence of comfort is an aspect of solastalgia, in Lamentations the comforter sought is clearly God or fellow human beings in the absence of a response from God.
wounding, imprisonment and torture. Adele Berlin suggests this persona may represent the voice of those taken into exile.\(^70\) The man speaks of being made desolate (3.11) as he describes his physical and emotional affliction at the hand of his enemy who is identified as God (v. 18). In v. 19 this same voice bemoans his affliction in association with his homelessness.

The final two chapters of Lamentations contain a series of vivid poetic images which paint a picture of the extent of the destruction and the ravages of life for those who were left behind. In 4.1–10 the lamenter contrasts past and present to emphasize the current deplorable state of the inhabitants of the city. Lamentations 4 contains a series of statements which, if read rightly, point to the decimation of the land as a consequence of Babylonian destruction. Verse 5 uses שׁמם to describe the plight of the elite of the city.\(^71\) They are desolate and cling to ash heaps. Echoes of the destruction of the city and hinterland are present in this verse and those preceding it. There is an accumulation of references to the extreme famine (vv. 3–4), and the desolation of the elite coincides with the despair of others in the city. The chapter opens with reference to the sacred stones being scattered in the street, and while this verse is most often translated as reference to the human citizens of the city, it is also conceivable that the material destruction of the city is also present.\(^72\)

In 5.18 Mt Zion itself is described as lying desolate, a fate which causes the community’s hearts to be sick and their eyes to be dim (v. 17). This is the only time in Lamentations that Mt Zion / the hill Zion is referred to, narrowing the focus to the mount on which the temple was built. The desolation of Mt Zion, now inhabited by jackals, represents the ultimate destruction of the symbolic and ideological home-place. While the collapse of Zion theology is central to this verse, that jackals now roam the mount again highlights the physical destruction of place: ‘the sight of the desolate and jackal-infested Mt Zion is the ultimate in tragic reversal.’\(^73\)

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71. Purple dye was both rare and expensive in the ancient Near East. Note that NASV translates שׁמם as perished in this instance. This is the only occurrence of the niphal form of verb in Lamentations, and there is some debate as to its translation; for discussion, see R. Salters, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Lamentations*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 294–5.

72. For a discussion of the versions which translate the sacred stones as the stones of the Temple, see Salters, *Lamentations*, 236.

73. Ibid., 366.
Beyond the references to שָׁמָם, Lamentations is permeated with references to the grief and suffering of the people. Included are references to physical stress (1.13, 20, 22; 2.11; 4.17), tears and weeping (1.2, 16; 2.11, 18; 3.49–51) and more abstract psychological language (1.3, 4, 5, 12; 3.5, 11). The reality of famine and deprivation also pervades (1.1, 19; 2.11, 12, 19, 20; 4.3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10; 5.4, 6, 9, 10). These multiple references point not only to the ravages of siege, but also to the ongoing deprivation in the post-siege period. Given the evidence of widespread depopulation in rural areas around Jerusalem, it can be argued, at the very least, that agrarian production was all but destroyed and/or was significantly reduced. Both the built environment of the city and the surrounding environs are implicated in the destruction of warfare.

The anguish expressed in Lamentations can be seen, at least in part, as a form of solastalgia. The community, likely to have been made up of both urban and rural folk, were living amidst the ruins of both the city and its environs. Visually the world was changed. Sacral and ritual sites had been demolished, as had been the visible evidence of administration and rule. Food was scarce and famine rife. That the destruction of place is intimately tied to the sense of distress is made poignantly clear in 2.15 which describes the mockery of those who pass by Jerusalem and say ‘Is this the city that was called the perfection of beauty, the joy of all the earth?’ – emphasizing that the city and all that it represented is gone. As an act of desolation, the Babylonian strategy of destruction can be seen to have been effective in demoralizing the community.

Conclusions

There is sufficient evidence to indicate that not only was Jerusalem destroyed as a consequence of the Babylonian invasion of Judah, but that the surrounding environs were also made desolate. That the destruction of place was an effective means of demoralizing and incapacitating the enemy under attack is made clear through the many descriptions of distress seen in both Lamentations and Jeremiah. The descriptions of distress can be understood as a form of solastalgia, a response of despair in the face of radical change to one’s home environment.

The case for environmental despair being present in both Lamentations and Jeremiah is strengthened when the mirroring of language to describe the destruction and its impact on both land and people is considered. Both entities are described as desolate (שָׁמָם), a word that occurs in the context of other descriptors which reflect shared fate and response between the human and other-than-human realms. All are desolated and all share in
the desolation of grief and mourning in response. The intertwining of all aspects of the material world, the world in which humans are embedded, is evident in the blurred boundaries evident in the texts examined. It is this same intertwining that makes the destruction of place an effective weapon of war.

While it is clear that warfare did impact the environment around Jerusalem, it remains open as to the long-term impact of that desolation. Certainly, if woodlands and trees were cleared, the risks of erosion and top soil loss would have significantly increased, which may have led to an increased risk of salinization. The descriptions in Jeremiah point to a loss of wildlife as part of the scene of desolation. Conversely, as agrarian activity and human habitation was significantly reduced, it is equally clear that this period could be seen as an opportunity for the land to lie fallow and potentially regain fertility lost through agricultural practice. The fact that the exilic period is referred to as Sabbath rest for the land (2 Chr. 36.21; Lev. 36.34–5), while clearly a theological construct, does lend credence to the possibility that a restoration of the land may well have been a long-term outcome of the Babylonian destruction.

In the power play of human politics, and in the face of the destruction of human warfare, the land on which humans live and depend can and does become a victim of war. In the case of the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE, the environs of Judah were clearly impacted, with devastating effects for the human population in the short term. The impact of depopulation and decreased agrarian activity in the long term may well, however, point to a time of release and recovery.

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74. Tucker, (‘Impact of Warfare’, 20) notes that while the short-term impact of war on the environment in the ancient world is clear, the longer-term environmental impacts are harder to determine.
The title of this chapter draws upon Ezek. 45.9 where the Princes of Israel are instructed by God, ‘Remove violence (חמס) and destruction (שד) and exercise judgement (משפט) and righteousness (צדקה)’. The two pairs of words stand in opposition to one another and this will be revisited later. First, the semantic range of חמס and שד within the Hebrew Bible will be considered and it will be seen that war, as well as the land or its produce, can appear in connection with them. Secondly, the geographical and historical context of the southern Levant will be outlined in its vulnerability to both חמס and שד. Thirdly, an examination will be made of the locust as a metaphor for a human army in the ancient Near East and the Bible, prior to turning to Joel 1. Although there is ambiguity in Joel 1 as to the identity of the perpetrators, it will be seen that it gives one of the best descriptions in the Hebrew Bible of the despoiling of the land and its produce, the consequences thereof and how such a situation can be avoided in the future. The latter aspect will be seen to correspond well with Ezek. 45.9 in its context. The question of justice arises, though, for ‘judgement’ falling on the whole community does not take account of the individual’s guilt or innocence. The book of Joel seems to have been aware of the problem and provides a solution, although one that would not be fully articulated until Dan. 12.2.

**The Semantic Range of חמס and שד**

As a noun, חמס appears some sixty times in the Hebrew Bible. It can apply to an individual or type of person (e.g. 2 Sam. 22.49; Ps. 140.2[1]); to a tribe (e.g. Simeon and Levi in Gen. 49.5). The earth can be filled with it (Gen. 6.11, 13), as can masters’ houses (Zeph. 1.9). Countries can be
said to exhibit it (e.g. Lebanon in Hab. 2.17) and some of the prophets complain about its presence in Jerusalem or Israel / Judah (e.g. Jer. 4; 6.7; 20.8; Ezek. 7.11, 23; 8.17; 12.19). Usually translated as ‘violence’ or ‘cruelty’, the exact nature of what חמס entails in particular instances is not always apparent in individual biblical passages. In some though it is clear. In the case of Simeon and Levi they are said to have ‘killed a man’ (Gen. 49.6), thus providing information about the nature of their חמס in the previous verse. חמס is clearly associated with the events of war in Jer. 51.35 where imprecations for vengeance are made by Zion or Jerusalem against Babylon. Later, in the same chapter, God’s people are warned that eventually they should leave Babylon because it will be her turn to be overthrown and there will be חמס ‘in the land, ruler against ruler’ (Jer. 51.46). Physical violence and חמס are linked in all the cited passages but, according to Ezekiel in the period leading to the overthrow of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, it was the חמס of the city’s inhabitants that brought about the catastrophe (Ezek. 12.19). This leads to the suspicion that חמס has a broader application than simply physical violence.1 A further pointer in this direction is that חמס can be used of a witness (e.g. Exod. 23.1; Ps. 35.11), and in such cases it has the implication of false testimony. Here the true purpose of witnessing has been overturned; it has been inverted. As such it provides an important clue to the concept that underlies חמס, and this will be discussed further towards the end of the paper.

The second kind of activity in Ezek. 45.9 that is to be removed is שׁד which is also paired with חמס in Jer. 6.7; 20.8; Amos 3.10 and Hab. 1.3.2 שׁד is translated variously as ‘spoil’/ ‘destruction’ / ‘desolation’ / ‘wasting’ / ‘oppression’ but, as with חמס, it is not always possible to be sure what שׁד entails in a particular biblical verse, although the context of some of its occurrences appears to provide details of its application. God pronounces שׁד for the people in Hos. 7.13 on account of their trespass (פשׁע) against him, and three verses later it is specified that their ‘princes shall fall by

1. חמס can be associated with wine or drink (Prov. 4.17; 26.6) and it is well known that alcohol lessens inhibitions including the impulse to violence. חמס can cover the mouth (Prov. 10.6, 11) and presumably is an indication of violent words or speech which incites to violence | Mal. 2.16 says חמס can cover a garment. For a discussion of this phrase, see A. E. Hill, Malachi: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, AB 25D (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 252–3.

2. In Jer. 6.7, they are said to be heard in Jerusalem. In Jer. 20.8, Jeremiah cries out these words ‘because the word of the Lord is made a reproach unto me, and a division, all the day’. In Amos 3.10, they are stored up in palaces. In Hab. 1.3, ‘spoiling and violence are before me (the prophet)’ . This last verse connects closely with the topic of the present chapter and will be discussed below.
the sword’, but whether a direct equation can be made between the two verses is not clear. In Hos. 9.6, it is said that the people are gone because of שד. This happened in the context of war but earlier in the chapter it was said ‘the threshing floor and the winepress will not feed them’ (Hos. 9.2). Why this was so, is not stated. It could have been because the agricultural produce had failed or been spoilt or simply that the people would not be there to avail themselves of it. There are passages though that definitely link שד with the spoiling or lack of the produce of the land. Isaiah 51.19 appears to have שד in parallel with ‘famine’ (רעב) in a passage that recalls the besieging of Jerusalem by the Babylonians. The link with agriculture is also present in some instances of the use of the verbal form of שד:

Jer. 25.36: ‘Yhwh has spoilt (שדד) their pasture’

Jer. 48.32: ‘spoiling (שדד) has fallen upon your summer fruits and your vintage’

Joel 1.10: ‘spoilt (שדד) is the field, eaten up is the ground’.3

שד also relates to the spoiling of cities for, in an oracle of Yhwh, Jer. 48.3 cites ‘spoiling (שד) and great destruction (שבר)’ in Moab, and v. 8 specifies ‘no city shall escape’. A city features in Hos. 10.14 as well, for it says that Beth-Arbel was spoiled in the day of battle. Jeremiah 48.8 indicates that, in the case of Moab, ‘the valley also will perish and the plain will be destroyed’ and v. 15 proclaims ‘Moab is spoiled’ using the verbal form of שד. In a chapter devoted mainly to denouncing those who possess ill-gotten gains, Hab. 2.17 speaks of ‘the spoil of beasts’ and there are several instances (e.g. Jer. 4.13; 47.4; 49.28) where the verbal form of שד relates to the spoiling of people in a military situation.

In the context of war, then, חמס appears to relate to physical violence while שד seems to connect to the spoiling or wasting of the land and all that is on it: agricultural produce, grasslands, beasts, dwellings and even people.

The Southern Levant and Its Vulnerability to חמס and שד

As part of the Fertile Crescent, the land of Canaan upon which Israel and Judah formed their national identities was in great demand. It supported crops of many kinds as well as domesticated animals. It is obvious from archaeological finds going back to at least the Middle Bronze Age (first

3. The passage in Joel will be considered more closely later in this chapter.
half of the second millennium) that the area could produce an over-
abundance and that there was a thriving export trade in olive oil and
wine, amongst other agricultural products.\textsuperscript{4} The other attribute of the land
that made it attractive was its geographical location between the great
civilizations of the ancient Near East: Egypt to its south-west; Arabia to
its south-east; Anatolia to its north-west; and Mesopotamia to its north-
east. Trade routes criss-crossed the land. They reached the Mediterranean
Sea on its west and the Gulf of Aqebah to the south-east. Little wonder
so many wars were fought on it and over it – the desire for power and
economic gain brought about disaster for the land. The Annals of Pharaoh
Thutmosis III provide an example of what happened in war and the nature
of the spoils.

\textit{Thutmosis III, the Spoils of War and Military Policy}

Thutmosis III (1504–1450 BCE) began a series of military campaigns and
expeditions in Canaan and Syria in the twenty-third year of his reign.\textsuperscript{5}
The Kingdom of Mitanni (the Hurrian state from the area of the Upper

\textsuperscript{4} According to S. Cohen, ‘Cores, Peripheries and Ports of Power: Theories in
include timber, bitumen, other resins, wine and olive oil, as well as people and
animals. Most of these commodities, with the exception of people and animals, were
in short supply in the traditional “core” societies such as Egypt and Mesopotamia,
and thus, by necessity, had to be obtained from regions outside their traditional
borders’. Forty-seven ‘sealings’ or ‘bullae’ were found in the moat associated with
the first phase of the Middle Bronze Age fortifications at Ashkelon. The sealings are
Egyptian and they sealed clay jars. According to Cohen (ibid., 72) ‘the prosaic nature
of the sealings implies an exchange of subsistence commodities’. M. Bietak, \textit{Avaris,
The Capital of the Hyksos: Recent Excavations at Tell el-Dab’a} (London: British
Museum, 1996), 20, is of the opinion that the number of sherds found at Tell el-Dab’a
in Egypt in the late twelfth and early thirteenth dynasty layers (i.e. late MB IIA–early
MB IIB in Canaan) represent about two million Canaanite jars! Indeed, as pointed out
1993), 103–12, esp. 105–6, Ashkelon was a seaport linking Egypt and Mesopota-
mia via Byblos and other Syrian coastal ports in the Early Bronze Age. Further,
at that time, goods from Canaan were transported overland by donkey caravan from
Ashkelon to Egypt.

Euphrates) had expanded into Syria and Canaan and was encouraging local rulers in those areas to break free from Egypt. Thutmosis III had a number of rebellions to deal with and desolated many towns. When he captured Megiddo, he took a great deal of spoil:

- 3400 prisoners of war
- 83 hands
- 2041 horses
- 191 foals
- 6 stallions
- ...colts.

In addition, chariots, armour and other accoutrements of war are listed, then the city’s livestock is enumerated: 1929 cows; 2000 goats; 20,500 sheep. Grain, too, became spoil, for the Annals tell us that the fields around Megiddo were divided into plots and royal agents assigned to reap the harvest. It is specified that 207,300 sacks of wheat were taken away by Thutmosis.

**How This Illuminates the Biblical Text**

Awareness of what kind of spoil was taken in the aftermath of war in the ancient Near East, provides a greater understanding of the biblical passages that mention ‘spoil’. People, artefacts, animals and grain were all part of the ‘city’ and all were taken. Megiddo was in a key strategic position overlooking the narrow pass from the Via Maris to the inland route leading northwards to Damascus and beyond and southwards through Transjordan to the Gulf of Aqebah. Whoever controlled that pass controlled the trade routes. Thus after Stratum IX was destroyed (probably by Thutmosis III), it was deemed to be important to rebuild as soon as possible, as is apparent from the evidence of Stratum VIII.

**Thutmosis’s Policy When He Destroyed a City**

When Thutmosis III destroyed a city, it is specified that he carried off the grain harvest and sometimes felled the trees. For instance, during his fifth

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6. Ibid., 235.
7. Cf. the lists in ibid., 242–3.
campaign ‘his majesty destroyed the town of Ardata, with its grain. All its pleasant trees were cut down.’\textsuperscript{10} In his final campaign, his sixteenth or seventeenth, Thutmosis continued such destructive practices, for his annals at Karnak specify, ‘Arrival at Tunip. Destruction of the town. Cutting down its grain and felling its trees…’\textsuperscript{11} Grain was the staple food of settled peoples and its removal would have led to starvation for any local populace remaining in the area. The felling of trees, if they were fruit-bearing ones, would have ensured deprivation for many years to come. As such, it may have been a strategy to prevent the area being repopulated quickly.

**Locusts or Grasshoppers Used as Similes of Military Matters**

In Egypt, the wider ancient Near East and the Bible, invading armies, and sometimes defeated armies, are likened to grasshoppers or locusts. A few examples will suffice.

**Egypt**

In the Poem of the Battle of Kadesh from the time of Ramesses II (1275 BCE) inscribed on the walls of major temples in Egypt and Nubia, the forces of the King of Hatti and his subsidiary states are described in the following terms:

their chariotry was vast in extent, unequalled;
They covered hill and valley, they were like the locust swarm in their multitude.\textsuperscript{12}

In the Karnak inscription of Pharaoh Merneptah’s victory over the Libyans (1207 BCE) it is said,

Libya is like a petitioner brought as a captive. You have made them to be like grasshoppers for every road is strewed with their bodies.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} Wilson, trans., ‘Egyptian Historical Texts’, 239.  
\textsuperscript{11} Cf. ibid., 241.  
**Assyria**

Sargon II, in a letter (714 BCE) sent to Assur which recounts his eighth campaign, says, ‘As with a dense cloud of the night, I covered that province, and all its great cities. I [ ] like an attack of a swarm of locusts.’

In a description of Elam – the enemy he was fighting – Sennacherib says in his Annals, ‘Like the onset of the locust swarms of the springtime they kept steadily coming on against me to offer battle.’ Ronald Simkins, who draws attention in his own work to the above texts, says that ‘In Assyria…locusts are used to describe the vastness of an army but also the devastation caused by the army’s march across the land’. In support of the latter assertion, he refers to the publication, ‘An Inscribed Scaraboid from Megiddo’.

**The Hebrew Bible**

The Hebrew Bible, too, uses the simile of the locust. Judges 6.3–5 provides an example, as well as listing the spoil taken by the attackers.

> And so it was when Israel had sown that the Midianites came up and the Amalekites and the people of the east;… and they encamped against them and destroyed the increase of the earth till you come to Gaza and left no food in Israel, neither sheep, nor ox nor ass. For they came up with their cattle and their tents they came in as locusts for multitude, both they and their camels were without number and they came into the land to destroy it.

Judges 7.12 also likens the same attackers to ‘locusts for multitude’. Jeremiah 46.23, in describing the army of Nebuchadnezzar’s attack on Egypt (Jer. 46.13), says ‘they are more than the locusts and are innumerable’. With the simile of the locust in mind, it is time to turn to Joel 1.

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15. Ibid., section 252.
The first chapter of the biblical book of Joel describes the devastation of the produce of the land. The identity of the perpetrators of the devastation has been the subject of debate amongst scholars with some claiming that locusts were to blame, others that it was a foreign nation. The ambiguity is present in the text, for Joel 1.4 says:

What the גזם has left
the ארבה has eaten;
and what the ארבה has left
the ילק has eaten
and what the ילק has left
the חסיל has eaten.

but Joel 1.6 says:

For a nation (גוי) is come upon my land,
strong (עצום) and without number (עין מספר);
his teeth are the teeth of a lion
and he has the jaw teeth of a great lion.

In recent years, it has been recognized that Joel constructed his work in dialogue with earlier biblical passages and that these illuminate his


message. Joel 1.4 has been shown to draw on Exod. 10 and Ps. 78, both of which refer to the plague of locusts upon Egypt; plus Deut. 28 and 1 Kgs 8 which warn Yhwh’s people that if they do not adhere to the covenant a plague of locusts will come upon them. Ostensibly, then, Joel 1.4 seems to be a straightforward reference to a plague of locusts. However, a plague of locusts is not the best explanation for all aspects of the devastation that appear in the chapter: while locusts could, on a surface reading of the text, be responsible for vines being made a desolation (1.7) and fig trees being subjected to ‘wrath’ (1.7) and both rendered bare and cast away, ‘the seeds shrivel under their clods…the barns are broken down’ (1.17) suggests drought and abandonment by humans. ‘Fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness and the flame has burnt all the trees of the field’ (1.19) is also unlikely to reflect the activity of locusts. For the pastures and trees to burn indicates that they were tinder dry. That drought was involved is supported by the following verse where it is said, ‘the beasts of the field cry also unto you, for the rivers of waters are dried up…’ The fire itself could have been spontaneous or deliberately lit by humans. Overall, it seems that one kind of disaster does not fit with the details of the chapter and this makes room for the possibility that Joel 1.6 does indeed refer to a human army. A consideration of the other biblical occurrences of the words for the ‘creatures’, including the אֶרֶבָּה, that appear in Joel 1.4, shows that their very designations are indicative of particular activities and that they can be used as similes for human armies.


21. Strazicich, *Joel’s Use of Scripture*, 66–9, provides the connections between the two works and refers to the views of other scholars. He discusses the use Joel makes of Ps. 78 (Strazicich, *Joel’s Use of Scripture*, 75–6).


24. Simkins, *Yahweh’s Activity*, 149–50, claims that swarms of locusts could look like fire but it is not a convincing explanation.
The Creatures of Joel 1.4

The creatures, including the ארבה (usually rendered as locust), in Joel 1.4 have been translated as different types of plant-eating insects or understood as the different stages in the life-cycle of the locust. One of the difficulties of the latter interpretation is that the order of the insects is different in Joel 2.25 and so it is unlikely that the terms reflect the stages of the locust’s growth. As recognized in some translations, the actual terms lend support to their being descriptors of activity rather than generic terms for particular creatures. The clue to this appears in Deut. 28.38, for there the verb חסל has as its subject the ארבה (locust). It represents therefore something that the ארבה (locust) does and is usually translated as ‘consume’. Literally, then, an one who brings about consuming. The verb may lie behind ילק and, if so, ילק could mean ‘one who laps up’.

Another word in the series of supposed creatures in Joel 1.4, ילק, occurs also in Ps. 105.34; Jer. 51.14,

25. For example, the RV has ‘palmerworm’, ‘locust’, ‘cankerworm’, ‘caterpillar’. This follows Driver’s translation that appears in Joel and Amos, 36.

26. According to Simkins, Yahweh’s Activity, 79, and Wolf, Joel and Amos, 27, K. A. Credner, Der Prophet Joel übersetzt (Halle: Waisenhauses, 1831) introduced this notion.

27. For scholarly attempts to overcome the difficulty of the different order of the four terms in Joel 1.4 and 2.25, see Simkins, Yahweh’s Activity, 104, 107, 111.


29. Simkins, Yahweh’s Activity, 105, thinks that, as locusts do not lick, such a meaning is inappropriate. He theorizes that the Arabic root wlq ‘hasten’ provides a more appropriate etymology.

30. BDB, 916, notes that Delitzsch thought it derived from ברא meaning ‘devastate’.
Ecological Aspects of War

27; Joel 2.25; Nah. 3.15, 16. While the instance in Ps. 105 refers to the plagues in Egypt and Joel 2.25 is similar to Joel 1.4, the occurrences in Jeremiah and Nahum all concern war. In these instances, the לילָה is a simile for a variety of forces that attack people. In an oracle against Babylon, God says, ‘I will fill you with men as with the לילָה and they will lift up a shout against you’ (Jer. 51.14). In a continuation of the oracle against Babylon, God issues the order in Jer. 51.27 ‘cause the horses to come up as the rough לילָה’.

In an oracle against Nineveh, God says, ‘There shall the fire devour you, the sword will cut you off, it shall devour you like the חֶסִיל (Nah. 3.15). This is a particularly interesting passage for it brings into play not only human warfare but fire, which also features in Joel 1. חֶסִיל, another word in the series in Joel 1.4, occurs elsewhere in 1 Kgs 8.37; 2 Chr. 6.28; Ps. 78.46; Isa. 33.4, Joel 2.25. Psalm 78.46 is in the context of the plagues of Egypt which came about because Pharaoh did not obey God; 1 Kgs 8.37 sees the חֶסִיל and multiple other ills coming about because of sin and 2 Chr. 6.28 is similar. Isaiah 33.3–4 though links the חֶסִיל with war: ‘At the noise of the tumult the peoples are fled; at the lifting up of yourself the nations are scattered. Your spoil will be gathered as the חֶסִיל gathers; as locusts leap shall they leap upon it.’

As far as the ארבה is concerned, while most of its occurrences clearly indicate a locust in its natural state and activities (Exod. 10.4, 12, 13, 14 [×2], 19 [×2]; Lev. 11.22; Deut. 28.38; 1 Kgs 8.37; 2 Chr. 6.28; Job 39.20; Pss. 78.46; 105.34), others, as seen above, present the locust as a simile for human manifestations (Judg. 6.5; 7.12). This is the case also in Ps. 109.23; Jer. 46.23; Nah. 3.15, 17.

In sum, the four terms in Joel 1.4 are applicable to devouring insects but each has been used elsewhere in connection with, or as a simile for, the activities of humans, even human armies.

Joel 1.6

While ostensibly Joel 1.6 seems to be a reference to a human incursion because of the inclusion of the word גוי, it has been argued strongly that the ‘teeth (שׁני) of a lion (אריה)’ and the ‘jaw teeth (מתלעות) of a great lion (לביא)’ could apply to the mandibles of a locust.31 Nevertheless, ‘teeth’ (שׁני) are symbols of aggression in the Hebrew Bible (Pss. 35.16; 37.12; 57.5[4]; 124.6; Prov. 30.14) and ‘lion’, appears as a metaphor for nations – particularly Assyria or Babylon (Jer. 4.7; 5.6; 50.17; Nah. 2.12[11], 13[12]). It is also used as a simile for the wicked ruler in Prov.

28.15 and for wicked prophets in Ezek. 22.25. The second Hebrew word for ‘lion’, אֱלֹהִים, represents foreign nations in Isa. 5.29; Neh. 2.12[11]. Further, מַתְלֻעָת (jaw teeth) appears only twice elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and on both occasions it refers to the jaw teeth of humans. In Job 29.17 ‘I broke the jaw teeth of the unrighteous’ is part of Job’s attestation of the path he followed before disaster struck him. Indeed ‘righteousness’ and ‘judgement’ / ‘justice’ were part of his garb for he says in vv. 14–16,

I put on righteousness (צדק) and it clothed me
My judgement / justice (משפט) was as a robe and a diadem
I was eyes to the blind and feet to the lame
I was a father to the needy
And the cause of him that I knew not, I searched out.

Such is the context of Job’s breaking of the jaw teeth of the unrighteous who presumably had behaved in a way contrary to Job himself. In Prov. 30.14 which contains the only other occurrence of מַתְלֻעָת (jaw teeth), those who are cited as possessing them are also unrighteous:

There is a generation whose teeth are swords
And their jaw teeth knives,
To devour the poor from the earth
And the needy from mankind.

It seems then that unrighteousness and rapacity are the characteristics of the גּוֹי of Joel 1.6 and that the גּוֹי is composed of humans, not locusts. The result of the actions of this גּוֹי seems largely agricultural.

Joel 1.7
It is essential to look closely at what follows in Joel 1.7, for it has been cited as clear evidence of locust activity. It reads,

subjected my vine to destruction and my fig tree to קָצַפה
In making bare, it has made it bare;
Its branches have been made white.

32. God is likened to a lion (אריה) in Isa. 38.10; Lam. 3.10; Amos 3.8; Hos. 11.10, as are the tribes of Judah (Gen. 49.9) and Dan (Deut. 33.22).
33. לֶבָב characterizes God in Num. 24.9 and in Job 4.11 and 38.39 it is asserted that God controls the לֶבָב in that he provides or denies it prey.
34. This word will be discussed later.
Simkins, who argues that locusts caused this kind of devastation,\textsuperscript{35} draws attention to, and quotes from, John Whiting’s description of the 1915 locust plague on Jerusalem where after the leaves of the fig trees had been devoured, the bark was eaten from the young topmost branches which then, because of their exposure to the sun, were ‘bleached snow-white’.\textsuperscript{36} Nevertheless, there are aspects of Joel 1.7 that suggest the description is also a metaphor. God is speaking (or the prophet is speaking in God’s name),\textsuperscript{37} as indicated by ‘my vine…my fig tree’. In the Hebrew Bible the vine and fig tree are metaphors for peace and prosperity (1 Kgs 5.25 [4.25]; 2 Kgs 18.31//Isa. 36.16; Mic. 4.4; Zech. 3.10; 8.12), but, more importantly for Joel 1.7, they can also be metaphors for Israel. Psalm 80.9[8] reads, ‘You brought a vine out of Egypt, you drove out the nations and planted it.’ The vine’s establishment and spread are described in vv. 10–11[9–10] in terms that make clear the expansion of the nation and its territory, but in vv. 12–14[11–13] destruction and abandonment are apparent and in v. 15[14] God is begged

Turn again, we beseech you, O God of hosts,
...Look down from heaven and behold and visit this vine.

Verse 17[16] continues the metaphor of the vine saying, ‘It is burned, it is cut down…’ As such, Ps. 80 describes Israel’s beginnings in the land, its growth into a prosperous nation but then its downfall (probably the events leading to the Babylonian Exile) and a plea to God to restore it. Hosea 10.1 also likens Israel to a vine when it states ‘Israel is an empty vine’. Ezekiel too refers to Israel as a vine when he says in 19.10, ‘Your mother was like a vine…’ and continues in 19.12, ‘she was plucked up in fury, she was cast down (השלכה) to the ground and the east wind dried up (הובישו) her fruit / chosen ones;\textsuperscript{38} they were broken off (התפרקו) and withered (ובשוי), her strong stem / tribe (מטה), the fire consumed it (אסכלרה)’.

It is noteworthy that both Ps. 80 and Ezek. 19.12 refer to fire within an agricultural metaphor, as do Joel 1.19, 20. As far as the fig tree is concerned, God says in Hos. 9.10, ‘I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness, I saw your fathers like the firstborn / the first ripe in the fig

\begin{itemize}
\item Simkins, \textit{Yahweh’s Activity}, 130.
\item Assis, \textit{The Book of Joel}, 82, says it is God; Creshaw, \textit{Joel}, 96 asserts that it is the prophet speaking in the name of God. The difference is not worth the argument.
\item The \textit{MT} reads ‘fruit’ where the \textit{LXX} has ‘chosen ones’. As ‘fruit’ can be a metaphor for ‘offspring’, the \textit{MT} and \textit{LXX} are not as disparate as they first appear.
\end{itemize}
tree at her first season.’ This implies that the fig tree also is a metaphor for Israel.

Joel 1.7 is thus more complex than it appears at first sight. The destruction of the vine and the fig tree in the context of the Babylonian army come to punish should be understood on three levels: as a literal act; as a metaphor for the loss of peace and prosperity; and for the overthrow of the nation and the land. The fig tree is subjected to קצפה. קצפה appears only in Joel 1.7 and Brown, Driver and Briggs state that it is a feminine noun meaning ‘snapping’ or ‘splintering’. Such a meaning is accepted by most commentators. However, קצפה appears on numerous occasions (e.g. Pss. 38.2[1]; 102.11[10]; Isa. 34.2; 60.10) as God’s wrath which he pours out on his people. James Crenshaw thinks that in Joel the הē (ה) on קצפה is not indicative of a feminine noun, rather it is a suffix and so ‘wrath’ rather than ‘snapping’ / ‘splintering’ is the appropriate translation. At first sight, this accords well with the fig tree as a metaphor for Israel; an Israel which is subjected to God’s wrath at the time of the Babylonian Exile. However, the following phrase in Joel 1.7, והשׁליך חשף, is strange and is queried in Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Accordingly, it should be reviewed.

Rather than Crenshaw’s hypothesis that the ה on קצפה was a suffix, it is possible that the ה originally prefaced חשף which would then read חשף. The only occurrence of חשף as a noun is in 1 Kgs 20.27 where, in a pre-battle scene, the people of Israel who are encamped are described as being like two חפשי of kids. חפשי is usually translated as ‘little flocks’. The root meaning though of the verb חשף is ‘to make bare’ / ‘uncover’. Therefore, the noun probably means ‘uncovering’ and in the case of the kids ‘unprotected’. If so, in Joel 1.7, ‘the uncovering’ ( חשף) would be a reference to the destruction of the vine and the fig tree, and so the protection that these (and God) had given to the land was no longer present. Instead it had been made bare (חשפ) and was cast aside: its branches (שריגים) were made white (הלכנו). קצפה appears elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible only in Gen. 40 in the account of the dream of Pharaoh’s butler and its interpretation. That there is likely to be a link between this verse and Joel 1.7 is made even more possible by the ‘branches’ (שריגים) in Gen. 40.10 being in a vine (גפן). The vine budded and blossomed and produced ripe grapes. By contrast, in Joel 1.7 the branches were ‘made white’ (הלכנו), indicating they were not in a state where they would be

39. BDB, 893.
40. Crenshaw, Joel, 97.
fertile in the near future. לָבָן (make white) is not a common verb and the only places where the hiphil occurs, apart from Dan. 11.35,42 are Ps. 51.9[7] and Isa. 1.18. In all, being ‘made white’ is a metaphor for purification. In Ps. 51 the psalmist pleads with God to have mercy on him and to blot out his transgressions (Ps. 51.3[1]) and, in the verse where the hiphil of לָבָן occurs, he urges God, ‘Cleanse me with hyssop and I shall be clean, wash me and I will be whiter (אֲלָבָן) than snow’. Isaiah 1.16–18 is particularly interesting, for there God spells out what the people must do: ‘Wash, make clean; put away the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek judgement (משפט), relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow…though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white (אֲלָבָן) as snow’. ‘Making white’ then, when applied to the branches of the vine which itself can be a metaphor for Israel – both land and people – indicates the purification of the vine’s skeleton, that is, the land will lie fallow and those that remain of the people will be forced to consider their past behaviour in the light of the disaster that has come upon them.

In sum, God, land, locusts and people are inter-linked in the verses in Joel that have been considered. While on a surface reading, no reason is given in Joel 1 for the disaster, the biblical passages that lie behind the mention of locusts or an invading army indicate that a lack of obedience to the will of God, along with a lack of caring and compassion, is the cause. In the following chapter, in a way reminiscent of the framework of the book of Judges, the people lament and appeal to God to spare them (Joel 2.17). God then promises to restore the blessings of the land to them and they will once again praise God’s name.

Violence (חֲמָס) and Destruction (שָׁד) in Opposition to Judgement (משׁפט) and Righteousness (צדקה)

Lack of obedience to the will of God leads us back to חֲמָס and שָׁד. It was seen earlier that in Ezek. 12.19 it was the חֲמָס of the city’s inhabitants that brought about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and, as will be seen later, Hab. 1.3–4 paints an even sharper picture of the corruption that prevailed at that time. Further, חֲמָס does not always mean ‘violence’ or ‘cruelty’ for, as the example of the false witness (i.e. the witness of חֲמָס) shows, it can indicate the overthrow or violation of God’s will which in turn impinges on the well-being of others. To overcome חֲמָס, judgement (משׁפט) is required. Where there is שָׁד, there is spoiling or

42. The hithpael appears in Dan. 12.10
wasting of the land and anything that is on it, that is, agricultural produce, grasslands, beasts, dwellings and people. In addition to instances of שד related to the activity of armies or insects, the word is used for taking what does not belong to you in non-war situations, for example, ‘for the spoil (oppression) of the poor’ (Ps. 12.6[5]); ‘the spoil (robbery) of the wicked’ (Prov. 21.7). Where שד does not exist there is justice (צדק) for all. This is encapsulated in Ezek. 45.9 where, in the context of the new Temple, the prince is not to practise חמס nor take that which does not belong to him (שד) rather to give judgement (משפט) and deal righteously / justly (צדק) with the people, making sure that the regulations are adhered to and the offerings made. This requirement in Ezekiel stands in contrast to the picture painted by Hab. 1.3–4 of the corruption that prevailed prior to the coming of the Chaldeans. Habakkuk says,

… spoiling (שד) and violence (חמס) are before me
… Thus the law (תורה) is slacked and judgement (משפט) does not go forth to victory
For a wicked one (רושע) compasses about the righteous one (הצדיק),
Thus judgement / justice (משפט) goes forth from crookedness.

That violence and destruction stand in opposition to judgement and righteousness is absolutely clear. Wrongdoing violates others; it violates the land and it violates the Torah. This is as true today as it was in the time of the Hebrew Bible.

**Punishment and Justice**

After wrongdoing, punishment sent by God ensues, whether in the form of a natural disaster such as a plague of locusts or devastation by a human enemy in war. This has a cleansing effect and repentance leads to restoration. While an invading enemy is punished in turn for the violence it has perpetrated (e.g. Jer. 51.46 in the case of the Babylonians), and rough justice is assured, none of the passages that have been considered so far provide any hint of justice for the innocent whose lives are disrupted or lost in the disaster. It may be that this was a matter that was meditated upon for, even though it appears in what seems to be quite a different

43. No more are the princes to oppress the people and the land is to be given to Israel according to their tribes (Ezek. 45.8). The balances are to be set justly (Ezek. 45.10), weights are to be regulated (Ezek. 45.11–12) and specified amounts of produce of the land are to be offered as oblations, burnt offerings and peace offerings by the people (Ezek. 45.13–16) and others by the prince (Ezek. 45.17).
context, it is asserted later in the book of Joel that only those ‘who call on the name of the Lord will be delivered’ (Joel 3.5[2.32]). This provides some hope of justice for the individual on the ‘Day of the Lord’, whenever that might be. The profound failure of the appropriate retribution in this lifetime for some individuals, undoubtedly led to the conviction of Dan. 12.2 that on ‘that Day’ (Dan. 12.1) individuals would be judged after death. For believers, this is still a comfort today.

Postscript

War and its consequences for both people and land were devastating in the ancient world. How much more so in the modern world where weapons are more advanced and capable of wreaking havoc remotely. The violation of the rights of others and the land upon which they live leads to war; the need for judgement / justice and righteousness is greater than ever if Earth creatures and the Earth itself are to survive.
The book of Revelation has the reputation of being the War Scroll of
the New Testament,¹ and indeed the word ‘war’ is found there more
frequently than in the other twenty-six texts combined.² Just how this
violent military language in Revelation is to be interpreted, and its impli-
cations for empire and for earth – both in the text itself, and in subsequent
history – has generated vast quantities of popular and scholarly literature

(1988): 17–40, where he concludes that Revelation ‘fulfills the function of a “Chris-
tian War Scroll”’ despite repudiating ‘apocalyptic militarism’ since it ‘promotes the
active participation of Christians in the divine conflict with evil’ (17). As we shall see
below, others are less convinced that militarism is repudiated in Revelation. Stephen
Moore states that, ‘(m)ore than any other early Christian text, Revelation is replete
with the language of war, conquest, and empire – so much so, indeed, as to beggar

S. D. Moore, Empire and Apocalypse: Postcolonialism and the New Testament,
Bible in the Modern World 12 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2006), 114.

2. ‘War’ (πόλεμος) occurs only in one reported saying of Jesus about the inevi-
tability of war (Mark 13.7 twice; Matt. 24.6 twice; and Luke 21.9, along with
earthquakes, famines and plagues – ‘these things must happen’, δεῖ...γενέσθαι), and in
one metaphorical reference to kings counting the cost of war (Luke 14.31), accounting
for all the explicit references to war (six) in the Gospels. The three references in the
epistles seem to refer to ‘spiritual warfare’ (1 Cor. 14:8; Jas 4:1, 2?), one to the heroic
past of Israel (Heb. 11.34) and the remaining fifteen references (counting both noun
and verb forms) are found in the Apocalypse, where perhaps we might have expected
even more. For an annotated bibliography on war and violence in the New Testament,
liographies.com/obo/page/biblical-studies (accessed 9 December 2016).
in recent times. A disturbing amount of the popular literature seems to glory in a Divine Warrior who snatches away the faithful before defeating the powers of evil and trashing earth. Yet there are also those who argue that earth participates in a non-violent struggle against the forces of exploitation and destruction in Revelation, and is not just a passive victim in the wars waged by human empires. I write in support of such views and seek to show here that whereas the four horsemen of the apocalypse (Rev. 6.1–8) represent the inevitable consequences of human power-mongering, the appropriation and exploitation of the environment in support of imperial theologies and power is directly challenged by John’s visions.

Furthermore, the question as to who has voice (φωνή) and place (τόπος) in the narrative of Revelation generates hope in the silent, suffering Lamb and the One who has the power to withhold (2.5; 12.8) and to grant place (12.6, 14), even to earth and heaven (6.14; 20.11). Thus, this One can wield power far greater than any human authority dependent on the threat of war and the support of local gods, but does so by empowering the

3. Around seventy-five million copies of the Left Behind series of novels have been sold, for a start. For an analysis of this phenomenon and other interpretations of Revelation in film and media, see the Apocalypse and Popular Culture series from Sheffield Phoenix Press: J. Walliss and L. Quincy, eds., Reel Revelations: Apocalypse and Film (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2010); C. Gibben and M. S. Sweetnam, eds., Left Behind and the Evangelical Imagination (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011); and R. G. Howard, ed., Network Apocalypse: Visions of the End in an Age of Internet Media (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011).


5. From here onwards, all Scripture references refer to the book of Revelation unless otherwise specified.
basileia (βασιλεία) and priesthood of all the people (1.6; 5.10) and not by
imitating the patriarchal power structures of the Roman Empire.

For many contemporary commentators, however, the use of violent
military language indicates an intent to overthrow and replace Roman
Empire with Christian Empire. Stephen Moore has argued very persua-
sively that, ‘[e]ssentially, Revelation’s messianic empire (“The world
empire [hē basileia tou kosmou] has become the empire of our Lord
and his Messiah,” 11:15) will be established by the same means through
which the Roman Empire was established: war and conquest, entai-
ling, as always, mass slaughter, but now on a hyperbolic scale’.6 Others have
also argued for a similar rhetoric of reversal, a war of empires, such that
Steven Friesen asks the question: ‘does Revelation become imperial in
order to oppose empire?’ If so, then as he says, Revelation ‘actually
ends up advocating the values it opposes’.8 Indeed, a cursory survey of

6. S. D. Moore, Untold Tales from the Book of Revelation: Sex and Gender;
Empire and Ecology (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), ‘Raping Rome’, 146. I have argued
elsewhere against the over-reading of basileia as empire and how this plays out in the
Gospel of Mark. See K. Dyer, ‘The Empire of God, the Postcolonial Jesus, and Post-
pocalyptic Mark’, in Colonial Contexts and Postcolonial Theologies: Storyweaving in
the Asia-Pacific, ed. M. Brett and J. Havea (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014),
81–97.

7. S. J. Friesen, ‘Roman Imperial Imagery in Revelation: Space, Knowledge,
(Leuven: Peeters, 2011), 43. Friesen does not take this view himself, but suggests
the following authors do: C. Keller, Apocalypse Now and Then: A Feminist Guide to
the End of the World (Boston: Beacon, 1996); R. M. Royalty, The Streets of Heaven:
The Ideology of Wealth in the Apocalypse of John (Macon, GA: Mercer University
Press, 1998); and C. A. Frilingos, Spectacles of Empire: Monsters, Martyrs, and the
Book of Revelation (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), to which
we can add Stephen Moore’s work on Revelation. Friesen aligns himself with those
who argue that Revelation subverts empire in more ambiguous ways, such as: B. R.
Rossing, The Choice Between Two Cities: Whore, Bride, and Empire in the Apoca-
lypse (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999); D. L. Barr, Tales of the End: A
Narrative Commentary on the Book of Revelation (Santa Rosa: Polebridge, 1998);
and H. O. Maier, Apocalypse Recalled: The Book of Revelation After Christendom
(Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

while Revelation is busy shaming Roma by turning her into a prostitute, on the one
hand, Revelation is also busy modeling Jesus on Roma, on the other hand, the one
hand not knowing what the other is doing’. Moore, Untold Tales, 154. A form of this
paragraph also appears in K. Dyer, ‘Basileia or Imperium? Rome and the Rhetoric
of Resistance in the Revelation to John’, in From Ancient Manuscripts to Modern
Dictionaries: Select Studies in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek, ed. T. Li and K. Dyer
Christian empires through the ages would suggest that Moore is correct at least in relation to the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Apocalypse, but this may simply confirm that the texts of the powerless are read very differently in the hands of the powerful.

I am interested here in exploring how Revelation might be understood environmentally – in its earliest habitat – where the gods that were pressed into support of empire lurked in every lake and abyss, and in every ancient shrine. Revelation challenges the assumption that those who think they rule over the nations have the support of such gods in ruling sea and land as well. Rather than one human power subjugating the ἔθνη (*ethne*[^1]) and enlisting the gods to support their sovereignty over earth, John envisions one God enlisting the ἔθνη to share sovereignty and transform the κόσμος (*kosmos*).

**Imperial Hegemony and Its Consequences for the Environment**

The brutal reassertion of Roman hegemony in the East during the mid-first century CE had a profound effect on the texts of the New Testament, in prospect and retrospect, and on humans and the circum-Mediterranean environment. Yet understandably, this is only evident in sources from that time in allusions and ‘hidden transcripts’.[^9] Nowhere in Revelation is Rome or its rulers named explicitly, yet everywhere the dominant culture of Rome (and the previous empires it imitated and cannibalized) is alluded to and critiqued in the mixed metaphors and hybrid images of John’s visions. In so doing, the vivid language of the Hebrew traditions (Babylon!) and the Greco-Roman iconography of power, war and victory over sea, land and the nations, are juxtaposed and redefined in order to challenge the assumption that the gods / God must be on the side of the powerful and that peace comes only through conquest.

[^9]: (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, *forthcoming*), where I critique more fully the translation of *basileia* as empire in recent NT scholarship.

War may be seen as inevitable given the avaricious nature of human sovereignty (13.7–8; cf. Mark 10.42–45), but it is never glorified or described in detail. Not even the Book of Revelation provides battle scenes as such, but rather prefers to report the gathering of armies (9.16; 16.14, 16; 19.14–15; 20.7–10) and to give graphic descriptions of the aftermath (19.17–21; 20.9–10). The consequences of these multiple wars are felt theologically (12.7–12), politically (13.1–18; 17.9–14; 18.3; 19.18–19), economically (13.17; 18.11–19), ecclesiologically (13.7–10) and perhaps above all, environmentally – as the ecological consequences of war and imperial exploitation are repeatedly and increasingly made plain in Revelation. Four of the seven broken seals reveal the explicit consequences for earth (6.4, 8, 10, 13), and the extent of the damage for one quarter of the earth (6.8) increases to one third (8.7, 10), and is detailed in six of the seven trumpets: earth (8.7); sea (8.8); rivers and springs (8.10); sun, moon, stars (8.12); earth (9.1, 3).

Not all of this devastation is attributed to war alone, since John the Seer is relentless in his exposure of imperial hubris and the exploitative trade practices of empire as well (6.6; 13.17; 18.11–19). Indeed, the consequential order of events is made clear at the outset by the four horsemen of the apocalypse: (1) conquering and ‘victory’ (6.2); (2) war and violence (6.4); (3) unfair trade and economic exploitation (6.3); (4) the combination of sword, famine, plagues, unbalanced ecology and death (6.8). This cycle of events is presented as the inevitable outcome of human abuses of power, rather than as the punitive action of God.10 The sequence as it unravels can be described as:

1. the imperial impulse (to invade and conquer, whether by Babylon, Parthia or Rome);
2. the rule of violence (internal and external violence – civil war – to maintain control);
3. the corruption of commerce (exploitative trade to sustain the centre of power);
4. social, political and environmental degradation (the inevitable consequences of increasing imbalances in power and wealth).

10. Any direct connection between the One on the Throne and the four horsemen and their actions is modified by the repeated use of ‘it was given to them’ (permitted/allowed, ἐδόθη, 6.2, 4 [×2], 8), and by the announcement being made by each living being, ‘Come!’ (or ‘Go!’). By comparison, in Zech. 1 and 6, God is much more directly involved in sending out the horsemen/chariots on their assigned missions (see further below).
The environmental devastation detailed in the seals, trumpets and bowls is not described in passing as mere collateral damage in the battle between the agents of evil and the divine forces. Rather, it is central to the struggle between the polytheologies of the dominant culture on earth (ultimately Babylon / Rome), and John’s (non-)description of the all-powerful One on the Throne. The close link cultivated between the ecosystem and infrastructure of first-century Asia Minor and the agents of evil (between ‘natural’ phenomena, and temples, theatres and the named powers of oppression), requires explication and illustration if we are to appreciate fully the power of the gods and those who manipulated them, and the alternative that John’s visions offered.

**Imperial Ecotheology and Its Consequences for the Nations**

In March 2013, Italian archaeologist, Francesco D’Andria and his team, discovered the gates of hell (Hadēs) in Hierapolis – two years after having discovered the tomb of St Philip in the same region. The chthonic (under-earth) shrine of Hades (Greek god of the underworld and brother of Zeus and Poseidon) dates back to the Phrygian earth-mother cult of Cybele, whose eunuch priests continued to serve through the Hellenistic era, as the sponsoring deities shifted to Hades and Pluto (the roughly equivalent Roman deity), until the wall of a church built by Christians in the fifth to sixth century restricted access. D’Andria wryly comments that the Christians were not on good terms with Pluto, and so sealed the shrine off and filled the pool with rocks. The gates of hell could not prevail against the church it seems (Matt. 16.18).

Only the eunuch priests were able to walk on the proskene and enter the abyss, and they took great care in doing so – for Strabo (Geogr. 6.13.4.14) describes this Plutonium (the most important of the three in the wider region) as a place for a special kind of sacrifice: the god of the underworld would kill the offerings directly and instantly, without any shedding of blood, as the participants sat above and looked on.

Some 80% of the bones of sacrificial victims found around the abyss are from small birds, and 20% from bulls – the latter butchered after their sudden mysterious death and distributed to priests, sponsors and participants. The ceremonies were held at night (many broken lamps have been

found), and the vast majority who were unable to afford major sacrifices could procure small birds to throw towards the opening in the hope that Pluto / Hades / Cybele would find them acceptable and take them in death – as continues to happen there to small birds at times today – achieved we now know by way of plumes of carbon dioxide from the underground seismic disturbances.

The round building and rooms excavated nearby housed mysterious cult activities, including ritual bathing, incubation (sleeping in the sacred place with the intention of receiving a divine dream), interpretation of dreams by the priests (after drinking the mineral water) and healing. The sacred site was well guarded by statues of the guard-dog Cerberus and a pair of large serpents (or δράκων) which looked every participant in the eye as they entered the complex.

I am not arguing that the Seer John had this very shrine in mind each time he writes of ‘death and hades’ (as with the fourth horse and rider, 6.8, and also in 1.18; 20.13, 14), or of that ‘ancient serpent / dragon (δράκων), who is called the Devil and Satan’ (12.9; 20.2), but rather that these discoveries indicate the lived realities of the context in which the Seer writes and suggest the kind of images that would have been evoked for first-century hearers by John’s vocabulary. Hierapolis is clearly visible from nearby Laodicea, and the visual language that John uses confronts the polytheologies of his day and their embeddedness in the surrounding political and ecological systems. So when John speaks of ‘Death and Hades being thrown into the lake of fire’ (20.14), this does not only signify the demise of two gods of the Greek pantheon, but it overturns the terrible power of known physical locations in the wider region, thereby undermining the legitimacy of those political and spiritual powers claiming authority over land and sea in the name of the gods.  

Apparently John is convinced that following the Lamb and the One on the Throne makes better sense of the appropriation by the Romans of sites like the plutonium of Hierapolis and its associated deities, and possibly of the volcanic ‘lakes of fire’ (19.20; 20.10, 14–15 [×3]; 21.8) of the Anatolian plateau (also known as gateways to Hades), does not imply that evil rules the cosmos in the Seer’s understanding, since the three uses of κόσμος in Revelation affirm ultimate Divine control (11.15; 13.8; 17.8), if 11.15 is translated consistently with the other genitive chains in Revelation as ‘The basileia of the cosmos of our Lord and his Christ has come’ (contra Moore, Untold Tales, 146, above). Rather, evil is thrown onto earth because it has no place in heaven (12.8), and its allies come from below (‘out of the abyss’ 11.7; ‘coming up out of the earth’ 13.11), and together they seek to deceive the inhabitants and kings of earth until such powers suffer the ‘second death’. See D. E. Aune, Revelation 6–16, WBC 52B (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 1065–7, for a detailed discussion of the ‘lake of
everyday experience and the lived environment of his audience than the
gods on offer in the dominant culture, and subsequent history in the Lycus
Valley confirms that, at least in part.

Francesco D’Andria’s first discovery, of the missing tomb of St Philip
the evangelist, might be described as finding ‘the gateway to heaven (on
earth)’ in contrast to the ‘gates of hell (below earth)’. High on the hill
behind the city and near the traditional location of Philip’s crucifixion,
lies an octagonal baths building for pilgrims, a marturion (featuring eight
in the designs), and a sanctuary church where the tomb was eventually
found (though the body had long since been moved to Rome). According
to early Church tradition, Hierapolis became a centre and shrine for
Philip and his prophet daughters, for charismatic feminism (the Montanist
renewal movement) and for holistic healing in the context of the natural
environment (the mineral springs and so on) – pre-dating the Johannine
shrines in Ephesus, for example. The practices of the Christian pilgrims
walking up the mountain closely parallel those who attended the Shrine
of Hades in the abyss – ritual bathing, incubation, dreams and interpreta-
tions, and healing. So what was it that brought about the relocation of such
activities from Hades to Heaven, from the abyss to the mountain, from
seeking multiple Deities to one Deity?13

Hierapolis had long been the place to die honourably and be buried –
those priests knew Hades well, and therefore how best to get a body
across the Styx and safely resting – and so the necropolis outside the
gates of Hierapolis extends for kilometres. The sort of death that Philip is
thought to have died as he followed his Master to the cross was not such
an honourable death, but naked, public and shameful – and outside the
city wall. Yet his body lay buried within the church, in the heart of the
worshipping community, as evidence that death (and Hades) had indeed
lost its sting (1 Cor. 15.55), and that the early followers of Jesus had been
freed from the fear of the bottomless abyss and a perilous afterlife. It is
precisely such examples of enduring suffering and witness (to death if
necessary) that John foreshadows in Revelation to shape his response and
challenge to human empire and its supporting deities. Regardless of the
historicity of the later Philip traditions, the slain Lamb / crucified One
clearly deconstructed the assumptions, fears and theology that under-
girded Roman assertions of victory, power and peace.

fire’ and ‘second death’ imagery and their possible connection to the Egyptian Book
of the Dead, and/or to the ‘river of fire’ imagery (Dan. 7.10; 2 En. 10.2).

13. The sharing of the Throne/s by the One on it (not directly described or
named by John) and the Slain Lamb (alongside the ‘Seven Spirits’) may not indicate
monotheism to some, but I will leave that as an open question here.
Across the Lycus Valley from Hierapolis, the smaller city of Aphrodisias provides us with another insight into the politics of empire and the manipulation of the gods in the service of the powerful. It too is dominated by theatres and Temples, but it is the Sebasteion – a ninety metre, three-storey high procession-way into a Caesar Temple that illustrates most graphically the fusion of religion, myth and politics in the construction of power and elite identity.\(^\text{14}\) The stunning reliefs were commissioned by local Romaphiles and modelled on similar statuary in Rome. The panels demonstrate the use of Greek heroes, traditions and values as a foundation for visual representations of the might and power of Rome and its Caesars, who through the favour of the gods achieved victory over the nations. The images are patriarchal and violent, celebrating the power of elite males over foreign nations, personified as naked women. The enslavement and humiliation of captives is a recurring motif. Indeed, the nations (ἐθνη) appear to be brutalised by elite males promoting a peace built on subordination, enslavement and exploitation of the environment (as indeed the nations are deceived in 11.9; 13.7), but contrast this with another recurring theme in Revelation that every nation, tribe, tongue and people shall find a way to resist human empire and be part of God’s new community (5.9; 7.9; 14.6).

**The Four Imperial Horsemen and the Voices of Resistance**

So I am arguing here for a reading of Revelation from the perspective of those captives humiliated by Rome, as a call to non-violent resistance to the dominant exploitative culture.\(^\text{15}\) I realize that this is not an easy task, given the nature of the violent imagery and language in John’s visions. But violence of all kinds has to be named in some way before it can be challenged and subverted. I argue that John uses the image of the Christ with sword-in-mouth to embody a different kind of victory over those who have the sword-in-hand – the persuasive authority of voice and logos over brute military power. Even so, many astute commentators and readers have not found these redeeming features in Revelation, and the


\(^{15}\) I owe a debt here to scholars such as Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Eugene Boring, Michael Gorman, Steven Friesen, Barbara Rossing, Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, Harry Maier, David Neville and many others.
enduring power of such threatening images as the four horsemen of the
apocalypse (6.1–8) have long skewed interpretations towards seeing a
vengeful God who destroys the earth as a means to defeat evil.16

John seems to recycle the vivid imagery of the horsemen in Zech. 1 and
6, Jer. 15.1–4 (cf. also 13.9–10) and Ezek. 14.21–23, to shock his hearers
into seeing the inevitable outcomes of self-interested human empire:
international threats from rivals; civil war; economic injustice and famine;
and finally all three (sword, famine, pestilence / death), together with the
wild beasts of an ecosystem out of balance (6.8). It is one thing to name
the imagery of Zechariah as a possible source for Rev. 6.1–11, but quite
another to interpret any differences in wording and to explain what this
might mean for Revelation. In Zechariah, the horses / chariots are clearly
sent out on a mission from God to affirm that peace reigns (Zech. 1.11;
6.8; under the empire of Darius!) and that the Jerusalem Temple
will be rebuilt (Zech. 1.16). Clearly these concerns are not analogous to the
setting and interests of Revelation and perhaps that is why the colours
of the horses are not in parallel and why the ensuing disasters follow the
bleaker prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel (see Table 1) – there is no
peace or true temple under empire.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zech. 1.8–17</th>
<th>Zech. 6.1–8</th>
<th>Rev. 6.1–11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First horse</td>
<td>First horse / chariot</td>
<td>First horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red</td>
<td>Red</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Parthian mounted archer?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>pax Romana</em> unsettled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second horse</td>
<td>Second horse / chariot</td>
<td>Second horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sorrel</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Civil?) War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>pax Romana</em> destroyed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

16. For a helpful discussion and further literature wrestling with the issue of
violence in Revelation, see D. J. Neville, ‘Apocalypse of the Lamb: Reading Revela-
J. Neville, ‘Faithful, True, and Violent? Christology and “Divine Vengeance” in the
The first rider on a white horse (6.2) achieves victory (conquers), dressed not as a Roman, but as a Parthian mounted archer – part of the only army to defeat Rome three times (in 53 BCE, 40 BCE and 62 CE) and remain undefeated. This threat from the East (sometimes combined with the *Nero redivivus* myth) persisted throughout the first century CE, and John doesn’t hesitate to use it to unsettle the myth of *pax Romana*. The second rider (6.4) goes further and is permitted ‘to take peace out of the earth’ through civil war (‘so that people would slay one another’), again, a shrewd comment on Rome’s recent history and the massive blood-letting in the Battles of Philippi and Actium that led to the hegemony of Augustus, and the later civil wars ushering in the Flavian dynasty.

The third rider, on the black horse (6.5–6) and carrying scales (for measuring goods in the market) requires closer attention:

> And when he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature saying, ‘Come!’ And I looked, and behold! a black horse! And the one sitting upon it held a pair of scales in his hand. And I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures saying, ‘A quart (χοῖωιξ) of wheat for a day’s pay (δηναρίου), and three quarts (χοίνικες) of barley for a day’s pay (δηναρίου), and the olive oil and the wine do not damage (unjustly?)!’ (6.5–6)

A mysterious voice seems to give market news and advice: ‘The prices of wheat and barley are hugely inflated, but don’t harm the oil and wine!’ Or perhaps: ‘Sources close to the throne lament the inflation affecting staples in the market, and oppose the threat to oil and wine production’.

Whose voice is this that speaks here? Indeed, who has voice in Revelation? The word ‘voice’ (φωνή) occurs there fifty-five times as summarized below, listed in order of first occurrence and grouped according to subject.
Those Who Have ‘Voice’ in Revelation

the one like a Human One / Son of Man (10 times): 1.10, 12, 15; 3.20; 4.1; 9.13; 10.8; 11.12; 19.5?; 21.3?

rumblings, peals of thunder, lightning flashes, earthquake (4 times): 4.5; 8.5; 11.19; 16.17

mighty angel, another angel, angels (12 times): 5.2, 11 (∗2); 7.2; 10.3, 7; 14.7, 9, 15, 18; 18.2; 19.7

(loud) voice/s from heaven (5 times): 11.15; 12.10; 14.2, 13; 18.4

martyrs (6.10); great multitude (7.10; 19.1, 6); eagle (8.13); locusts’ wings (9.9 [×2]); harpists / millstone / bridegroom and bride (18.22–3); (10 times)

Voices from ‘sources close to the Throne’

four living beings / creatures around the throne (2 times): 6.1, 7 (and possibly 6.6)

‘what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the four living creatures’ (‘A quart of wheat for a day’s pay…’) (6.6)

‘a voice from the four horns of the altar’ (‘release four angels’) (9.13)

‘a loud voice from the Temple’ (in Heaven) (‘Go and pour out on Earth the seven bowls of the wrath of God’) (16.1)

‘a loud voice came out of the Temple, from the Throne’ (‘It is done!’) (16.17)

‘and from the Throne came a voice’ (‘Praise our God, all you servants…’) (19.5)

‘a loud voice from the Throne’ (‘See the home of God is among mortals…’) (21.3)
The wider context of 6.6 suggests four possible sources for this voice: ‘around the throne and on each side of the throne are four living beings’ (4.6), and, ‘Then I saw between the throne and the four living beings and among the elders, a lamb…’ (5.6). So is it the voice of one of the four beings; an elder; the Lamb; or the voice of the One on the throne? Nowhere else in Revelation does the slain Lamb have voice – except perhaps in this one passage – so who, or what, is this source close to the throne?17

Note that the dragon, serpent, Satan, devil, sea beast and land beast have no voice in Revelation – indeed, nor do any of the other forces opposed to the lamb.18 The closest is perhaps the locusts (the ‘voice’ of their wings, 9.9), but they do the bidding of the angel and torture those who do not have the mark of God. Creation has voice (rumblings and thunders in 4.5; 8.5; 11.19; 16.17, and the eagle in 8.13) and participates in the struggle to transform earth (as does earth itself in 12.16, where earth comes to the rescue of the woman in the wilderness). Clearly for John, the combined voices of the faithful as they express themselves in prophetic witness (7.9–10; 19.1, 6) – the great multitude from every nation, tribe, tongue and people – are able to overcome (to have victory) over those who claim to have power over the nations.

If the voice in 6.6b is from God (or the Lamb, or perhaps an Elder), what is its register? Is the voice simply stating the facts of horrific inflation (prices between eight to sixteen times higher than normal for grain),19 followed by a command not to do further damage? Do we understand the first part to be a lament on behalf of the poor, shifting in the second half to a sarcastic / ironic quotation of the attitude of the wealthy towards luxury items (oil and wine)?20 Can we press this saying into a divine affirmation

17. Of course the ‘slain Lamb’ as one like a Human One/Son of Man has voice (if we accept that equation), and even seems to speak ‘from the Throne’ to exhort praise of God (19.5; 21.3).
18. The land beast is said to have enabled an image (εἰκών) of the sea beast to speak (λαλέω), but no words are actually reported (13.15).
20. This is perhaps the most common interpretation of commentators; see, for example, W. Howard-Brook and A. Gwyther, Unveiling Empire: Reading Revelation Then and Now (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999), 142; Koester, Revelation, 397. But it assumes an awkward change in tone – or a strongly sarcastic tone overall. Brian Blount describes it as ‘ironic sarcasm’ (B. K. Blount, Revelation: A Commentary, NTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009], 129). Such a change in tone stands in marked contrast to the directness of other reported voices from God, or from
of the rules of warfare (Deut. 20.19–20; Thucydides 2.72.3), that trees, especially those that take years to become fruit-bearing – such as olive groves after five years, and vineyards after three years – should not be destroyed by invading armies?21

I think that in this case the best interpretation takes account of the particular historical situation in the time of Domitian – a shortage of grain (in Asia Minor and Rome) that results in a threat to the production of oil and wine (which are not necessarily luxury goods, but basic necessities in the Mediterranean diet).22 In 92 CE, Domitian ordered half the vineyards and olive groves of Asia Minor to be destroyed and the fields replanted with grain in order to feed Rome. This was hugely unpopular and largely resisted, and not just by the elite in Asia Minor. It led, with other factors, to the removal of Domitian’s name from many of his statues, temples and monuments (damnatio memoriae), including the Flavian Temple in Ephesus. So arguably, this voice not only notices and laments ‘sources close to the Throne’ (9.13; 16.1, 17; 19.5; 21.3). This interpretation is also dependent on a strongly adversative ‘but’ between the two clauses in 6.6c and 6d (as argued by Aune, Revelation 6–16, 381), whereas John uses καί (usually ‘and’), and the negative command does not follow immediately after it. This suggests that the voice affirms what is said (‘and the oil and wine do not damage unjustly’), rather than satirizing the response of the elite to Domitian’s decree (“but do not harm the oil and wine?” – preposterous!). It seems clear that the voice laments the gross inflation of prices for grain staples, but if the second clause is also read satirically, does it not lend (problematically) Divine support to Domitian’s plan to increase the grain supply to Rome at the expense of the cultivated eco-systems of Asia Minor!? 21. Alternatively, some early Church Fathers argued that ‘oil and wine’ were mentioned for their liturgical significance, as have Josephine Massyngberde Ford and Margaret Barker more recently in relation to the Jerusalem Temple (in support of an earlier dating of Revelation). See J. M. Ford, Revelation: Introduction, Translation and Commentary, AB 38 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 98, 107–8; and M. Barker, The Revelation of Jesus Christ (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 156. The suggestion that the divine voice is prohibiting sacrilege in relation to sacred liturgical elements in the Temple or in later Christian worship demonstrates the hermeneutical implications of shifting the assumed provenance of a text, which then need to be worked through the text as a whole.

22. Howard-Brook and Gwyther (Unveiling Empire, 98–101 and 142) argue that there is an oversupply of oil and wine in Asia Minor because of the imperial program of consolidating large elite landholdings (latifundia) at the expense of the poorer peasant farmers, resulting in a focus on the better returns promised by oil and wine production. This may well be true in part, but it is the distortion of the grain market because of forced exports to Rome that is lamented by the voice from the ‘midst of the four living beings’.
the effects of inflation on the poor, but also speaks in support of the cultivated ecosystem of the people of Asia Minor and of those who resist the imperial threat to damage unjustly the traditional oil and the wine production of the region.

**The Forces of Evil and Those Who Find a Place in God’s Cosmos**

Revelation pits God-on-the-throne, the slain Lamb and the seven spirits – plus sundry other angels / messengers, heavenly beings, elders and the faithful suffering saints – against the Satan / devil / ancient snake / dragon, sea beast, land beast (Babylon, great whore, Apollyon, great armies, death and hades, the abyss and so on). This may seem like replacing one polytheology with another, but John also preserves a mysterious aura and distance from the Throne and the One on it. Does the idea of this ‘one’ God who acts and suffers through the slain Lamb make more sense of the chaos amongst the powers and the resulting devastation of earth and its ecosystems – and generate more hope – than the alternative polytheologies of the first century world? If so, is it because of a battle between sovereignties and powers, or because the voiceless slain lamb has won ‘victory’ through suffering and death? Could it be that the ultimate victor on the white horse, stained in his own blood (19.11–16), who wields the sword-in-the-mouth, finds voice only through those who are given voice in the narrative of Revelation? Is it the participation of the suffering witnesses, the living beings, and the beleaguered earth that renders the looming war scenes redundant to the narrative in the end?

It is not so surprising that when the perpetrators of violence themselves (‘the kings of the earth, magnates and generals and the rich and the powerful’) become victims of the ecological disasters they have caused and call upon earth (‘the mountains and rocks’) to protect them, help is not forthcoming (6.15–16). Rather, we hear of the active involvement of earth in struggling to resist such destructive powers (12.15–17) by assisting in the birth of an alternative community, given a place (τοπός) ‘in the wilderness’. Ultimately, and in contrast to many populist constructions of apocalyptic eschatology where the righteous are ‘snatched away to heaven’, this alternative community lives in a renewed heaven and earth, graced by the presence of God and the slain Lamb – since the New

23. See, for example, Rossing, ‘Alas for Earth!’, 180–92. For a different analysis of *topos*, strategy and tactics in Revelation, see Friesen, ‘Roman Imperial Imagery in Revelation’.
Jerusalem descends from heaven to this renewed earth, and the fruit of the tree at the centre of this garden city brings ‘healing to the nations’ (22.2).24

I have explored briefly some examples of how the graphic imagery of Revelation is grounded in the natural and built environment of its day, connected in what might be to us surprising ways to contemporary social, religious and political realities, and we should at least consider what it might mean in that context before we condemn its inappropriateness for our own. The vivid pageantry of Hebrew Bible prophecy and motifs, interspersed with equally vivid imagery of Greco-Roman culture and traditions is perhaps most evident in the interplay between Temple / Tabernacle (σκηνή / skēnē / tent), and theatre (skēnē and proskēnē / scene, stage and understage, representing the three-tiered cosmos), and the hybrid depictions of worship in both Jewish and Roman culture evident in the hymnic fragments and throne room scenes that repeatedly frame the narrative (chs. 1; 4; 5; 7; 11; 12; 15; 19; 21; 22).25 The culmination of these ‘scenes’ is the vision of 21.3:

See, the home (σκηνή) of God is among mortals.
God will dwell (σκηνώσει) with them as their God;
they will be the peoples of God,
and this same God will be with them.’

Indeed, this God, before whom even earth and sea could find no place (6.14; 20.11), is the One who is making (present continuous, not future pious hope) all things new (καινός) and providing an inclusive place for every nation, tribe, tongue and people, with three gates standing open 24/7 on each of the four sides of the New Jerusalem (21.12, 13, 25) to welcome ‘the glory and honour of the nations (τῶν ἐθνῶν)’ (21.26).26

24. Again, see B. R. Rossing, ‘For the Healing of the World: Reading Revelation Ecologically’, in From Every People and Nation: The Book of Revelation in Intercultural Perspective, ed. D. Rhoads (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 165–82. Contrast this with the olive trees of Asia Minor that are to be chopped down (6.6) to provide more food for the centre of human power.

25. For further explorations of the interplay between the imagery of Revelation and Greco-Roman theatre, mime and street theatre, see Low, ‘What Have the Romans Ever Done For Us?’, 253–70.

26. Of course there are exclusions in the fine print (21.7; 22.15), and the major prior exclusions of Satan / devil (20.10) and the beasts (19.20) who are consigned to the lake of fire. Earth has its revenge.
In both Britain and Australia – the differences notwithstanding – it is tempting to think of recent decades as a time free from the ravages of war, a temptation fostered by the prominence of the two World Wars as definitive landmarks in our cultural and social memory. Yet that thought only carries any truth if we restrict our awareness to wars ‘on our own soil’. As Anne Elvey remarks with regard to Australia, so too in Britain, our armed forces and politicians have in recent years been frequently involved in military campaigns, directly or indirectly – in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere. In these operations we have kept the worst impacts of war elsewhere, fighting those identified as enemies far from our shores. The occasional instances – and ongoing threat – of terrorist attacks prevent any complacency regarding security at ‘home’, and significant numbers of military personnel have been killed and injured, but it remains the case that the vast majority of the deaths, and the impacts of war, have been inflicted on others, elsewhere. Michael Trainor opens his essay with a powerful depiction of the most large-scale contemporary such impact, ironically captured in the image of the drowned Syrian boy on a Greek island beach: the displacement of some 11 million Syrians who have fled their war-torn country. Yet for all the terrible human cost of war, there is also a massive ecological cost, as the essays in this book make clear, though this is much less frequently noticed or discussed. That ecological cost is, of course, inextricably bound up with the human cost, since poisoned water, parched earth and burnt vegetation all bear ruinous consequences for human inhabitants too. And the Bible, and the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament in particular, is strikingly aware of the interconnectedness of human and ecological destruction, as the essays by Anne Gardner and Elizabeth Boase show.
Both the contemporary importance of these issues and the resonant biblical depictions make this collection of essays particularly welcome, and I appreciate the invitation to offer a response to it. As already hinted at above, I write from a context in Britain, where some features are broadly shared with Australia, but where there are also significant differences in terms of history, conflict and contemporary experience. I hope the combination of commonality and difference provides a useful perspective from which to reflect on this collection. Since the editors have already introduced the essays at the outset of the volume, I will not offer a summary of each one. Instead, I shall offer some reflections on issues that arise, first in terms of some of the gaps in the collection’s coverage, then in terms of the stances taken towards biblical interpretation and finally in relation to questions about what the aims and purposes are for such reflective engagements with biblical texts.

Some Significant Gaps

As is usual in a collection such as this, the various authors have each selected particular texts as the focus for their work, and no such book could be comprehensive in its coverage. Moreover, there is good reason why authors such as Gardner and Boase, mentioned above, choose texts which depict the interconnectedness of both human and ecological destruction. These are cases where the Bible’s depictions can be positively and fruitfully read in our contemporary context and where the ecological dimensions of the texts, for too long ignored, can be brought to our attention. Texts mourning the devastation of both people and land resonate with our sense of grief and horror at the destruction we continue to see in the world of today. Keith Dyer also tackles one of the texts that calls out to be dealt with in a collection of this kind, though not because of its positive appeal. Rather, the book of Revelation represents the most difficult New Testament book, in terms of its vivid and extended depictions of war and slaughter, sometimes seen, as Dyer notes, as a kind of New Testament ‘War Scroll’. Some of the other selections – such as the image of the rainbow in Gen. 9.13–17, the story of Sodom in Gen. 18–19 or the depiction of the forest in 2 Sam. 18.8 – engage texts that are of less immediately obvious resonance; I shall discuss some of these further below. But it is notable that none of the essays tackles perhaps the most problematic depiction of the principles and practice of war in the Bible, certainly within the Hebrew Bible, namely the herem (חרם), that is, the devotion of certain things to complete destruction or extermination in a kind of holy war. In cases where there is a perceived threat to the holiness
of Israel’s God from the gods and cultic objects of other peoples, then there is to be ‘complete destruction’ (see, e.g., Deut. 7.2; 13.12–18; 20.16–20; Josh. 6.1–7.26; 11.11). Not only does this involve men, women and children, but also livestock and cities as a whole: ‘you must not let anything that breathes remain alive’ (Deut. 20.16). Fruiting trees are explicitly excluded from this command to destroy, but trees that do not yield food may be felled in service of defeating a foreign city (Deut. 20.19–20). This is both human and ecological devastation. These acts are commanded by a God who is so jealously opposed to his rival gods that such all-encompassing destruction is called for.¹

These texts invite not only careful historical analysis but also contemporary consideration in light of such things as recent appeals to the concept of jihad, and the evident enmeshment of religious ideologies, however distorted, in the motivations for war and violence. Can the ‘holy war’ texts of the Hebrew Bible help us understand the complex intersections between religion and violence?² What kind of critical rereading – or outright rejection – of such texts do we need if we are to work towards the kind of peaceable flourishing that the essays presented here clearly value, for the whole earth as well as its human inhabitants?

Another thing readers will not find in these essays is any treatment of the New Testament letters. One reason for this may be that the themes of war and ecology are much less evident here than they are in the Hebrew Bible, or even in the Gospels and Revelation. A few brief reflections on Paul’s letters may, however, add to the range of perspectives presented here. On the issue of ecology, Paul offers little by way of explicit comment on topics that are prominent in the Hebrew Bible – the land in particular and the interconnections between land, people and God³ – but certain texts do offer the potential to find some kind of ecological theology in Paul. The most obvious and well-known of these is Rom. 8.19–23, with its depiction of the whole creation groaning and hoping for its eventual

². See further the discussion in Collins, ‘Zeal of Phineas’.
liberation, along with the (possibly pseudo-Pauline) Col. 1.15–20, with its emphatic declaration that all things are reconciled in Christ. These texts offer much more than isolated proof-texts in the Pauline letters; they can, I have argued elsewhere, stand at the centre of an ecological re-reading of Paul’s theology and ethics that focuses on God’s reconciliation of the whole creation in Christ and the associated ethical imperative to embody other-regarding care towards all the ‘others’ included in this cosmic reconciliation.4

Creation’s groaning – co-groaning along with humans and the Spirit – is a resonant image to ponder in the context of reflections about the connections between war and ecology, offering another biblical depiction of the interconnections between human and non-human creation, and the divine spirit. These depictions may also be juxtaposed with the focus in Paul (as well as elsewhere in the New Testament) on peace, not least as an eschatological goal for the whole creation.5 Early Christian moral teaching, as conveyed particularly in Paul’s letters, clearly emphasized a theme most likely derived from the teaching and practice of Jesus: non-retaliation and the rejection of vengeance, along with a positive commitment to doing good to all (Rom. 12.17; 1 Thess. 5.15; 1 Pet. 3.8).6 In view of such teaching, and its roots in the example of Jesus, Richard Hays argues that the witness of the New Testament coheres around a commitment to non-violence that should be central to Christian ethics.7 But the material in Paul is somewhat ambivalent, not least in terms of its implications for contemporary Christians. In Rom. 12 Paul calls his addressees to peace and a refusal to seek vengeance. But he does so on


the grounds that God – specifically, God’s wrath (Rom. 12.19)\(^8\) – will enact that vengeance. Even more difficult is his conviction that the governing authorities serve as the instrument through which this wrath is enacted (Rom. 13.4), leading John Stott, for example, to suggest that the (modern) state, in ‘bearing the sword’, should retain the right to enact capital punishment for murder.\(^9\) Pacifist theologians such as John Howard Yoder see here a separation of the roles of church and state – ‘the function to be exercised by government is not the function to be exercised by Christians’\(^10\) – but this only works so long as Christians have no involvement in the practices and offices of the state, whether as administrators or as police or military personnel.\(^11\) This latter point is pertinent not only to contemporary Christians but to the early Christians too, for whom the issue of whether it was possible to serve Christ and be a soldier soon reared its head (though more because of the issue of the ‘idolatrous’ oaths and worship that military service required than the practice of violence per se). In this connection it is notable that Luke appears to see no conflict in someone serving in the Roman army and also believing in Christ. Philip Esler sees this as Luke’s attempt to legitimate the position of members of the early Christian communities who were also serving in the Roman army,\(^12\) while Hays notes that ‘these narratives about soldiers provide the one possible legitimate basis for arguing that Christian discipleship does not necessarily preclude the exercise of violence in defense of social order or justice’.\(^13\) The evidence, then, is at least somewhat more ambivalent on the issue of the military than some have acknowledged. This ambivalence leads me to a second and broader point, about the dilemmas of biblical interpretation.

8. As Keith Dyer has pointed out to me, the phrase in Rom. 12.19 does not denote ‘the wrath’ explicitly as God’s, but most commentators agree that this is the sense here. See, e.g., J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9–16*, WBC 28B (Dallas: Word, 1988), 749; R. Jewett, *Romans*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 775–6.


Recovery or Resistance: Modes of Rereading

My brief observations on Paul’s somewhat ambivalent stance towards the physical violence enacted by the governing authorities raise a wider question about the aims of biblical interpretation, particularly when it is undertaken – as in the essays in this book – with a deliberate connection to contemporary issues of moral significance. What kind of stance towards biblical texts is most appropriate for a fruitful rereading in contemporary contexts of war and ecological destruction? Is our task as interpreters to offer a reading that finds fruitful and positive material in the texts or to highlight their potentially damaging and violent implications? These contrasting stances may be concisely labelled as strategies of recovery and resistance respectively, though in practice they may be combined in nuanced ways, depending on what text is being read. But highlighting the alternatives does, I think, serve to highlight the distinction between, say, Stephen Moore’s critical exposure of the imperial violence mimicked in the book of Revelation (cited in Dyer’s essay), and Dyer’s explicit attempt to find a more positive interpretation of Revelation as a text of resistance to empire from the perspective of the oppressed and the earth itself. One thing that is interesting about such disagreements is that, to some degree at least, the interpreters agree on their contemporary ethical stance – ecological commitment, concern for the poor and oppressed, critique of violence and empire – but differ in whether they derive a message of support for such a stance from readings of the Bible or rather expose how far the biblical texts perpetuate the ideologies they oppose. In part at least, I suspect that differing notions of biblical authority and the role of biblical interpretation underlie such differences, issues I shall briefly return to later.

Other essays in the book vary in the extent to which they find a positive depiction in the biblical texts or whether they highlight the ambivalence of the texts. Carolyn Alsen, for example, suggests the need for an ideological critique of the controlling view of earth ‘from above’, evident in both Yhwh’s viewing of Sodom and contemporary drone activity. Marie Turner, after a probing reading of the depiction of the forest’s involvement in violence in 2 Sam. 18, finds in this depiction ‘a powerful word against

the violence that brings so much destruction of the Earth in the battles of our own time’ (p. 00, my emphasis). I wonder whether the image is here being appropriated in too positive or ‘recovering’ a mode: after all, the text gives only a brief comment about the forest, informing us that it ‘devoured more people that day than the sword’. As Turner herself makes clear, the forest, it seems, was the most violent, destructive participant in the combat – a potentially disturbing picture of nature collaborating, perhaps more than ‘unwittingly’ (p. 00), with humans in causing slaughter. One means by which this violence was enacted is described in the following verses (9–17), again explored in Turner’s essay: Absalom, becoming trapped in the branches of an oak, is speared and killed by his enemies. There seems little in the text that suggests ‘visions of environmental destruction’ of forests (cf. p. 00), significant though that issue is for us. For Turner, the forest speaks against violence in its collaboration in the death of Absalom, a judgement against his pursuit of violence. But if so, the forest displays its protest against violence only by itself collaborating in another act of bloody violence, replicating the cycle. Does this, then, rather raise the prospect of a particular kind of ‘text of terror’: nature and humanity combining to perpetrate violence and death?

Another kind of reading of recovery – finding a nonviolent and ecologically resonant reading – is found in Michael Trainor’s essay on Luke’s Gospel, which presents not only a powerful opening depiction of the devastating impacts of war in our current time but also an attractive reading of the depiction of Jesus in Luke as offering a countercultural response that refuses to meet violence with violence and aggression. I appreciate much in Trainor’s rereading, not least his cogent articulation of what an ecological reading is, and is not (see below). There are, though, certain risks in the presentation of Luke’s vision as one that stands distinctively in an ancient world ‘essentially of violence and war, honour and shame’, in which the ‘other…is always perceived as the primary threat to a household’s honour’ (pp. 00–00). Jesus’ teaching, Trainor argues, ‘stands in clear contrast with what is expected in Luke’s socially acceptable retaliatory world, where maltreatment and dishonour met their response in kind’ (p. 00). Since this tendency to contrast Jesus (and the New Testament more generally) with the wider ancient society is widespread in New Testament studies, I think it is worth drawing

15. I am not quite sure, then, what Turner means when she describes the forest as a setting ‘never meant for warfare’ (p. 00). To be sure, it is a setting which makes movement and combat more difficult, but which settings were ‘meant for war’?

attention to what I see as its potential risks. One such risk is historical, that we overly stress the distinctiveness of Jesus, or early Christian perspectives more generally, underplaying the evidence, for example, that ‘the non-retaliatory ethics in the New Testament stand solidly in the tradition of the non-retaliatory ethics in early Judaism’,\(^\text{17}\) and that other ancient philosophers could express similar convictions about meeting evil with good. For example, in his fine comparative study of early Christian and Stoic ethics, Runar Thorsteinsson insists that ‘the idea that “love of enemies” was unique to Christian ethics…is altogether false’.\(^\text{18}\)

He does, though, note one difference between the Stoic and Christian sources in their treatment of this theme: the Christian sources, notably Rom. 12, show greater interest in the idea of revenge.\(^\text{19}\) More generally, Thorsteinsson shows the considerable extent of overlap between these ethical traditions and (provocatively) finds the key point of difference in the focus of early Christian ethics on love for insiders – fellow members of the community – while Stoic ethics expresses a much more universal concern.\(^\text{20}\) In other words, put very crudely, in this regard the Stoic traditions might appear more attractive and appealing to modern sensibilities for global concern, if one were to read them without the skewing effect of a prior commitment to Christianity’s superiority. One might suspect some special pleading in the reading of the Christian sources when the awkward texts that run in a less appealing direction are smoothed away: after all, in the text on which Trainor focuses, Jesus explicitly amends his earlier instruction to the travelling disciples in Luke 9.3 and 10.4, and states that the time has come now for swords (22.35–36). It is perhaps just a little too convenient to evaluate this as ‘symbolic’ (p. 00), particularly given that Luke–Acts, as noted above, seems to exhibit no awkwardness about a believer in Christ also being a soldier.

The other potential risk of such a positive assessment of the distinctively countercultural nonviolence of the Christian sources, in comparison with other ancient perspectives, relates to the modern context of interpretation. If Jesus uniquely and counter-culturally challenges violence and shows the way of peace, then it is those who follow Jesus – Christians


\(^{19}\) Ibid., 171.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 190–206, 209.
and, by extension, the countries whose national identity is predominantly Christian – who are best placed to be the peacemakers in the world. I should stress that this notion is, I am sure, very far from Trainor’s intentions, and I bounce this idea off his essay, as it were, only because it is, it seems to me, pertinent more widely in terms of the contemporary location of biblical (especially New Testament) studies, and the ways that location shapes interpretation. Interpretations which find in the early Christian sources a uniquely attractive vision of peace, inclusion, tolerance and so on, can (unintentionally) both reflect and legitimate a particular version of Western liberalism which sees itself as uniquely placed to provide the framework for peaceable coexistence. The problem is that this requires that others accept the superiority of the Western (Christian) liberal model and its values, a move that is understandably perceived to undermine the integrity of their own traditions. One of the ironies of recent wars is that they have been fought, in part at least, under the banner of bringing freedom, tolerance and democracy, imposed by force: the intolerant imposition of tolerance, as it were.21

There are, then, complex questions about the task of the interpreter, and the benefits and risks of different kinds of reading. Whether we favour readings of recovery or of resistance will naturally depend to some extent on what text we are reading, but consideration of the options also highlights issues of approach and purpose: What type of reading should we pursue, and why should we bother at all? For understandable reasons, none of the essays presented here stands back and asks such foundational (if unavoidably ‘background’) questions, so I hope it is valuable to offer some brief thoughts here.

**Types and Aims of Reading: Why Bother?**

I turn, then, finally, to consider some of the broader methodological issues that this collection of essays has raised for me. In terms of the type of reading represented, the essays clearly vary, in ways that, I suggest, can helpfully be considered along something roughly resembling a sliding scale. In all cases, contemporary concerns about ecology and war shape and inform the reading. But some essays, such as those by Marie Turner, Elizabeth Boase and Anne Gardner, focus primarily on the ancient text

and its context, highlighting and exploring the interconnections between human and non-human creation evident in depictions of the forest’s role in war in 2 Sam. 18, and of destruction and lament in Lamentations and Joel. In Boase’s case, a specific contemporary concept – the notion of *solastalgia* – is used to illuminate these expressions of lament, but the resonances with experience in the modern world remain implicit, in the background. Similarly, Keith Dyer’s essay focuses primarily on Revelation in its ancient imperial context. Michael Trainor’s essay moves a bit further along the spectrum, not only setting the scene with contemporary images but also making explicit how an ecological reading does not pretend that Luke ‘was an ancient ecologist’ but rather finds ecological resonances in the text, missed by commentators with a more anthropocentric focus (p. 00). In taking this approach, one might perhaps tease out how far this ‘finding’ of ecological resonances is understood as a ‘rediscovery’ of what is in the text and how far a constructive creation of new meanings on the part of the contemporary (ecologically aware) interpreter.22 Other essays, notably those by Jeanette Mathews and Carolyn Alsen, represent a strategy of *juxtaposition*, in which the depictions in a biblical text are set alongside a theme or practice from a quite different and unrelated context: the Aboriginal rainbow serpent and the use of drones in modern warfare respectively. Anne Elvey’s essay seems to me to embody another kind of engagement, in one sense a form of juxtaposition that brings various texts and contexts alongside one another, but also an examination of what one might call the afterlives of the Magnificat, its echoes and rewritings in new texts of liturgy and poetry.23

In asking what may seem an impertinent question – Why bother? – I am aware that the answers may vary according to the type of reading strategy employed. But that broad question seems to me worth reflecting on explicitly. In part, such readings as are presented here make a contribution to a Christian context in which the Bible is too often treated as a direct handbook of teaching, rules, promises, as if finding the right verses and lining them up can straightforwardly reveal what a Christian should conclude about the rights and wrongs of war and violence. The essays here exemplify an approach that insists on going beyond a search for


23. For example, Elvey notes how ‘Drake-Brockman’s short story “Magnificat” poignantly juxtaposes the Lukan song with the horror of war’ (p. 00).
‘biblical teaching’, or ‘what the Bible says’, showing instead some of the nuances and ambivalences in the texts, and the ways in which resonant and valuable images can be evoked through creative and attentive rereading. In part, as I suggested above, such differing approaches and strategies of reading reflect different underlying convictions about the kind of status and authority the Bible should be accorded, and the modes in which it might therefore contribute to our reflections on contemporary issues of pressing importance. And in a Christian context at least, readings that recover from the Bible positive and fruitful material that can support and resource the quest for social and ecological justice are likely to be more appealing than readings that seek (only) to expose the negative dangers of the biblical texts, valuable though the latter can be. 24 Certainly insofar as a ‘resistant’ reading exposes the Bible as a whole to suspicious critique it is less likely to offer constructive resources to Christian theology and ethics, even if its highlighting of the Bible’s more difficult and dangerous material is a vital part of the critical task of biblical studies in academy, church and world.

What about the strategy of juxtaposition? Why place a biblical text alongside the contemporary practice of drone warfare or the Aboriginal rainbow serpent, when neither bears any direct relationship to the biblical text (unlike, say, the afterlives of the Magnificat considered in Elvey’s essay)? One answer is simply that the Bible, as one of the formative classics of Western culture, remains good to think with, and that thinking ‘alongside’ the Bible, as it were, in creative engagement with it, helps us to gain critical purchase on issues of our own time, as Elvey’s essay exemplifies. But I think there is more going on. To take one example from this volume, Mathews’ essay on the rainbow of Gen. 9 and the Aboriginal rainbow serpent explores both traditions and images in turn, before concluding with a question about whether the rainbow serpent, ‘as a distinctly Australian version of the rainbow metaphor’ could ‘actually function as a more appropriate and potent image of the intended portrayal of the rainbow in the biblical flood narrative?’ (p. 00). Yet there do seem rather significant differences in the two kinds of rainbow, as Mathews’

24. Cf. further the nuanced and illuminating discussion of what it means to ‘appeal’ to Scripture, exemplified in positive and creative, but also critical, engagement, in G. Thompson, Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union (Melbourne: Uniting Academic, 2016), 189–229. For example, Thompson appeals to Acts 10–15 and its report of the (experience-led) process by which gentiles came to be accepted within the fledgling Christian movement as ‘a paradigm of inclusion of homosexual people in the contemporary church’ (221; and see 197–206).
own analysis indicates: Yhwh’s bow in the sky is a weapon, whereas the Aboriginal rainbow is a serpent, a ‘great creator’ (p. 00), albeit one that ‘combines both creative and destructive power’ (p. 00). Nonetheless, the possible function and contribution of this juxtaposition is hinted at in Mathews’ closing sentence: ‘the rainbow can provide a bridge between the writers of Genesis and both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians through their respective traditions concerning violence and the natural world’ (p. 00). What this suggests to me is that, at root, the juxtaposition exhibited in the essay represents a particular instance of the kinds of juxtaposition, engagement and negotiation that the specifically Australian context demands. The Bible represents, in a sense, the cultural and religious tradition of the originally colonizing Western population, while the rainbow serpent embodies the traditions of Indigenous people. To what extent, Mathews implicitly asks, can we find points of connection between these two cultural traditions, and how far can such identified points of connection offer positive symbols to resource the task of being Australian together? As in all such forms of dialogue between traditions, there are difficult questions about how far different stories and perspectives can be forged together in a quest for common ground, without negating the integrity of either tradition. But in a contemporary, plural society, not least one with difficult legacies of violence and colonization of land to confront, the search for forms of peaceable and ecologically sustainable modes of living together is a vital task, and one to which creative readings of biblical texts have a contribution to make.
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