

LOST VOICES OF ANCIENT ISRAEL  
RECLAIMING EDEN: AN ECOCRITICAL EXEGESIS

by

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## ABSTRACT

This work addresses the historically-read despotism Genesis 1.28 has often received in its subordination of nature for the interests of human enterprise and counters the notion of reading the entire Bible as an anti-environmental, anthropocentric text. In using a combined literary lens of eco-criticism and new historicism, this work examines the Hebrew Bible with particular attention to the books of Genesis and Exodus, offering within the Torah's oldest literary tradition (the J source) an environmental connection between humanity and the divine that promotes a reverence of natural world and, conversely, a rejection of rampant urbanization and its cultural departure from nature. It is the goal of this research to create a discourse by bridging the gap between religious and green studies and forging a connection with the works of the early biblical writers and environmental thought of the modern world.

## DEDICATION

To my mother and father with the upmost gratitude for your unwavering support and guidance. I strive to always make you proud.

To my brother, Michael, for being my harshest critic and biggest supporter.

And to my loving best-friend and inspiration, Florangel, thank you for always believing in me, even on days I didn't believe in myself. None of this would have ever been possible without you.

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## INTRODUCTION

*“The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship”* (Emerson, *Nature* 59).

*We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds . . . A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each [man] believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul which inspires all men.* (Emerson, “The American Scholar”).

The words of Ralph Waldo Emerson have left an indelible mark upon my own research, a mark that wholly encompasses the sole intent and aim of all I wish to present in this investigation of the biblical corpus. Emerson’s writing created a dramatic philosophical shift in the religious consciousness of America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for he believed that the human soul was in direct connection with the surrounding world and that God was inseparable from its natural processes. This, of course, rejected contemporary conceptualizations of God being portrayed as entirely *other* and separate from the cosmos, as all the Abrahamic religions have come to portray Him as. Emerson’s idea, however, calls for a reevaluation of how we are to perceive ourselves in relation to the world and the divine. For Emerson, there truly was no distinction between humankind, nature, and divinity. Rather, for him, it is through the natural world that humankind is able to fully understand and comprehend the beauty, awe, and fear of the divine hand and its works.

And ironically, while his understanding of the natural world may run counter to the great monotheistic faiths and their perception of the human/divine binary, it would seem that this very idea Emerson posits was one shared by a small group of people over three thousand years ago, as they began to develop their own nation and religion, forming the basis of what would later



become monotheism. It is for this reason we may be able to modify his quotation slightly, replacing his “nation of men” with an interesting alternative: a “nation of Israel.” For in the same way Emerson envisioned a nation of individuals free to think, work, and worship of their own accord, archeology tells us that during the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE, thousands of people from the Near-Eastern Levant<sup>1</sup> left behind the great city-state systems of oppressive Canaanite society to begin anew in smaller settlements of simpler means: in an area that would later be referred to as the land of Israel.

When we look to the archeological records of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century, we see Canaanite cities like Hazor and Jericho showing signs of massive destruction. Among the ruins are dozens of decapitated statues of kings and gods, the few remnants of what appears to have been a very personal attack, not only on the ruling body but also of its religious views (Ben-Tor and Zuckerman 4). Amnon Ben-Tor, co-director of excavations at Hazor, argues that these findings align quite well with the biblical account of Joshua’s conquest and an Israelite invasion.<sup>2</sup> His fellow co-director and former student, Sharon Zuckerman, however, offers a different explanation. Zuckerman argues that the site shows signs of gradual decline, deterioration, and

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<sup>1</sup> The term “Near East” is used by scholars and archeologists in reference to the geographical area of South-Western Asia as it was known in antiquity. It is now more commonly referred to as the “Middle East.” The Levant is one part of this geographical area, bordering the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Mesopotamia to the east, the Taurus Mountains in the north, and the Arabian Desert to the south.

<sup>2</sup> Josh. 11.10-11: “At that time Joshua turned back and captured Hatzor and put its king to the sword. Hatzor had been the head of all these kingdoms. Everyone in it they put to the sword. They totally destroyed them, not sparing anyone, and he burned Hatzor itself” (New Revised Standard Version). Deut. 7: “Break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession.”

eventual disuse, a period of abandonment lasting for 100-150 years before settlers would later arrive to inhabit the city (Ashkenazi). If the semi-nomadic Israelites really did conquer the city, why would they not build their own settlements upon it immediately—or, for that matter, within the *same century*? Moreover, the burn layers in Hazor suggest a large, intense fire was set, but no sign of any military siege can be found (Ben-Tor and Zuckerman 4). In opposition to Ben-Tor's theory, Zuckerman posits that there was no external force that toppled Hazor but, rather, dissent and rebellion from within.

Hazor in the 14<sup>th</sup> century was a society greatly demarcated by class structure. Reflected also in the layout and design of the city, the wealthy elite resided in an upper acropolis, characterized by its grand palaces and luxurious temples, while the commoners occupied the lower levels, lacking in the same sophisticated grandeur. Zuckerman states, “[I]t seems that the rulers, the elite, invested in large-scale construction and accumulating great wealth at the expense of the other residents. The ordinary people paid taxes and built the city; they paid the price for glorifying the rulers” (qtd. in Ashkenazi). In this way, she argues, the Egyptian rulers and their Canaanite vassal kings burdened the lower class, sowing the seeds of enmity and, eventually, leading to a rebellion and collapse from within. The most significant damage from the conflagration can be found in the public buildings located in the upper parts of cities, thought to be palaces that were used for ceremonies and administrative purposes (Ashkenazi). None of the private houses belonging to the lower class showed signs of destruction and, even, “looked as if the residents . . . had time to seal [them] before leaving” (qtd. in Ashkenazi). Contradicting the biblical account of Joshua's conquest—in which no one is spared and all is destroyed—these findings are consistent with an internal revolt, a proletariat uprising against the oppressive ruling

class and their religious views, evidenced by the decapitation of their idols. They abandoned the land and religion of their forefathers<sup>3</sup> to forge a new identity, one that radically defied the cultural climate of all Near-Eastern civilizations around them.

By the 13 and 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, hundreds of smaller settlements had arisen in the Cisjordan Highlands following the collapse of these great city-states (Finkelstein and Silberman 106).<sup>4</sup> In comparison to the megalithic empires of Sumeria, Babylon and Egypt, however, these early settlers were constantly reminded of the threatening foreign powers that surrounded them from all sides. While this created a certain feeling of fragility, it also allowed these people to forge their own identity. In his landmark text *Orientalism*, Edward Said discusses how identity is constructed through opposition: an “us” versus “them” mentality (7). Thus, in order for these new settlers to create their own identity, they first needed to define who they were not. These smaller settlements, as a result, contrasted in their design and complexity the lavish building projects of their former Canaanite cities, as well as the towering ziggurats<sup>5</sup> of Mesopotamia and

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<sup>3</sup> Gen. 12.1-3: “Now the Lord said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

<sup>4</sup>Based on his survey of the Cisjordan Highlands, Finkelstein concludes that his findings support a long period of slow infiltration in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century that aligns with peaceful habitation and not a conquest of the land (*The Bible’s Buried Secrets*). Accordingly, the Merneptah Stele, an Egyptian victory stele, contains the earliest recorded instance of the word “Israel” used to refer to land of Canaan. This is said to date to the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, confirming Israel as a cultural entity around this time and associated with these small settlements.

<sup>5</sup> Large pyramid structure with a flat tops, designed to serve as dwelling places for the gods throughout ancient Mesopotamia.

the grand pyramids of Egypt. These pre-Israelite dwellings were, instead, constructed as communal houses with no central government structures (Killebrew 150). Rather than the elaborate and complex designs of their neighbors, simplicity became the hallmark of these peoples. And vital to their way of life was not the urban expansion of great cities but the cultivation of the land to produce a modest means for their families.

Moreover, it is believed that many nomadic tribes and groups fleeing Mesopotamia and Egypt arrived in these highland communities and settled down, trading and sharing the experiences and stories of their former lives (*The Bible's Buried Secrets*). One interesting theory suggests that, while no large-scale exodus was ever historically recorded in the Near East, it is very possible smaller groups of Canaanite slaves escaped from Egypt and travelled through Midian before they reached these highland settlements (Noll 160). Egyptian records attest to a place called Yahu (YHW) belonging to the Shasu, an Asiatic people of southern Canaan, located in Midian (Astour 18). The name Yahu shares an uncanny resemblance to the personal name of the Israelite God: Yahweh (YHWH). Some scholars argue that Yahweh may have been Midian's local patron god, especially considering that the Hebrew Bible tells of God's revelation to Moses in Midian, where the divine name is announced (Exodus 3.14). The theory suggests that these former slaves, escaping from Egypt, were introduced to the patron god on their travels, whereupon hearing the stories of this great deity, attributed their own salvation from Egypt to it (Noll 160); once reaching the settlements in the highlands, they related these stories and told of the god who delivered them safely from their enslavement in Egypt, a powerful message that resonated with these settlers, who, themselves, had risen up against the oppression of the Canaanite empires (Noll 160).

Ann Killebrew posits that the origin of Israel began in this way, as a slow and gradual process of “diverse antecedent groups . . . converg[ing] and diverg[ing] over time,” sharing and exchanging stories and, in turn, creating new ones to replace them (184). Killebrew writes:

The binding component of group formation and identity usually includes a powerful narrative of shared experiences, woven into an epic of primordial deeds, miracles and genealogies. In the case of Israel’s prehistory, its enduring epic narrative, the Bible, recounts the journey from slavery to salvation in a land promised to them by the Israelite God, Yahweh. The central theme of Israel’s ethnogenesis is the saga of their unique relationship as the chosen people of Yahweh. (184)<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Yahweh stood for something to these early Israelites, something they could latch onto and call their own. He embodied their guidance and deliverance, as well as their freedom and salvation. And for a nation in the shadow of great foreign empires, this was all extremely vital to their identity, and even their existence, as a people. It is this cultural context that galvanized the creation of stories and legends, folk-tales and songs, which sought to give spiritual meaning to the quotidian and provide greater purpose to the natural world they

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<sup>6</sup> Karen Armstrong argues that one of the oldest versions of this binding and powerful narrative is the recounting of the exodus from Egypt found in Deut. 26.5-10: “My father was a wandering Aramaean. He went down to Egypt to find refuge there, few in numbers; but there he became a nation, great, mighty and strong. The Egyptians ill-treated us, they gave us no peace and inflicted harsh slavery upon us. But we called on Yahweh the God of our fathers. Yahweh heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression; and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought us here [to Canaan] and gave us this land, a land where milk and honey flow. Here then I bring the first fruits of the produce of the soil that you, Yahweh, have given me” (16).

inhabited. However, well before any of these were written down and compiled, these stories were disseminated orally, forming a great oral tradition that would be passed down from generation to generation all the way to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, when the early scribes would eventually record them.<sup>7</sup>

We know this to be the case, for scholars have pointed to one of the poems in the Book of Exodus, referred to as the Song of the Sea, which celebrates Yahweh's victory over the Pharaoh at the Reed Sea (Exo. 15). David A. Robertson, a scholar of Hebrew poetry and its composition, presents in his findings consistent uses of archaic syntax and diction, along with marked parallels to the Ugarit poetry of older Canaanite religious literature (qtd. in Russell 55). From this, scholar Brian Russell concludes that the Song of the Sea "is perhaps the oldest literary and textual element extant in the Hebrew Bible . . . find[ing] its provenance in premonarchal times (c. 1150 BCE)" (47). Not only does this dating align with the time the Canaanites occupied the highlands, but the parallels between the "Song of the Sea" and other Canaanite religious poetry further support that these early settlers were, indeed, the original creators of it. Lawrence Stager, a professor of Archeology of Israel at Harvard University, states: "It [is] very likely [the Song of the Sea] was the kind of story told in poetic form that you might tell around the campfire, . . . orally passed on from one to another, long before they commit things into writing" (*The Bible's Buried*

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<sup>7</sup>A large stone was uncovered at Tel-Zayit, containing a complete alphabet written in Paleo-Hebrew script. This inscription is dated to the mid-tenth century. This is the oldest abecedary found thus far, and suggests that writings in Hebrew had already begun by the tenth century (Tappy et. al).

*Secrets*). But what implication does this victory song have on the entirety of the exodus narrative?

At the very least, it means that there was some early version of the exodus narrative that was shared and passed down by the highland settlers, forming an oral tradition that later writers would be familiar with, a base they could record, add, and subtract from as they saw fit. But perhaps even more important is: if we are to accept that the Song of the Sea is the oldest textual source we have on record, how many other stories from the Hebrew Bible may have also had their traditional beginnings, here, in “premonarchal times?” Or, how many of the stories we find in the Hebrew Bible were influenced by the contextual landscape of these highland settlers?

It is these questions that have led this reexamination of Judeo-Christian scripture in an interesting direction. The biblical narratives of Genesis and Exodus are a compilation of many stories, narrating the early stages of Israel’s growth and development, prior to it becoming a central, monarchal power of the Near East. However, while little evidence can be found in support of their historical veracity, one thing that does remain is that the Torah is a historical document. By this, I mean, even if these stories aren’t factual accounts of Israel’s history, they do reflect the world in which they were created, insomuch that we are better able to understand the biblical text in reference to the historical background and cultural milieu of its writers.

In fact, the work of Julius Wellhausen has provided invaluable insights into the composition of the Torah, pioneering a method of source criticism referred to as the Documentary Hypothesis. Wellhausen’s theoretical framework posits that the Torah is not a single document but, rather, is composed by multiple authors, all writing at vastly different times in Jewish antiquity. According to Wellhausen, the Torah is comprised of four constituent, literary

strands: “a Yahwist source (dated 900-800 BCE), an Elohist source (800-700 BCE), a Deuteronomic source (600 BCE) and a Priestly source (500-400 BCE)” (Bandstra 20). Given that all these sources are interwoven into the very fabric to produce a *nearly* cohesive body of work, it is incredible to consider the enormous span that separates the initial writers from the work of the final redactors. I use the word “nearly,” however, to curtail my last statement because it is the presence of contradictory doublets, two versions of the same story, that alerted Wellhausen to the work of two major authors: an earlier writer who provided the majority of the narrative content and a much later writer who added to the existing narrative supplementary content with a distinct theological focus. Wellhausen believed that, “Israel's own literature [was] a development from a religion of nature . . . in the older sources . . . to a religion of history in the later Priestly Writings” (qtd. in Hiebert 16). Over time, Wellhausen asserts, “Israelite religion became ‘denaturalized’ and finally came to represent an absolute ‘negation of nature,’” where God’s transcendence of nature resulted in the subordination and subjugation of the natural world (qtd. in Hiebert 16).

Because the Torah intertwines these different literary sources, it is impossible to regard this development through a straight forward reading of the text. Thankfully, the Documentary Hypothesis provides the perfect blueprints for the architecture of the Torah and circumscribes which passages belong to which author based on their diction, syntax, theological content, and the divine name that is used. Using this template, we are able to trace a connection from the pastoral roots of monotheism to its eventual “denaturalization” centuries later.

Of the four literary strands, the J source—written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century by scribes from the Kingdom of Judah—is the oldest, providing us a window into the beginnings of Israel’s religious



literature: a profound shift from the oral tradition into a written one. And along with this transition, we can see that many of the stories belonging to the J source carry over the older pastoral tradition established by the early-settlers of the hill country. These ancient Israelites, whose primary occupations were farming and herding, would have identified Yahweh with their agrarian lifestyle, as a deity associated with the world and its natural processes. And when we look at the J source narrative, we are confronted with passages like the Garden of Eden and the story of Cain and Abel, which share the connection between humankind and the divine through a naturalistic setting that drives the plot towards a greater theological and etiological end.

Moreover, these early settlers created this pastoral identity in order to differentiate themselves from the urbanized and expansive empires of Mesopotamia and Egypt; and, not coincidentally, the J source is credited with the Tower of Babel story, as well as the underlying narrative of the Exodus—both of which contain an anti-urban undercurrent. Just as Yahweh scatters the people from completing their city and tower (Gen. 11), He also unleashes ten devastating plagues of natural disasters that annihilate Egypt's ecosystem and destroys its very infrastructure (Exodus 7-11). These stories can and most certainly have been read in a variety of contexts, but when placed against the historical background of the early settlers, these texts are also stark polemics against cultural centralization and urbanization, in justification of a pastoral tradition that boasts rustic simplicity over elaborate masonry.

As Wellhausen believed, it would appear that monotheism, first and foremost, began as a religion of nature, where its literature reflected a pastoral identity manifested in the depiction of Israel's god, Yahweh, and His relationship with the natural world. It is this environmental awareness and pastoral identification that charges my own investigation of Genesis and Exodus

through an ecocritical exegesis of the biblical text. And while the Hebrew Bible has been read through a variety of literary and theological lenses—methods which have never ceased to draw and perpetuate an endless array of interpretations—the emerging field of eco-criticism affords us a unique lens to examine the tie between theology and nature.

In defining eco-criticism, then, we may turn to Cheryll Glotfelty's direct and succinct definition: "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii), a very open and malleable approach of literary criticism. Eco-criticism rose as a prominent literary paradigm in the mid 1990's, reevaluating works with an environmental awareness and analyzing the ways in which nature and environmental issues are reflected. Despite its relative youth, eco-criticism has its roots in early nineteenth century American Transcendentalism, as well as British Romanticism. Thus, in its very nature, eco-criticism tends to be, as Peter Barry notes, both "celebratory" of the pastoral and "minatory" in its assertion of the "environmental threats" caused by human activity (251).

And while celebrating nature is certainly of significance in eco-criticism, and something that I will indeed touch upon in my examination of biblical narrative, the "criticism" of eco-criticism stresses the responsibility of the reader to treat the text referentially, as a vehicle for reflection of the world within and, by extension, outside the text, i.e. "the world in which the text materially and ideationally exists at the moment of reading" (Murphy 4). Barry adds, "Nature, then, isn't reducible to a concept. . . . For the ecocritic, nature really exists . . . [and is] actually present as an entity that affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it" (252).

And indeed, much of the criticism associated with the Hebrew Bible stems from the opening chapter of Genesis, in which God blesses mankind to “[b]e fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (1.26). It is partly from a reading of this passage, argues Lynn White, Jr., that the West adopted a despotic outlook towards the environment, a destructive need to control and conquer nature to serve the needs of man. This problematic passage, according to source critics, however, is one that was written by the Priestly authors, composed at a much later time in Jewish antiquity, far removed from the earlier J source tradition and its environmental focus. In fact, this Priestly source unreservedly reflects the transformation of monotheism into the absolute “negation of nature” that Wellhausen discusses. Its presence, nevertheless, is all the more reason for this reevaluation of biblical literature in an attempt to elicit from the Bible a positive outlook on the natural world in defiance of the despotism and subjugation of nature evidenced in the later Priestly tradition.

Consequently, in characterizing this relationship and tension between the environment and human activity, culture is perhaps the best term to describe humankind’s departure from the “raw,” the natural, the rural, the pastoral and progression towards the “cooked,” the commoditized, the urban, the “civilized” (Lévi-Strauss). This binary of culture and nature, then, can be seen as an inverse relation, where, on the one hand, humankind progresses and urbanizes at the cost of nature, extracting its resources to irreparable depletion and, on the other, where nature grows, overtakes, and consumes remnants of cultural advancement, independent of human agency. It is a binary in constant tension, culture in direct opposition to nature, in which, philosopher Jacque Derrida states, “We are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-

vis, but rather . . . a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other (axiologically, logically, etc.), or has the upper hand” (41).

Of the two “terms,” culture is often perceived to be the favored, for “[t]heory generally sees our external world as [being] socially and linguistically constructed” (Barry 252).

Structuralism presents an ontological understanding of the world through a system of binaries (hot understood when contrasted with cold, day with night, positive with negative, nature with culture). Because of this, it has been argued that nature does not really exist in of itself but only as a concept juxtaposed to culture, and, therefore, only understood because we, humankind, are present to perceive this distinction and can define what nature is. This thinking displaces nature from its existence independent and prior to humanity and renders it solely as a concept dependent on humanity. Thus, humankind not only defines nature but also defines its value and utility.

Reflected precisely in the Genesis 1, the Priestly creation account, the cultural construct of the Creator forms the sky, the sea, the land, its vegetation, and all living creations from the waters, earth, and air. Nature doesn’t exist in of itself and independent, but only as a *created* entity and therefore “culturized” from the beginning. With humankind given expressed permission to “have dominion” and “subdue the earth,” nature’s value is ultimately pre-assigned: its purpose to serve the needs of humanity.

This anthropocentric<sup>8</sup> perception of the natural world presented by the later writers, however, is not a view shared by the early settlers or the J source narratives. While we should not mistaken the ancient highland settlers as being cultureless in any way—for they certainly formed a cultural identity around Yahweh—their agrarian culture was forged in deliberate contrast to the “high culture” of their urbanized and imperial neighbors. When culture is being impugned by the ancient Israelites, it is in particular the grandeur and opulence of Babylonian temples and ziggurats, the sprawling cities of Mesopotamia and Egypt, and the “sophisticated” religious practices of the Sumerians—all of which, from the perspective of the highland settler, are nothing more than ostentatious, superficial, and superfluous shows of their vanity.

For the Yahwistic tradition, nature supersedes the very interests of “cultural” progression, the J source stressing the power of nature—and Yahweh as a reflection of Nature—independent of and greater than any human enterprise. Indeed, the natural world, barred to the Babylonians encased in elaborate masonry and eclipsed to the Egyptians by their obelisks and pyramids, is intertwined into the very existence and purpose of humankind for the ancient Israelites. The Yahwist’s creation narrative is a prime example of this connection, for Yahweh intimately fashions man out of the earth itself and tasks both Adam and Eve to “till” and “keep” the land and look after all of its animals (Gen. 2.15).

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<sup>8</sup>Viewing humankind to be the most important entity in the entire universe, regarding all else as subordinate and regarding the world in terms of human values.

Nature, for the Yahwist, is not some construct oppressed and rendered in terms of culture but a force capable of supplanting humankind's anthropocentric elevation. Adam and Eve's "Fall" from Eden exemplifies this overturned binary, where their exile is in direct consequence of not heeding the environmental limitations set forth by God, consuming the forbidden fruit and attempting to abandon their responsibility to the natural world. They are not banished simply out of disobedience but, more so, in doing so they showed a deliberate disregard for the natural world, one that God establishes and protects, threatening the balance and harmony existent in the garden.

Thus, the Yahwistic tradition preserves not only a pastoral identification with God and the natural world but also an understanding of the human condition through nature. The Garden of Eden and other J source narratives like it establish a strong relation between humankind and the environment, reflecting the early settlers' identification with the natural world and rejection of the urban culture of its imperialistic neighbors. It is this dichotomy of the pastoral and urban that manifests in the earliest writings of Bible, and which paints a portrait of a people lost and forgotten but whose identity and tradition still remain.

This work is in an attempt to bring these voices to light, to hold them over the anti-environmental reputation of Genesis 1 and, in turn, argue against painting the entirety of the Hebrew Bible with a single anthropocentric brush. With the rise of ecocriticism in contemporary studies, I hope to provide a new approach to reading the biblical corpus—one that takes into account the historical and cultural context of the work, but which views the text through a contemporary theoretical framework, in order to show how the ecological attitudes of the past are recurrent ones that are still present in the environmental movements of today.

## A PRIESTLY ACCOUNT OF CREATION: REALITY MANUFACTURED, NATURE COMMODITIZED

*The realm of human culture...dominates biblical religion. It is the primary . . . concern of [the] biblical authors. The redemption of the human race, and of the people of God in particular, surpasses all other interests. By consequence, the realm of nonhuman nature recedes into the background and becomes less important. The world of creation is . . . “subordinated to the interests and content of the doctrine of redemption,” at times “altogether swallowed up in the doctrine of redemption.” Nature is not only separated from human culture, but it is regarded as subservient to it. (qtd. in Hiebert 22)<sup>9</sup>*

*Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Genesis 1.28)<sup>10</sup>*

To present biblical narrative as purporting an environmentalist and anti-urban undercurrent would be impossible without first acknowledging what is a contentious opening chapter for the eco-critic. Whereas the Garden of Eden narrative can be seen as humanity’s cohabitation with nature, the first creation account has been charged with presenting a decidedly anthropocentric portrayal of the natural world. Although some scholars<sup>11</sup> have attempted to rationalize the first creation’s reflection of nature, defending the text as being more

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore Hiebert’s summary of Gerhard von Rad’s argument in von Rad’s essay, “The Theological Problem of the Old Testament Doctrine of Creation.”

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1.28, New Revised Standard Version

<sup>11</sup>See Eugene Pentiu’s work, “Holding Sway in Companionship: Genesis 1:26 Revisited” and Gene M. Tucker’s essay, “Rain on the Land Where Nobody Lives: The Hebrew Bible on Environment,” which present arguments against an anthropocentric Genesis 1.

environmentally-oriented than the charges waged against it, such cases have been made tenuously and unconvincingly. I, on the other hand, concede the text's anthropocentrism and have no doubt that the criticism surrounding the first creation is partly responsible for the perceived counter-intuitiveness of my own eco-critical approach. I would not go so far as von Rad, however, in claiming the entirety of the biblical corpus is written in despotic domination of the natural world. In fact, it doesn't appear that the biblical authors shared the same views on humankind's relationship with nature. Taking into account modern scholarship and source criticism, I would like to offer instead a possible explanation for this chapter's distinct departures from Eden and other ecological-ascendant passages—one that does not color or compromise those texts in the slightest.

The proposed authorship and historicity of composition has much to do with the differences in portrayal of the environment in the two creation accounts, reflecting two polarizing views of the natural world. Modern source critics confidently assert that the first creation account was written by a different author than the Garden of Eden narrative (Bandstra 37). James Kugel elaborates, "For modern scholarship, the opening chapters of Genesis combined two originally separate texts, each with their own agenda" (56). Michael Coogan adds: "The vast majority of scholars agree the first creation account is of the Priestly source [P source], said to have been written sometime during or shortly after the Babylonian Exile by a sect of Priestly writers. Their focus is primarily of the 'temple-based religious system'" with emphasis on sacrifice, circumcision, the Levitic priesthood, and the keeping of the Sabbath (4, 8).

The geo-political conflict at the time of composition plays a vital role in shaping the P source's content. Babylonian oppression not only would have stripped Israelites of their nation,



but also their identity as a people. Barry Bandstra poses the question: “How can [they] affirm the power of [their] YHWH<sup>12</sup> when [they] live in a world dominated by Babylonians, who trumpet the power of their god, Marduk?” (26). He proposes, “These priests gave traditional religious practices new significance, particularly the observance of the Sabbath day . . . [to] sustain the faith of the refugees and rebuild their . . . social and religious identity . . .” (27).<sup>13</sup> Thus, if the Priestly writers sought to elicit a revitalized emphasis in God, their writings are a reflection of a time where the environment, as an entity, was not of direct importance to their theological agenda; contrarily, God’s six days of creation with one day of rest is in Priestly promotion of the “social and religious” injunction to regard the Sabbath, providing the Jewish reader a cultural distinction from the religion of their oppressor. The rebuilding of their identity, then, came from a conscious effort to create a cultural superiority. As a result, the natural world needed to be subordinated in order to elevate Israel’s God above all else. Thus, the divine blessing “to fill the earth and subdue it” can be read as an allegorical message to the Israelites in captivity: that the earth was given to them first and that they have every right to fill it and subdue it (if it belongs to another nation). Therefore, in its very intent, the P source can be considered culturally centered, contributing in part to the anthropocentrism found in Genesis 1. While this is not to say that the

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<sup>12</sup> YHWH is the most commonly transliterated tetragrammaton for the divine name of God, as revealed to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3. There is ongoing scholarly debate as to what vowel combination was originally used for its pronunciation. Yahweh tends to be the consensus in modern scholarship and academia; however, the divine name is considered sacred and is not to be pronounced or written out by orthodox Jews.

<sup>13</sup> The six day creation with one day of rest God takes in Genesis 1 would appear to be in Priestly promotion of the “social and religious” injunction to regard the Sabbath.

Priestly writers actively sought out to paint a negative portrayal of nature, by affirming God as transcendental creative agent in Genesis 1, the Priestly writer presented the existence of the natural world reductively: as a construct of a *cultural* deity, not as its own independent entity. Precisely, the Priestly account opens:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

Translated as, “When Elohim<sup>14</sup> began His creation of the heavens and the earth . . .”<sup>15</sup>

from the very first line, this ubiquitous verse and introduction to the Tanakh presents eco-critics with their first immediate contention: the establishment of a “socially and . . . linguistically constructed” reality (Barry 252). Peter Barry provides a fine summation of eco-criticism’s central tenet, asserting that, “Nature . . . isn’t reducible to a concept which we conceive as part of our cultural practice (as we might conceive a deity, for instance, and project it out unto the universe). . . . For the ecocritic, nature really exists, out there beyond ourselves, . . . present as an entity that affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it” (252). Genesis 1.1, however, not only eliminates nature as transcendental “entity” but replaces it with the cultural construct of the *Creator*, an external force wholly “beyond ourselves,” even more external than

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<sup>14</sup> A general term for god or gods, this term is primarily used in the Tanakh as an epithet for the God of Israel. It was a conscious decision to maintain the Hebrew name whenever possible for purposes of differentiation, as the Priestly writers’ Elohim, I argue, differs greatly from the early conception of Yahweh in the J-text.

<sup>15</sup> While differing from the more ubiquitous, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,” this translation by Bandstra serves to emphasize that this was not creation, *ex nihilo*—a concept foreign to the ancient world.

nature itself.<sup>16</sup> In turn, it is Elohim who creates the natural world, denying nature its existence independent of culture. Thus, the Priestly writer reduces nature as merely a medium for God's will, a concept of constructed reality.

The ontological constructedness of the external world found in the first creation account can be best understood in terms of structuralist precepts of reality. Robert Parker aptly notes, “In structuralist thinking, the world is not something that we discover. It is something that we *produce*, that we *construct*, through language” (49)<sup>17</sup>. While the first verse of Genesis 1 does not appear to signal any apparent linguistic significance in its English translation, in the original Hebrew, the grammatical structure of this line has yielded interesting interpretations that present a kind of structuralist anthropocentrism. Particularly, the presence of the accusative  $\text{לְ} (et)$  within the verse—which has no equivalent in the English language—has led some rabbinical scholars, such as Rabbi Mordechai Kraft, to assert a linguistic origin to creation. In his lecture on *The Hebrew Language: The DNA of Creation*, Kraft states:

The major premise we have as Jews is that HaShem<sup>18</sup> created the world by first creating the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet . . . and by combining letters together, He created the reality of everything that we know. The first creation was

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<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew word for Holy, *qodesh*, is often used as a moniker for God: “the Holy One.” It also has the added connotation of differentiation; something that is *qodesh* is set aside, separate, otherworldly—even. Thus, in Judaism, Elohim is beyond the realm of nature, wholly separate from the entirety of His creation.

<sup>17</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>18</sup> Literary translated as “the name,” it is used in lieu of pronouncing or writing the divine name of God.

the creation of the Hebrew alphabet, so therefore each letter has a spiritual energy, and that energy combined, produced reality.

What Kraft offers is a linguistic constructedness to reality, wherein language actually “produce[s]” reality, rather than merely describes its production. אֵת (*Et*), which precedes a direct object in Hebrew syntax, is comprised of the first and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet (*aleph, tav*). Kraft comments that the first part of Genesis 1.1— *Bereisheet bara Elohim et*—can be understood as: “When Elohim began His creation of *et*, He had begun to create the aleph through *tav* . . . : the Hebrew alphabet.” Following this premise, then, all things came into being through the first creation: through the word,<sup>19</sup> the Hebrew language. Bandstra notes that Elohim’s creative work is “not physical activity but speech” (39). When Elohim speaks: “Let there be,” He brings forth all things into existence (Gen 1.3).

While Elohim commands all creation as such, there is a linguistic shift, however, in His pronouncement to create humankind. He promulgates: “Let *us* make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness . . .” (1.26).<sup>20</sup> The use of “us” and “our” is a striking rhetorical shift. Up until this point, there has been no mention of any other beings existing alongside Elohim. To this,

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<sup>19</sup> The idea of the spoken word bringing all things into existence can perhaps be related to the concept of the Word present in the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (New Revised Standard Version 1.1-3). While no definitive conclusions can be drawn to their relatedness, it is an interesting parallel nonetheless.

<sup>20</sup> Emphasis Mine.

Bandstra offers that: “Based on the analysis of similar notions in the Hebrew Bible,<sup>21</sup> the most likely reading is that the “us” refers to the Divine Council, . . . thought to be the governing assembly of angelic beings that managed the world with God” (43). If true, then it can be inferred that the creation of humankind, as Banstra puts it, “was so momentous that God sought the approval and cooperation of the Divine Council, . . . underscor[ing] the importance of humanity” (43). Thus, this linguistic differentiation from the rest of creation connotes humankind’s anthropocentric elevation from the external world. Humankind is Elohim’s *magnum opus*: the greatest of His creations, marking the completion of His work.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, this signified distinction between humanity and the environment is perpetuated by an anthropocentric treatment of the natural world, exacerbating the binary divide between *culture* and *nature*, particularly in Elohim’s pronouncement to humankind: “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and *subdue* it; and have *dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth” (NSRV 1.28).<sup>23</sup> This verse has been interpreted as being so violently anthropocentric that some critics go so far as to claim its influence in Western thought is responsible for perpetuating destructive and exploitative attitudes towards the environment.

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<sup>21</sup> Particularly, Genesis 3.22, 11.7, and Job 1-2.

<sup>22</sup> Whereas Elohim “saw it was good” when he created the natural world and all its living things (1.13); it isn’t until he creates humankind that he “sees everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good,” suggesting that humankind was the final act, marking completion and perfection of creation.

<sup>23</sup> Emphasis Mine.

Lynn White, Jr. is one such commentator who interprets this particular line to a hierarchal “dualism” of man over nature. In his essay, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” White asserts that, “[Humanity] shares, in great measure, God's transcendence of nature. Christianity . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends” (4). As White points out, humankind is made in the reflection of God, in His “image and likeness” (1.26). Humankind’s elevation above other creation is thus mirrored in Elohim’s transcendence over all of creation. In this way, humankind is an extension of Elohim’s “dominion” over creation and over nature. To this, the psalmist writes in praise: “[Y]ou [Elohim] have made them [human beings] a little lower than God,<sup>24</sup> and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the fields, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas” (Ps. 8.5-8). It appears that the psalmist may have also made the connection that human-beings and their “likeness” to Elohim suggest a shared power over creation. “A little lower” in their hierarchal rule than the Creator, humankind is still “given” dominion over the creation Elohim has placed “under their feet”— a position that places nature at the mercy of our treatment towards it. And with a divine blessing to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it,” nature and its resources are certainly relegated to an anthropocentric means to an end (1.28).

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<sup>24</sup> Can also be read as angels.

Scholars, however, have long debated the exact meaning of verses 26-28 and are not easily settled on the notion of Elohim's approval of humankind's despotic rule as proposed by White. To the contrary, Eugene Pentiuic discusses in his article, "Holding Sway in Companionship: Genesis 1:26 Revisited," that there is a misunderstanding of the Hebrew term *radah* (רָדָה), often rendered as "rule" or "dominion" in most modern English translations of the text, which calls for a reexamination of the passage. Robert Alter in his commentary on the book of Genesis translates *radah* as "holding sway," noting that *radah* is "not the normal Hebrew verb for 'rule' (the latter of which is reflected in 'dominion' in verse 16), and in most cases seems to suggest an absolute or even fierce exercise of mastery" (19). Alter refers to verse 16 which uses the noun *memsheleth* (מְשָׁלָה), "derive[d] from verb *mashal*: to rule, have dominion, reign" (Pentiuic 223). Pentiuic states:

Etymologically and semantically, the verb *radah* used in Genesis 1:26 is not the *terminus technicus* of the Hebrew lexicon for the idea of 'ruling, having dominion.' The mere fact that the author of Genesis 1:26 (and v. 28) chose such a peculiar verb, and not the more common *mashal* attested in the same chapter, v. 16, has to make one think of the main reason for such a lexical choice. . . . The Hebrew verb *radah*, "to have dominion, rule, dominate," found in the MT<sup>25</sup> should be related to the Akkadian verb *redu*, "to accompany." (223-224)

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<sup>25</sup> Masoretic Text

Pentiuc makes an astute etymological link. And indeed, the Akkadian verb *redû* (also spelled *radā'u*) developed into the proto-Semitic *radāw*, and eventually the Hebrew *radah* (*Akkadian Dictionary*). His assertion, however, that the verb *radah* should be read in the sense of stewardship (to watch over and “accompany” creation), rather than subjugation, is unfounded within the context of the passage. While the Akkadian verb does literally mean “to lead, bring, to lead away,” and connotes an *accompaniment* of sorts, that same cannot be said about *radah*, which is never used in the Torah in the sense of accompaniment.

The word *radah* is only used 7 times in the Torah. Genesis 1.26 and 1.28 are the verses where *radah* is in question; however, the other 5 occurrences are located in the Book of Leviticus and the Book of Numbers. And in these later books, the connotation of the verb *radah* does not warrant Pentiuc’s ideal of *accompaniment*, but rather, as Alter noted, a “*fierce mastery*” over another (emphasis mine). Leviticus 26:17 reads: “I will set my face against you, and you shall be struck down by your enemies; your foes shall *rule* over you, and you shall flee though no one pursues you” (emphasis mine). Number 24:19 makes it even more apparent, “One out of Jacob shall *rule*, and destroy the survivors of Ir” (emphasis mine). It is apparent that the use of *radah* as *rule* in these passages cannot be equated to accompaniment or stewardship, and from the context of the passages is only to be understood in terms of subjugation.<sup>26</sup> In addressing Pentiuc’s appeal

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<sup>26</sup> Interestingly, according to Modern Source criticism, both Leviticus and Numbers are almost exclusively P source texts, written by the same author as the first creation account. Is it possible that *radah* happened to be a lexical choice of a later time period, given its absence in the earlier J and E sources, and presence in texts written by the P source?



to “peculiar[ity],” there are much better “lexical choices” in Hebrew that denote accompaniment or stewardship than a term that possesses such a violent connotation, like *radah*.

Furthermore, the cultural mandate issued in Genesis 1.28 expresses that man is to “fill the earth and *subdue* it” (emphasis mine), using the Hebrew verb *kabash* (כָּבַשׁ), which is attested a number of times in reference to “land” throughout the Hebrew Bible. Interestingly, the phrase, “and the land was subdued” can be found in multiple passages: Numbers 32.22,<sup>27</sup> 32.29,<sup>28</sup> Joshua 18.1,<sup>29</sup> and 1 Chronicles 22.18.<sup>30</sup> There is no ambiguity in its violent meaning in these instances, as all of these excerpts pertain to human conquest over another territory. Thus the negative relation between *kabash* and *eres*, land, further supports a reading of Genesis 1.26-28 as being humankind’s control and domination of the natural world—not cohabitation nor stewardship.

Nevertheless, while this eco-critical reading of the Priestly account reveals a highly anthropocentric and reductive view of the natural world and its treatment, this negative portrayal, I must stress, is not indicative of the environmental views expressed by the all authors of the

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<sup>27</sup> “So Moses said to them, “If you do this—if you take up arms to go before the Lord for the war, 21 and all those of you who bear arms cross the Jordan before the Lord, until he has driven out his enemies from before him 22 and the land is subdued before the Lord—then after that you may return and be free of obligation to the Lord and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before the Lord” (Num. 32.22).

<sup>28</sup> “And Moses said to them, “If the Gadites and the Reubenites, everyone armed for battle before the Lord, will cross over the Jordan with you and the land shall be subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead for a possession” (Num. 32.29).

<sup>29</sup> “Then the whole congregation of the Israelites assembled at Shiloh, and set up the tent of meeting there. The land lay subdued before them” (Josh. 18.1).

<sup>30</sup> “Is not the Lord your God with you? Has he not given you peace on every side? For he has delivered the inhabitants of the land into my hand; and the land is subdued before the Lord and his people” (1 Chron. 22.18).

Torah. To the contrary, the best example of this is found in the following chapter: the Garden of Eden narrative.

## THE YAHWIST'S EDEN: A CREATION FROM NATURE

*Then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being. And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east; and there he put the man whom he had formed. (Genesis 2.7-8)*

*Man, far from being the overlord of all creation, is himself part of nature, subject to the same cosmic forces that control all other life. Man's future welfare and . . . his survival depend upon his learning to live in harmony, rather than in combat, with these forces. (Rachel Carson, "Essay on the Biological Sciences")*

Eden, as it has reverberated down the centuries, endures as a cornerstone of Western thought. It is undeniably one of the most ubiquitous passages of the Hebrew Bible, deeply ingrained in centuries of religious traditions and interpretation centered on a profound moment in the biblical history of humankind; from Adam and Eve's single act of disobedience they—and we by extension—are banished eastward from the fertile fields to "toil" and "sweat" and labor over a "cursed" ground of "thorns and thistles," barred and severed perpetually from a paradisaical state of existence (Gen 3.17-19).<sup>31</sup> Indeed, this has become a tale not only of creation but also of deception, temptation, and unequivocal loss.

The pathos elicited, even from this brief summation, signals a vast departure from its Priestly counterpart. The transcendental agent at work in Genesis 1, who materializes all life into existence by His word alone, is not even remotely similar to the maternal figure of the Garden of

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<sup>31</sup> The name for the garden comes from the Hebrew word eden, which best translates to delight, or even luxury. This is perhaps where the concept of a paradisaical garden stems from.

Eden's Yahweh,<sup>32</sup> who intimately shapes man from the soil<sup>33</sup> and fashions animal skins for both Adam and Eve to wear. (Gen 2.8, 3.21). Not only do we have two versions of creation here but two distinctly different portrayals of the Creator and the natural world.<sup>34</sup>

The premise I will follow, then, is one that aligns with modern scholarship in that we are dealing with two different textual strands from two vastly different eras in Jewish antiquity. As such, each creation account is a reflection of markedly different cultural attitudes—social, political, geographical—which, in turn, shape the very content of the texts. Whereas the first creation account, the P source, was written during the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, the Garden of Eden narrative is purported to have been written much earlier and no doubt existed as an oral tradition well before its date of composition. The consensus in modern scholarship is that the Garden of Eden passage, along with most of the narrative structure in Genesis, belongs to the Yahwist, or the J source,<sup>35</sup> said to have been written by scribes living in the southern kingdom of Judah in the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE (Bandstra 21). Yet, the Yahwistic tradition, itself, most likely dates back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century in the highland settlements belonging to those who

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<sup>32</sup> Translated as LORD God in the NRSV.

<sup>33</sup> There is a play on words in the Hebrew between adam, the first human, and adamah, meaning earth.

<sup>34</sup> Whereas Genesis 1 delineates the creation of animals and then humankind, Genesis 2-3 tells a different order of creation, wherein man is created first, then animals, then woman.

<sup>35</sup> It is referred to as the J source because it was German scholars who first identified the particular use of the divine name, Yahweh, in these narrative portions and thus named it after the first letter of the divine epithet; however, the Y is a J in German. Of course, this is not the only criteria for distinguishing a J source text, but it is where the name of the source itself is derived from.

migrated following the collapse of the Canaanite city state system. It is believed these people created the early images of Yahweh through stories and songs that later writers would record, perpetuate, and adapt to their needs.

This is precisely what the Priestly writers did, transforming Yahweh into a God so *other* that His name is not to be pronounced and His image is never to be seen or recreated. To a much smaller degree, though, the Judean scribes of the 10<sup>th</sup> century also had a hand at shaping the Yahwistic tradition of old, for they created a narrative that paid close and special attention to the Kingdom of Judah and often promoted it over the northern kingdom of Israel. This political spin adds an entirely new layer to an already nuanced text but, unlike the Priestly source, the writings of the J source still retain the pastoral elements found in the primitive stage of monotheism established by the highland settlers.

Accordingly, the J source's depiction of Yahweh relies heavily on the zeitgeist of the early settlers and the world they lived in, drawing from the many pagan religions of the Near East, especially that of its Canaanite creators. In fact, it would seem that in His earliest conception, the image of Yahweh was conflated with an already familiar Canaanite deity: *El*. One instance of this is found in Chapter 17 of Genesis, where God introduces himself to Abraham as *El Shaddai*, a peculiar epithet that reveals an interesting connection. The term *El* itself is used as a common title for God, literally translating to "deity." Another derivation for El, however, comes from the Canaanite religion, where El is not just a god but, according to Michael Coogan, the "head of the pantheon" and father to all of creation (6). The word *Shaddai* can be linked to the Akkadian "*shadu*," meaning "mountain." And Coogan notes, "The home of El... is a mountain whose base flow the two rivers that are the source of all fresh water in the world" (6).

Thus, *El Shaddai*, God of the Mountains,<sup>36</sup> could very well hint at the development of Yahweh, expanding upon the traits and characteristics of the well-known Canaanite El.

Moreover, when we look to other depictions of deities throughout the Near East, we begin to see a pattern emerge, where gods are illustrated, associated, and intertwined with the natural world. This provides a vital context for understanding the birth of Yahweh and his relationship with pastoral. Bron Taylor, in his *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, elaborates: “Older Mesopotamian cosmogonies focused on various nature gods including . . . Anu, the sky-god; Enlil, the wind-god, . . . and Enki, the creator god . . . [of] life on land” (491). Henri Frankfort, author of *Kingship and the Gods*, adds: “Ninhursaga, the ‘lady of the Mountain,’ was Mother Earth: ‘the lady, who gives birth’ and, perhaps what’s most revealing, “‘the fashioner of . . . forefathers’ (281). Immediately, we see the connection between El and Ninhursaga and, moreover, an association between the fertility goddess and Yahweh.<sup>37</sup> The J source’s Garden of Eden presents the reader with a God who, while serving as the patriarchal creator of all life, is also intimate and maternal as he “fashions” the forefather of the Hebrews from the earth itself.

Thus, Yahweh is born out of “the most primitive stage [of Israel’s religious consciousness],” emerging as a by-product of “the world of pagan myth, in which gods are

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<sup>36</sup> The relationship between Israel’s God and the mountains is a significant one vital to the entire narrative of the Torah. His revelation to Moses on Mt. Horeb and the giving of the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai provide two epitomic images of this mountain deity.

<sup>37</sup> The correlation between Israelite’s God, Ninhursaga, and El is even further solidified when comparing Shaddai with the Hebrew word shad, שד, meaning “breast,” adding the nuances of femininity and fertility to Israel’s God (Akkadian Dictionary).

everywhere” and inseparable from nature (Scholem 7). Embryonic and proto-typical, He is precursor to the otherworldly, awe-inspiring, and terrifying *God* that is to develop centuries later in the P source. However, for the J source, he remains close and connected, intimate and personal with humankind and the natural world—an image no better illustrated than in the Garden of Eden.

Just like Yahweh, the Garden of Eden narrative is created out of the pastoral traditions of other Near Eastern religious literatures, forming a creation account that interweaves nature with theology. Jean Delumeau, author of *History of Paradise*, notes, “Scholars have not failed to show parallels and even connections between the sacred garden of the Bible and the sacred gardens of the other religions and civilizations of the ancient East” (5). The Sumerian myth of Enki, for example, “begins with a description of the paradisaal peace that reigns at Dilmun,” where “the beasts do not fight among themselves and human beings are untouched by illness” (5) Similarly, Delumeau draws a connection between the Israelite narrative and the epic of Gilgamesh, which contains an identical setting of a “mountain covered with cedars,” a “wonderful garden of the gods, the source of [all] rivers,” and a “plant that gives life” (5). Lastly, he remarks that, “Mesopotamian temples also had on top their ziggurats<sup>38</sup> a sanctuary consisting of a grove of trees” (5), further illustrating the symbolic nature of the garden in Near-Eastern worship of the gods. Perhaps even this concept of the *garden of the gods*—also alluded to by the prophet

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<sup>38</sup> Large pyramid structures with flat tops, designed to serve as dwelling places for the gods throughout ancient Mesopotamia.

Ezekiel in reference to Eden—was an oral tradition and cultural mythos that had disseminated throughout the region and was later adopted and re-appropriated by the high land settlers and recorded by the Yahwist.

This pastoral influence forms a narrative wholly unlike that of its Priestly counterpart. Indeed, the biggest difference we observe when comparing the two creation accounts, Priestly and Yahwist, is the scope of the two locales. The Priestly account deals in a grand scale creation: the creation of the entire world, as well as the sun and moon—and light itself. This is a cosmic undertaking. Conversely, the Yahwist's creation is nothing of the sort. Here, we shift from a distant panorama to a small, defined location: an intimate garden that serves as a bucolic abode for man, woman, and animal.

The biblical account opens, “In the day that the Lord God made *the earth and the heavens*, when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up—for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no one to till the ground; but a stream would rise from the earth, and water the whole face of the ground” (Gen 2.4-6).<sup>39</sup> The order of Yahweh's creation is subtle yet profoundly telling; it stands in direct contrast with the Priestly source. Whereas the P account retells the creation of the “heavens and the earth,” the Yahwist describes the creation of the “earth” first, followed by the “heavens.” The Priestly account, being the later of the two texts, may have indeed reversed the Yahwist's creative order in an attempt to shift the focus to a grander scale, befitting of Elohim's otherness



and transcendence. However, for the Yahwist, the earth comes first. The natural world is something tangible and conceivable, intimate and personal. When the Yahwist introduces Eden, it is unlike anything of Priestly composition:

Out of the ground the Lord God made to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight and good for food, the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river flows out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; and the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. The name of the second river is Gihon; it is the one that flows around the whole land of Cush. The name of the third river is Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (2.9-14)

The Yahwist, in an ekphratic movement from the heart of Eden outward, compels the reader to follow the description from the main river, the source of all life in Eden, to its branching channels that travel all across the Near East in a single, fluid motion. Its description feels organic, and its detail of the natural landscape serves not only to set the stage from the narrative but to also ground it in connection with the people who inhabit this area. Carolyn Merchant, referencing the works of Theodore Hiebert,<sup>40</sup> writes that the narrative itself is “told from the perspective of

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<sup>39</sup>Emphasis mine

<sup>40</sup> See Hiebert’s work, *The Yahwist’s Landscape*.

an audience outside the garden familiar with the post-Edenic landscape. The use of the word *before*<sup>41</sup> in the phrases that described God making “every plant of the field *before* it was in the earth,’ and ‘every herb of the field *before* it grew” signify the pasturage and field crops of the post-Edenic cultivated land in which the listener is situated (13). Moreover, she remarks that, “phrases that note ‘God had not caused it to rain upon the earth’ and that ‘a mist from the earth’ came [and] ‘watered the whole face of the ground’ indicate a post-Edenic rain-based agriculture centered on cultivation of the *adama*, or arable land” (14). There is a rich, referential connection noted between the text, the reader, and the natural world. The text presumes the audience’s familiarity with the postlapsarian landscape and, in doing so, reveals its etiological agenda. Eden, in borrowing from pagan mythos, creates a narrative in order to provide an origin to agricultural practices—in order to signify and solidify the divine connection between humankind and environment.

We see this connection illustrated perfectly in the creation of the first man. The Yahwist writes, “[T]he Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being” (Gen 2.7-8). The very act of Yahweh fashioning Adam from the ground reflects both a physical and linguistic association between humankind and the earth; here, translator and commentator Robert Alter notes the presence of a

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<sup>41</sup>The use of *before* alluded by the author is most likely in reference to the King James Version: “And every plant of the field *before* it was in the earth, and every herb of the field *before* it grew: for the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground” (2.4-5). The New Standard Revised Version uses “yet” instead to provide the same effect.

“Hebrew etymological pun,” where the first human, *'adam*,<sup>42</sup> is being formed out of *'adamah*: the soil (21). Moreover, Alter points out that whereas the Priestly account uses the verb *bara*, which translates best to “create,” the Yahwist uses the term *yatsar*, which means to “craft” or “fashion,” depicting a far more physical, hands-on, and intimate creation (20). When Yahweh “breathe[s] life” into Adam to make him into a “living being,” it is an intimate exchange between the divine and a natural substance of the earth that, in turn becomes alive. Thus, man is derived from, and thereby forever linked to, the natural world: “for out of it [he was] taken . . . and to dust [he] shall return” (Gen 3.22, 24).

Adam’s creation, moreover, is in direct response to a divine need for someone to look after the earth. The Yahwist tells us that since “there was no one to till the ground the Lord God took . . . man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (2.5.15). According to the Yahwist, the purpose for humankind is to be a worker and caretaker of the earth, “to serve the land, turning it into that which can support life” (Tucker 8). And, indeed, the key contributors to any agrarian society—man, woman, and livestock—are all part of Yahweh’s creation, each playing a vital role in the agricultural labor of Eden (Hiebert 60).

Adam, as the patriarch, takes on the bulk of the manual labor of the fields: sowing, cultivating, and harvesting the land. This is, of course, no easy undertaking. Thus, “The animals

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<sup>42</sup>Another possible derivation of the name Adam can be traced to the Enuma Elish, where the first man is said to have been created from the “blood of gods” (Pritchard 36). The Hebrew word *dam* means blood, while also serving as the root for the word for earth, *adamah*. Moreover, *adom* in Hebrew means “red,” which further solidifies the connection between man, blood, and the earth.

are created to assist 'adam in his agricultural tasks. When the Yahwist describes God's concern that 'adam not remain alone (2:18), he is less concerned with the feeling of loneliness or existential isolation than with the magnitude of labor involved in subsistence agriculture” (Hiebert 61). Also brought forth from the *'adamah*, these animals share the same earthly connection and interlinking of nature and flesh that man does, solidifying their close relationship with one another.

On the one hand, Adam's naming of the animals represents their domestication (becoming integrated as “helpers” to ease man's burden in the fields), but, on the other hand, it also represents a certain intimacy that is shared between man and his fellow creation. From the moment Adam names an animal, the relationship between himself and the creature is formed. While some commentators may argue this act indicates a kind of hierarchy of man over creation, falling into the same Priestly construction witnessed in the first creation account, when we consider that man and animal are designed to work together to accomplish the divine task of keeping Eden, then man is seen as the steward of creation, working in harmony with the animals—and not in despotic dominion over them.<sup>43</sup> When the Yahwist writes that there was no “helper” found as man's “partner” among the animals, this should not be read as there was no

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<sup>43</sup>It would seem that to argue dominion, 'radah,' as stewardship in the Priestly creation narrative relies in reading these two texts as one unified document—where Genesis 1 tells man to have dominion, and the subsequent chapters focus on man's role as steward of creation and caretaker of nature. From a modern scholarship perspective, however, looking at the Priestly source as a revisionist work of the earlier J source, to use words like “dominion” and “subdue” seem to be deliberate departures from the older tradition. It is more likely that the later Priestly writers simply did not share the same view as the Yahwist, and, in turn, shifted away from the idea of stewardship and into the theme of dominion found in Genesis 1 (in line with Herbert's observation of monotheism's denaturalization).

partnership between man and the animals. Rather, according to Hiebert, “The emphasis should be placed on the term ‘like himself’ (kenegdo) rather than ‘helper’ (’ezer). The animals . . . did contribute to the agrarian economy and were indeed helpers. But none was sufficiently like the man (kenegdo) to be a suitable sexual partner” (77).

Thus, Eve is created from Adam’s rib so that both man and woman can come together as “one flesh” (Gen 2.24): a metaphor that serves to represent the family unit incredibly vital for a successful Near-Eastern, agrarian society (Hiebert 60). Hiebert writes:

Within this family structure, the first woman’s role reflects the female role in the traditional Mediterranean agricultural family. Her primary activity is the bearing and raising of children. This role is introduced in the narrative of her inception, which focuses on the sexual union of male and female. The childbearing role is also the basis of her name, *hawwa*, Eve, which the Yahwist understands to mean “mother of all the living.” (60-61)

While the “childbearing role” may form “the basis of her name,” the term *hawwa* also possesses an environmental connotation. As the “mother of all the living,” Eve, in essence, serves as an extension of nature. Her association with fertility is paralleled in the fields that produce life in order to support other life to follow. Indeed, the Yahwist seemed to have understood this connection between women and nature quite evidently, for in later chapters, we see a theme of infertility in the matriarchs, where Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel are referred to as being “barren” for being unable to conceive a child (Gen 11.30, 25.21, 29.31). In using the term “barren,” the writers sought to elicit a connection between the reproductive infertility of women and the agricultural infertility of a desert setting—an environ of poor soil quality that cannot support any

kind of life necessary for an agriculturally-based society to sustain itself. Moreover, when we look at the curse placed upon Eve, we once again see how the human condition is related in terms of the natural world. When Yahweh states in line 16, “I will greatly increase your labors and your pregnancies,”<sup>44</sup> the exacerbation of her pain in child labor is paralleled in the increased toil Adam must endure in the fields to produce the fruits of his labor (3.17).

In fact, this parallel is so resounding that when the 17<sup>th</sup> century poet John Milton re-envisioned the Garden of Eden narrative in his own renowned epic of *Paradise Lost*, he also drew upon this earthly connection during the moment of the “Fall.”<sup>45</sup> Milton writes:

Earth trembl'd from *her* entrails, as again  
In pangs, and Nature gave a second groan,  
Skie lowr'd, and muttering Thunder, som sad drops  
Wept at compleating of the mortal Sin  
Original. . . . (9.1000-1005)<sup>46</sup>

In this climatic moment, Milton chooses the most striking image of Nature, personified as a woman, painfully conceiving the doctrine of Original Sin<sup>47</sup> as it enters the world. The *'adamah*

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<sup>44</sup>Translation by Kenneth Hanson, professor of Judaic studies at the University of Central Florida.

<sup>45</sup> The “Fall,” also referred to as the “Fall of Man,” is a Christian concept that alludes to the moment Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree and transition from a state of innocence to one of corruption, through which sin enters the world.

<sup>46</sup> Emphasis mine.

<sup>47</sup> Christian doctrine that asserts humanity is in a constant state of sin because of the “Fall” of the first man.

“groans” as “her entrails” “trembl[e] in pangs,” which would not only seem to mirror but also foreshadow the punishment inflicted on Eve in childbearing. Moreover, these lines can also be read as Nature struggling to digest the forbidden fruit, as if the earth and human stomach are interconnected as one. When Adam and Eve take their first bites, Nature, in turn, strains to try and process the fruit meant to be inedible for human consumption. Thus, while Milton’s rendition of the “Fall” may appear puzzling at first glance, it is quite apparent that he, too, has observed and retained the organic link between the human body and the natural world that the Yahwist created in the biblical narrative.

The very notion of the “Fall,” however, as we, contemporary readers, have come to understand it is not a concept that would have been familiar to the early originators of the story. Indeed, the “Fall of man” is a Christian term that reflects an interpretation of the text well over a millennium after the tale was first created. It simply did not exist during the time of the story and is not regarded in Judaism as a fundamental component to the faith as it is for Christianity and its doctrines of original sin, redemption, and salvation. So, the question then becomes: what function did the fruit serve to its early audience? Is it merely a narrative device, or does it carry a greater significance in terms of humankind’s relationship with nature?

In order to answer these questions, we must first address the reason why Adam and Eve are forbidden, with fear of death, to eat from this particular tree (2.17). According to the snake, its fruit is different from all the others: it possesses the ability to make the consumer “like God” by providing a higher level of knowledge—to discern both good and evil (Gen 3.5). In eating the fruit, then, Adam and Eve sought to ascend to the status of godhead and, in doing so, leave behind their earthly ties; in trying to become gods, themselves, in attempting to elevate

themselves above the natural world and all other creation, their downfall comes as a direct consequence of their anthropocentric desire. Whereas the Priestly writers encouraged the elevation of humankind over nature, giving man expressed “dominion” to “subdue” the earth, the Yahwist, to the contrary, denies and even punishes Adam and Eve for attempting to raise themselves above the natural world. For the Yahwist, man and woman are depicted as extensions of nature, stewards of creation, with a responsibility and duty to oversee the natural world God has established and “keep it.” This responsibility is taken very seriously, for we see that disobeying the divine injunction to not eat from the forbidden tree, overstepping the environmental limitations set in place, results in expulsion from the garden—expulsion from nature—entirely. In choosing to partake in the fruit of knowledge, in attempting to ascend to godhead, Adam and Eve threatened the very equilibrium existent in Eden. And because Yahweh fashioned humankind from the earth to, in turn, work and look after the land He had set aside, Adam and Eve belonged to the same plane as the natural world. There was no hierarchy but, rather, a harmony between humanity and nature prior to eating the fruit.

In consuming the fruit, however, this harmonious bond becomes irreversibly severed. Before eating from the tree, both man and woman lived in the garden “naked” and “unashamed” (2.24), their nakedness representing a state of innocence in Eden that remained untouched, unblemished, untainted from any wrongdoing. Yet, after having consumed the fruit, their eyes “were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (3.7). When Yahweh asks Adam why he had hid, Adam replies, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself” (3.10). Whereas Adam and Eve were once “naked” and “unashamed,” it is only after consuming



the fruit that they “knew” they were exposed and, desiring to conceal their nudity from God, clothed themselves to hide their altered state.

The permanence of their alteration is solidified in their inability to regard themselves as they once were—innocent and one with nature; now, they must clothe themselves, for they are ashamed of being naked. In his work, *The Animal that Therefore I am*, philosopher Jacques Derrida poses the question: “Ashamed of what and before whom? Ashamed of being as naked as a beast . . . ? [T]he property unique to animals, what in the last instance distinguishes them from man, is their being naked without knowing it. Not being naked therefore, not having knowledge of their nudity, in short, without consciousness of good and evil” (373). Derrida, alluding to precisely this moment in the biblical narrative, notes that in eating from the tree of knowledge, the first man and woman gained “consciousness” and, with that, an awareness of the “self.” Whereas the animals possess no innate knowledge of their nudity, Adam and Eve have discovered their nakedness through the fruit and determined it unsuitable for themselves to remain naked like the rest of the animals—a judgment that signifies the demarcation of man and animal.

Furthermore, according to structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, this newly created distinction between man and animal is the result of Adam and Eve gaining *knowledge*, which he defines as “the outcome of an encounter between . . . cognitive classification structure and the observed phenomenal world” (qtd. in Elyada). By this, Lévi-Strauss asserts that in order to understand and know the world, one must observe it as a system of structures, where meaning is derived through pairing and juxtaposing concepts into binary oppositions. The fruit of knowledge of *good* and *evil* serves as the epitomic metaphor for this, where the fruit gives the

consumer the ability to regard the world in twos, as possessing both good and evil. The fruit, then, not only functions as a catalyst for human ethos but can also be credited for introducing man and woman to the ability to discern their world through difference.

That is why, upon eating the fruit, Adam and Eve are able to realize they are naked. Not only have they gained an awareness of the “self” but are now able to juxtapose this “self” relative to all “other” creation in the garden. Thus, Adam and Eve, in determining that animals are defined by their nakedness, realize that they must now clothe themselves to signify that they are unlike the rest of these “beasts.” They may even deem it wrong or “evil” to remain in a state of nakedness, which signifies a rejection of their former natural state. As a result, the earthly connection that man and animal once shared is shattered. Having both been created from the same *'adamah*, this tie has been lost as man has removed himself from nature through the fashioning and wearing of clothing.

Hans Biedermann, a scholar whose work centers on the natural sciences and semiotics, states that Adam and Eve’s nakedness “symbolizes the primal state of humanity . . . without the social or hierarchical markers that clothing constitutes” (234). In eating from the fruit, however, we see the conversion of Adam and Eve from a state of nature to one of culture as they too convert a raw, natural substance (עֲלֵה הַנְּזֵאֶת), fig leaves, into a product of cultural signification. While fig leaves are clearly not high fashion, *haut couture* of the Near Eastern world, the very act of making them demonstrates a level of production never before seen in Eden. Whereas man had only produced plants from the fields up until this point, we now see the process of manufacturing these plants for other uses not intended in Eden. After all, the only reason Adam and Eve fashion

these garments is to signify they are not naked, to convey their hierarchal distinction from the rest of the animals—neither of which would have been necessary if they had not overstepped their environmental limitations; but, unfortunately, this new mode of production poses lasting consequences on the ecosystem of Eden.

Jeopardizing its equilibrium, Yahweh is forced to banish Adam and Eve before they “take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (3.22). There are two reasons for this. First and foremost, if humans are to live forever, then there would be no mortality; this would place an ever-increasing burden on the ecosystem to the point where the earth would be unable to sustain the population. Secondly, Yahweh cannot risk humanity becoming too powerful and, in turn, playing god with the natural world. Unlike the cultural mandate of the Priestly account, the J source’s Yahweh fears humanity becoming overlords to creation and dominating and subduing nature in the process. His expulsion of Adam and Eve is not an act out of malice but of necessity. And despite their transgression, Yahweh fashions “garments of skins for the man and . . . his wife” (3.21) to wear for their journey outside the gates of Eden—a final act of compassion. However, while subtle, these lines, indeed, imply that an animal was killed in order for God to fashion the leather to clothe Adam and Eve. This is the first mention of animal skins being used for clothing in the narrative, which suggests that this practice was never used prior to man and woman consuming the fruit of knowledge. It would seem that Yahweh had no other choice at this moment, for sending Adam and Eve out of Eden with mere fig leaves would have been

equivalent to no protection at all against the harsher climate awaiting them. Thus, the price for their transgression is the cost of another creation's life—a lasting scar that man must now carry with him.<sup>48</sup>

The conclusion of the narrative rests with Adam and Eve being shut out from Eden permanently, a final image that returns the narrative back to the world from which it was created—and in which the audience resides. For the originators of the story, the Canaanite settlers who migrated to the highlands in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the intensive labor required to start anew—to plow, till, sow, cultivate, and harvest from scratch—was a burdensome load to bear. Thus, in creating the “Garden of Eden,” these peoples were able to provide a greater meaning, a divine explanation, to the bleak and harsh “toil” that comprised daily life, and, in doing so, they created a narrative told from the outside looking in. Eden was created and upheld as an ideal, one to strive towards and return back to: a utopian existence and coexistence between humankind, nature, and the divine who oversaw and maintained it all. Indeed, the text seems to suggest that any effort to reclaim Eden will never be possible unless we, first, learn from our mistakes. Latent within the narrative is, indeed, a stark polemic, one which deconstructs the anthropocentric elevation of man over nature and leaves the reader with a final caveat.

Throughout the course of the narrative, man and woman are created, identified, and associated with nature. Their purpose is to serve the natural world Yahweh has established as

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<sup>48</sup> The animal skin tunics serve as both a means for protection and to signify the burden that man must bear. In the following chapter, after Cain murders Abel, God curses Cain with a scar, also symbolizing the burden of taking another life—the first murder—as well as protection, preventing others from trying to murder Cain.

stewards of creation and caretakers of the earth. In this Yahwistic construction, nature and man are seen as one and the same; there is no binary division, no hierarchical demarcation that separates man from nature, as in the Priestly account of creation. In eating the fruit of knowledge of good and evil, however, by introducing an oppositional ontology to the world, man has now divorced himself from his natural state and chosen to elevate himself to a higher plane of godhead. For the moment, man might have gained ephemeral superiority over the natural world, but this does not last very long, for Yahweh enacts a divine corrective. Just as an ecosystem seeks to correct itself to maintain equilibrium, Yahweh—as the embodiment of earth’s natural forces—overturns man’s anthropocentric actions by expelling him from the garden, so he cannot cause any more harm to Eden. The curse Yahweh places upon Adam affirms nature’s resolute power:

Cursed is the ground for your sake;  
In toil you shall eat of it  
All the days of your life.  
Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you,  
And you shall eat the herb of the field.  
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread  
Till you return to the ground,  
For out of it you were taken;  
For dust you are,  
And to dust you shall return. (3.17-19)

These lines convey the true gravitas of nature's sway over the efforts of man. Since man sought to ascend past his earthly ties and separate himself from the natural world, his labor is greatly increased, and the ground is now placed in opposition to him, reciprocating the tension man has created in trying to oppose the natural world. Moreover, both man and the earth are "cursed" from Adam's transgression, once again, grounding man as an inescapable product of nature, sharing its same fate. No matter what man does, he will always "return to the ground" from which he came: from "dust" he was created and to "dust" he "shall return." Thus, Adam's punishment symbolizes the complete reversal of the culture/nature binary: a destabilization of the hierarchal structure of man over the natural world, where Yahweh reestablishes order by having nature supplant culture through reconstructing the division of man and nature back into one.

In the end, man and nature are intertwined again—just as they were in Eden—but, unlike Eden, the harmony once shared is now replaced with a constant tension; man will continue to attempt to dominate and control the natural world, to build up empires with its natural resources, to urbanize, industrialize, marginalize the earth in order to further progress; however, the natural world will always prove to be a force capable of uprooting and supplanting cultural advancements, often through the most catastrophic of natural disasters.<sup>49</sup>

The message of Eden, then, is a cautionary one; it warns against trying to abandon or oppose the divine purpose of humankind to be stewards and caretakers of the natural world—a

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<sup>49</sup>This is exactly what we see throughout the J source narrative in the Flood story, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the Ten Plagues of the Exodus, and the Famine in the Wilderness.

message that served to strengthen the pastoral roots of the highland settlers and their identity as a people of farmers and herders. Their work, while difficult, was in the pursuit of working towards a closer relationship with Yahweh, something only possible through fulfilling their responsibility to nature.

This was an ideal entirely absent in the elaborate masonry and sprawling metropolises of Mesopotamia. These cities, while the most culturally advanced in all of the Near East, lacked any meaningful connection with nature and, therefore, any relation with Yahweh. If the Canaanite settlers built their identity, their image, from their theological connection with the natural world, then the great nations of Mesopotamia represented the antithesis: what *not* to become.

Urbanization marked a departure from nature, something that the highland settlers rejected—a rejection no more resounding than in Genesis 11: the city of Babel.

## ABANDONING BABEL: AN INDICTMENT OF URBAN CULTURE

*We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one less traveled by—offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth. (Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, 156)*

*“And they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens.’ . . . [But] the Lord scattered them abroad...over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building . . .” (Gen 11.4, 8).*

Genesis 11, often referred to as simply The Tower of Babel, directly precedes the events of the Great Flood, presenting the reader with an intriguing narrative of a single race of people who settle down to build a city and tower and are quickly scattered by Yahweh, their language confounded so as to prevent them from trying to come together again. The narrative, despite its brevity, has perpetuated a wealth of interpretations in an attempt to answer a question that has long challenged readers and on which the text itself is entirely silent: why did God scatter His own people? What about their actions was so threatening that He was compelled to intervene before they could finish their construction?

For centuries, ancient interpreters had sought to answer this question, paying close and special attention to the tower, which appeared to almost be purposefully specified and separated from the rest of the city. After all, when reading verse 4, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens,” it seems quite suspect that the tower is not only emphasized but also hyperbolized to such heavenly proportions. Why must it be so tall, and what purpose would it serve? Thus, it was presumed that the intention behind building the tower was to surpass



mortal limits, the builders attempting to make a name for themselves and ascend into the realm of the divine, “challenging God’s heavenly rule” (Kugel 83). For the ancient interpreters, “such arrogance,” as James Kugel describes it, “must have been what caused God to frustrate their plans” (83), an argument that still holds unprecedented weight today. Indeed, this reading has become so inextricably engrained in the hermeneutics of the narrative that the tower was *assumed* to be the reason for God’s actions above all other explanation.

Illustrated in the extra-biblical writings of antiquity, the Book of Jubilees, the Third Apocalypse of Baruch, Josephus’ *Antiquities*, and Genesis Rabba of the Midrash all interpret the prideful construction of the tower as the basis for the builders’ punishment. The Book of Jubilees—an ancient reworking of parts of Genesis and Exodus—can be considered one of the earliest recorded interpretations of scripture, composed in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. In retelling the narrative, the author of Jubilees shifts our focus slightly, writing: “For they [the descendants of Noah] had emigrated from the land of Ararat toward the east to Shinar, and . . . they built a city and the tower, saying, ‘*Let us ascend on it into heaven*’” (Jubilees 10.19).<sup>50</sup> While subtle, this reading of the narrative, unlike the original text, conveys the presupposed motive behind the builders’ construction. Here, the text suggests that the builders desired to use the tower as a vehicle to enter the heavens, and, thus, the primary reason for the tower’s destruction was to impede their hubristic advance.

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<sup>50</sup>Translation by James Kugel in his work *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture then and Now*.

The Third Apocalypse of Baruch, however, takes it one step further. Despite it also being written in 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, we start to see how interpretation actually begins to rewrite the text, adding onto the original narrative an entirely new dimension. 3 Baruch reads: “And the Lord appeared to them and confused their speech. . . . And they took a gimlet, and sought to pierce the heavens, saying, ‘Let us see whether the heaven is made of clay, or of brass, or of iron.’ When God saw this, He did not permit them, but smote them with blindness and confusion of speech, and rendered them as thou seest” (3.5-8). Whereas Jubilees was subtle in its take on the intentions behind building the tower, 3 Baruch presents a wholly different image: one of active rebellion, violence, and war with the heavens in defiance of God and his authority

Adding onto to these themes, Flavius Josephus in his work *Antiquities* assigns the construction of the tower to Nimrod, who, according to the Table of Nations in Genesis 10, is described as a “mighty hunter”<sup>51</sup> before God and the king of “Babel, Erech, and Accad . . . in the land of Shinar” (10.10). Josephus writes:

Now it was Nimrod who excited them to such an affront and contempt of God. . . . He persuaded them not to ascribe [the tower] to God, as if it were through his means they were happy. . . . He also gradually changed the government into tyranny, seeing no other way of turning men from the fear of God, but to bring them into a constant dependence on his power . . . Now the multitude were very

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<sup>51</sup> Some interpreters have interpreted this particular epithet to mean that he was a fierce challenger before the Lord.

ready to follow the determination of Nimrod and to esteem it a piece of cowardice to submit to God; and they built a tower (113,114).

And by the sixth century CE, the Midrash<sup>52</sup> would add to this, again, by including the symbol of an “idol . . . placed on top of the tower holding a sword pointing upward to heaven, as if to do battle with God” (Ron 167).

By the time we return back to the biblical narrative, it is clear how vastly shaped its tradition has become throughout the centuries, so much so that the original work becomes almost eclipsed by interpretation. To this, Theodore Hiebert in his work, “The Tower of Babel and the Origin of World Cultures,” notes that, “The pride-and-punishment reading of the story of Babel is already firmly fixed. . . . It has been embraced with little basic variation by both Jewish and Christian exegetes throughout the history of interpretation, and it is still dominant in recent scholarly commentaries on Genesis” (Hiebert 29). Yet, while the dominant reading of antiquity is one that still remains standard in the exegesis of today, the sole emphasis on the tower is unwarranted when viewing the entirety of the passage in relation to the historical context of its originators. Just as Eden was shaped by the pastoral traditions of the 12<sup>th</sup> century highland settlers, the same can be said for the Tower of Babel—or, rather, a more appropriate title is “the City of Babel”—which appears to be less about the tower and more about urbanization as a

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<sup>52</sup>See Genesis Rabbah 38.6.

whole. However, before we address the more likely meaning of the text, it is necessary to first point out why the traditional reading of Genesis 11 is problematic.

While it must have seemed to the ancient interpreters that the tower was a pronounced feature of the city, and therefore the centerpiece of the narrative, scholar James Kugel has a different view on its significance. He writes:

The tower is certainly there in the story—no doubt about it. But it is hardly the whole point. If it were, there would have been no need to mention the building of a city at all. . . . In fact, it is remarkable that, after God’s intervention, the text says, “and the building of the city was stopped.” Not a word is said about the tower’s fate; if it were so crucial, should not the text have mentioned its collapse or abandonment? (Kugel 84)

It is a question that puts into perspective the importance of the tower; after all, Hiebert points out that the tower is not mentioned until the fourth verse of the narrative (almost half way through the story), and even when it is mentioned, it is always accompanied by the mention of the city, first (31). Accordingly, E. A. Speiser has viewed the city and tower as a “hendiadys, in which the two terms are employed to represent a single idea,” in this case, an urban complex, where the tower is merely an “aspect of the cityscape the narrator describes, rather than the primary object of attention” (qtd. in Hiebert 36). When regarded as such, it is clear that the story is not about the tower alone but of the city as a whole, specifically the city of Babel—Babylon.

Moreover, past interpretations of the text relied heavily on the height of the tower to support their pride and punishment readings. The description of a “tower with its top in the heavens,” however, is, as Hiebert clarifies, “just an ancient Near Eastern cliché for height and

implies neither an attempt to scale the heavens nor an arrogant revolt against divine authority” (37). Furthermore, he points to two other passages in Deuteronomy, which use this exact phrase to describe the “fortifications” of Canaanite cities (Deut 1.28, 9.1) (Hiebert 37). It turns out that, sometimes, a tower is just a tower—albeit, in the case of Babel, a very large one— and most likely part of an even larger city complex. Thus, while the tower does serve a purpose, it does not play as large a role as was once believed. We must, therefore, not focus our attention on the tower in isolation but on the bigger picture of the urban landscape the narrative takes place in.

While Hiebert has done a thoroughly convincing job in presenting the flaws of the traditional pride and punishment reading in his essay, his own argument that “the story of Babel . . . is exclusively about the origins of cultural difference” and not urbanization or Babylon presents another set of issues (40). Hiebert’s alternative reading focuses primarily on the tension between “singularity and multiplicity” (40), both in language and location. He points to lines such as the opening verse, “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words” (11.1) and, “Let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (11.4) to argue the people’s true intention was to remain as a collective, reflected also in the common language shared amongst them. According to Hiebert, God’s decision to scatter these people abroad is for the purpose of cultural diversification—which should not be regarded as a punishment but as an etiological explanation for the creation of different cultures. Like the Garden of Eden, Babel is a tale of origin. However, while the narrative undoubtedly seeks to explain the origin of “cultural difference,” it is not limited to this and is certainly not “exclusively” about it.

Rather, to understand the passage fully, we must consider its creators, the 12<sup>th</sup> century Canaanite settlers, who established the Yahwistic tradition that comprises the majority of the primeval history. Why would these people choose to create a narrative about the origin of different languages, and, moreover, why would they set the scene in the beginnings of Babylon? A closer look at the demographics of the highland settlers reveals the answer.

In her work, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity*, Anne Killebrew posits that ancient Israel did not originate as a homogeneous cultural entity but, rather, emerged from an ethnically-diverse population. She writes:

The emergence of ancient Israel should be interpreted as a process of ethnogenesis, or a gradual emergence of a group identity from a “mixed multitude” of peoples . . . most likely compris[ing]...the rural Canaanite population, displaced peasants and pastoralists, . . . lawless ‘apiru and Shasu...[and] [f]ugitive and runaway Semitic slaves from [the] New [of] Kingdom Egypt. . . . Nonindigenous groups mentioned in the biblical narrative, including the Midianites, Kenites, and the Amalekites . . . may have also formed an essential element. (Killebrew 184)

While an exact reconstruction of these settlements would be an impossible feat and beyond the scope of this examination, we can say, at the very least, that the highlands were home to a motley crew of diverse origins and cultural backgrounds, both indigenous and foreign. In these

settlements, a great many languages were undoubtedly spoken and exchanged; yet, despite these differences, the early settlers must have noticed the linguistic similarities that encompassed each of their native tongues.<sup>53</sup> Thus, creating a story that provided the origin to language and a divine explanation for the cultural and linguistic diversity now attested to in these settlements was both relevant and significant to their developing societies.

The narrative they fashion, however, seems quite paradoxical—for why would these settlers create a story of their ancestors coming together and being dispersed by Yahweh as they, as a dispersed people themselves, are trying to come together as one? If we are to follow Hiebert's reading that the story is about Yahweh preventing humankind from homogenizing, then this would, in fact, conflict with the historical context of the story's creators. To come together, despite Yahweh's wishes to remain separate in the narrative, would imply an active defiance of God, incompatible with the nature of these storytellers. Instead, perhaps the issue is not about coming together as one but about coming together for the wrong reasons, i.e. coming together to build elaborate cities, to urbanize and, in the process, leave behind the natural world and its divine protector, Yahweh. As evidenced in the Garden of Eden, there is a close tie between humanity, nature, and divinity present throughout. Continued on into Cain and Abel and Noah and the Flood, the environment plays an undeniably large role in shaping the theological content of primeval literature. Babel, on the other hand, marks a departure from that.

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<sup>53</sup>Proto-Semitic is a hypothetical language believed to be predecessor of Near Eastern languages, part of a much larger Afro-asiatic language tree. It is believed to have originated in Northern Mesopotamia, the Arabian Peninsula or the Levant around 3750 BCE (Kitchen et. al).

Rather than the naturalistic landscape and pastoral elements found in previous narratives, we are presented with a different image—one of “bricks and mortar.” The narrative begins: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there” (11.1-2). While Hiebert places the focus of the narrative in the speaking of “one language” and “settling” down in one location, we must also consider the lines which follow them, where the shift from exposition to action occurs. The Yahwist writes, “And they said to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth’” (11.3-4). While it would have just as well sufficed to say that these people built a city and a tower, the narrative takes great pains in explicitly detailing the process of how the city was constructed, describing the brick-making process.

For a relatively short narrative—Babel only comprising nine of the thirty-two lines in Genesis 11—the fact that the authors deliberately chose to spend one of those lines mentioning the bricks used in construction suggest they are an important element to the story and cannot be overlooked. James Austin in his work *The Tower of Babel in Genesis* notes, “[Brick-making] was not only a learned behavior, but one could read this account and learn how to replicate handmade bricks. [It] . . . is almost a recipe.” The early settlers would have, no doubt, been



familiar with this process, as many of them were once former slaves, tasked to build up the sprawling empires of Canaan and Egypt. Thus, the mention of baked bricks and mortar in Babel—and later in Egypt (Exod. 1.14)<sup>54</sup>—serve as a referential reminder of the harsh labor and servitude exacted at the cost of grand building projects, certainly casting the development of the city of Babel in a negative light.

Furthermore, the highland settlers developed their own identity, in contrast to the elaborate masonry and building projects of their imperialistic neighbors, to reflect a much simpler way of life. Illustrated in the archeological records, the Cisjordan highlands saw a “sudden boost in population” in the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> and into the 12<sup>th</sup> century, accompanied by a correlative drop in “previously thriving Canaanite urban centers” (Kugel 383). These highland settlements, for the most part, were “extremely small” and “unfortified,” consisting of “4 to 6 houses” and only “about 40 people, sometimes fewer” (Noll 176). Unlike the metropolises of Mesopotamia and former Canaanite cities, there was no central government structure or political center. Kugel adds that, according to some scholars, “This was a time when . . . Israelite religion actually forbade the use of even a simple metal tool to quarry or shape the stones of an altar—a law that seems virtually to thumb its nose at the architectural sophistication of the Babylonian[s] . . .” (85). Stripping themselves of the pomp and frill of other supposedly

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<sup>54</sup> This parallel thematically connects this story to the forced labor and construction of Egypt, solidifying the anti-urban ideology latent within the J source.

“great” nations, these settlers defined themselves not by ziggurats or palaces but solely through their relationship with each other, the earth, and, in turn, the earth’s relationship with Yahweh.

Returning to the story of Babel, it becomes much clearer why Yahweh intervenes in the human project. While Hiebert boldly asserts, “The Yahwist’s tradition . . . shows no anti-city polemic, and it is doubtful whether the Bible contains any true anti-urban ideology at all” (40), the text suggests otherwise. The Yahwist writes, “The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, ‘Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them’” (11.5-6). The narrative makes the “city and the tower” the object of Yahweh’s attention, the purpose of His investigation. The mention of them being gathered as “one” and speaking a common language is not the issue at hand, but both of these factors significantly contribute to the ease and speed with which these builders are able to erect a city in their names. When Yahweh remarks “nothing that they propose will now be impossible for them,” there is an insidious threat, an ominous caveat behind his words. But, in order to understand it, we must take the entire passage into account.

Revisiting verses 3 and 4, the process of brick-making and the actual building of the city are separated into two lines, suggesting a division between the two events. Moreover, verse 4 in the Hebrew uses the vav (ו) at the beginning of the first word to construct a temporal shift, known as the “vav consecutive.” Its use in verse 4 can be best understood as: the building of the city happened after the making of the bricks and mortar. The NRSV retains this structure best in its translation, rendering the vav consecutive as a euphemistic “then.” The NRSV reads: “They said

to one another, ‘Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.’ And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. *Then* they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower. . . .’” (emphasis mine). Thus, according to the narrative, the construction of Babel did not occur all at once but in stages. However, the brevity in which the events are described and the quick succession in which they follow one another connote that, even in stages, these people were developing at a rapid pace.

The story seems to reflect that as civilization became more advanced, so did their methods for building more elaborate structures and on a much greater scale, evidenced by the people’s desire to build an entire city and tower, believed to be an ancient ziggurat.<sup>55</sup> This progression is reflected in the narrative as rampant urbanization, the product of which Yahweh admonishes. Kugel writes, “From the viewpoint of the ancient Israelites, who were sparsely settled in the Semitic hinterland, such teeming conglomerations” and their “complex urban culture,” especially “Babylon’s highly sophisticated religious practices of which the ziqqurat was a fitting emblem . . . the story seems to say, do not find favor with our God” (85). Yahweh’s remark, “Nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them,” is part of the settler’s own commentary on this urban sprawl, the understanding that, if left unchecked, humankind will continue to grow, develop, and excel at unrelenting speeds with nations extending their borders

further and further until nature is consumed entirely. Confusing their language and scattering the people becomes a way of preventing this from occurring, all the while providing an explanation for where cultural diversity originates.

This anti-urban polemic, contrary to Hiebert's estimation, is not only evident in the Yahwistic tradition but goes hand in hand with the highland settlers and their reverence for the pastoral. Leon Kass, author of "What's wrong with Babel?," notes that this sentiment carries on into—and even prompts—the patriarchal cycle, where Abram<sup>56</sup> is first introduced leaving the Mesopotamian city of Haran to pursue a nomadic life in search of a new home. What might have propelled Abram to abandon the most advanced civilization on earth in favor of a trackless desert? Moreover, "Why does God choose Abram?<sup>57</sup> Why does Abram go? The text is utterly silent on these matters. . . . But what if the lessons of Babel have something to do with the election of Abram?" (Kass 57). With the rather "abrupt" transition<sup>58</sup> between chapter 11's Babel

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<sup>55</sup> The tower of Babel may be a possible reference to Etemenanki, a great ziqqurat dedicated to the God, Marduk. In his study, "The Tower of Babel: Archaeology, History and Cuneiform Texts," Andrew George claims the ziqqurat's exact date is uncertain, but it may have "reigned in the fourteenth, twelfth, eleventh or ninth century [BCE]," pointing to an allusion of it in the *Enuma Elish* as evidence for the tower's existence in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium (75).

<sup>56</sup>The original name of Abraham prior to his name change in Gen. 17.5.

<sup>57</sup> See the work of James Kugel, who charts the history of interpretation behind the election of Abraham in his book *How to Read the Bible: A Guide to Scripture Then and Now*, pages 90-107

<sup>58</sup> The account of Babel and Call to Abraham share a similar opening, perhaps showing a thematic relatedness between the two. Gen. 11.1: "Now the whole earth had one language and the same words." Gen. 12.1: "Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." Just as Genesis 11 is linked to the narrative of the Flood and appears to be a continuation of the story, it can be likewise argued that Gen. 12's opening serves as a continuation of the preceding Babel narrative.

and chapter 12's Call to Abram, "could the text, by juxtaposing the two stories, be suggesting that an understanding of the beginning of Abram is linked to an understanding of Babel?" (57).

Originally from Ur of the Chaldeans, there seems to be an implicit indictment of Babylonian high culture reflected in Yahweh's call for Abram to leave his former life as a Mesopotamian city-dweller behind. Kass notes, "Chaldees is a biblical synonym for Babylonians; Ur, though not Babylon itself, was a Babylonian city, historically a center of moon-god worship, as was Haran . . ." (58). Thus, these cities forge "the most obvious negative connection" with the story of Babel, and—not at all surprising but all the more telling—archeological excavations of Ur in the 1920's and 30's reveal remnants of an impressively large and elaborate ziggurat that was built in the 21<sup>st</sup> century BCE and was later restored in the Neo-Babylonian period, ca 500 BCE (Woolley 5). Abram's abandonment of this technologically-advanced and superior cultural presence speaks to the same theme of abandonment seen in the story of Babel and its unfinished city (both departures galvanized by Yahweh). Moreover, this motif of cultural abandonment once again harks back to the highland settlers who, too, left behind the opulent and "sophisticated grandeur" of the Canaanite empires in search of a new land and a new home, absent of such artifice.

Indeed, these settlers made a conscious decision not to become like the narrative's Babel and, in coming together as one, built their settlements to reflect the antithesis of Babylonian culture and society. Reflected in the end of Babel, culture is uprooted and supplanted by Yahweh once again. Like Eden, His divine corrective seeks to reestablish order by displacing those who potentially threaten the balance of the natural world. Urbanization is quelled with the single

image of a city left unfinished, the final nail in the cultural coffin, but certainly not the last grave we will see.

## PLAGUES AND POLEMICS: THE COLLAPSE OF EGYPTIAN IMPERIALISM

*“I [Yahweh] will bring you up from the abuse of Egypt to the land . . . flowing with milk and honey. . . . And I will send out My hand and strike Egypt with all My wonders . . .”* (Exod. 3.17, 20).

*When YHWH appears via miracle and warrior imagery, . . . the natural world is overwhelmed, with considerable dramatic effect: Mountains quake; rivers turn red, cattle die; eldest sons die; people tremble. The short last words by the bested Egyptians concede, with some understatement, YHWH’s superior power. “We are all dead men . . . .”<sup>59</sup>* (Walsh 116)

*You blew with Your breath—the sea covered them over.  
They sank like lead in the mighty waters:*

*Who is like You among the gods, O Yahweh  
who is like You, mighty in holiness?*

*Awesome in praise, worker of wonders  
You stretched out Your hand—  
Earth swallowed them up. (Exod. 15.10-12)<sup>60</sup>*

It may seem a jarring transition that, from the primeval history, we move directly to the land of Egypt and the world of the Exodus. But, as we migrate from the remnants of Babel to the cities of Egypt, there is a single unifying theme binding these two seemingly unrelated events, the same theme that underscores the heart of Eden, Cain and Abel, and the Flood story. The Exodus, the foundational myth of Israel, marks the beginning of the Yahwistic tradition for the ancient

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<sup>59</sup> Exod. 12.33

<sup>60</sup> Translation by Robert Alter

highland settlers. The narrative they fashion—of an oppressed people whose cries are heard by Yahweh and who are, thus, liberated out from under their oppressors—serves to unite this culturally diverse group under a common belief in the power of their god above all others.

The historicity of the Exodus is something that is often called into question when examining the text and continues to be a polarizing point of contention for scholars and archeologists alike. However, it is, perhaps, incorrect to think of the Exodus as a historical document. Christine Hayes argues, “The biblical writers are not trying to write history as a modern historian might try to write history. They are concerned in trying to show us what they believed to be the finger of God<sup>61</sup> in the events and experiences of the Israelite people.” The Exodus is not meant to be a factual account, although it may present factual events in its retelling; it is, more importantly, a work of literature, its “composition is influenced and determined by literary conventions and goals” that point towards a greater theological end (Hayes). It is true that Semitic slaves were recorded as having worked on the cities in Egypt and some did eventually flee. However, the general lack of archeological evidence for a mass exodus, and even findings that contradict the biblical account,<sup>62</sup> further supports the notion that the Exodus is not a bare recounting of historical events but, more so, a powerful narrative that speaks to greater themes of liberation, deliverance, and salvation—themes that create an identity for a people wholly marginalized and a claim to the land in which they reside.

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<sup>61</sup>Reference to Exod. 8.19



In this examination, we will first look at the ways in which the highland settlers' oral traditions shaped the biblical account's depiction of Yahweh and his integration into the natural world. Throughout the narrative, Yahweh is portrayed and personified as a warrior god,<sup>63</sup> wielding the forces of nature so as to slowly erode Egyptian civilization, first with the unleashing of the ten plagues and then with the flooding of Pharaoh's army at the Reeds Sea. At other points, Yahweh assumes the form of nature itself, as a burning bush, a cloud of smoke, and a pillar of fire, His theophanies always occurring on the mountain tops and always in the wilderness. His association with nature and divine intervention in the natural world aligns with what we have already witnessed in the Garden of Eden, and, moreover, His supplanting of Egypt, an imperialistic powerhouse of the Near East, parallels the anti-urban polemic of Babel.

It is not surprising, then, that the underlying narrative of the Book of Exodus belongs to the J source. While the Priestly writers had a large role in editing the text into the final form we have today, the divine connection with nature and, conversely, divine rejection of urban development is still deeply rooted in the early parts of narrative—with Egypt utterly decimated

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<sup>62</sup> See William Dever's *What Did the Biblical Writers Know, and When Did They Know It?*, which outlines the lack of archeological evidence to support the biblical Exodus.

<sup>63</sup> Karen Armstrong does not mince words in her analysis of Yahweh of the Exodus, writing: "This is a brutal, partial and murderous god: a god of war who would be known as Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Armies. He is passionately partisan, has little compassion for anyone but his own favourites and is simply a tribal deity" (19). And while I do agree with her estimation that this is a much more violent God than what we have seen in the J source narratives, I do not believe that this image of Yahweh is in any way incompatible with the image of God as an extension of Nature. Just as Yahweh is portrayed as Mother Earth figure that provides for and sustains her people, He is also the catastrophic harbinger of natural disasters responsible for unprecedented levels of loss and death.

by the end. For the Yahwist, Nature, associated with Yahweh, is responsible for eradicating all remnants of cultural advancement and punishing those who take part.

The earliest part of the Exodus myth preserved in the Hebrew Bible can be found in Chapter 15, in a dramatic and triumphant poem of Yahweh's defeat of the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds. Referred to as the "Song of the Sea," its use of archaic diction, grammar, and syntactical structure has led scholars to the conclusion that this passage is decidedly older than the rest of the exodus narrative.<sup>64</sup> James Kugel notes, "Its style, vocabulary, morphology, and orthography all indicate that it is a very old form of Hebrew" (227).<sup>65</sup> Brian Russell contends that the "Song of the Sea" is "perhaps the oldest literary and textual element extant in the Hebrew Bible . . . find[ing] its provenance in premonarchal times (c. 1150 BCE)" (Russell 47). David A. Robertson's analysis of the "Song of the Sea" indicates parallels between its poetry and the Ugarit poetry of older Canaanite religious literature (qtd. in Russell 55), further solidifying its composition and origin to the Canaanite settlers occupying the Cisjordan highlands in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE. This is perhaps the best place to start our examination, as it establishes the literary foundation from which the exodus narrative is born.

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<sup>64</sup>See Cross and Freedman's *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry* (32).

<sup>65</sup>"Scholars have established that none of the Semitic languages originally had a definite article (corresponding to "the" in English). . . . [L]ater, however, most developed some way of indicating definiteness, the prefix ha- in Hebrew. . . . In most parts of the Bible, the prefix ha- is found in abundance; in the song, however, it is not found even once. That—along with a host of apparently ancient morphological and lexical features—would indicate to modern scholars that it has been preserved from a very early stage of Hebrew" (Alter 227).

For the highland settlers, a marginal group of “rural Canaanite[s]” “displaced peasants and pastoralists,” “lawless ‘apiru and Shasu” and “[f]ugitive and runaway Semitic slaves from [the] New Kingdom [of] Egypt,” the “Song of the Sea” was an anthem that bound their vast differences together (Killebrew 184). The poem speaks of liberation from their enslavement, salvation from their oppressors, and deliverance to the land of Canaan—a powerfully uplifting message with Yahweh as the driving force of it all.<sup>66</sup> In the poem, Yahweh is portrayed as the mighty warrior who turns the tides on the Egyptians and is declared the valorous hero of unequivocal strength by His people. The first stanza highlights this perfectly:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has *triumphed* gloriously;

horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.

The Lord is my *strength* and my *might*,

and he has become my *salvation*;

this is my God, and I will praise him,

my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

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<sup>66</sup> It may seem strange for a group who originates from Canaan to write a narrative from the perspective of a foreigner who is entering the land and, in the process, decimating its indigenous populations. However, it would appear that these highland settlers, or ancient Israelites, in creating an identity wholly separate from their former Canaanite lives saw themselves as becoming a distinctive group, a cultural entity, which no longer conformed to the term “Canaanite.” Thus, their narrative seeks to establish this new identity and assert its dominance over their older Canaanite history, erasing, eradicating it from the land, to start anew.

*The Lord is a warrior;*

the Lord is his name. (NRSV 15.1-3)<sup>67</sup>

The poem celebrates Yahweh as if he had just done battle with the Egyptians Himself. No mention is made of Moses who, in the previous chapter, acted as God's medium in channeling the waters. Rather, the poem reads, "You [Yahweh] blew with your wind, the sea covered them; / they sank like lead in the mighty waters" and "At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up, / the floods stood up in a heap / the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea" (15.8). These lines portray the climatic confrontation between Yahweh and the Egyptians almost as a battle on the high seas, where Yahweh is depicted as a mighty storm god, harnessing the wind and the waters to drown Egyptian "horse and rider" alike.

Indeed, commentators have noted the parallel between this depiction of Yahweh and the storm god Baal from the Canaanite pantheon: a "Divine Warrior...who battles the watery chaos often depicted as a sea monster" (102). Russell adds that the "Song of the Sea" "resembles the Baal cycle in a number of striking ways," highlighting that it "roughly follows" the same thematic arc of "conflict, order, kingship, and palace or temple building" (40). In the myth of Baal, Baal's conflict is with Yamm, the god of the rivers and seas. Yamm represents "the watery chaos that threatens the order of the cosmos" (40). Baal, however, is "victorious" in battle and is made king, representing a greater "victory" of "order over chaos" (40). As a result, a palace is erected in honor of Baal, as "a symbol of his authority" over the earth (40). Similarly, Yahweh's

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<sup>67</sup>Emphasis mine.

conflict with Pharaoh mirrors this chaotic struggle between two forces in a watery confrontation, whereupon defeating Pharaoh and his army, Yahweh's "holy place" is alluded to, and a final "declaration of [Yahweh's] eternal kingship" is made (40).<sup>68</sup>

There is one major difference, however, between the original Baal cycle and the "Song of the Sea." Whereas in the Ugarit text, Baal's conflict is with another divine force, Yamm, the highland settlers alter the tale so that Yahweh is not fighting a divine evil but a corporal one.<sup>69</sup> Water in the "Song of the Sea" is not antagonized as a threat to the natural order but is, instead, used as a weapon to establish this order. Yahweh does not work against the chaotic waters but, on the contrary, channels the Reed Sea in order to vanquish His true foe, the Egyptians. Thus, Pharaoh, the figurehead of Egypt, takes the place of "chaos" in the poem, where Yahweh's drowning of the Egyptians symbolizes the purification of the land with the removal of chaos and wickedness from it. Water, in this case, is regarded not only as an agent of powerful destruction but also of divine cleansing, similar to that of the Flood.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup>"The place, O Lord, that you made your abode, / the sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands have established. / The Lord will reign forever and ever" (Exod. 15.17-18).

<sup>69</sup> While the Pharaoh is a mortal and not a god, it was very common for Egyptian rulers to depict themselves as being of divine origin or gods, themselves. Indeed, when we look at the name of Pharaoh Ramses, it is merely a combination of Moses "born of" and "Ra," the sun god. Thus, perhaps this poem can also be read as a critique of the Egyptians and their hubris, as if to say: if the Pharaoh considers himself a god, let him fight as one.

<sup>70</sup> Indeed, allusions to both the Flood and the Sea of Reeds can be traced to the beginning of the Book of Exodus and the birth of Moses. In Exodus 2, we are told that Moses is placed in a basket called a *tevah* (the same word used for Noah's ark) and then set amongst the reeds in the Nile, which foreshadow the confrontation at the Sea of Reeds with the Pharaoh. Ironically, whereas Pharaoh decreed that all male infants are to be drowned, the one child that is rescued by the ark becomes the means in which all Egyptian male infantry is drowned (Alter 238).

Thus, Yahweh's power and strength is made manifest through the power of nature itself. From the perspective of the ancient audience, such a display of raw elemental force could only be expressed through the metaphor of a wrathful divine "hand" striking down upon its enemies. And as we will continue to see throughout the narrative of the Exodus, Yahweh and Nature are regarded as one and the same, at times nurturing and care-giving like the personification of Mother Earth and, at other points, devastating and destructive, delivering calamitous natural disasters that have lasting ramifications. With the final image of Pharaoh's army drowned in the Reed Sea, all signs of political, cultural, and material wealth and power are at once engulfed by Nature—an overturning of the anthropocentric binary that becomes the motif of the Exodus narrative.

No better illustration of this deconstruction is found than in Exod. 7-11, which contains the plague cycle, an iconic and just as fundamental element to the narrative as the crossing of the Reed Sea. As a literary convention, the plagues function as "ontological disruptions" that "serve the purpose of political and cultural disruption" and, ultimately, "as a cultural corrective, requiring [the reader] to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, motivation" (Zamora and Ferris 3). Polemical in nature, the plagues target a social, political, and cultural evil for the ancient Israelites, Egypt, disrupting the expansion of its empire and, ultimately, dismantling this cultural force through the intensification of natural disasters. The storytellers intend not only to highlight the iniquity of urbanization in their eyes but also to attack it in most fitting way possible—through nature. The context for this indictment is established within the first chapter of the Exodus narrative:

[Pharaoh] said to his people, “Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh.<sup>71</sup> But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them. (Exod. 1.10-14)

Commentators have pointed out that while Pharaoh, indeed, fears the Israelite population and their continual growth, his approach seems quite paradoxical. Sheila Keiter writes, “His solution to the problem of Israel's burgeoning population is persecution and enslavement, rather than expulsion or genocide (Ex. 1:11). If they are too many, why not just kill them?<sup>72</sup> . . . Furthermore, if the Israelites represent a potential fifth column, why is Pharaoh afraid that they will leave the land? He should welcome their departure” (200). Keiter comes to the conclusion that population control is not the primary motive behind Pharaoh's decision to enslave the Israelites—perhaps

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<sup>71</sup> Lines 10-12 are asserted to have been written by the J source, whereas the following lines 13-14 belong to the Priestly—the multiplying and spreading harking back to the Priestly account of creation.

<sup>72</sup> “Pharaoh does eventually order the killing of all the male babies born to the Hebrews, but only after his first policy prescription results in an Israelite population boom (Ex. 1:12, 16)” (Keiter 200).

simply a projected by-product. Truly, Pharaoh's ulterior motive is to use the enslaved workers to build and expand his empire, to further develop and urbanize Egypt, hence the mention of the cities "Pithom and Rameses" he has them build.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, within this short excerpt, there are multiple linguistic parallels between Pharaoh's building project and the construction of Babel, linking the two narratives together and thereby suggesting their thematic connection. First, Pharaoh uses the phrase *hinneh* הִנֵּה, which can be understood as "look, lo, or behold," to call attention to the growing numbers of Israelites in Egypt. This very same phrase is used in Genesis 11 when Yahweh comes down and observes the people's building project, stating, "Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (Gen. 11.6). Both expressions are used in a similar context, where the speakers are commenting on a single ethnic group growing and expanding, reflecting a shared fear that, if left unchecked, these peoples can pose a serious danger. Furthermore, the imperative, "Come, let us," הָבָה *havah* in Hebrew, is used by both Pharaoh and Yahweh just before issuing their corrective solutions, Keiter noting that "this formulation . . . appears nowhere else in the Torah except in the Tower of Babel story, where it occurs three times" (201).<sup>74</sup> Finally,

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<sup>73</sup> Archeologists have identified the biblical city of Rameses with Pi-Ramesses of Ramesses II, which dates to 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

<sup>74</sup> "Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard" (Gen. 11.3); "Come, let us build us a city, and a tower with its top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves; else we shall be scattered all over the world" (Gen. 11.4); "Come, let us then go down and confound their speech there, so that they shall not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11.7).



solidifying these connections to Babel's theme of urbanization is the "bitter service" the Israelites are tasked with in "mortar and brick." We cannot help but be reminded of the building project of Babel, where this exact method of brick making is first introduced (Gen. 11.3). In the same way "the people of Shinar use their newfound technology to build a city (Gen. 11:4), . . . Pharaoh uses his slave labor to build great store cities (Ex 1:11)" (Keiter 201).

Thus, with the many allusions to Babel found in the opening chapter of Exodus, it stands to reason that the biblical writers sought to create these parallels to draw a connection between the two accounts. The similarities found in both narratives implore us as readers to approach the text from a similar angle. However, Keiter argues that Babel should be read in the traditional sense, as a pride-and-punishment narrative, which she supports with the parallels to the Exodus narrative and the defiance of Pharaoh, who consistently challenges God. But, as argued in chapter three, the historical interpretation of Babel is flawed in a number of ways; however, seeing that the Priestly hand took part in composing lines 13-14, then it is quite possible these 6<sup>th</sup> century writers may have interpreted the previous Yahwistic parallels as an echoing of the pride and punishment reading. Nonetheless, in concentrating here on the story fashioned by the Yahwistic tradition, it is more likely that the ancient Israelites, given their geographical context, created a connection to Babel to impart the same polemical message against urbanization and cultural supremacy.

It is apparent, however, that between Genesis 11 and Exodus 1, there are also some major narrative differences that must be taken into consideration. Whereas in Gen. 11, Yahweh appropriately addresses the problem of urbanization through *de-urbanization*, the scattering of His people, Pharaoh, as mentioned, seeks to resolve his population issue with the problematic

solution of urbanizing further. Unlike the story of Babel, Pharaoh does not seek to dispel or scatter the Israelites out from Egypt; in fact, he forbids it repeatedly.<sup>75</sup> Instead, he chooses to oppress the Israelites with the harshest of toil and forces them to build up his empire—a decision he is adamant in maintaining.<sup>76</sup> It is Pharaoh's hope that, in enslaving the Israelites, forced labor will curb the population's growth, while also expanding his empire in the process. But, as evidenced in Babel, urbanization is the problem, not the solution; hence, Pharaoh's decision comes with unintended ramifications, and the people continue to grow, “multiply,” and “spread” across the land of Egypt, despite the harsh labor inflicted upon them. This worsens Pharaoh's disposition, and he takes further measures throughout the narrative to oppress and suppress the Israelites, from attempting to drown all male first-borns in the Nile (Exod. 1.15) to making the Israelites' labor more difficult by not providing the straw needed to make the bricks but demanding the same amount of bricks be produced (Exod. 5.7-9).

Thus, the Yahwist does not merely port over the Babel story and transcribe into the Exodus; but rather, the storyteller exacerbates the builder's conditions in Egypt and, thus, creates a hyperbolized version of Babel within an Egyptian context, underlining the dire consequences of urbanization fueled through political, cultural, and material hegemony. This deliberate construction is a commentary on and criticism of the historical nature of Egypt as an imperialistic

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<sup>75</sup> See Exod. 7.13, 8.15, 8.19, 8.30, 9.7, 9.12, 9.35 10.20, 10.27.

<sup>76</sup> Indeed, Yahweh seems to understand this quite well, for He elicits this stubbornness from Pharaoh by hardening his heart so that his position would not be swayed in letting the Israelites go until all the miracles can be preformed (Exod. 10.1-2).

superpower that seeks to expand its own empire through the conquering of others. In establishing its cultural context—perhaps not at all unlike that of the Babylonians—the Yahwist seeks to portray Egypt as the greatest of cultural inequities and, thus, in most need of a cultural corrective. In this way, it can be argued that Babel foreshadows the outcome of its counterpart, where the divine presence not only intervenes but supersedes cultural advancement; yet, just as Egypt represents a magnified adaptation of Babel, the punishments dealt to the Egyptian empire is also much more severe. Whereas Babel is a city simply left abandoned at the end of the narrative, neither Egypt nor its people are spared from divine retribution.

The introduction of the plagues, then, represents a corrective shift in the narrative, supplanting the implacable and seemingly adamant cultural icon of the Near East through the powerful elemental forces of the anti-cultural—the natural world. Exod. 7-11 delineates a total of ten plagues of environmental disaster, each more severe than the last and each directed exclusively at vital aspects of Egyptian society. Just as an ecosystem seeks to maintain equilibrium, the plagues, too, seek to reestablish a natural order by correcting the damage done by human activity through the disruption of their cultural enterprise.

The plague cycle begins with the conversion of water into blood, killing all of the fish and making the Nile undrinkable (Exod. 7.17-18). The following three plagues describe an infestation of frogs, gnats, and flies that debilitate Egyptian society, making daily life unbearable (8.6, 8.17, 8.21). The fifth plague targets all the Egyptian livestock, bringing upon them a deadly “pestilence” that annihilates their population (9.3). The sixth plague infects all the Egyptians and animals across the land with “festering boils” (9.9). The seventh conjures thunder, hail, and fire from the heavens that rain upon the land of Egypt, destroying the plants and trees of the fields

(9.23-25). The eighth spawns a swarm of locusts that “devour the fields” consuming all the crops and plant life (10.4-6). The ninth plague brings about a darkness “that can be felt,” lasting three days (10.21-22). And for the final and most devastating plague, God passes over the land of Egypt, killing every Egyptian firstborn, “from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne to the firstborn of the female slave who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the livestock” (11.5-6).

However, while the plagues, indeed, illustrate the destabilization of Egyptian society through an environmental shift, we must first clarify a point source critics have noted in the composition of the plague cycle before continuing with our analysis. According to proponents of the Documentary Hypothesis, the narrative of the ten plagues does not all belong to the same author and was not all written at the same time; in fact, scholars Candida Moss and Jeffrey Stackert write, “[T]he plague account in Exodus may be divided entirely between the Yahwistic (J) and Priestly (P) sources” (363). According to Moss and Stackert, the J source constitutes the underlying narrative of the Exodus, accounting for seven of the ten plagues: water becoming blood, frogs, flies, pestilence targeting livestock, hail, locusts, and the death of the firstborn (363). The later Priestly writers added to these existing plagues as well as added an additional three plagues to the overall narrative: gnats, boils, and darkness. Below is a table that delineates which particular passages in Exodus 7-11 belong to the Yahwistic and Priestly writers (364).

**Table 1: Composition and Source Division of the Plague Cycle<sup>77</sup>**

<b>Plagues</b>	<b>Yahwist (J)</b>	<b>Priestly (P)</b>
Water into Blood	7.14-18, 20b, 23-25	7.19-20a; 21b-22
Frogs	7.26-29, 8:4-11a	8.1-3, 11b
Gnats		8.12-15
Flies	8.16-28	
Pestilence/Cattle	9.1-7	
Boils		9.8-12
Hail	9.13-21, 23a $\beta$ -b, 24a $\beta$ -b, 26-30, 33-34	9.22-23a $\alpha$ , 24a $\alpha$ , 25, 31-32, 35
Locusts	10.1-11 [minus 5b $\alpha$ , which is redactional], 13a $\beta$ -b, 14a $\beta$ -15a $\alpha$ , 16-19, 24-26, 28-29	10.12-13a $\alpha$ , 14a $\alpha$ , 15a $\beta$ -b, 20
Darkness		10.21-23, 27
Death of all firstborns	11.1-8.12:21a, 27b, 29-34	11.9-10, 12.1-20, 28.

It is worth mentioning this division because there are numerous inconsistencies and contradictions within Exod. 7-11 that reveal its composition to be the work of multiple authors, so we should not mistakenly attribute the entirety of the plague cycle to the J source and the Yahwistic tradition of the highland settlers. This source division also calls into question the assumption and approach this eco-critical investigation operates under, arguing the J and P sources present diametrically opposing views of the natural world. And lastly, it raises the issue of how we should now approach analyzing the plagues, viewing them collectively or in isolation based on literary tradition.

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<sup>77</sup> See Candida Moss and Jeffrey Stackert's "The Devastation of Darkness: Disability in Exodus 10:21-23, 27, and Intensification in the Plagues," 363, Erhard Blum's *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch*, 247-248, Jeffrey Stackert's "Why Does the Plague of Darkness Last for Three Days? Source Ascription and Literary Motif in Exodus 10:21-23, 27," 657, 676.

It is argued by source critics that the plagues were written by these two different authors because, despite what can be considered a beautifully woven and cohesive narrative, the plague cycle is still very much flawed in its redaction. Indeed, certain J source plagues are overlapped or altogether disregarded by the P. For example, the pestilence brought forth in the fifth plague is said to kill “all” Egyptian livestock (Exod. 9.6), but in the sixth plague, the festering boils are described as infecting both “humans and animals throughout the whole land of Egypt” (Exod. 9.9). Which animals did these boils infect if all the animals had already been killed in the former plague? Furthermore, there seems to be an undeniable overlap between the third and fourth plague—gnats and flies being closely related and perhaps even too similar, especially when considering the J source unleashes locusts in the eighth plague. And lastly, a jarring confrontation with Pharaoh occurs in the ninth plague, where Moses tells the Pharaoh, “I will never see your face again,” (10.29) only to see the Pharaoh once again to announce the final plague of the J source (11.8).

These inconsistencies and doublets, although potentially problematic to the modern reader, may have not been regarded as such to the redactor. The concern is whether the Priestly content alters or conflicts with the pastoral and ecological tradition of the underlying Yahwist source. For the most part, the Priestly writers took their lead from the Yahwist, mimicking the J source account and adding onto it an additional three plagues for a total of ten—perhaps in an effort to parallel the Ten Commandments given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. However, as argued in chapter 1, the Priestly source presents God as an independent and transcendental agent that subordinates the natural world in his elevation; this, of course, conflicts with the Yahwist, who

views God as intertwined with Nature, as one and the same as the natural world, where Yahweh works through nature in order to protect it and His people.

Can such opposing views be reconciled, and does such polarity exist in the plague cycle? Largely, the plague cycle—despite its few narrative hiccups—can be read cogently and without any trouble in identifying its major themes. The themes of liberation, deliverance, and salvation that resonated so powerfully with the 12<sup>th</sup> century highland settlers connected also with the Priestly writers, who wrote during a tumultuous era of the Babylonian exile and captivity. For the Jews oppressed by the Babylonians, Exodus' message was all the more powerful; therefore, it is not in the least surprising that the Priestly writers sought to add onto the narrative additional theological significance. Exod. 7-11 is a narrative that focuses entirely on the subjugation of Pharaoh and his authority, the destruction of the nation he has created, and revelation to the Israelites of their God's power above all other—all of which being incredibly uplifting to those facing the hardships of oppression and exile from their lands.

Thus, in the case of the plague cycle, the P source does not conflict with the existing J source and its representation of the plagues in the slightest but merely adds onto it. The ecological elements of the J source were not lost and perhaps not even a point of contention for the Priestly writers, who simply did not view nature or urbanization as central to the stories but who saw the elevation and exaltation of God to be the primary focus of the text; yet, neither of these readings are mutually exclusive. Left intact is the Yahwistic tradition's ecological focus,

where environmental disaster, in turn, is used to illustrate God's incomparable power over Pharaoh and, by extension, humanity as a whole. And, yet, Nature can certainly be regarded in the same way, a power incomparable to human capacity.<sup>78</sup> In the Priestly creation account, Elohim's transcendence resulted in the subordination of the natural world. However, for the Book of Exodus, the Priestly writers abide by these same transcendental principles but, now, in accordance with J's already established formula, to elevate Yahweh above Pharaoh and Egypt—and, in this case, above cultural hegemony. Both writers accomplish their objectives and, thus, we are left with a text that still supports an eco-theological reading. However, while the P source is heavily influenced by the J in the plague cycle, we will still concentrate our examination on the Yahwistic tradition and its seven plagues (i.e. blood, frogs, flies, pestilence, hail, locusts, and death of firstborn), seeing that its tradition forms the foundation of our eco-critical reading.

As a whole, the order of the plagues reflects an intensification of severity throughout the cycle, with each plague becoming more dangerous than the last and culminating in a climatic and destructive episode of the Passover, killing every Egyptian firstborn. The turning of water into blood marks the beginning of the plagues and sets the stage and tone for the rest of the plagues to follow. Water can be considered the "life blood" of human existence—and the Near Eastern world understood this like no other; indeed, for a geographical area comprising mostly of arid

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<sup>78</sup> The Pharaoh's magicians attempt to replicate the natural disasters that Yahweh performs. However, Robert Alter notes, "[T]he soothsayers can do nothing more than a pale imitation of the destructive act of the God of the Hebrews; what they are powerless to do is to reverse the process of destruction" (349).



and semi-arid desert, one of the greatest determining factors of a civilization's success was its proximity to a major water source that provided the means to grow crops.

The Fertile Crescent is a geographical term used to designate the most fertile land in the Near East favorable for agricultural subsistence, encompassing the land around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (Mesopotamia and Assyria), along the coast of the Mediterranean (Levant) and into the Nile Delta of lower Egypt. Known as the cradle of civilization, it is no wonder why water was so prominently reflected in Near-Eastern poetry and literature. And for the ancient highland settlers, this was no exception. As an agrarian society, they not only knew the importance of water but, even more so, how powerful of a force it can be. In the narrative, we already have seen how water is portrayed as a violent and deadly force of nature capable of supplanting culture, but the first plague presents another aspect of water as natural disaster. The Yahwist writes:

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, 'Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt—over its rivers, its canals, and its ponds, and all its pools of water—so that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout the whole land of Egypt, even in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone.'" Moses and Aaron did just as the Lord commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and of his officials [Aaron] lifted up the staff and struck the water in the river, and all the water in the river was turned into blood, and the fish in the river died. The river stank so that the Egyptians could not drink its water, and there was blood throughout the whole land of Egypt" (7.20-21).

The Yahwist narrates the tainting of every water source in Egypt, from the smallest of containers that collect and transport well-water to the major bodies, like the Nile River—nothing is spared.

The turning of water into blood is symbolic of the importance of these water sources for the Egyptian empire, the notion that blood and water are both essential for human life; the irony, of course, is that for the Egyptians this importance is not truly realized until after this parallel has been established and their water source has been turned into blood and becomes unusable. Their “cry” here is proleptic of the cry that is heard throughout the land of Egypt after the death of all Egyptian firstborn, the motif of blood recurring in this last plague to mark Israel’s election as well as Egypt’s destruction (Fretheim 387).<sup>79</sup> Indeed, the first plague elicits a thematic connection with all the plagues that are to come; just as water is the source of all life, we see that what is to follow is the disruption of all life, the disturbance of an ecosystem (hordes of displaced frogs and swarms of flies that overtake the land), the death of cattle, the destruction of crops, plants, and trees, and, of course, the death of all of Egypt’s firstborn.

Looking more closely at the second plague, a frog infestation may not seem like much of a danger. Indeed, it is more of a nuisance than it is an actual threat; nevertheless, their presence in the land has crippling effects. The account reads, “[T]he river shall swarm with frogs; they shall come up into your palace, into your bedchamber and your bed, and into the houses of your officials and of your people, and into your ovens and your kneading bowls” (Exod. 8.3). Yahweh’s pronouncement is very detailed. The mention of “bedchambers,” “ovens,” and “kneading bowls” paints a stark portrait of unlivable conditions; there will be disturbance during

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<sup>79</sup> Repeatedly, Yahweh says to his people that he will “make a distinction” between the Israelites in the land of Goshen and the Egyptians, to whom the plagues are meted out exclusively (Exod. 8.23).

all waking hours and no rest for those wishing to retreat in repose. No one will gain respite, neither the royal “officials” nor the commoners. Ironically, these frogs, seemingly insignificant creatures in comparison to the mighty Egyptians, are able to elicit great consternation from them, remarking how little it takes for culture to be felled by nature and how insidious environmental repercussions can be.

Escalating further, the following Yahwistic plague contains swarming flies, which, like the frogs, infest the land and fill the houses. Here, the text describes, “In all of Egypt, the land was ruined because of the flies” (Exod. 8.24). This is the first instance of actual damage and destruction mentioned rather than just irritation and discomfort. We also see a transition from the previous J plagues, shifting from land to air, connoting that these environmental threats are present on all levels.

Along these lines, we see the rise of airborne pathogens in the fifth plague—a pestilence that is brought upon the Egyptians by Yahweh, targeting all livestock and animals of the field (Exod. 9.2). Relative to the loss of water, a valuable and necessary resource, the death of livestock is a critical blow to Egypt’s livelihood. From the perspective of the highland settlers, whose agrarian society knew all too well the value and significance of raising animals, this plague seems to be directly addressed to the “superior” and more “advanced” empires around them, as if to say: “Egypt, despite the vastness of your empire and its sophisticated architecture, you are no more infallible than we are.”

Confirming this, Yahweh sends down a series of even more destructive ecological disasters; the seventh plague evokes thunder and hail that targets and ravages the open fields, injuring and killing “every human or animal that . . . is not brought under shelter,” as well as

striking “down all the plants . . . and shatter[ing] every tree in the field” (Exod. 9.19, 25). And from the ruins, the next plague brings forth locusts to consume earth, to “eat every plant in the land, all that the hail has left” (Exod. 10.12). In the wake of their destruction, the fields lie barren and desolate, the most basic and fundamental of societal needs entirely eradicated. The famine-like conditions here serve as a stark contrast to the fruitfulness of Israelites and the prosperity of the kingdom they built for Pharaoh.

This degradation comes to a close with the final plague, where, like the seeds of the field, every Egyptian firstborn is ruthlessly exterminated. Throughout the plagues, the “hardened” heart of Pharaoh makes him unable and unwilling to regard the signs of the natural disaster or the power of Yahweh as the divine harbinger of environmental discord. And now, it is far too late to reverse this process. From the moment of his inception in the Book of Exodus, Pharaoh’s primary concern was to expand his empire and exterminate the Israelites; however, quite the opposite has occurred. Not only is this empire left in ruins in the wake of these ecological disasters, but Pharaoh’s attempt in the very beginning to kill all the Israelite firstborn sons has backfired, and he now bears the loss of all of Egypt’s firstborn.

Thus, if there is one thing illustrated throughout the plague cycle, it is that the forces of Nature, as manifest through divine association and intercession, are capable of displacing the anthropocentric notion that humankind has *dominion* over the natural world. Just as quickly as the nation expands, the powerful cities of Egypt are rapidly dissembled through natural disasters, which, in turn, eradicate all of the land’s natural resources (water, livestock, plant life, crops). This, in effect, not only cripples Egyptian society but also makes a general statement on how dependent we, as the human race, are on nature for our own survival. Terrence Fretheim, in his

essay, prompts us as readers to consider how the ecological disasters depicted within the text relate to—and are an inescapable commentary on—our own world. He writes:

As signs [and] portents, the intent of the plagues is not . . . to leave observers with mouths open in amazement. Having gotten people’s attention, they point beyond themselves towards a disastrous future, while carrying a certain force in their own terms. They are both acts of judgment in themselves and point towards a future judgment. . . . [I]t may be said that the plagues are ecological signs of historical disaster. (Fretheim 387)

And while Fretheim’s argument remains in the literary context of the Exodus narrative—with each plague culminating towards the final death blow dealt to the Egyptians at the Reed Sea (387)—there is also a sense that these “ecological signs” of a “disastrous future” exist not solely in textual isolation but reflect the world within and, by extension, outside the text, “the world in which the text materially and ideationally exists at the moment of reading” (Murphy 4).<sup>80</sup> Indeed, at times, the text seems unable to contain the plagues within its literary setting. According to Fretheim, “[T]he word *kōl*, “all,” is . . . used over fifty times” and “while used in every plague,

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<sup>80</sup> It would seem unavoidable that scholars, and even a few scientists, do take-up the challenge in trying to identify the plagues with possible natural phenomena. And while this is not a position I wish to take-up, for it is not in the interest of this investigation to confirm the veracity of the plagues or presume they are meant to be read in such a way, it at the very least illustrates the unavoidable referential connection between the text and the natural world these plagues seem to elicit. See G.H. Hort’s “The Plagues of Egypt,” which offers a possible reconstruction of the plagues as natural events that could have taken place in the land of Egypt, e.g. flooding in the Nile delta that supplied additional nutrients to allow red algae to grow in greater numbers, making the water toxic for aquatic life, thus creating a red Nile filled with dead fish (69). See also Siro Trevisanato’s *The Plagues of Egypt: Archaeology, History and Science Look at the Bible*, which discusses the implications the volcanic eruption of Santorini would have on the weather patterns, creating “plague-like” conditions for Egypt (152).

there is an explosion in its use (as well as *'eres*, “earth”) as one moves into the seventh plague” (386). Fretheim describes this as “an extravagance of language” or “perhaps even a failure of language, in an effort to speak of the increasing intensity in the final plagues: every tree, all the fruit, no one can see, not a single locus, the whole land. Everything is affected or nothing” (386).

The notion that language is incapable of capturing the gravity of the natural world, limited in its capacity to describe these natural phenomena, confronts and rejects the linguistic ontology of the Priestly creation account. Whereas in Genesis 1, divine speech pronounces the existence of the natural world (“let there be”), language for the Yahwist is just as overwhelmed as the natural world itself (Walsh 116). The repetition of *kōl* and *'eres*, is the best language can do to record the plagues; thus, with the linguistic boundaries broken, the reader is faced with the reality that nature is not merely a linguistic construct, a literary motif, a symbolic setting. Nature “isn’t reducible to a concept. . . . [It] really exists... [and is] actually present as an entity that affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it” (Barry 252).

For the ancient Israelites, this mistreatment is reflected in Egypt’s imperialistic domination, urban expansion, and cultural advancement—all of which challenge the natural world established by Yahweh. The more empires develop and nations expand, the more the natural world slowly recedes until nature is swallowed up entirely. The cost of cultural advancement for Pharaoh and his empire is clear, their “fatality” delivered in the most fitting way possible. For in the same way that culture gradually encroaches and supersedes nature through urban growth, Yahweh erodes and overtakes culture through the gradual intensification of ecological disasters, until Egypt is, in turn, consumed whole. To view the plagues as “ecological

signs of historical disaster” resonates powerfully with the words of Rachel Carson and her warning of the direction we are heading in. Carson writes:

We stand now where two roads diverge. But unlike the roads in Robert Frost's familiar poem, they are not equally fair. The road we have long been traveling is deceptively easy, a smooth superhighway on which we progress with great speed, but at its end lies disaster. The other fork of the road—the one less traveled by—offers our last, our only chance to reach a destination that assures the preservation of the earth” and perhaps even our survival (156).

The ancient Israelites’ indictment of Egyptian civilization captures both this rapid progression as well as this disastrous outcome; through the plagues, the binary opposition of culture over nature is, ultimately, overturned. The ancient Israelites are liberated out from under their oppressors, and their oppressors are condemned by their inability to regard the power of Yahweh as Nature or do anything to reverse the damage already done. In the end, the Israelites leave behind a desolate Egypt and proceed into wilderness to worship their God. This transition from a ruinous culture left in ruins to the purest and most pristine form of nature, untapped and untainted, serves to bring the Egyptian narrative to a close and delivers a powerful polemic from the highland settlers: a caveat to not become like Pharaoh and to never harden one’s heart to the natural world.

## CONCLUSION

*What we do about ecology depends on our ideas of the man-nature relationship. . . . Since the roots of our trouble are so largely religious, the remedy must also be essentially religious. We must rethink and refeel our nature and destiny. (White Jr. 5-6)*

Lynn White, Jr.'s essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis" was seminal in paying a close, eco-critical eye to how the Bible reflects the environment and how we have come to interpret its portrayal. Arguing that Christian doctrine, reflected in Genesis 1.28,<sup>81</sup> sets man, in the image of God, apart from nature, White held that the Bible was responsible for influencing the despotic treatment of the natural world and its subjugation for the needs of humankind.

As noted by Peter Harrison, however, "White's thesis does not . . . lie within the ambit of biblical criticism or hermeneutics but in the sphere of history," that is to say the "reception of the text" rather than the presumed "meaning" of the text or the meaning understood to the "community in which it first appeared" (89). Indeed, the original meaning behind the text has become entirely lost to us throughout centuries of interpretation, replaced and written over by interpretive communities<sup>82</sup> who have, in effect, "constituted" the text's "properties" and "assigned" its "intentions," constantly prescribing new meaning (Fish 171). However, the goal of

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<sup>81</sup>"God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>82</sup> Readings of the Torah have undergone centuries of interpretive approaches, including: Rabbinical commentaries (Mishnah, Talmudic), early Christian exegesis, Medieval Christian allegory, and the reformatory split that led to the creation of hundreds of Christian denominational communities, each with their own individual approaches to scripture.



modern scholarship is to try to place the biblical text against its historical and cultural context in order to derive and reconstruct what the texts might have meant to those who wrote it and the message they were presenting through their writings. White's essay neither takes this approach nor accounts for the methods of source criticism.

Looking at the biblical corpus, however, especially the Torah, as a composition of multiple authors, presenting very different agendas and ideologies, we can begin to understand and change the ways in which we view the biblical writings and their reflection of the natural world. Just as the biblical writings have undergone centuries of exegetic readings and interpretive approaches—methods which have never ceased to perpetuate and prescribe new meanings for these texts in our lives—it is now, more than ever, the time to uphold a different outlook on the biblical view of the natural world and our responsibility towards it.

White's critique is exclusively concerned with the text's historical interpretation and its use in justification for the despotic treatment of the natural world, but as Harrison writes, "The Bible does not present a single perspective on the question of the human relation to the natural world. There are, Ian Barbour points out, 'diverse strands in the Bible' regarding this issue."<sup>83</sup> If Genesis contains a dominion concept, it also puts forward one of stewardship. Gabriel Fackre<sup>84</sup> thus suggests . . . Genesis teaches 'stewardship over the earth before a higher claimant'" (89).

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<sup>83</sup> See Ian Barbour's anthology: *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes towards Nature and Technology* (6).

<sup>84</sup> See Fackre's article, entitled "Ecology and Theology," used in Barbour's anthology (122).

While parts of the biblical text might have “endorsed” exploitative attitudes of the environment, they are by no means a representation of the biblical text as a whole. As is evidenced in this examination, there is a polyphony, as well as a cacophony, of voices resounding within the Torah. Truly, when we look at the two major textual traditions of the Torah, the J and P sources, we see how different their theological views are and how these differences, in turn, reflect distinct representations of the environment and humanity’s relation to the non-human world.

The Yahwistic tradition that originated with the settlers of the Cisjordan Highlands in the 12<sup>th</sup> century BCE viewed human purpose and destiny as intertwined with the natural world. From the Garden of Eden story, we see this illustrated in the creation of man from the earth itself, as well as in his task to look after Eden, and his punishment for attempting to transcend and abandon his duty to the natural world. In the narrative, Yahweh is portrayed as one who protects the equilibrium of natural world and is, moreover, a part of it. Conversely, as an agrarian society who believed nature to be superior to city-culture and who also believed the natural world was jeopardized by cultural advancement, the highland settlers created stories that impugned and polemicized urbanization, from the Tower of Babel to the early narrative of the Exodus. In both cases, Yahweh removes the cultural signifier from view and displaces the anthropocentric elevation of culture over the natural world; and, in the latter episode, Yahweh uses the natural world to do so—unleashing plagues of ecological disaster to erode cultural advancement into ruin. This perspective of the early writers upholds nature as something greater than, transcendent of, human activity, and, thus, the divine is seen as one and the same as the natural world in the Yahwistic tradition.

This ecological precedence, however, became denaturalized as centuries of theological progression altered the early naturalistic elements of the J source into a more refined religiously-centered text replete with rituals, practices, and observations. The P source marks a movement from the earliest tribal stages of Israel's beginning and presents a decidedly more "culturized" document; however, with this progression came the loss of the personal connection between Yahweh and the earth. For the Priestly writers, Yahweh was to be elevated and extended, made entirely "other" from the cosmos. His transcendence may have been a vital necessity for Judaism's success, for it afforded those suffering under the weight of Babylonian exile the assurance that a higher power was in control the whole time, but it also meant that nature was no longer the interest of the biblical writings. The Priestly author writing the cultural mandate in Genesis did so with an intention to assert the Hebrew's divine right to fill the land and subdue it, including any and all other nations who attempt to claim it as their own. In the context of the Babylonian captivity, this meant to take back the land that was already theirs and to fulfill the divine blessing to be fruitful and multiply. As White points out, it is evident from the first creation account that the Priestly writers sought to elevate God—and humanity in his image—above the natural world because it was vital for forging their religious identity.

But, while much of scholarship wrestles with the debate between dominion and stewardship, few come to the conclusion that both, indeed, exist. Both writers, J and P, had very different views on humankind's relation to the natural world, and, no doubt, these environmental attitudes continued to be played out within and outside the confines of the first five books. As Rachel Carson advises, it is ultimately up to us which road we take. If the historical roots of our ecological crisis were brought forth from a reading of despotism, then we must also take White's

advice and “remedy” our understanding of the human-nature connection in turning to the ideals of stewardship and reverence for nature. To this, we may turn to the words of the Prophet Ezekiel:

On the day that I [Yahweh] cleanse you from all your iniquities,<sup>85</sup> I will cause the towns to be inhabited, and the waste places shall be rebuilt. The land that was desolate shall be tilled. . . . And they will say, “This land that was desolate has become like the garden of Eden. . . . I will make the fruit of the tree and the produce of the field abundant, so that you may never again suffer the disgrace of famine. . . . Then the nations that are left all around you shall know that I, the Lord, have rebuilt the ruined places, and replanted that which was desolate.  
(Ezekiel 36.33-35, 30, 36)

Bridging the past, present, and future, Ezekiel’s prophetic vision leaves us with a lot to consider. Six centuries after the highland settlers began their settlements in the shadows of greater, foreign nations, the prophets, too, envisioned a world not wholly unlike the one these settlers strived to create. From the ashes of 13<sup>th</sup> century Canaan followed a rebirth of a people in a new land, under a new God, where humankind’s responsibility to the environment was mirrored in a divine responsibility to oversee all of creation. And with the desolation of this land six centuries later,<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The earth will be desolate because of its inhabitants, for the fruit of their doings (Micah 7.13)

<sup>86</sup> The final Kingdom of Judah was overtaken during the Babylonian conquest, exile and captivity in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (ca 528) BCE .

Ezekiel envisaged its rebirth to follow: where out of its ruins will flourish a new home with humankind having atoned for its errors allowing for a new Garden of Eden to grow. Such a vision, I contend, cannot be bound solely to the context of antiquity. It relates to us even now. Where urban progression and environmental desolation often go hand in hand, ecological apocalypse overshadows utopia for us now in the same way that Babylon and Egypt overshadowed the land of Israel then. History is often said to repeat itself, and it is clear the Bible still has much to teach us, and we still have much to learn if we ever wish to have a chance at reclaiming Eden.

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