

ECHOES FROM EXILE: AN ECO-POLITICAL READING OF CREATION AND  
THE GARDEN IN GENESIS 1-3

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## ABSTRACT

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Genesis 1-3 does not merely contain narratives of creation. These stories engage some of the most rudimentary and vital concerns of the ancient world, but these tellings of earth-beginnings do not exist as mere theological declarations or religious propaganda. These texts are deeply cosmological and ecological—even political. This work examines the potential political and ecological ramifications of the creation stories written in a post/exilic context. It takes seriously the realities of displacement, imperial oppression, and trauma that were likely formational for these ancient communities' narratives. The works of Edward Said and Catherine Keller frame the dialogue of this work, allowing the biblical text to engage with current political theory, process theology, and various contexts of displacements (and vice versa). This work focuses on the situation of occupied Palestine, ultimately seeking to provide space for new biblical interpretations (of Genesis and other texts) that confront the violence of occupation and erasure in Israel/Palestine. This writing aims to work against such violence, fostering creative openings for resistance and life.

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*The earth is closing on us  
pushing us through the last passage  
and we tear off our limbs to pass through.  
The earth is squeezing us.  
I wish we were its wheat  
so we could die and live again.  
I wish the earth was our mother  
so she'd be kind to us.  
I wish we were pictures on the rocks  
for our dreams to carry as mirrors.  
We saw the faces of those to be killed  
by the last of us in the last defence of the soul.  
We cried over their children's feast.  
We saw the faces of those who will throw  
our children out of the windows of this last space.  
Our star will hang up mirrors.  
Where should we go after the last frontiers?  
Where should the birds fly after the last sky?  
Where should the plants sleep after the last breath of air?  
We will write our names with scarlet steam.  
We will cut off the hand of the song to be finished by our flesh.  
We will die here, here in the last passage.  
Here and here our blood will plant its olive tree.  
—Mahmoud Darwish<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, "The Earth Is Closing On Us," in *Victims of a Map*, trans. Abdullah al-Udhari (London: Al Saqi Books, 1984), 13.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### **An Agonized Prelude**

Stories of beginning are timeless. They have both the ability to become standard sources of knowledge and construct self-definition for communities, while also functioning as time-traveling myths—allowing hearers and tellers to dip into beginning times, and times before beginning, while rooted in a particular point in the present. Stories of human beginnings encompass birth, science, divinity, tragedy, loss, gain, displacement, sowing, creation, building, planning, order, lack, helplessness, and grappling with life. Stories of earth beginnings are often intertwined with those told of human creatures, employing similar vernacular of atoms, soil, species, fluids, and breath—the stuff and substance of primordial life. Theories, conjectures, musings, and myths of such primal birthings flow endlessly to and from the waters of our cultural milieu, filled with religious traditions and interpretations of ancient texts, scientific research and calculated beliefs, and lived earth experiences.

The biblical creation story of Genesis as a telling of beginning reeks of all the markers of biblical narrative—plots are woven with characters and timely events to achieve a desired function, an aspired literary affect. Yet the fable also wafts a scent of other ancient Near Eastern creation myths, both borrowing from and competing with the Babylonian story and others familiar to a presumable Canaanite context. Both these characteristics of the texts are reasonably assumed by most biblical scholars, but another voice hovers over these writings and bubbles up from beneath their surface, a voice that is not heard so clearly by those who know the text best. Anxiety pulses through its

sentences—fearful beginnings gave way to contingent goodness gave way to restriction and displacement. A story of beginning should invoke in hearers not only questions of the composers’ worldviews, religion, and cosmology, but ought to probe inquiries of political alliances, land possession, and earth relationships. Tensions between chaos and order may not be mere histories of earth’s origins, but instead echo memories and current realities fractured apart by such forces. Stories throughout the Hebrew Bible are marred with the blood and tears of exile that are first acknowledged just a few chapters later in Genesis. This creation narrative, when read as a composition from displaced earth creatures, sprouts from similar foreign soil and dwells in like *tehom* waters that are depicted in the text. Creation in Genesis is not descriptive of the historical ordering of cosmos and earth, nor is it a prescriptive hierarchy of beings, earth, and the divine. Instead, these stories as grappling with political, geographical, and ecological trauma are works of imagination—musings on utopic and destructive systems; they are openings that reimagine earth and recreate relationships of dwelling in it.

### **A Haunted Ruach: The Breath and Content of this Work**

The image is disturbing: the earth appears formless and empty, yet darkness rests upon the face of the deep and God’s breath hovers upon the waters. The creation narrative in Genesis 1, and the stories following, are mysterious, perplexing, and perhaps even terrifying? What is this face of the deep—what dwells in the abyss of this *tehom* and lurks in these chaotic waters? The body of the cosmos, the womb of creation, tortured lands rendered barren, exile, the psychological of the displaced, the political in shambles—may these be what this creation myth attests to, the very spaces in which God

began and begins to create? Could this *tôhû vā-bôhû*, this “chaos and nothingness”<sup>2</sup>, be a product of humanity’s own doing, rendering a deep that cries out for a reimagined creative process, and for God to speak light once again? The mobocracy of displacement that erupts across borders and is contained inside checkpoints can be found too in the beginning chapters of Genesis, where ordered days are disrupted and a deceptive utopia fractures the co-dependent union of earth and creatures. The reality of exile that the authors of Genesis grapple with—whether it be in the shape of political, geographical, or ecological trauma—reverberates throughout history and finds resonance within infinite cataclysms of displacement. In reading the creation narratives and the garden story in conjunction as post/exilic texts, I pose that both the unknown chaos from which God creates and the politically confined garden serve as space where trauma and creation simultaneously occur. Such a reading, I argue, creates an opening to question the particular and systemic oppression wielded by imperial rulers, colonizers, and democratic governments alike. And the creative earth-praxis often ingrained in interpretations of resistance, enables for an embodied hope to sprout from the depleted and dusty soil upon which they dwell.

The content of this work is presented in a much similar way as above, flowing in and out of Genesis, as well as other discourses engaging in a wide variety of topics relating to creation and displacement. As I have been captivated by both the poetry of Hebrew Scripture and *theopoesis*, my writing is also informed by (and sometimes gets carried away with) such styles. The chapter titles will guide readers through short, alternating vignettes of biblical interpretation and geo-political or theological

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 1:2, Author’s translation.



reflections/analyses, prompted by either a Hebrew verse translation or a poignant quote. While this writing follows the telling of creation as it unfolds in the biblical text, it draws upon a plethora of “current” theological, geo-political, and ecological works in order to highlight prescient interconnections present between them. This work seeks to unearth the fertile grounds present in biblical texts for modern political analysis, ecological/earth praxis, and embodied hope for displaced communities. After beginning in the opening of Genesis, this work draws upon other ancient creation texts, which are close kin to the Genesis myth. Mark Brett, Steed Davidson, and Edward Said are the main interlocutors who contribute to biblical and modern definitions and existences of exile. The work of Catherine Keller on a *tehomitic* theology of Genesis and a “Political Theology of Earth” are central groundings for the eco-theological framework with which this work approaches creation in Genesis. The political and biblical analysis in this writing flow intuitively from Keller’s work into the discourse of ecowomanism engaged by Angela Y. Davis and Melanie Harris, which aid in defining the entangled devastations of female, colored, displaced, and earth bodies. The persistence of hope and justice present in these women’s voices make evident the need to work in solidarity towards liberation and justice in Palestine. It is for this reason that the writing closes with a brief case-study of eco-political resistance being cultivated in modern-day Bethlehem. By engaging this variety of existing political theologies on displacement, creation, identity, and earth, I will illuminate the *tehomitic* nexus of colonialism, space, and boundaries that coalesce in displaced communities. These works will provide a foundation upon which my reading of Genesis will aid in conceiving the process of creation in creative and liberating ways for those amid such disruptive and exiled chaos. My work ultimately reimagines land (in

biblical texts and current contexts) as a subversive tool for displaced communities to combat the sovereignty of their oppressors, as they labor in cultivating a fractured foundation.

**(Mis)Informed Origins?—A Note on the Grounding of this Work**

This work enters into academia at a strange place, a perhaps no-place. Does it fit into the field of Biblical Studies, Constructive Theology, Ecology & Religion, Ecofeminsm/womanism, Geo-Political Activism, or Palestinian Liberation Theology? My inclination is to answer yes (to all), and then—not quite. Surely critical theory and scholars of these disciplines are engaged throughout the entirety of this project, however surprisingly few are treading in the estuaries where these fields converge, speaking mainly of the intersection of Biblical Hermeneutics, Ecotheology, and Palestinian-Israeli Geo-Politics. I thus struggle to find a “place” where my work “fits.” I say this not to assert why my writing is unique and irrevocably unlike any other of its nature, which has become the common custom in most introductions to one’s own work. On the contrary, I am highlighting this gap as a means of acknowledging what might seem obvious: these disciplines dwell in different worlds. And to build bridges between them in such a short amount of space, is a stretch to say the least. Some may even say it borders on irresponsible or appropriative scholarship. These critiques I welcome warmly, and in fact are ones I often bring upon myself. But my hope for this work, which I accept as the beginning of a much larger project, is that it may serve some sort of usefulness for others. Ultimately, it is my desire that it might spark some sort of constructive question, action, or opening for someone facing occupation, displacement, or perhaps merely the biblical text itself.

Mitri Raheb, a current Palestinian postcolonial/liberation theologian and pastor in Bethlehem, explains how the history of Palestinian conversion to Western churches (Anglican, Latin, Lutheran, Protestant, and even Greek Orthodox) included an adoption of those theologies, which were of the “respective empire” and of a tradition disconnected from this people and land.<sup>3</sup> Raheb thus mourns the lack of theology and biblical interpretation that takes the Palestinian geo-political context into consideration. Judeo-Christian biblical theology thus holds Palestine entrenched in occupation—“it is the native people of the land, the Palestinians, who are paying a high price of this distortion of history and theology.”<sup>4</sup> I write, extremely grateful for the work of Mitri Raheb, Naim Ateek, and many others who have been insistent the Bible can be read in a way that invokes justice for Palestinians.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, I compose my words carefully and at times reluctantly, weary of the voices of Homi Bhabha, R.S.

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<sup>3</sup> Mitri Raheb, “Toward a New Hermeneutic of Liberation: A Palestinian Christian Perspective,” in *The Biblical Text in the Context of Occupation: Towards a New Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Mitri Raheb (Bethlehem: Diyar Publisher, 2012), 24-25.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 26. I must take a moment to orient readers with the current political/religious context of Israel/Palestine, at least from the perspective I am approaching it. I use the term “Israel/Palestine in this work because of the contested naming of the land. Israel is the name of the nation recognized as a country by the United Nations. Palestine is the name of the land prior to its colonization, and the title which Palestinians and others resistant to Israeli occupation of Palestinian land are insistent upon. The muddled current history of this land is not one that can be covered here, even at surface level. The development of the modern state of Israel is inextricably intertwined with religious and theological notions of land that have evolved in Judeo-Christian biblical tradition throughout the entirety of their existence. The move from understanding land as soil, to understanding land as place, to understanding land as commodity for colonization, is an ideological shift that has been bolstered by engagements with biblical texts regarding land, for the sake of particular people groups. These conceptions of land are not mere perspectives, but political tools that have been used in the name of Yahweh and religious identity throughout the First and Second Temple Periods, Persian and Roman occupation, periods of Islamic control, the Crusades, the Mamluk and Ottoman Eras, European colonization, and in the post-Holocaust world up until the modern-day state of Israel as it exists today. The land of Israel is and always has been a deeply politicized soil. But I write here, aiming to break some of the silencing of Palestinian voices around issues of biblical interpretation, land ideology, and religious politics (or political religion). There is no longer space for the romanticized story of modern-day Israel as a “Holy Land.” Instead, we must dive deep into our texts and traditions, and seek to lift up voices most similar to those which are silenced by the wall of the occupier.

<sup>5</sup> See Naim S. Ateek, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

Sugirtharajah, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak who warn of the homogenization of voices, orientalism, and appropriation of other cultures that are embedded in Western scholarship on Eastern matters. Yet here I am—a Western, White, Middle-Class, Christian, Female Scholar writing on the Hebrew Bible and its relation to the eco-geo-politics of Palestine and other displaced peoples. Despite the logical context and prerequisites I seem to be lacking, I am continually drawn to interpret these ancient Hebrew writings and write on issues of exile and displacement, which appear undeniably in them. Being a distinguished scholar in the field, identifying with the people group one is writing about, or whatever it is that ought to comprise an accredited scholar's repertoire, are all requisites that seem to be lacking from mine. So, why am I continuing to write about such experiences when it seems logical that I should not? To put it simply: I am writing because I am haunted. My friends' stories of their journeys as refugees from Syria and about living under occupation in Palestine continue to haunt my thoughts, my prayers, and academic work. With these continual intrusions, I am increasingly compelled to write about land and space and place as it is shaped and conceived by their struggles. I fully acknowledge my own privilege in my experiences with land and nature, but also consider this to be my sole grounding in writing such things. It is because of my connection with the earth, in combination with extended amounts of time spent in occupied territory, that I believe the experiences of those who are displaced creates space for new creation/ing narratives to be written and refreshing political theologies to be imagined. The voices of these people that are crying out are urging me to cry out as well. And it is their voices of resilience that are helping me find my own.

I heed to the call of Mitri Raheb in this work, who urges any who read the Bible to take into account the suffering of the Palestinian people. It is only ironic that texts once seeking to subvert imperial power are now wielded by similar colonizers. As Raheb says, interpretation is a science; the storyline which the empire seeks to control is done both consciously, and far more dangerously—unconsciously.<sup>6</sup> In the Western world where religious and political bias exist towards Israel and Judaism, there begs a reconsideration of the narrative which has long been manipulated and silenced. Raheb’s words fuel the purpose and work of this project, almost to a tee: “the nostalgia for a biblical Israel, which is associated subconsciously with the modern state of Israel, has led to the suppression of the Palestinian narrative.”<sup>7</sup> This work sets out to read the Hebrew Bible with and alongside Palestinians, taking seriously the call of many to understand the Bible in a context of occupation in a contested “Holy Land.”

*If we truly want to understand the message of the Bible, it is of utmost importance to listen to the experience of the native people of Palestine. Their suffering under occupation, their aspiration for liberation, their intra-fighting, their lamentations and hopes, are all relevant for exegesis. Reading the Bible, with Palestinian eyes makes one feel as if the Bible were written now and for such times like these.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Mitri Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire: The Bible Through Palestinian Eyes* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 23.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>8</sup> Raheb, “Toward a New Hermeneutic of Liberation,” 18-19.

## Chapter 2

### A Non-Beginning

*Bə-rêšît bārā ʔlōhîm ʔt ha-šāmayîm wə-ʔt hā-ʔāreṣ*—When God began to create the heavens and the earth...<sup>9</sup>

The beginning spoken of in this classic creation myth is contingent upon many factors—reader held notions of earth beginnings, histories of interpretation, scientific knowledge, and beliefs about divine power all contribute to understandings of creation, beginning, and implications for its existence in the biblical text. These affects on beginning theology and translation however, are all readerly impositions on the text—histories of interpretation and ideologies that have been imprinted upon this Hebrew story for centuries. Such biases and lenses are impossible for any reader to remove when approaching an ancient text, and perhaps may produce an invaluable reading when used confessionally as recent biblical criticism has shown.<sup>10</sup> However, the notions of beginning which are most often infused into readings of the Genesis creation myth are more often harmful than helpful. The “beginning” word, *bə-rêšît*, often provides a foundation for this this story to be [ab]used, serving as a defense or affirmation for different theories of how the earth and its life came into being, and assert who it belongs to.

Unfortunately, creativity—the very thing which this poetry invokes from readers—has been sucked out of creation as it is has historically been reduced to

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:1, author’s translation.

<sup>10</sup> Contextual biblical interpretation, that is reading biblical texts from one’s own particular context, as well as particularized biblical hermeneutics have become invaluable approaches to biblical texts in recent biblical studies and are quite possibly the future of this discipline.

something calculable, historic, and static. Instead of reading creation as a temporal act that occurred “in the beginning,” it may be more helpful (and faithful to the Hebrew) to read it as a process that unfolds—albeit ambiguously as the Hebrew suggests—but does not necessarily end.<sup>11</sup> Grammatically this verse begins with a dependent clause, which makes it plausible for *bə-rêšît* to be rendered as “At the beginning of” or “When,” rather than the traditional “In the beginning.”<sup>12</sup> Walter Bruggemann suggests that this verse may hinge upon a temporal clause, in which case creation is “an ongoing work which God has begun and continues.”<sup>13</sup> He offers that verse one contains evidence for a “creation from nothing” understanding, and verse two describes a pre-existing chaos.<sup>14</sup> However, this tension of potential conflicting ideas is not a “problem” in the text; “the ambiguity of *creation from nothing* and *creation from chaos* is a rich expository of possibility.”<sup>15</sup> In her reading of Genesis as a theology of becoming, Catherine Keller suggests the notion of *bə-rêšît* in Genesis offers space to play. She affirms the scholarship of many others who have claimed the construct *bə-rêšît* denotes not merely a sequential event of beginning, and offers instead that it serves as an opaque opening that may burst into a “multileveled coherence of dispersion.”<sup>16</sup> Beginning, not as a starting point but as a scattering, thus invokes the imagination to see displacement in creation and life birthed amidst chaos. Understanding this first word of the first verse as a non-absolute is crucial in reading

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<sup>11</sup> Grammatically this verse begins with a dependent clause, which makes it plausible for *bə-rêšît* to be rendered as “At the beginning of” or “When.” Speiser notes that most Medieval Hebrew scholars and grammarians did not oppose this verb as a dependent clause instead of the absolute form. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1964), 12.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 29.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 159.

creation beyond notions of *ex nihilo*—creation does not happen out of nothing, but flows forth from mysteriously messy matter.<sup>17</sup>

The openings in Genesis for interpretation of beginning and all other notions of creation are multivalent, lending themselves to a multiplicity of interpretations and meanings and rendering absolutes as precarious at best. Hebrew Bible scholar Mark Brett frames the slippery text this way:

*The laconic styles of Genesis, and its opacities and ambiguities, suggest that we can engage with it only partially: we can never exhaust the peregrinations of its meaning. This precludes the pretensions of scholarly objectivity that have too often marred the historical biblical scholarship of the last two centuries, pretensions shaped by the confident epistemological tones of both Protestantism and the Enlightenment.*<sup>18</sup>

Along with deconstructing absolutist held beliefs about the earth's primordial creation in Genesis, it is essential to revisit scholarly assumptions about the authorship and geopolitical context of the writing. As I will unpack in greater detail throughout this work, I am reading the creation stories in Genesis written from a perspective of post/exile.<sup>19</sup> This project approaches Genesis 1-3 as communal narratives seeking to make sense of earth beginnings and its politics, while grappling with displacement and the trauma amassed by it. Brett holds the conviction that the Hebrew version of Genesis is in direct relation to

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<sup>17</sup> For a poetic summation of the doctrine of *ex nihilo* (creation from nothing) from a process perspective, see Keller, "Tears of Achamoth: The fathers' *ex nihilo*," in *Face of the Deep*, 43-64.

<sup>18</sup> Mark G. Brett, *Genesis: Procreation and the Politics of Identity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 4.

<sup>19</sup> I use the term "post/exile" denoted as such with the slash mark to call attention to the ambiguity of the historic biblical contexts named as "exilic" and "post-exilic," and the slipperiness of these terms. The ways in which these "historiographic" time periods become conflated by biblical texts often produces homogenous notions of "Israel," "exile," and "empire." I aim to challenge these strict binary, historical categories, even if only in the slightest, by employing "post/exile" as a term referencing a collective imaginary influenced by the events and subsequent generational trauma inflicted by exile. The sort of geopolitical resonances that can be found in the text may be hauntings from exilic deportation/occupation, forced labor, an extractive economy, an oppressive imperial governance, or a conglomeration of any or all the above.



the politics of the Persian period.<sup>20</sup> The resistance in Genesis he speaks of can be read in both theological and political terms, its stories refuting a strictly ethnocentric Israelite identity while also challenging the land possession of the Persian empire and other economic issues disseminating from a “holy seed” strategy.<sup>21</sup> He is of course speaking of the larger book of Genesis here, however that does not exclude its very beginning from serving as a foundation—an opening—for a platform of such political resistance. Roland Boer notes in a similar vein that “nothing is more political than sacred myth.”<sup>22</sup> This story of political defiance is not an isolated tale of beginning, nor is it a novel one. It both rises from the depths of exile and gleans from the cultural milieu of its surrounding world, reiterating and retelling the creation stories that other peoples have told for generations.

Although the dating of Genesis 1 has often been attributed to the Priestly source, I interpret Genesis 1-3 as post/exilic texts, reading along with much recent scholarship that regards Genesis through 2 Kings as post-exilic.<sup>23</sup> Brett notes that language of holiness is largely missing from the first chapters of Genesis (except in regard to Shabbat), which

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<sup>20</sup> Brett, *Genesis*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Boer, *Political Myth: On the Use and Abuse of Biblical Themes* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 8.

<sup>23</sup> I am dealing with a relatively small portion of texts out of the larger Genesis-Kings narrative, which recent scholarship affirms as a collection of texts written in the post-exilic Persian period after the Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem/Israel (the entire Jewish-Babylonian war spanning from 601-587 BCE). For more on dating and “The Babylonian Metanarrative of Empire,” see Leo G. Perdue and Warren Carter, “Judah under the Neo-Babylonian Empire,” in *Israel and Empire: A Postcolonial History of Israel and Early Judaism*, ed. Coleman A. Baker (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015). However, I’d like to note that my approach to these three chapters in Genesis can surely be applied to other texts within this consortum. Of course, there are endless nuances specific to these texts that this writing addresses specifically, but a sort of eco-political hermeneutic as I have developed here can surely find heaps of ripe material to interact with in terms of ecological and diasporic trauma. For a brief summation on Genesis-Kings as a “textual continuum,” see David Gunn, “Telling and Retelling the Bible’s First Story,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a different perspective on the dating of Genesis, yet nonetheless helpful to think ecologically about the text, see Theodore Hiebert, *The Yahwist’s Landscape: Nature and Religion in Early Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

erodes the grounding for a priestly dating of the stories.<sup>24</sup> *Hibdîl* (divide), which is often attributed to priestly language of division (usually in terms of clean/unclean) can therefore be reinterpreted not as a hierarchical creature ordering, but as a cosmic ordering.<sup>25</sup> This reading of order falls in line with the narrative functioning as a grappling with cosmic order and earth hierarchies, rather than a proclamation or affirmation of such structures. Although a political voice can be named and attributed to a general post/exilic dating source, it is not coherently homogenous. It is helpful to approach the convergence of voices in these narratives with Brett's understanding of "intentional hybridity" in Genesis wherein a multitude of "ideologies have been juxtaposed with so many traces of otherness that the dominant voices can be deconstructed by audiences who have ears to hear."<sup>26</sup> He ultimately concludes that by tracing these incongruous patterns in the text he is able to "point to an ancient editorial agency which is contesting the privileged grasp of colonial power in the Persian Period."<sup>27</sup> Such a theory helps us understand that the non-uniformity of voices that emerge in the first three chapters of Genesis does not hinder the politically subversive nature of the narrative. In actuality, the confused and convoluted nexus these texts create allows for a multiplicity of imperial contestations to converge, challenging the order of their world and one another.

### **Creation Myths and Their Entangled Politics**

No one occupies the sea,  
Cyrus, Pharaoh, Caesar, the Negus and all the others

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<sup>24</sup> Mark Brett, "Earthing the human in Genesis 1-3," in *The Earth Story in Genesis*, ed. Norman Habel and Shirley Wurst (Cleveland, OH: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 76.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* This understanding of the text is what Brett argues allows us to see the ecological potential in creation narratives, even when it is often expressed through ironic modes.

came to write their names with my hand  
 on its watery tablets.  
 I write: *The land is in my name*  
*and the name of the land is the gods who share*  
*my place on its chair of stone.*<sup>28</sup>

The Babylonian creation epic, *enuma elish*, served too as a story grounding a people's reality that was not lacking political impetus. This Akkadian text likely written sometime around the early part of the second millennium B.C.E seeks to make sense of cosmology, chaos, and order, while expressing overwhelming interest in the Babylonian empire and its rulers. E.A. Speiser argues that Marduk's role as a deity of the city of Babylon and "the hero of the cosmic struggle and the creator of the universe" serves to buttress the city of Babylon as the capital of the Babylonian Empire (which came to power in the 19<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E.) and "the cultural center of the whole Mesopotamian world."<sup>29</sup> The gruesome battles between gods over the stuff of creation—and even more so the power to create—does not merely tell the story of a distant reality that once existed or serve as a folktale from long, long ago. The *enuma elish* grapples with chaos and war while it also seeks to allocate the power to rule, create humans, cultivate land, harness the energy and forces of the universe, and govern the gods, people, and stuff of the cosmos. This epic speaks not only of the battles amongst gods in the heavens, but of struggles of human empires on earth—the most relevant and poignant concerns and struggles of the Babylonian people.

A look even at the beginning of the *enuma elish* renders the paramount beginning of Genesis not as a uniquely isolated myth, but as an appropriation of the Babylonian

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<sup>28</sup> Mahmoud Darwish, *The Adam of Two Edens*, ed. Munir Akash and Daniel Moore (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 79.

<sup>29</sup> E.A. Speiser, "Akkadian Myths and Epics," in *Religions of the Ancient Near East: Sumero-Akkadian Religious Texts and Ugaritic Epics*, ed. Isaac Mendelsohn (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1955), 17.

creation story. Many characters and central elements of the Genesis text echo its precursor. The opening line of *enuma elish* is quite familiar if one has knowledge of the creation stories in Genesis: “When on high the heaven had not been named, firm ground below had not been called by name...”<sup>30</sup> Before the work of creation has been done, heaven and earth are unformed and their features have yet to be called into being. The lack of existing ordered matter is congruent in the two stories, however the primordial waters of *enuma elish* are named—*Apsu* and *Mammu-Tiamat* are the father and mother who have a war waged against them and the stuff of their beings shaped into earth’s creations.<sup>31</sup> And it is out of their waters that gods are formed and brought into being, which are the cause for great disruption and eventually the destruction of *Apsu* and *Mammu*. Other elements of the creation story in Genesis 1 are present too in *enuma elish*; sky (Tablet 1, line 14), earth and water (1.16), disruption and chaos (1.22, 39, 45), the “deep” (1.63, 76), and monster creatures (1.125) all appear in the first tablet of *enuma elish*, though they are often manifested as or under the control of one of many gods. Like the Genesis story, this Babylonian myth seeks to make sense of earth beginnings, yet its political goals and the literary tools for communicating them appear much less covert.

It is crucial to name and deal with the violence done to the female body in *enuma elish*, which is then both subsumed and erased the Genesis narratives. Extreme violence against the females in these creation narratives has been recapitulated in interpretative

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<sup>30</sup> *enuma elish*, Tablet I, lines 1-2 in *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. E.A. Spieser, 19.

<sup>31</sup> *Apsu* translates literally to “God of subterranean waters; the primeval sweet-water ocean.” *Mammu* means something to the equivalent of “mother” and *Tiamat* translates to “A water deity; the primeval salt-water ocean.” *Ibid*, 19. For an interesting history of interpretation of *enuma elish*, and an insightful introduction to the protection of patriarchal hierarchy via the Greek gods in *Theogony*, see Catherine M. Schlegel, “Introduction to Hesiod,” in *Theogony and Work and Days*, ed. Catherine M. Schlegel and Henry Weinfield (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), 1-10.

tradition through oppression and marginalization of women. Such a destructive history must be named and dealt with in any attempt to reread these texts in a constructive or life giving way. In her book, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*, Rosemary Radford Ruether traces androcentric interpretations that violence as “the fall into patriarchy,” as well as “Western colonial systems of modernity” and militarism.<sup>32</sup> Many feminist scholars have, and continue, to respond to the great violence done to the mother-god’s body in *enuma elish*. Not only is she the one who creates monsters to unleash against her children, she is the recipient of their most violent retribution. Her body is split in half by *Marduk*; one half is used to seal off the sky and waters above it, and the other is used to fashion the heavens. In portraying the female goddess as the trickster/troublemaker whose actions warrant conquering and mutilation, the story challenges a matriarchal worldview (which would have existed prior) and affirms an alternative power model dependent on male hierarchy and militaristic violence.<sup>33</sup> Such gender hierarchies are likely subsumed and interrogated in the Genesis creation narratives, and its power dynamics mimicked, even if unintentionally.

The backdrop of *enuma elish* is not a blank canvas being painted with the creation of the world. It is war. Wrapped up in the creation of earth and heaven is a cosmic war waged against the primordial water-beings by a plethora of other gods. Gruesome battles are peppered throughout the text, all fueled by attempts to gain the power to rule this newly created world and its humans. When the battling between the primordial parents and gods gets close, *Marduk* is called to step in on the side of the gods: “He whose

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<sup>32</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992), 8.

<sup>33</sup> See again Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 16-19.

[strength] is potent shall be [our] avenger, He who is *keen* in battle, Marduk, the hero!”<sup>34</sup> *Marduk* is introduced as a hero of the gods and an almighty warrior, maintaining this identity throughout the remainder of the story until he is finally victorious in battle and named as ruler over gods, the land, and its order. After the events of the battle have taken place, a great amount of the text is dedicated to entailing the skills and namesakes of all the gods. They are equipped with the abilities to rule the gods, govern seeds and vegetation, wield order and governance, control the power of life, eradicate enemies and be victorious in war, institute ritual offerings, provide agricultural abundance, and maintain order in the cosmos, just to name a few.<sup>35</sup> And in the end, all are to “rejoice in *Marduk*, the *Enlil* of the gods, that his land may be fertile and that he may prosper.”<sup>36</sup> This story was not written about an imaginary rule or land; stories of political and geographical domination are not conjured from dust. James Kennedy posits that ancient Near Eastern cosmogony stories “were never politically disinterested stories about the creation of the universe.”<sup>37</sup> He claims that these stories were power plays, exposing the social and political agendas of cultural communities. *Enuma elish*, he argues, justified the rights for adherents to rule with dominance; it was “a way as to serve the political agenda of the Mesopotamian royal elite.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, if *enuma elish* is read as a victory story

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<sup>34</sup> *enuma elish*, Tablet II, lines 94-95; *ibid*, 26 (translator’s original emphasis).

<sup>35</sup> *enuma elish*, Tablet VI-VII. It must be noted that the ordering laid out in these tablets include clear hierarchies of race/ethnicity, distinguishing the “black-headed/haired ones” as shepherds and slaves. The establishment of the Babylonian empire was surely reliant upon a hierarchy of rulers and slaves, which may not have been resisted in the Hebrew creation story for the sake of justice, but for the sake of an Israelite self-definition against an abuse of their own labor. Again, see Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 18-19.

<sup>36</sup> *enuma elish*, VII, *Epilogue*, lines 150-151.

<sup>37</sup> James Kennedy, “Peasants in Revolt: Political Allegory in Genesis 2-3,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 15, no. 47 (June 1990): 4.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*.

(perhaps aspirational in many of its details) for the newly formed Babylonian empire—a sort of political propaganda—it only makes sense that the Genesis story was also a political project of the Hebrews. In all practicality, such a creation story was not merely theological in its aim. It was a response to a previous ordering of the world, to a text which upheld the unjust imperial governance whom they were displaced by and now suffocated under.

The two texts side by side are striking. Just as the writers of Genesis may have borrowed content from this “foreign” homeland’s creation epic, it is likely that they too had political motives for composing a story that both speaks to the order of the cosmos and their place in it, and protests the political order as laid out by their occupiers. Gerald West posits that many scholars have understood the Genesis account, in its similarity to *enuma elish*, “was constructed as a polemic against the religion of Babylon.”<sup>39</sup> While the text may surely be making arguments for religious distinctness and purity, I offer that the myth functions beyond the luxury of this ideological defense. If indeed the writing was curated in a time of exile, might it protest more than the empire’s religion, functioning as a critique of Babylon itself and the political oppression it wielded on this community? Mark Brett notes that even if *enuma elish* had not made its way to Israel previously, they would have become familiar with the Babylonian creation myth during their exile in the land.<sup>40</sup> Even if it was not a story that had been woven into the fabric of their social identity from the start, it was one that likely disrupted that identity, pulling further at the fibers already unraveled by the events of exile.

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<sup>39</sup> Gerald O. West, *Genesis: The People’s Bible Commentary: A Bible Commentary for Every Day* (Oxford: The Bible Reading Fellowship, 2006), 25.

<sup>40</sup> Mark Brett, *Genesis*, 25.

## Chapter 3

### Creation Out of Chaos, Creation from Exile?

*wə-hā- 'āreṣ hāyətāh tōhū vā-bōhū*—and the earth was chaos and nothingness...<sup>41</sup>

Just after the text declares that the earth was both “chaos and nothingness,” it adds that darkness was upon the face of deep waters, which God’s breath hovered upon. This further muddies the physical image of earth at this point in the story, as well as the chaotic nature of it. Is there something in this deep depository of the earth’s womb? Or is it really nothing? Is the watery-deep fear inducing, or inviting with its repository of possibility and divine presence? Is darkness inherently “bad,” or might it signify the struggle and perhaps even despair that preclude any work of creation? These are all questions that haunt and guide our readings of this beginning story, and must be interrogated if we are to enter into its mysterious processes. In his work on Genesis in the *People’s Bible Commentary*, Gerald West notes that the Hebrew of verse 1 likely indicates God creating the heavens and the earth out of “pre-existing chaotic matter,” rather than out of nothing.<sup>42</sup> He reflects that in verse 2, earth’s form has no structure and the chaotic sea invites readers to “feel the desolation before God.”<sup>43</sup> West offers that after only chaos is imaginable, “finally, there is a spark of hope, for ‘the spirit/wisdom/storm

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<sup>41</sup> Genesis 1:2, author’s translation.

<sup>42</sup> West, *Genesis*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.



of God vibrated/trembled/moved/stirred over the face of the waters.”<sup>44</sup> While his string of possible translations are evocative and surely help to stir up new imagination in our readings, his following affirmation perhaps does so even more: “implicit in the formless and empty chaos evoked...is the presence of God.”<sup>45</sup> Such an idea troubles notions of chaos and the good/bad binary it is often bound to, as well as understandings of the divine, stimulating potential associations the textual composers may have made between intense struggle, a divine power, and their geo-political situation.

The Hebrew language used in this verse not only lends itself to a multitude of meanings and interpretations, the wording nods to other biblical texts whose contexts may not be terribly different from that of Genesis 1. The *tôhû* that appears here that can be translated “formlessness,” “confusion,” “emptiness,” “wilderness,” or “chaos” also appears in Isaiah 24:10, amidst an entire chapter on the impending judgement that will bring desolation on the earth. In verse 10, *tôhû* refers to a chaotic city; in conjunction with the earth drying up and ceasing to bear fruit, “The city of chaos is broken down, every house is shut up so that no one can enter.”<sup>46</sup> This chapter speaks of a time where everything will be overturned—one might even say it calls for it. *Tôhû* and *bôhû* appear together again in Isaiah 34:11 and Jeremiah 4:23, both in narratives that infer political or earth chaos and upheaval. Isaiah 34 speaks of judgment to come upon the nations, where the earth will be laid waste; it will belong to the raven, owl, hawk, and

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. The theological reflections that West makes will certainly inform analysis of the political function of the text to come later in this work. However, I’d like to make clear that while writing God into chaotic/traumatic events can serve as a theological apologetic, its work does not end there. In asserting that one’s own God rests in the midst of earth (and human) chaotic processes and has control over them, a people may also find channels to assert their God/people hold superior political power in endless forms viable to manifest in violence, manipulation, or oppression against “others.”

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Isaiah 24:10, NRSV.

hedgehog and the Lord “will stretch a line of *confusion* over it and stones of *chaos*.”<sup>47</sup> Jeremiah 4 projects its words from the heart of exile; it speaks of expulsion from Judah and a land overtaken with disaster. And in the midst of a description of a land completely “devastated,” the writer declares: “I looked upon the earth, and behold, it was chaos and emptiness; and upon the heavens, there was no light.”<sup>48</sup> Similarly, the *têhôm* that exists in Genesis 1:2 also flows in Exodus, making an appearance in the “Song of the Sea” after Israel escapes Pharaoh and his chariots in the Red Sea crossing.<sup>49</sup> Exodus 15:5 reads as such: “The deep covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone.” Whether there is an intentional connection drawn between the texts or not, the notion of *têhôm* seems inextricable from the role of chaotic/oceanic waters in migrant travel. Bodies of water are boundary markers all throughout the Hebrew Bible. Think of the Red Sea crossing, the four rivers flowing out of the garden Eden, the flood, Moses put in a basket in the river; these instances not only serve to delineate boundaries and create order, but are banners for migration stories, battle scenes, and mass destruction. The waters in these texts are markers that bear the suffering and trauma of Israel. Lastly, the verb *rahêp* employed Genesis 1:2 gives the connotation of hovering, even vibrating.<sup>50</sup> A divine presence is described brooding not over water, but over creatures in Deuteronomy 32:11. In this verse, God cares for and hovers over the people like an eagle: “As an eagle stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions.”<sup>51</sup> The language of Genesis 1 flows in and out of the creation story

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<sup>47</sup> Isaiah 34:11, author’s translation.

<sup>48</sup> Jeremiah 4:20, 23, author’s translation.

<sup>49</sup> Exodus 15:1-19. *Têhôm* can be translated simply as deep, or more specifically as ‘primeval ocean’ or ‘depths of the sea.’

<sup>50</sup> The verb *rechef* is used in the Piel imperfect form here, rendering the face of God as ‘hovering.’

<sup>51</sup> Deuteronomy 32:11, NRSV.

and other biblical texts, making new waves and surfacing again on traumatic shores of exile.

Further disputes of the notion of “creation out of nothing” can be found in the Midrash’s commentary on Genesis 1:2. In it, R. Huna responds to a remark that a world created from *tôhû*, *bôhû*, and darkness impairs God’s glory. He claims that “If the matter were not written, it would be impossible to say it, ‘God created the heaven and earth;’ Out of what? Out of ‘Now the earth was *tôhû* and *bôhû*.’”<sup>52</sup> He understands *tôhû* and *bôhû* as the very matter from which earth and heaven are formed. Recent work in Quantum physics may echo such a theory in the ways that disordered order seems to govern the life and interactions of the elements that make up all matter. Further, chaos theory says that fluctuation is the movement which produces order from chaos.<sup>53</sup> Keller offers that “fluctuation signifies both the repetitions comprising a chaotic process and the genesis of order.”<sup>54</sup> In light of this physics theory, it may not be too far off to understand how the chaos folded into earth substances is breathed into the dusty flesh of human beings and reverberates in our interactions.

Catherine Keller’s work on the chaotic frequencies pulsing through these verses in Genesis are a helpful theological interlude between physics chaos theory and the *tôhû vâ-bôhû* to be confronted by Jewish and Christian readers alike. Keller works against historical constructions of *creatio ex nihilo* offering instead that creation indeed arises from chaos—a *creatio ex profundis*. She offers that throughout biblical texts, *tôhû* connotes “the uninhabitable, unformed condition associated with the wilderness of

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<sup>52</sup> Rabbi H. Freedman, trans. *Genesis*, Midrash Rabbah, (London: Soncino Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>53</sup> These fluctuations in the subsystems that exist in all systems can, with any movement, cause the system to erupt in chaos or move into greater “order.” Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 188.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

desert,” rather than a space of complete nothingness likely not to resonate with a Hebrew cosmology.<sup>55</sup> Translations of the Hebrew word range from “brouhaha” to “hodgepodge,” with some classical rabbinic commentators arguing that the “nothingness” before creation was only so in that “it was not a thing.”<sup>56</sup> Keller draws upon Luise Schottroff’s interpretation of Genesis, imagining that this “groundless” beginning is indeed the groundwork for a “nomadology of the *āreṣ* itself”—a story written for an unsettled people.<sup>57</sup> Another compelling way to understand *tôhû vā-bôhû* from a post/exilic perspective is to ask what sort of “creative reinscription of the colonized” lives in a notion of all new creations sprouting from initial chaos.<sup>58</sup> Telling a story of the creation of the world and cosmos bursting forth from chaotic matter in a deep unknown is a means for colonized peoples to map new order on their existent world and its inner workings.

The chaos and “unknownness” of Genesis 1 thus find resonance with memories of exilic trauma, while also constructing a new cosmology, which is inherently political.<sup>59</sup> Keller also delves briefly into chaos theory, based on the central principle that “order” arises out of “fluctuation” or “amplification through the bifurcating trajectories of extremely unstable systems.”<sup>60</sup> “The edge of chaos” is a term coined by physicist Per

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 183-184.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 184. See further Luise Schottroff, “The Creation Narrative: Genesis 1.1-2.4a,” in *A Feminist Companion to Genesis*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 24-38.

<sup>58</sup> Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 186.

<sup>59</sup> One of the best views into cosmology in the Ancient Near East is the apocryphal Book of Enoch, where earthly “evils” and chaos clash with a divinely ordered and dichotomized world (heaven/earth, light/darkness, good/evil, waters, sky, earth-life, etc). See Joseph B. Lumpkin, *The Books of Enoch: A Complete Volume Containing: 1 Enoch (The Ethiopic Book of Enoch), 2 Enoch (The Slavonic Secrets of Enoch), 3 Enoch (The Hebrew Book of Enoch)* (Blountsville, AL: Fifth Estate Publishers, 2010). For more on Assyrian and Babylonian cosmology, astrology, and the earthly realm, see J. Edward Wright, *Early History of Heaven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 31-41 and pp. 52-97 on “Israelite Traditions” of cosmology.

<sup>60</sup> Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 188.

Bak, explaining the crucial point where fluctuating elements burst into a random, yet communicative “organization.”<sup>61</sup> Keller offers that this process of “self-organization,” where order emerges randomly from chaos, resounds theologically in the “order” of creation.<sup>62</sup> This scientific notion of the universe’s unorderedly and self-ordered creation troubles the binary assumption that bad things come from chaos, and allows space for a sort of self-organizing creation that need not be controlled or orchestrated by transcendent imposition.<sup>63</sup> The complexity of chaos thus lends itself to an ever evolving matrix of creation, where sterile and clear-cut order can be put into question.

Processes of the earth and narrative may have more in common than appears at face value. Both physical substances and stories are anything but stagnant. They are always changing and evolving, whether in structure or interpretation, things are always in process. In his book on Quantum Gravity, physicist Lee Smolin convincingly makes the case for a universe made up of processes and not things. He describes that in order to best convey a person or a culture, we tell stories since “we are dealing with a process that cannot be comprehended as a static object, independently of its history.”<sup>64</sup> He argues that just as the causal relations that stories convey are crucial to understanding how the world is shaped, so are relations key in understanding matter.<sup>65</sup> Smolin claims that there are not two categories in the world—objects and processes—but that people, cultures and things are all “processes unfolding in time” (some faster than others, of course).<sup>66</sup> He goes

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>64</sup> Lee Smolin, *Three Roads to Quantum Gravity* (Lymington, UK: Basic Books, 2001), 50.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

further to say that all events in the universe are relational, being that all its properties can be described by the relationships that exist between events.<sup>67</sup> In his explanation that processes only follow one another by causal necessity, Smolin makes the case that the story of the universe must therefore be told by a story. He claims, “If one wants to talk about it, one has no alternative but to tell its story.”<sup>68</sup> The notion of a dynamic causal structure of the universe made up of infinitely related processes can thus be read back into the story of creation in Genesis 1. The indefinite beginning that marks the story followed by chaotic nothingness that is somethingness is a means of making sense of the functions of the universe. By reading the text with attention to its post/exilic political context and modern quantum theory, the story seeks to make sense of its reality, and does so from the perspective of those who are intimately acquainted with the earth and its entangled processes. The creation story of Genesis might then in fact aid an understanding of creation in a postmodern scientific world, where physics informs us to see the world “as something created, and under continual recreation, by an enormous number of processes acting together.”<sup>69</sup>

As we turn back to the text, an important question for us to ask is why the composers of this myth choose to speak of creation with such confusion, such terrifying elements, and such poetry. It may be unclear whether these writings emerge from exile or its aftermath, but their grappling with chaotic beginnings may nonetheless mirror the

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 64. Now I must be clear here that I am certainly not making the argument that the ancient composers of this text had a working knowledge of quantum physics or anything close to a similar scientific understanding of the universe. However, I do think comparative readings of the biblical text and scientific theories open up rich and creative opportunities for thinking on the relationship between chaos and earth processes, as well as the interaction of human experiences and events with them.

realities of the human-induced chaos these writers found themselves in.<sup>70</sup> The phrase *tôhû vâ-bôhû* may have even conjured ripe political images for its ancient hearers. It appears again in Jeremiah 4:23, describing the earth exactly as Genesis 1:2 does, and recalling this creation myth after the event of Israel’s exile to Babylon. In his work on exile in the Hebrew Bible, Steed Davidson remarks that exile is a “contested political claim.”<sup>71</sup> It is debated in biblical scholarship whether exile was a “temporary phenomenon” as Jeremiah 29 suggests, or a much less short-lived event.<sup>72</sup> Davidson argues that unlike the temporally ambiguous term ‘diaspora,’ the term “‘exile’ evokes the visceral experiences of the inequities of geo-political power and the responses and resistance of dominant power.”<sup>73</sup> If so, could the formation of Genesis be a poetic embodiment of Israel’s response to exile in Jeremiah 29? As this community cultivates a relationship with new and unfamiliar soil, might they also question the very existence of this ground—that which has caused significant trauma, yet invokes new hope to sprout.

### **Exile: A Deported Identity**

*“The pathos of exile is the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of the earth...”*<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Traces of P, J, and E sources can be found in these first few chapters and all throughout Genesis. But, this isn’t necessarily problematic. By allowing these identities to assemble and diverge in the text, questions of nationality and location surface on the face of this exilic *t’hô(w)m*. German 19<sup>th</sup> century scholarship understood two early sources in Genesis: the J(Yahwist) Source (10<sup>th</sup> C) and the E(elohist) Source (8<sup>th</sup> C., reign of David or Solomon). Later, the P source was developed and understood in relation to Priestly texts; Exodus- Numbers, as well as Gen. 1.1-2.3 became seen as P, and Gen. 2.4-3.24 as non-P. For this project however (as I have already noted), I am reading with recent scholarship that understands Genesis-2 Kings as “post/exilic.”

<sup>71</sup> Steed V. Davidson, *Empire and Exile: Postcolonial Readings of the Book of Jeremiah* (New York: T&T Clark International 2011), 133

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>74</sup> Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 179.

The notion of chaotic breeding grounds which creation emerges from is quite helpful in conceiving of communal imaginaries that may be at play in this text. An examination of the experience of exilic identity deconstruction and formation (both biblical and modern), lends the opportunity for a provoking conversation with the cosmological and political worldviews that emerge in Genesis 1. The work of political scholar Edward Said, alongside the commentary of biblical interpreters, Steed Davidson and Mark Brett, illuminates the complex depths of exilic identity and the questions of theodicy that are often incumbent in such a process. By inviting these historic and poignant voices on displacement to converge in the same space—in and around the text of Genesis—there is a hope for the impetus and psychological affects of Genesis’ storytellers to be troubled, complexified, and approached with new possibility.

The experience of exile is deeply formational for individual and collective identity and has the power to further estrange communities, othering them geographically, culturally, and even psychologically. Edward Said laments the true views of exile which are obscured in literature and religion: “exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is *produced by human beings for other human beings*; and that, like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from *the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography*.”<sup>75</sup> Homi Bhabha coins the experience of diaspora communities as “unhomely,” wherein they must develop new ways to retain and (re)form individual and community identity.<sup>76</sup> And just as Davidson, claims that exile conveys unequal experiences with geo-political power and dominance, exile is neither a

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 174 (author’s emphasis added).

<sup>76</sup> Davidson, *Empire and Exile*, 131.



solely political, geographical, or cultural battle. Similarly, identity is not comprised solely upon a people's exiled experience. According to Said, exile is an alternative to the mass institutions that dominate modern life" and "provided that the exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity."<sup>77</sup> This tension between identity preservation and exile fetishizing is precisely the reason why the earth must play a role in these formations. The collisions of identity and space that without a doubt splinter a migrant community's identity can also become breeding grounds for resistance.

Said approaches the notion of exile in a cautious manner, acknowledging that it is "strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience."<sup>78</sup> Even in his political analysis of "our age" of exile, he is insistent that the experience of exile goes beyond larger systems, and is instead a quite particular (individual and communal) agonized experience of estrangement. In its inevitable permanence, he names exile as "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home."<sup>79</sup> Literature, if indeed does obscure the experience of exile in almost every circumstance as Said claims, must be set aside at first to really consider the atrocities of exile. Said commands: "you must think of the refugee-peasant with no prospect of ever returning home, armed only with a ration card and an agency number."<sup>80</sup> He warns that writing emergent from exile cannot primarily be understood as beneficial classics to be placed within a library of such experiences. To do so would be to "banalize its

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<sup>77</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 184.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

mutilations,” euphemizing the suffering, horror and death incumbent in exile. As a Palestinian exile birthed in a displaced place, Said’s words must be carefully heeded in approaching any exilic text. Reading the stories of Genesis as content formed during and in the aftermath of exile may also involve considering his prophetic warning. If biblical texts of displacement are to continue to be read today, interpreters must seek first to encounter the utter loss of exile that lives within it, rather than analyzing it for sake of historical categorization and timeline placement. Seeking to dwell in the trauma and violence of displacement in such stories creates openings for what may be more pragmatic interpretations. Explanations of beginnings and order out of chaos may appear a little less murky.

Edward Said’s insight into the inner workings and products of exiled peoples sheds helpful perspective into the communal and environmental dynamics at play in a post/exilic writing. Genesis 1-3 as narratives from/of displacement thus come to life when read in tandem with exile theory. Later in his reflections, Said defines exile as “a jealous state;” what it produces is due to the lines it draws around communities, including “an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders.”<sup>81</sup> National and exilic identity is often proliferated by loathing another people, place, or nation-state. Just as this sort of agonizing relationship can be seen in bloody tension between modern Palestinian nationalism and the animosity of Israeli Zionism and government, it can also be found in a biblical Judean identity.<sup>82</sup> In the post/exilic

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 178. Ibn Khaldun’s notion of social order is further illuminating here. What he terms “*asabiyah*” (group solidarity) is a bond that forms in all levels of communities and civilizations, and is what causes the cycles of (rising and falling) of history to take place. Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, Vol. 1, trans. Franz Rosenthal (New York: Pantheon Books, 1958).

<sup>82</sup> The issue of Israel’s occupation and apartheid in Palestine is one that necessitates pages and years of analysis, only in order to begin comprehending the complexity of geopolitical issues at play in the situation.

narrative of Genesis-Kings, hostility towards “outsiders” is not always manifest in the form of abrasive or exclusionary language towards others (although it frequently is). Throughout these books and especially in Genesis, a “pure” Judean identity is pioneered and propelled forth with great force, quieting any other national representations that might usually mix in naturally, due to familiarity and proximity. The way in which Mesopotamian (read mostly Persian imperial) stories are co-opted and conformed for the purpose of proliferating a “different” people’s story (read Judean) certainly bear tendencies of an exiled community. Thus the “alternative” creation stories told in Genesis 1 and 2 may certainly be anti-imperial and political in nature, but may also be the reflection of extreme (non-homogenous) group solidarity of peoples taken over, expelled, ruled, and “returned” by one or more imperial regimes. The need for a displaced people to create a new understanding of cosmological order, and in turn political order, is completely practical in light of the utter agony of exile and the intense group solidarity it fosters.

Exile’s life is surely marked by national and group identification, but also spends a great deal “compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule.”<sup>83</sup> I bring in this notion of exile containing the ability to create “alternate” order, not to unground its immediate contextual experience and render its work completely as utopian social dreaming.<sup>84</sup> Rather, just the opposite conclusion seems palpable. If exile forcefully

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Later I will further address some particularities of Palestinian estrangement from land, but will hardly begin to uncover the mangled issues at hand. I choose to speak of this relation at this point in my writing as a mere example of national/outsider identity tension because it is most poignant to my project’s aim as a whole, and is nonetheless incredibly ripe for connections to be made.

<sup>83</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 181.

<sup>84</sup> Maia Kotrosits approaches diaspora theory through the lens of affect theory, understanding it not only as a way to analyze the politics that create diaspora and the violent effects of it, “but also the ways diaspora as a condition *enables* a sense of belonging.” Kotrosits’ work illuminates the concept of utopian social dreaming in biblical texts as she poses questions about how alienation is articulated, the passionately fueled

removes bodies from a homeland and contains them in isolation from social and political systems, that “othered” space in which exiles dwell is surely capable of creating “alternatives” to those systems in a variety of forms.<sup>85</sup> Said speaks to the out-of-order everyday activities that exist in exile: everyday habits and activities in a new environment “inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment” and “both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally.”<sup>86</sup> The warring existence of past and present life in exile causes the most simple acts and interactions to become unorthodox, and often agonizing. Thus the need to grasp a new order amidst chaos becomes all the more apparent. And the need to do so in a way that opposes the ruling power, or renders it delegitimate in exilic space, is crucial. Exile, like a season looking towards another potential season that never materializes, “is life led outside habitual order.”<sup>87</sup>

As we turn back to Genesis 1 and the confluence of contexts that underlie it, chaos as a trope of undoing order (or acknowledgement a lack thereof), thoughtfully sets the stage for a narrative that contains the potential to disrupt order. Mark Brett argues for a democratizing and anti-monarchic voice in Genesis 1, where a created order is established that is not dependent upon kings—Mesopotamian, Israelite, or Persian.<sup>88</sup>

Unlike the characteristic kingly “image of God” displayed in Mesopotamian and

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imaginings that stem from trauma and loss, and how these forces affect “national imaginaries” that are constructed in the text. Maia Kotrosits, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity: Affect, Violence, and Belonging* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 11-12.

<sup>85</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 184.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Mark Brett, *Genesis*, 28. Brett notes that Genesis 1 both co-opts notions of this ideology and completely rejects other parts of it; humankind is still to rule ‘over all the earth,’ yet “there is no expectation that this rule will entail the subjugation of distant enemies and nations, as Psalm 72:9-11 suggests.”

Egyptian literature, and the “Israelite royal ideology” displayed throughout the Psalms, Genesis 1 democratizes a sort of utopian polis that places expectation on a kingly ruler.<sup>89</sup> If we follow with Brett’s theory here, not only is the creation narrative in Genesis 1 giving voice to earth’s agency and authority in creating, it also works against traditional monarchical ruling ideology often imposed on land, and most likely has been wielded over Israel and a multiplicity of lands dwelled in throughout the Babylonian exile. But even in its subversive nature, the story, perhaps unavoidably, encompasses the tensions between ruling, dominion, and potential violence that may exist between earth and humans.<sup>90</sup> Such notions of hierarchy may be reworked in the second creation narrative where the human is created from earth substances, humans and animals are equals (both *nepeš hayyāh*), and the humans are to “serve” and “keep” the garden (*lā-ābədāh ū-lā-šāmārāh*).<sup>91</sup> Certainly the verb *rādāh* that appears in Genesis 1:26 and 1:28 conveys dominion, as it is a term used to refer to royal rule and ideology throughout the Hebrew Bible. However, the instruction that is given in these verses is for *all of creation* to rule over the earth, and *not* the monarchic power. Brett offers that by placing the power to govern with all earthly creatures and creation, this writing undermines the typical role of dominance associated with kings and is effectively an anti-monarchic proposal.<sup>92</sup> The existence of “dominion” language nonetheless may be representative of the community’s non-linear thinking. Even if a sort of decolonial project was at work for these Judean-Persian writers, it is nearly impossible for it to exist in any purely anti-imperial sense. In

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, 29. Brett notes that this first creation story acknowledges and embodies the tension between “this primal utopia” and the threat of other species to human beings and vice versa.

<sup>91</sup> Genesis 2:7,15, author’s translation.

<sup>92</sup> Brett, “Earthing the human in Genesis 1-3,” 78.

other words, the macro-structures of oppression still play out in this narrative and traces of empire are woven throughout. It is clear that the first and second creation stories, while holding the tension between ruling hierarchy, humans, and other earth creatures, both included language that resists a monarchical politics (though not wholly) and democratizes earth and human relationships.

Mitri Raheb notes the gaps in historical studies of the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict; he claims they are done in “historic isolation,” failing to see the ongoing pattern of politics and occupation which they are a part of.<sup>93</sup> If we keep a more holistic historical approach in mind when approaching the case of Palestine, its conflict is not only a product of European colonial history, but also finds resonance and relation (whether geographic, political, or religious) to the colonization and occupation of the biblical land of Palestine from the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE onwards.<sup>94</sup> I call attention to such a perspective at this point to prime readers with inquiry of how particular interpretations of the creation stories in Genesis may affect the current geopolitical context of Palestine and how it may extend into situations of exile and displacement worldwide. If the creation stories had the potential to function politically for ancient writers and audiences, might they also carry the same possibility and religio-political force in political matters today in relation to land, borders, displaced peoples, and ecological justice? A further dive into the depths of

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<sup>93</sup> Raheb, *Faith in the Face of Empire*, 10.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-11. Raheb notes that the imperial history of the land of Palestine does not end with the Jewish Revolt of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE, as biblical historicists leave it, nor does it begin with Constantine in the Byzantine Empire, as church historians frame it. Raheb, as I understand him, is not seeking to blend a number of imperial histories and amalgamate their diverse forces and contexts. Yet he is acknowledging the conversation between these “*sacred*” and “*secular histories*” as he calls them, and the recurring question of God and faith that has remained central throughout them. It is this interstice which I hope to illuminate and carefully implant my work within.

Genesis may shed a bit more light on the tumultuous yet constructive forces at play in the text and their ever-changing context(s).

## Chapter 4

### Dwelling in the Depths

*wə-ḥōšek al pānê t<sup>h</sup>ôm* —and darkness was upon the face of the deep...<sup>95</sup>

With this second verse in the first creation story, readers are invited to come dwell in the deep unknown from which creation emerges. This *t<sup>h</sup>ôm* has often traditionally been understood as an abyss—as a place of nothingness, emptiness, and complete void lacking any sort of life. Such a rendering effectively ensures that an *ex nihilo* theology is derived from the text, and the story of a divinely mandated creation of the world from nullity is pushed forth. As mentioned earlier, the word *t<sup>h</sup>ôm* is used not only in Genesis 1 to connote chaotic depths as places where meaningful transformation transpires. The “depths” covered the enemies of Israel in Exodus 15:5 in the crossing of the Re(e)d Sea; “the deep” speaks in an interlude in Job 28:15, proclaiming that even in deep and sea, wisdom cannot be found; in Genesis 7:11 and 8:2 “the deep” is the source of flooding which wipes out all the earth and is subsequently closed up by God. *T<sup>h</sup>ôm* exists elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible referring to a deep source of underground water (Deut. 8:7; Psalm 104:6, 77:16), a place that lies beneath the earth (Deut. 33:13, Psalm 71:20, 107:26, 135:6), a place of blessing that lies beneath (Gen. 49:25), harsh waters and home of the Leviathan (Job 38:16, 30; Psalm 148:7), likened to the judgement of the Lord (Psalm 36:6), a thunderous place responding to the Lord (Psalm 42:7), and as a deep sea (Psalm 78:15). The *tehom*ic imaginary that surfaces in this diverse array of post/exilic texts in the Hebrew Bible communicates a complex and multilayered understanding of

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<sup>95</sup> Genesis 1:2, author’s translation.



“the deep.” It carries notions of profound waters and deep wellsprings that are spaces of great chaos and fecund possibility. The cavernous depths of *têhôm* house a good deal of trauma that is created in these story tellings—the Leviathan monster of Mesopotamian cosmology, the source of ecological flood disasters, and the fleeing and drownings of war battle all dwell here. Given the abysmal cultural recesses of a tehomitic source for violence, trauma, mystery, divinity, and creation, its existence in Genesis 1 surely carries more than “nothingness” into the birthplace of the heavens and earth.

The mythological notions of a “primeval deep” are also entangled in the *têhôm* here in Genesis. It surely hearkens to the turbulent waters of *enuma elish* that contain battle, gruesome violence, and creation. The *têhôm*, as both a site of great mystery and miraculous events, in a Mesopotamian storytelling world alludes to a sort of utopian dreaming that may be at work in this text. The reimagined cosmological and political order that is constructed in Genesis 1-3 follows in creating an alternative reality than that of the occupying Persian empire. In *enuma elish*, it is the gods *Apsu* and *Mummu-Tiamat* who comprise the sweet and salt water primordial ocean—“their water commingling as a single body.”<sup>96</sup> The bodies of these gods are the waters which precede the naming of heaven and earth, as well as the earth’s landscape, and give birth to subsequent gods. Their waters pulse and surge with anger as these other gods (their children) disturb the order of things. And when these children-gods hear of their parents’ plot against them, the “all-wise” Ea cooks up a sleepy spell to defeat the gods, which he recites “and made it subsist in the deep.”<sup>97</sup> And with the deep waters subdued, the primordial gods’ rivals are

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<sup>96</sup> *enuma elish*, Tablet I, line 5, in *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. E.A. Spieser, 19.

<sup>97</sup> *enuma elish*, Tablet I, line 60, 3. “The deep” is another translation of the waters of *Apsu* and *Mummu*.

able to defeat them, violently destroy them, and create the god *Marduk* from their wreckage. It is important to keep in mind that the Babylonian creation myth is an intergenerational struggle of deities and political power. Rosemary Radford Ruether offers that this contestation with religious and political histories was also a “struggle to harness and organize the ‘chaotic’ social and natural forces that erupted periodically against this order.”<sup>98</sup> Ruether’s recognition that droughts and floods threatened agricultural systems, and therefore political systems, illuminates yet another helpful perspective from which to understand a chaotic *t’hom*. The uncontrollable nature of water, especially in the forms of natural disasters, was surely a primary concern in the ancient Near East, where agriculture *was* the economy.<sup>99</sup> Thus threatening an opposing power with a curse of water-induced catastrophe was accomplishing more than merely telling a mythic story. And if the Babylonian creation myth was challenging a previously established ruler with a narrative of riotous waters and fertile lands, the Hebrew myth may be reverberating such an objection back to Babylon. A revolt from exiled peoples who likely upheld oppressive agricultural structures with their labor begins with water. The contestation of Genesis claims the deep waters as the substance and force of their God, and ripples out to claim additional agency with land and creatures.<sup>100</sup> With such a

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<sup>98</sup> Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 16.

<sup>99</sup> Roland Boer offers this on the relationship between agriculture and economics: “Agriculture and allocation: these are inseparable for understanding the sacred economy.” He emphasizes the “ever-present threat of economic crisis” which was always hovering in the Southern Levant given its tremendous dependence upon natural resources and events. See Roland Boer, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 53.

<sup>100</sup> Ruether further comments on the potential threats to agricultural systems, adding that “social eruptions from the serfs and slaves who did the manual work and invasions from rival states and migrating nomads from outside all threatened the fragile order they had imposed on their ‘world.’” Ruether, *Gaia and God*, 17.

utopian imagination, the dominance and dominion found in Genesis can continue to be reinterpreted, with voices of peasant revolts echoing through the text.

The deep that exists along with the *tôhû* and *bôhû* is yet another mysterious form out of which creation begets. “The Genesis *t’hôm*,” as Keller posits, is not something victimizing, but is “more like the matrix of possibilities in which liberation struggles can unfold.”<sup>101</sup> If we follow with her that this is a space of becoming for both divinity and earth creatures, then it may be an accurate depiction of an exiled identity in shambles. In heeding Homi Bhabha’s insistence that the “unhomely” experience of displaced communities beckons individual and communal identity reformation, it is likely that the Genesis writers grappled with their own existence as well as the earth’s.<sup>102</sup> Seeking to understand formations of earth and existences of catastrophe, as appears in these chapters of Genesis, may be a creative and quite logical way of beginning to reshape traumatized identity. If we understand earth as playing a role in identity reformation here, the tension between identity preservation and exile fetishizing that Edward Said warns against could be relieved.<sup>103</sup> A communal recognition of a deep, darkness that rests in the place of a people’s identity may be a first step in shaping a new existence together. Land cultivation as a way of identity formation also serves as a means to subvert the power of the empire. If the land of the colonizer can become space for the colonized to create and sustain their lives, it thus has the potential to refuse trust in the nation-state and decenter its main source of power.<sup>104</sup> The earthy poetic imagination that occurs here in Genesis, when read

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<sup>101</sup> Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 21.

<sup>102</sup> Davidson, *Empire and Exile*, 131.

<sup>103</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, 184.

<sup>104</sup> Davidson, *Empire and Exile*, 53. Steed Davidson argues that for exiled communities to remove their trust from the nation state, space must be “decentered to locate new bases for power.”

with identity politics and additional exilic texts in mind, thus appears as a cathartic yet creative meditation on identity from the depths.

### **Entanglement of Dispossession**

*How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? The idea is strange to us. If we do not own the freshness of the air and the sparkle of the water, how can you buy them?*

*Every part of this earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memories of the red man.*

*This we know; the earth does not belong to man; man belongs to the earth. This we know. All things are connected like the blood which unites our family. All things are connected.*

--Chief Seattle, Suquamish tribe<sup>105</sup>

Catherine Keller begins her lecture, “Toward a Political Theology of the Earth” by questioning what form political theology might take in relation to the earth, and what the earth’s voice might sound (or look like) in circumstances of catastrophe or “exception.”<sup>106</sup> According to Keller, the variety of chaotic global outbreaks must be seen relationally—global emergencies, political and ecological, in their disturbing mutual entanglement.<sup>107</sup> Constructing a political eco-theology of dispossession relies on the interrelation of political and ecological trauma; it must heed to Keller’s conviction— “if our convulsive terrors are interlinked, so must be the alternatives.”<sup>108</sup> It may be helpful to further follow Keller into a Deleuzian, rhizomatic extrapolation of entanglement, where a

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<sup>105</sup> Chief Seattle 1848 speech, quoted in Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>106</sup> Catherine Keller, “Toward a Political Theology of the Earth” (Paper presented at the conference, “Political Theology: The Liberation of the Postsecular?,” Liverpool Hope University, Liverpool, July 2015), 9. Keller denotes global capitalism, specifically as it is fueled by U.S. political power, as a prominent roadblock that keeps the earth from maintaining any sovereignty.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

multiplicity of entanglements form such eco-global-political catastrophes.<sup>109</sup> If we re-enter into the experiences of a displaced community, such chaos cannot be reduced to one cause—to one garden tree—but is the unfolding of continually interacting forces and events. Whitehead’s conception of God as the becoming of each act of creativity can be incredibly helpful and liberating for perpetual victims of such traumatic becoming. The creator is always in relation, “emerging from the *dark depths*,” and according to Whitehead is “the outcome of creativity.”<sup>110</sup> If God is unfolding in the processes of life and creation, cannot such a destabilizing redistribution of power lend the same liberating potentialities to the dispossessed? If the geographical reality of a political refugee is intrinsically linked to the abused and agonized earth, cannot a relationship of solidarity serve as a subversive reversal of such positionalities? Land then, the very means of much violence experienced by most exiled communities, becomes the very ground upon which resilience and resistance against the sovereign may sprout.

The earth imagery peppered throughout the creation stories is no coincidence. The clear connections between earth and human suffering are evident, especially in situations of displacement, both historic and current. The first two verses of Genesis 1 portray not only a confusing and chaotic earth state, but an intimate relation to and knowledge of it. The biblical use of *têhôm* to denote sources of deep chaos and mystery provides ample evidence that like reflections lurk here in Genesis. But the subsequent content of the creation stories—that being the creation of the earth and its systems—undoubtedly binds the context of the writers’ situation(s) (read political, geographic, and economic effects of

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 181. My emphasis added.

imperial domination) to their experience with and knowledge of the land they inhabit (or once did). The work of ecowomanists and ecofeminists, which insists upon the interrelation of earth and human injustices (race, gender, class, etc.) in working towards any sort of liberation, are quite illuminating when read alongside the biblical text here. In her collation of the history of African American estrangement and earth memory, Melanie Harris defines “ecomemory” as “the collective and individual memory of the earth and relationship with the earth.”<sup>111</sup> These memories, just like any other sort of intimate communal history, are passed down through generations, having the potential to become “countermemories” to the racist and oppressive history of the United States.<sup>112</sup> The notion of collective earth-memories as acts that counteract the false histories imposed by imperial powers is not only a way of refuting stories of the past, but is a tool to transform the present. Harris offers that recognizing a deep connection of beings and having a sense of belonging to earth “helps to heal the terrorizing impact of dehumanization normative in practices of white supremacy.”<sup>113</sup> If we read back into the stories of Genesis with womanist ethics, insistent upon the entanglement of systemic suffering and the importance of counternarratives to those violences, the voices of these women are echoing all throughout the text. Attuning to their voices help us consider how the earth systems and elements in the text may have served as a canvas upon which ancient communities worked out political and ecological trauma and imagined new orders.

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<sup>111</sup> Melanie Harris, *Ecowomanism: African American Women and Earth-Honoring Faiths* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 28.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 30. I would add that these sort of connections and awareness also help heal the trauma of colonialism, war, displacement, and natural disasters.

Ancient cosmology and the post/exilic context of the creation stories adds depth to the watery deep the first story is framed within. Speaking of the “firmament” cosmological conception, Luise Schottroff describes that “earth is conceived of as a huge ocean with darkness above it.”<sup>114</sup> So not only was a deep sea a logical place for an ancient storyteller to imagine earth’s creation beginning, its carried over connotations from the Babylonian myth made it a natural and ripe narrative tool to work out the traumas of exile. According to Schottroff, there was a mix of deported and occupied victims of Babylon: “some in their homeland as peasant farmers who had to pay tribute to their lords; the others, especially the craftsmen, were deported to Babylon in the service of the conquerors.”<sup>115</sup> For most who were normalized to the reality of their worth residing in their labor, a counter-narrative employing elements of the natural world and imperial order told in the form of a creation story is not far-fetched.<sup>116</sup> Schottroff offers that longing for a homeland, expressing awe of the mystery of creation, and lifting up the story of their God were all a part of the Hebrew narrative working against the historic and ongoing exploitation they faced.<sup>117</sup> In her book *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace*, Vandana Shiva speaks of the destruction to earth and communities that comes with colonial enclosure.<sup>118</sup> Spaces of forced enclosure cut off life to earth, animal, and human beings, whether it be ecologically, psychologically, economically, geographically, or all of the above. Thinking in terms of imperial occupation and captivation, the *t’hôm* in

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<sup>114</sup> Schottroff, “The Creation Narrative,” 24.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 27-28.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>118</sup> Shiva explains that enclosures were not only historic projects of England, but have “been central to the continuing processes of colonization” which “created private property by enclosing the commons and displacing and uprooting the original peoples in the Americas, Africa, and Asia.” Vandana Shiva, *Earth Democracy: Justice, Sustainability, and Peace* (Brooklyn: South End Press, 2005), 25.

the Genesis narrative functions as a subversive poetic device, and a counter to the enclosed garden. Deep and chaotic waters are not a space or commodity that can be contained by even the most powerful earthly rulers. And neither are they another form of nature to be exploited with and against a colonized people. The *t'hôm* is a mysterious womb that bears both chaos and life; it exists as a sea of potential for a community in deep despair.

He said every morning found him here,  
 before the water boiled on the flame  
 he came out to this garden,  
 dug his hands into earth saying, *I know you*  
 and earth crumbled rich layers  
 and this result of their knowing—  
 ...And he called it *querido, Corazon*,  
 all the words of any language  
 connecting to the deep place  
 of darkness and seed. He called it  
*ya habibi* in Arabic, my darling tomato,  
 and it called him governor, king,  
 and some days he wore no shoes

*West Bank*<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Naomi Shihab Nye, "The Garden of Abu Mahmoud," in *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (New York: Greenwillow Books, HarperTempest Ed., 2005), 21.



## Chapter 5

### Interruption of Order: Shabbat

*way-hî 'ereḇ, way-hî ḇōqer—yōm 'eḥād. way-hî 'ereḇ, way-hî ḇōqer—yōm šênî. way-hî 'ereḇ, way-hî ḇōqer—yōm šālīšî... way- yōm rəḇî'î, yōm ḥāmīšî, yōm haš-šiššî —way-yiṣḇōṭ bay- yōm haš-šəḇî'î... And there was evening and there was morning—day one. And there was evening and there was morning—day two. And there was evening, and there was morning, day three...and day four, day five, day six—and God rested on the seventh day...<sup>120</sup>*

In this poetic [re]structuring of days, each contains an invitation, a creation, a seeing, an affirmation of goodness, and a rhythmic counting of the day. *ēlōhîm* invites for creation to be, and it is. And *ēlōhîm* sees that it is good, and the day is named. And suddenly—this ordering of days and creation is broken up with a time of rest—a time of non-creation within the never-ceasing flow of the earth's creating. Shabbat, a day of rest, invites humanity and God to pause and re-imagine their interactions with the earth. Such an abrupt halt enacted by both God and creation in this narrative disrupts the liturgy of progress in order to construct a time that carves out space for inactivity.<sup>121</sup> Sabbath exposes the paradigm of the process of creation: it is always in a state of infancy, yet always yielding its own agency. It requires a partner to “serve it” and to “guard it,” yet also demands rest for the regenerative process of creation to carry on uninterrupted.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>120</sup> Genesis 1:5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31 and 2:2, author's translation.

<sup>121</sup> In 2:1, the *pual* form of the verb *kalah* makes ambiguous whether it is God or the heavens and earth that finish creating. I render it, “And the heavens and the earth were to be completed, and all their multitudes.” The next verse simply states that God completed all the that he did on the seventh day and rested from that work.

<sup>122</sup> Genesis 2:15, author's translation.

*Shabbat*, not humankind, is the pinnacle of the first creation narrative. It disrupts the poem's rhythm and provides an awkward or non-existent transition into the second telling of creation. The chaos present in the text is unmistakable, perhaps visceral. But what is less clear is where agency rests in this disarray. Is it with creation? Is it with *ēlōhîm*, with *Yahweh ēlōhîm*? Or is it with the ones who create such a topsy-turvy story of *bə-rêšît*, who at this point remain unnamed, but whose traumatized fingerprints are smeared all over this dusty drama.

The order constructed throughout chapter 1, as the creation of each day is revealed, is a stark contrast to the first few verses of disarray that the story is introduced by. The strict structuring of creation within the framework of a week further exposes the tension between chaos and order at work in the social imaginary that informs this writing. As a story of a community grappling with the affects and aftermath of exile, the text grasps to create any sense of order—to stabilize the inconsistencies of a life displaced. If this story is read as a remapping of geopolitical landscape, and it is done so in conjunction with ecological hermeneutics, the relations of exile with its immediate creatures and environment become inadvertently explicit in the text. The humans in this narrative are created from soil, *'ādām* from *hā- 'ādāmāh*, and are regarded as *nepēš ḥayyāh* (living beings), just the same as all other creatures.<sup>123</sup> *Nepēš*, along with being or soul, can also simply be rendered as “existence.” The swarming things that creep and the

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<sup>123</sup> Hiebert traces Israel's ancestry to landholders and farmers through the central role of *hā- 'ādām* in Genesis 1, who is formed from “arable soil,” *'ādāmāh*. This lineage not only makes sense of an agricultural economy, but according to Hiebert recognizes an “integral link between divine activity and the soil's fertility” and human dependence upon fertile soil, as celebrated through later established ritual/cultic activity. Hiebert, *The Yahwist's Landscape*, 141, 143. The human as farmer is helpful in situating creation and earth-elements ritually, but is also comes with a certain worldview/occupational skillset/way of knowing/identity that may have been cut off or abused in a circumstance of exile.

flying creatures that fly exist, and the big sea monsters exist, and “living being(s) of every kind, animal and creeping things and every kind of land animal” exist, and humans exist.<sup>124</sup> It is clear that humans and animals share this living existence, and the community survives and thrives only in relation to the structure of the existence they are in. As explored earlier in this work, the restructuring of order in Genesis 1 as an anti-monarchical voice fits with the recognition and repetition of an earth-centered voice of interdependence.

If creation is a process unfolding through the lens of exile, anxieties of all kind are being worked out through the proclamations of this text. As the cathartic and perhaps mimetic order of creation reflects the systemized days of exile and all its agonies (forced labor, agricultural and economic exploitation, hauntings of home, geographic and cultural exclusion, etc.), it also instinctively confronts the natural world with which it coexists. The earth that “shoot(s) forth vegetation, . . . plant(s) yielding every kind of seed,” and “tree(s) bearing fruit,” was a reality this community knew intimately, both in previous modes of agricultural subsistence and current ones of imperial agronomy profiteering.<sup>125</sup> So why not reclaim those beings and systems in the name of *their* god? The “swarming,” “flying,” “creeping,” and “slithering creatures” were ones that an agrarian community knew and had their own names for for centuries.<sup>126</sup> So why not recall their names and conjure up the importance of their existence in the face of an extractive economy whose blind eye was turned equally to all exploited creatures? The repetitive ordering of days sharply interrupted by the wholly-other notion of sabbath creates space in the text that has

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<sup>124</sup> Genesis 1:24, author’s translation.

<sup>125</sup> Genesis 1:11, author’s translation.

<sup>126</sup> Genesis 1:20-22, 24-25, author’s translation.

the potential to function as resistance to the exploitative extraction of exile (and the political systems that perpetuate it) against creatures and land.

Carl Schmitt, one of the most prominent birthers of modern political theology, writes that “there exists no norm that is applicable to chaos.”<sup>127</sup> Such a “state of emergency” that the law cannot handle is where the sovereign emerges; “Sovereign is he who decides on the exception.”<sup>128</sup> Schmitt’s understanding of sovereignty, as he lays it out within the project of political theology, is without a doubt helpful in questioning where sovereign power lies, especially in situations of chaotic bursts and states of prolonged emergency (circumstances such as occupation, refugee crises, and climate induced erasure of lands come to mind). But, the ways in which Schmitt romanticizes the “power of real life that breaks through” in the exception fails to recognize the real lives who remain trapped under the weight of the sovereign’s gavel. While the exception does interrupt the flow of the state, it does not necessarily scatter life in this inbreaking, not for the real lives that dwell without choice in that fracture. This is where we may look for voices and movements which contest the sovereign, if they exist at all.<sup>129</sup> In the biblical text and in our current political climate, it is essential for us to ask: are their spaces wholly outside of the sovereign which refuse to succumb to the powers that be, to those

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<sup>127</sup> Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 11.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>129</sup> I question whether these voices in the fractures of exception “exist at all” as a nod to Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” The question of who the “subaltern” are and if they can speak is one that seems must always be asked of any academic work claiming to represent the “hidden” spaces of societies. This question is always haunting my work that deals with the spaces and voices of exile (and particularly Palestine); I acknowledge that it comes from an “outside” place of extreme privilege various degrees of separation. Nonetheless, I seek to find the hidden spaces and silenced voices in biblical texts and offer how they might find resonance in the voices of activists, artists, and academic critics—voices from modern-day exile (which I acknowledge are transmitted in forms that keep them from being what Spivak would deem “subaltern.”) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 271-313.

who indeed have the ability to decide who gets to live and who dies.<sup>130</sup>

In Abraham Heschel's timeless book, *The Sabbath*, he emphasizes the importance of Sabbath as a lacuna to embrace and grapple with "holiness in time" in relation to the "six days a week we live under the tyranny of things of space."<sup>131</sup> His language becomes ironically relevant when put into the context of exile—not only can things become tyrannical, but also people, governments, and nations. Even though an imagination of the holiness of the Divine apart from space can aid in deconstructing ancient and current religio-political claims and stakes to land, it endangers a disembodied interaction with it.<sup>132</sup> Yes, land is often the very root of trauma and suffering for displaced communities, but, it is also the grounds on which their reality can be reimagined, reconstructed, and reprocessed to beget a new creation. For Heschel, a world without Sabbath would be a world lacking creativity, a world whose relationship to God would be completely exiled.<sup>133</sup> This notion of creativity residing in the space of Sabbath may extend friendly tentacles back to the *t'ho(w)m*, which Keller likens to the depth of divinity in which the universe unfolds; a milieu of creativity, in flux of "indeterminacy and constraint;" a matrix of all relations; a watery abyss where all of creation groans.<sup>134</sup> May the ambiguous space of resting creation—*šābat*—also be an opening for embracing and mourning the chaos of the heavens and earth and everything in between? And could it further be a call from the colonized as to say, "Back up off of us and the land!" With the

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<sup>130</sup> To further explore this notion known as "necropolitics"—where power/sovereignty resides to decide who lives and who dies—read Achille Mbembe "Necropolitics," ed. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 11-40.

<sup>131</sup> Abraham Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1951), 10.

<sup>132</sup> "Holiness of time," Heschel distinguishes, is starkly different from the idea of holy places, in which we have extensively constructed spaces of geography and land to be bound in relation to the deity. *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>134</sup> Keller, *Face of the Deep*, 225-228.

spirit of ecofeminism/womanism, it becomes clear how the displaced and oppressed may find solidarity with the land and embrace some of its resilience and agency as their own.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> My grounding in doing this work comes from a rich tradition in eco-feminism/womanism which emphasizes the importance of the interdependence of their work with those of other oppressed groups and the earth. See Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Words on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) and Delores Williams, "Preface," in *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

## Chapter 6

### A Political Garden

*Wat-tō-mer hā- 'iš-šāh el han-nāḥāš...ū-mi-pārî hā- 'êṣ 'ă-šer bə-tōwḵ-ha-gān 'āmar*  
*ēlōhîm lō tōḵalū mim-mennū wə-lō tiggə 'ū bōw pen-təmuṭûn—And the woman said to the*  
*snake...but from the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, God said “You*  
*may not eat from it and do not touch it or you shall surely die.”<sup>136</sup>*

When we look at the exile of humans from the garden in Chapter 3, there is good reason that this expulsion should be read not as the result of “The Fall,” but as a reality of the corrupted orchard which already existed. In his rabbinical reflection on this story, Jonathan Magonet poses that the “Fall” already occurred before the humans ate the fruit, and our attention should rather be directed to questioning details such as “God’s singling out of a particular tree that was forbidden.”<sup>137</sup> In a decolonial vein of such questions, it is not hard to understand an exiled person characterizing God as restrictive and tyrannical. As one grapples with the ongoing trauma inflicted by the empire and land, might they also question where their God, a creator who sees creation as “very good,” may be in all of this?<sup>138</sup> And thus God is painted as the oppressor who creates laws and watches closely, as the colonizer who sets boundaries for control and banishes people from a known land. Notions of entanglement, as explored by Keller in her work on a political theology of earth, are helpful here in exploring the implications of the garden Eden as a

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<sup>136</sup> Genesis 3:2-3, author’s translation.

<sup>137</sup> Jonathan Magonet, *A Rabbi Reads the Bible* (London: Hymns Ancient & Modern Ltd, 2004), 124-125.

<sup>138</sup> Miguel De La Torre considers exile as an opening for questions of theodicy. See Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

colonized space. She insists that the variety of chaotic global outbreaks must be seen relationally—global emergencies, political and ecological, in their disturbing mutual entanglement.<sup>139</sup> Perhaps the garden tree, which *serves* as a restriction of knowledge and freedom for the humans, is also representative of the oppressive power under which a displaced community is constrained and the geographical implementations of it. This symbol allows an exiled community to grapple with their trauma in several ways: it acknowledges the physical geographical restrictions of their reality, while alluding to the more abstract restrictions from oppressors such as discourse and political agency. It raises questions such as, “What are the boundaries being drawn for these communities?” and “How are their actions being monitored and restricted?” The tree thus depicts the entanglement of colonizer and colonized, and the enigmatically confined space they must dwell in together. Here, Genesis may illuminate the interconnectedness of land and politics in exile, and how a community may use this nexus in processing their reality.

The humans’ banishment from the garden accompanied by a grim benediction to work the soil and birth children in pain, depicts the pain-induced bodily trauma inflicted on those who are displaced. A call to work the soil here does not come with a promise of prospering future generations and a return to their homeland as it appears in Jeremiah 29. Instead, the humans are told “in toil [they] will eat” of the soil, forever. Sustaining life through farming was a way of life that ancient Israel knew well, but being forced to do such work in the unfamiliar land of the exiler would likely awaken bodily memory which harbors much of the trauma of exile.<sup>140</sup> Perhaps Eve, who is depicted as the “mother of all

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<sup>139</sup> Keller, “Toward a Political Theology of the Earth,” 12.

<sup>140</sup> See Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2015). Another exilic experience that resonates with a toil-incumbent exile from the garden is the experience of Africans displaced and sold in the Atlantic Slave Trade. A decolonial African or



life” in chapter 3, can be a hopeful image here.<sup>141</sup> Just as giving birth is a pain-inducing act, so is creating and working the soil.<sup>142</sup> But, it is these processes that also bring forth new life. Although these “punishments” that come with banishment from the garden embody a relationship of grappling with the intense pain of this process, they also allow participation with land that creates an opening for life-bearing potential and resistance.

The question of the tree as the “exception” or circumstance outside of the law’s control is a necessary query in a political analysis of the text. Just previously in Chapter 2, God introduces two kinds of trees in the garden—“a tree of life” which may be eaten from just as all the others, and a “tree of knowledge of good and evil” which cannot be eaten from.<sup>143</sup> One tree assumedly brings life, while the consumption of the other’s fruit is proclaimed to bring death. Neither trees in themselves, nor the eating of their fruit, are introduced in this story as ostensibly good nor bad. Yet, this troubling tree narrative confronts deeper notions of good and evil, and the repercussions of disobeyed commandments. With some decolonial thinking, might the tree(s) in the garden function

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African American reading of expulsion from the garden might naturally draw parallels between the power of empire to draw boundaries and dictate toil/land relationships. Such an experience of permanent exile might not only see the garden Eden as an agonized enclosure. It may further consider a land placement not as one of promise, but one of hell.

<sup>141</sup> I do not seek to co-opt the figure of Eve, ignoring the history of interpretation of the female as the initiator and root of evil/sin for the purpose a political project. Instead, I am reading *with* eco/feminist/womanist scholars who interpret both Adam and Even as equally created beings in God’s image with equal responsibility in the garden and thereafter. By drawing upon her given title as “the mother of all life here,” I highlight yet another subversive tool in the narrative, connecting not just humans but a female character (and archetypal woman) to the earth, and attributing her the power to create and sustain life. See Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008) and Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

<sup>142</sup> Genesis 3:20, author’s translation.

<sup>143</sup> Genesis 2:9. The serpent may even function as a helpful question provoker, probing the humans push against the restrictive boundaries set around them. Brett notes that *arum* (shrewd), the Hebrew word used to describe the serpent, is the same word used positively for a prudent person in Proverbs, Brett, “Earthing the Human in Genesis 1-3,” 82. Since the snake is never denoted evil or trickery in the text (only through interpretation), perhaps the slithery creature functions more as wise counsel or a whistle-blower to divine/monarchical manipulation.

as working out the question of good and evil itself? Questioning constructed boundaries, lawmaking authorities, and notions of morality is surely a poignant and prescient act in a post/exilic existence. This rupturous end to the creation stories—when regarded as a political narrative tool—questions imperial powers, God, and exile itself. The death and life entangled in the trees may serve as a rhetorical echo; they beg the question of whether hope and trauma can exist side by side.

Finally, in examining the creation and garden expulsion stories, it is necessary to confront the notion of political “sacred myth” which Boer insightfully lays out in his work on political myth. He describes political myth as containing a convoluted “dialectic of reaction and subversion” which constructs fantasies that may indeed be “the powerful fiction of a completed truth.”<sup>144</sup> In its crafty “reactions” and thus subversions, Boer offers that myth may “have a virtual power in history.”<sup>145</sup> The realities which myths create may contain “power” for the communities constructing them in their ability to alter political systems and structures, circumstances of loss, and undesirable contexts, even if only in a virtual imaginary. In his analysis of Genesis 2-3 as political myth, Boer notes several paradoxes of loss in the text, where what is wished for only comes into existence in relation to that which is “lost.”<sup>146</sup> The fantasy of fruit without labor appears only when there is toil in agricultural labor (3:17-19), and the notion of living forever only emerges in the text when death becomes a threat (3:19). Paradise is only imagined in a reality of “hell” so to speak, and “the garden is possible only at the moment one postulates its

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<sup>144</sup> Boer, *Political Myth*, 34-35.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

loss.”<sup>147</sup> This is where Boer names the garden as “the paradox of utopia;” circumstances of loss and an imagined alternative are always dependent upon one another, existing side-by-side and dwelling in the same confined space.<sup>148</sup>

To the incident of forbidden fruit taken from the garden tree, Boer asks the question, “What if they hadn’t eaten from the tree?”—what would the consequences have been and what would become of the narrative if the humans stayed in paradise?<sup>149</sup> He reflects that this “choice” was never a choice, since this narrative and all subsequent biblical narratives are dependent upon it. By this example, Boer displays fantasy’s ability to “tease” its audience, causing them to believe it might exist or has the possibility of becoming. From Boer’s questioning a subsequent query rises to the surface that asks, ‘Why then create fantasy or myth at all?’ Why imagine paradise when it has never existed and shows no hope of manifesting anytime in the near future? The argument has been made by many Protestant and liberation theologians (or perhaps the easy misinterpretation of their arguments) across timelines that suggests utopic and subversive rhetorical and storytelling tools alter the imagination of a community and therefore alter their reality.<sup>150</sup> However, I’d like to suggest that, especially in the wake of exile and displacement, utopia does more than dream, imagining a new means of existence. Aside from being “always too much and not enough,” Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre characterizes utopia as a possibility that has “spatial, temporal, or conceptual anchors to the present,”

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>150</sup> Some of the works of John Howard Yoder and Jurgen Moltmann on ancient religious politics, eschatology, and hope come to mind here.

allowing it to map a place of concrete future.<sup>151</sup> For Johnson-DeBaufre, “in its concoction of disjunction and conjunction, utopia opens a paradoxical and open-ended space for imagining alternatives, for thinking what is possible in light of the negation.”<sup>152</sup> She remarks that utopia can exist as an observable place, “but it is always somehow not existing—a no-place.”<sup>153</sup> Thus creating a place such as the garden Eden may function for its audience not as an alternative to their suppressed reality, but as an opening to inhabit that reality differently. An oppressive political power both generates the suffering that cries out for something other, yet houses the means for such a fantasy to be imagined. The contradictions circle round and round. Boer concludes his garden narrative reflections with a refined definition of political fantasy: “myth (as fantasy) produces the possibility of political insurrection (the fantasmic kernel) in a radically synchronous fashion, a fact that it conceals by means of a diachronic narrative in which such insurrection is systematically repressed.”<sup>154</sup> Put more simply, the fantasy of political myths may hold potential for future insurrection, even while it exists within restrictive frameworks.

### **The Contaminated Case of Palestine**

*Here—we have a past  
a present*

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<sup>151</sup> Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, “Dreaming the Common Good/s: The Kin-dom of God as a Space of Utopian Politics,” in *Common Goods: Economy, Ecology, and Political Theology*, ed. Melanie Johnson-DeBaufre, Catherine Keller, and Elias Ortega-Aponte (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 112.

<sup>152</sup> Johnson-DeBaufre, 113.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, 73. It should be noted that Boer begins this book by developing a theory of political myth grounded in the political theory of Ernst Bloch, Theodor Adorno, Alain Badiou, Jaques Lacan, and Slavoj Zizek. It is the theoretical thinking of these authors that allows him to develop such a theory of fantasy and myth with the language that he does (i.e. kernel, the Real, synchronous & diachronic, etc.). And it is especially Bloch who allows him to relate “myth of reaction” and political uprising to his example texts in Genesis and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

*and a future.*

*Our roots are entrenched  
Deep in the earth.  
Like twenty impossibles  
We shall remain.  
-Tawfik Zayyad<sup>155</sup>*

The case of Palestine—one of political, geographical and ecological chaos—begs for creative hope and action in its exasperated state of stagnancy. Edward Said maps out the agonizing history of conquering, cleansing, deportation, and occupation of Palestine in his forthright political critiques and historiography that comprise *The Politics of Dispossession*. Much of his analysis is haunting—it brings to light the conglomeration of muddled politics, world superpowers, religion, and media that have proliferated the oppression of this land, while illuminating striking similarities to the political climate that surrounds Palestine in the present day. Said laments the deceptive veil that Israel has cast over Palestine under which “Palestinian Arabs, who have suffered incalculable miseries for the sake of Western anti-Semitism, really do exist, have existed, and will continue to exist as part of Israel’s extravagant cost—about these things very little is heard, apart from the usual unctuous complaints about injustice, the lack of reason, and the necessity of peace.”<sup>156</sup> The experience of Palestinians has long been mis/unrepresented, and doing so justly is not something the reaches of this project can accomplish here. Yet their experiences and current reality (and that of their occupiers) may be one of the most ripe and demanding for reimagined readings of biblical exile, especially those centered around creation and the politics of proliferation.

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<sup>155</sup> Tawfik Zayyad, *Enemy of the Sun: Poetry of Palestinian Resistance* (Washington: Drum and Spear Press, 1970) quoted in Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 130.

<sup>156</sup> Edward W. Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination, 1969-1994* (New York: Pantheon, 1994), 10.

Such urgent situations of political disaster, like that of Palestine via Israel, beg for reinterpretation of biblical shibboleths which have long been used to oppress land and people, rather than foster creative potentialities of life. In thinking about an ancient post/exilic text reflecting on displaced spaces, there are two hermeneutical tactics which any reader should take heed to. The more obvious of the two is a nuanced hermeneutic of exile, which interrogates the historic geo-political events and identities comprising the text's cultural milieu.<sup>157</sup> An understanding of even just a fraction of the politics at play in the background (and often foreground) of any biblical text makes a world of difference in potential understandings of it. The second essential tool in approaching exilic (or colonized) biblical texts is an intertextual narrative-literary analysis. By this I simply mean learning about exile by reading *other* texts of exile, and particularly those that cross national, canonical, historical, cultural, and geographic boundaries.<sup>158</sup> My insistence on reading the creation narratives in Genesis, alongside decolonial political theory, alongside Palestinian poetry, is just one experiential and experimental example of this.<sup>159</sup> And one might say that a work of biblical scholarship has the potential to become a decolonial

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<sup>157</sup> Again, I must reiterate my use of the term "exile" (biblical or current) as a really quite fluid term. It does not denote a uniform, historical experience comprised of equally devastating and perpetuated violence and disadvantaged circumstances. Nor is there a homogenized image of an oppositional "empire" which recognizably orchestrated such violence from a centralized location. The lines are far blurrier than that. There are always inextricable forces of power and systems that wield oppression of any kind. One interested in further understanding the nuances of conflicted identities of empire and exile in the ancient world should again look to Maia Kotrosits' book, *Rethinking Early Christian Identity*. Her definitions of "conflicted belonging" and her bit on homogenous categorical constructions in the introduction are especially helpful.

<sup>158</sup> Khaldun writes profoundly on the necessity to read historical and contemporary works together: "The (writing of history) requires numerous sources of greatly varied knowledge...if he trusts historical information in its plain transmitted form and has no clear knowledge of the principles resulting from custom, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilization, or the conditions governing human social organization, and if...he does not evaluate remote or ancient material through comparison with near or contemporary material, he cannot avoid stumbling and slipping and deviating from the highroad of truth." Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah*, 15-16.

<sup>159</sup> To simply explain my conviction of this method's promise, I circle back to the ever-relevant quote attributed to Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain): "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

project by facilitating for non-mainstream interpretations to take root in real and relative communities outside the academic realm of biblical studies. An insistence on the interrelations of biblical stories and current socio-political contexts and ideologies resists the hegemonic and divisive constructions of knowledge in scholarship and society. Edward Said names his belief in the ways culture works effectively “to make invisible and even ‘impossible’ the actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship...and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military forces...”<sup>160</sup> If it is true that such cultural systems exist, efficiently keeping us separate from one another in a multitude of ways, shapes, and forms, might allowing very separate (in every form of binary nameable) narratives to cross-pollinate and inhabit the same space work against such dominion? Said argues that interpretation is the work of an elite class of intellectuals “badly in need of moral rehabilitation and social redemption.”<sup>161</sup> An “other,” as he claims, is always constructed in interpretation—interpretation is a “social activity.”<sup>162</sup> The “others” that exist in biblical texts must certainly be named in our interpretations and their (non)appearances interrogated for the ways in which historical exclusionary readings have recapitulated these stories’ violences.<sup>163</sup> Exploring the “othered” voices that exist in the folds of these texts, while also confronting the silencing violence against similar “othered” groups today is a method of biblical interpretation that is incumbent in the contestations of power, boundaries, and control already at work in the text.

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<sup>160</sup> Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 119.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, I would add to Said’s definition of interpretation as “social activity,” by saying that it is political ordering and culturally divisive social activity.

<sup>163</sup> For a feminist-literary interpretation of unnamed women in biblical texts, see Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1984).

If questions of the monitoring, control, and violence of political regimes are present in Genesis, then surely modern-day queries and struggles of the like are entangled with those histories and their rhythmic ramifications. In her book *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, Angela Y. Davis skillfully exposes the interrelatedness of various freedom struggles and makes clear their dependence upon one another to strengthen and continue as movements. In her work with liberation groups worldwide, Davis asks questions such as, “How do we respond collectively to the militarization of our societies? What role can Black feminism play in this process?”<sup>164</sup> She is insistent that this process is a feminist one, that we must seek to understand “the interrelatedness of ideas and processes that seem to be separate and unrelated (“race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, and ability” in her terms).<sup>165</sup> Davis’ feminist approach to freedom struggles, and its prescience upon the structures that keep injustices siloed and sustained, comes from a rich tradition of freedom fighters and has much to lend to a biblical hermeneutic of dispossession. Just as struggles for liberation are dependent upon one another, so too should liberating readings of often abusive biblical texts rely on the stories of those currently writing narratives to shake the political order. To elucidate the vibrancy of such connections, let us again take a look at Genesis 3 beside Angela Davis’ writing. The “safe” confines of the garden Eden (when read in a context of imperial autocracy) resonates eerily with her description of the security

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<sup>164</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement*, ed. Frank Barat (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), xiii. Davis insists that links must be built between social struggles and focuses much of her work around tasks such as, “How to explain to people in Ferguson that what is happening in Palestine is also about them...” Mass incarceration, the political dispossession of millions, and consistent land grabs against indigenous peoples are just a few examples she gives of interconnected oppressions fueled by systems of racism and capitalism.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. The example she continues to center around is the connections between struggles against racism in the U.S. and struggles against Israeli repression of Palestinians. This is where questioning the obscurity of violence is key in any justice struggle.



company G4s, which has created “sophisticated technologies of control” in places such as the US-Mexico border and Israeli detainee prisons for Palestinians.<sup>166</sup> Davis explains how G4S has insinuated itself into our lives under the guise of security and the security state,” living up to its slogan: “In more ways than you might realize, G4S is securing your world.”<sup>167</sup> I probe these estuaries of state control and displacement not to suggest that the biblical text of Genesis is intentionally “speaking” of such politics, but to inquire what political work the text may do when read beside narratives of the West Bank and Gaza’s sterile confinement that flash up on our news feeds. Just as freedom struggles cannot function on their own, biblical texts of violence and exile cannot solely be read on a post-exilic timeline or recited in a liturgy, merely remembering a historical event of “liberation.”

### **A Living Text of Resistance: The Palestine Museum of Natural History in Bethlehem**

“Here We Will Stay”  
*In Lidda, in Ramle, in the Galilee*  
*we shall remain*  
*like a wall upon your chest,*  
*and in your throat*  
*like a shard of glass,*  
*a cactus thorn,*  
*and in your eyes*  
*a sandstorm.*

—Palestine Museum of Natural History<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> This is a portion of the poem “Here We Will Stay” by Palestinian politician and poet, Tawfiq Zayyad. Tawfiq Zayyad, “Here We Will Stay,” trans. Sharif Elmusa and Charles Doria, in *Modern Arabic Poetry: An Anthology*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 486.

This poem serves as the fiery mantra for the Palestine Museum of Natural History, and its parent the Palestine Institute for Biodiversity and Sustainability, located in Bethlehem, Palestine (occupied West Bank Territory). The work of the PMNH is a living example of political resistance in a displaced community by means of interacting with the natural world and standing in solidarity with their land of dwelling. Despite living in occupied land that is continuously being seized, disrupted, and polluted by both the Israeli government and Palestinian citizens, the museum works hard to preserve endangered species in Palestine, and educate its community on the necessity to care for and sustain their local ecosystem. With olive trees being uprooted, large cement walls constructed and cutting through nature spaces, and streams contaminated by waste, Bethlehem and its surrounding cities verge on ecological catastrophe. The few and far between forests and fields that exist are littered with trash and often encroached by hurried religious tourists, state separation fences, and newly constructed Israeli settlements. PMNH declares: “We will work to research, educate about, and conserve our natural world, culture and heritage and use knowledge to promote responsible human interactions with our environment.” These efforts manifest in extensive research on the diversity of flora, fauna, and human ethnography of the region, coupled with protecting the environment and fostering a responsible relationship with it. The museum is diligent in publishing their scientific research and cultivating space for embodied learning, both through its museum collections and integrated-system botanical garden. PMNH’s work is tangible and its mission is clear: to “develop respect for ourselves (self-empowerment), for our fellow human beings (regardless of background), and for all living creatures and

our shared earth.”<sup>169</sup> While laboring against dwindling biodiversity, extreme climate change, and dissonance towards the earth, PMNH is deeply aware of the destructive political forces creating this desperate state. The museum exists not only as an institution of ecological research and preservation, but is a resistance movement itself. The PMNH is adamant that education and preservation are crucial to the life-quality of their community (especially for young children), national identity, and efforts towards ending occupation. In response to the ignorance and lack of attention to issues of biodiversity, conservation, and sustainable development in their land, they reflect: “The question before us is whether we can afford to wait on these issues during the time it takes to finally end the occupation and allow Palestine freedom and independence. The answer we Palestinians have given is No.” The brave and brilliant work being done at the PMNH is widening the opening of earth for a subversive politic, so that the people of Palestine may stand in solidarity with creation and with each other, and cultivate an insurrectionary hope.

I lift up the work of the Palestine Museum of Natural History first and foremost because it would be a sin in many regards to do such a decolonial and eco-political biblical interpretation without turning to “real” communities who are working out the ecological, geographic, and political trauma of displacement.<sup>170</sup> But aside from the fact that it feels nearly impossible to write about ancient exilic communities without thinking about current ones (and vice versa), I also feel compelled to write about the current works

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<sup>169</sup> “About Us,” *Palestine Museum of Natural History*, Accessed December 4, 2016, <https://www.palestinenature.org/about-us/>.

<sup>170</sup> This is also part of the reason why the work of Edward Said, Mahmoud Darwish, Mitri Raheb, and other Palestinians scholars and poets have been essential voices to engage in conversation. I believe deeply that their narrative reflections from exile have infinite insights that can reverberate through readings of biblical texts which have historically served the interests of those in direct opposition to the dispossessed.

of ecological resistance being done under the weight of oppressive political regimes. In an age of ecological catastrophes, mass exiles, and refugees in abundance, ancient “religious” texts cannot simply be read and interpreted to sustain cathartic and disembodied rituals of faith. And in times where political leadership worldwide does not go uncontaminated by the projects of Zionism, colonialism, capitalism, xenophobia, and greed, we cannot preserve these texts as pristinely unpolitical. Instead, we must dig deep into the roots of these biblical texts to uncover the ways in which they produce and work against these age-old violences and traumas. The last stanza of Zayyad’s poem “Here We Will Stay” ruminates well with the conflicted garden story of curse, rebellion, and boundaries in Genesis 3. Zayyad’s words mimic many themes throughout Hebrew texts, but more profoundly assemble the spirit of Palestinian resilience alive in tree and human bodies alike—

*we shall remain,  
guard the shade of the fig  
and olive trees,  
ferment rebellion in our children  
as yeast in the dough.<sup>171</sup>*

It might be time that we return to the gated-off garden of the text and the contaminated soils that rest beneath our very feet, and confront their convoluted histories, as well as the mysterious kernel of resistance they may bear for today.

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<sup>171</sup> Zayyad, “Here We Will Stay.”

## A Postlude: Creation Stories in Process

So if indeed this collection of stories is the processing of trauma through which a displaced community subverts the power of their oppressors, then what are we to do with it? Might we conclude that the reclamation of these texts by currently dispossessed communities creates subversive power that alters their theological imaginations and thus their realities? No, I surely hope not. Such a claim would be irresponsible and unempathetic, and sounds like some twisted form of coercion that would be likely to come from the mouth of the colonizer. Instead, my hope is that we may allow such interpretations and theological play to take root in the grounds of those currently exiled, and learn from their earthy politics. Let us allow these narratives to learn new things from those who have been banished to an enclosed garden within their own land for years, and from those who are still in transit due to a violent upheaval of the land they knew well. Let us make way for a multiplicity of new creation stories. We need not fear the disruption of the one we know mostly dearly, for it has always dwelled in chaos. Since the beginning, or even before.

*I shall carve my story and the chapters of my tragedy,  
I shall carve my sighs  
On my grove and on the tombs of my dead;  
.....I shall carve the number of each deed  
Of our usurped land  
The location of my village and its boundaries.  
The demolished houses of its peoples,  
My uprooted trees,  
.....And to remember it all,  
I shall continue to carve  
All the chapters of my tragedy,  
And all the stages of the disaster,  
From the beginning  
To end,  
On the olive tree  
In the courtyard  
Of the house.  
—Tawfik Zayyad*

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