

PASSAGE TO WISDOM:  
PSALM 90, MOSES, AND RECURSIONS IN READING

by

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## ABBREVIATIONS

AAR	American Academy of Religion
ABD	<i>The Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
BDB	<i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
Bib	<i>Biblica</i>
BKAT	<i>Biblischer Kommentar: Altes Testament</i>
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CTLS	<i>Critical Terms for Literary Study</i>
EncJud	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i>
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i>
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
HB	Hebrew Bible
HCSB	<i>HarperCollins Study Bible</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
JAAR	<i>Journal of the American Academy of Religion</i>
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JSB	<i>Jewish Study Bible</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LXX	Septuagint
MT	Masoretic Text
NISB	<i>New Interpreter's Study Bible</i>
NIV	New International Version
NJPS	<i>Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text</i>
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
REB	Revised English Bible
RSV	Revised Standard Version
Sanh.	<i>Sanhedrin</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series.
SN	<i>Samyutta Nikaya</i>
Syr	Syriac
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
TgPss	Targum of Psalms
THAT	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i>

*VT*                    *Vetus Testamentum*  
*VTSup*                *Vetus Testamentum, Supplements*  
*ZAW*                    *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

## ABSTRACT

This project is a rhetorical-intertextual study of Psalm 90. It is also a study of the act of reading as a recursive, self-reflexive, self-organizing, and emergent process. The language of Psalm 90 forms a content chiasm, which can be read as a two-part structure or as a triptych organized around human experiences of divine wrath and compassion. Unique allusion to Moses in the psalm's superscription and shared language with Exod 32:12 evoke a reading of this poetic structure in the shape of a mountain: a reinscribed Sinai. As the mountain of God, Psalm 90 becomes a space to be traversed. Beginning and ending in the open-endedness of God, reading ascends through a lament on themes of temporality and transience, life and death; passes through figurations of divine burning; and descends into an imperative world sated in the moment at hand by God. To read Psalm 90 in this way is to return—with a difference. The readerly move brings other Sinai passages into play, elaborating a text more evocatively associated with the figure of Moses. It addresses a complex text with a reading process that is mobile, mutable, and relational in every sense. It provides for a reading of structure that enacts the change Psalm 90 reckons as wisdom while also suggesting a model for the linguistic construction of meaning.

Recursion, a concept of non-identical repetition borrowed from complexity theory, generates the methodology and shape of this study. Seven chapters map the

recursion in Psalm 90. Five chapter tropes outline its order: “mountain,” “law,” “fire,” “veil,” and “words.” These signs oversee a reading of the Psalter in the shape of Psalm 90 and of Exodus 32 as a paradigm for the law(s) given on that mountain; a reading of the ‘peak’ of Psalm 90 as the burning of the Holocaust and as the death of self figured in the language of Zen; a reading of Moses’ final descent from Sinai in Exod 34:29-35 in relation to the ‘descent’ from Psalm 90; and a critical inquiry into a postmodern rhetorical criticism.



SETTING THE SCENE:  
(TRACES, STRINGS)

*You turn mortals back to dust*  
Ps 90:3

One wants to begin at the beginning, but it isn't possible. History—that after the fact—comes marked with multiple before. A story surfaces, retreating toward speech. In our hands, our words, our visions, something is lost before it is found; a furrow rent before the web strung wide. Without the plural, no singular; without the broken, no connection; without the exhale, no breath. But it's *now* we are talking about. The insistent, endlessly moving moment of our lives. This, too, rises up already fractured; pieces meeting at the seams writing seeks to trace.

But I get ahead of myself . . . . What can be said, what I want to say, is that an interpretation, like a text, has any number of beginnings, which is to say, we enter—we begin—somewhere in the middle. This admission puts me at ease. Its landscape of transience, of dispossessing mediation is familiar. As text and as reader I locate myself in the *between*. It is my home, my place of recognition; that strange because always moving intersection where the 'I' who reads both knows and hides. Here the text is a means of connection. It is a cipher of movement, an embodied contingency. It is, as Lyotard has put it, a collection of “nodal points” in that web of recursions through which

communication passes.<sup>1</sup> From the space between, the medium of conduction, reading is the act of leaving and returning and leaving again in the “unclosable loop” that is text.<sup>2</sup>

This, I believe, is where Psalm 90 begins. A text about time, the lone psalm in the Psalter attributed to Moses casts its commentary on human limitation in the uncertain space between an infinite past and the open-ended future (cf. vv. 1-2 and 16-17). Somewhere in the middle, “all our days pass away” (v. 9a). Our lives slip off the page “like a sigh” (v. 9b), their “toil and trouble” (v. 10) given over to a never arriving after. In the prayer as in life, mortals live their cycle of dust-to-dust surrounded by the open frame of a kind of time deemed accessible only to God; that is, time without limits.

Humans know otherwise. We see rising and falling, give and take, the fury of finality and the grace of momentary joy. We also see, by way of Psalm 90, that we are never given to see all the way in any direction. Instead, what we *may* learn is to be able to ‘number our days’ (90:12); to count the gap; to *be* in the medial reality. We may learn to find ourselves where Psalm 90 locates reading.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Postmodern Condition*, 15. Lyotard refers here to the “self,” possibly the preeminent example of a text. In Lyotard’s text, the vocabulary of systems theory is adapted in favor of a language games paradigm.

<sup>2</sup> Barbara Johnson describes her own writing about writing as “an unclosable loop” in that “it is an attempt to comprehend that which it is comprehended by” (“Writing,” 39). When the reader is herself understood as a text, such characterization applies to all writing.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE TEXT THAT I AM

*From endlessness to endlessness—You are*  
Ps 90:2b (t[w]o be)

The more disorderly a message, the higher is its information content.  
Paul Cilliers

This project is an exploration of reading's fertile breach. It is two-fold, many times over, relying for method on the divided iterations of a recursively read text. In the biblical fold, it is a rhetorical-intertextual study of Psalm 90 set in the ideological milieu of deconstruction. Among the web of intertexts connected to Psalm 90, Exodus 32 (the golden calf) and Exodus 34 (the veiling of Moses' face) figure prominently in this reading. It is also a study of the reading process. In the course of this study, I will reinscribe the structure of Psalm 90 as a means of making the 'passage to wisdom' I read in this text.

Ever since the divine name was revealed to Moses on Sinai, the verb *to be* has taken on the complexity of text. Whether a proper name, an uncertain conjugation, or simply the sound of breath moving through fire, *that I am* (who I will be?) displaces the possibility of a fixed, singular, and knowable other and, in its place, opens up the

possibility of relationship.<sup>1</sup> Interaction and difference become necessary for life. With reality so storied, the relationship between God and Israel becomes a paradigm for language. Both are on the move, crossing thresholds, belonging to each other but never meeting face to face. Moses, the consummate prophet, rises up to negotiate this mobility and distance, but it is the space his mediation marks—the space between—that takes on prophetic proportions.

Prophecy is the legacy of this tradition, but reading is its inheritance. From generation to generation, the interpreted word passes from mouth to mouth, page to page, spawning its *translated*, *interpolated* meanings in the undulating middle ground of reading: text yielding text yielding text. The process is recursive—never quite repeating itself—and as unpredictable as a next generation’s offspring. It assures that reading (despite the unavoidable gap) be forever bound to its next of kin, dependent for meaning-making on the very difference it would bridge. From the beginning, interpretation issues in a kind of return that goads and unsettles identity, taking up with text that is always already—so never once and for all—read.<sup>2</sup>

If reading envisions a text that burns but is not consumed, it does so standing on ordinary ground. Reading takes the vertical divining rod of prophecy and lays it on its

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<sup>1</sup> For discussion of the divine name revealed to Moses in Exod 3:14, see Fretheim, *Exodus*, 62-67; and E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*, 268-70.

<sup>2</sup> On sameness and rereading, see Barthes, *S/Z*. See also Barbara Johnson’s reading of Barthes’ reading of Balzac in B. Johnson, *The Critical Difference*, 3-12.

(slithering) side.<sup>3</sup> It casts the urge toward meaning-making in all too human terms.

Relative and relational, it allows understanding to be other than self-contained, to be, as Barbara Johnson has put it, “traversed by otherness.”<sup>4</sup>

There is a (re)productive doubleness to this ‘crossing,’ a division at once disruptive and potentiating, a difference that makes reading—makes change—possible. Out of this possibility, interpretation proceeds with the veiled insight that however charted, reading is likely to take its own course, dividing and reconfiguring into “a space that is not given in advance but that opens up as one advances.”<sup>5</sup>

As a site of multiple crossings, Psalm 90 offers a map of this complex terrain. The psalm’s chiasmic order, Mosaic allusions, and nodal location in the Psalter (on the cusp between books 3 and 4) feed into a matrix of connections out of which a recurring pattern emerges. Read in relation, these aspects of textual production guide reading into a constructed space of ascent and return, dissimulation and reorientation; a rhetorical site reminiscent of the mercurial mountain on which Moses, prophet to the people, meets his God. In the present study, this rhetorical-intertextual structure—coupled with the psalm’s

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<sup>3</sup> See Exod 4:3. Moses’ staff turned snake suggests that from a biblical perspective the word of YHWH is no less dangerous or unpredictable than reading. For a ‘dangerous’ reading of the permutations of Moses’ staff in biblical text, see Camp, *Wise, Strange and Holy*.

<sup>4</sup> *A World of Difference*, 116. So described, interpretation invokes a double crossing. (Is it the text or the reader who is ‘double crossed’?) Traversal signals a passing through and a denial. It conjures a medial ground that is both crossed and countered; a text imbued with excess meaning and with self-difference. The same can be said of Israel’s God, whose sharply divided character is as irreconcilable with itself as the texts that “utter” this God’s name(s). On the “profound disjunction at the core of [YHWH’s] life,” see Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 268.

<sup>5</sup> Derrida, *Points . . . Interviews*, 202.

effective displacement of the reader—acts as a mobile template for reading. My hope is that by following the structure’s characteristic pattern through a series of recursions, interpretation, like the prayer of Moses, will yield an image of meaningful change, a momentary “snapshot” of a (re)read text relating to itself through time.<sup>6</sup>

To say that reading is relational and contingent, medial and productively doubled is to invoke dialogue as method. Setting the conversation within the recursive schema of Psalm 90, I plan to engage in a dialogical exchange between thematic aspects of the psalm—its association with Moses, concern with time and transience, encounter with wrath, and emergent wisdom—and aspects of reading reflected in these themes, such as form and spatiality, history, complexity, relationship, and imagination. In so doing, I set out to traverse the (re)productive interface between reading Psalm 90 and a collection of related texts and understanding what it is that happens when we read.

Five interpretive metaphors generated by my reading of the psalm provide a creative counterpoint for this dialogue: mountain (הר), law (תורה), fire (אש), veil (מסוה), and words (דברים).<sup>7</sup> Each of these figures acts, I believe, as a hologram; a part containing

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<sup>6</sup> According to Cilliers, a key characteristic of complex systems is that in order to describe them, “you have, in a certain sense, to repeat the system” (*Complexity and Postmodernism*, 10). My aim in this project is to repeat, in some sense, the system I mean to describe. For the metaphor of a “snapshot” of relationships over time, see William Doll’s description of a phase space diagram, also known as the ‘Butterfly Effect,’ in *A Post-Modern Perspective*, i. An image of the diagram appears in chapter 6 of this study.

<sup>7</sup> These metaphors are not taken directly from the vocabulary of Psalm 90. They are signs of the relationships that emerge in the course of this reading of the psalm. In chapters 6 and 7, I address these tropes as ‘strange attractors’ and elaborate the role they play in my text. The purpose of these images is both practical and poetic. As singular

the whole. In other words, each pursues the same question(s) along an only somewhat different path. Each organizing trope also marks a particular site of entry and exchange in the series of feedback loops that constitute this project, an area of attraction that allows for emergent order in an otherwise endlessly open inquiry.

*'The Text' as Autobiography*

Beginnings and endings are of special moment to this study, just as immortal time and its mortal boundaries represent a key concern within Psalm 90. Time and text are therefore not only the media in which this work unfolds, but also subjects it seeks to address. As overlapping spheres of interest, time and text interrelate in multiple ways. Each is a necessary and reciprocal scene of interpretation, without which there would be no sense of time and, from the reader's perspective, no text. Each is an intertextual site through and through, for only in relation—to what has been and to what may be—do time and text mean. And each requires the other in order to endure, moving into the world and toward the unknown by reaching across the perimeter of an internal, self-reflexive intertextuality (intratextuality) to larger and ever enlarging relationships. Time and text are thus linked together, not only by this study and in Psalm 90, a text about time, but also by the mutual ability to press each other on in the movement of meaning-making.

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images, they provide a focal point or illuminated node in the circuit of curves and crossings that make up each chapter. On the other hand, the tropes are meant to inspire the kinds of “twists” and “turns” in associative thought for which figurative tropes are named (McLaughlin, “Figurative Language,” 81).

The connection between time and text runs through language, whose relationality knows nothing of beginnings and endings but is intimately familiar with thresholds.<sup>8</sup> This is because language, like time and text, happens in the *between* and so always involves a crossing over, a bearing across.<sup>9</sup> Intertextuality is one way of acknowledging that language comes to us as an alloy, always already used.<sup>10</sup> In the same way, a text never begins with or in itself, nor does it arrive, by nature or by force, at fixed and final meaning. Context provides an endless before, which promises in turn countless afters. Feminist criticism has recognized this bind—the slippery footing of stable meaning, the binding of language to culture—with its enduring insight that there is no such thing as a non-ideological interpretation. Deconstruction turns on a similar mobility, the combination of lack and excess, with its attraction to the heterogeneity and dissociation within a text, the undecidability or *translatability* of language, and the necessity of difference to relationship.<sup>11</sup> Somewhere between disruption and attentiveness

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<sup>8</sup> The language of thresholds is a common idiom in deconstruction. The notion of a cusp that is both barrier and entry point will be appropriated in this study, particularly in the chapters relating law to history (chapter 3) and veil to prophecy (chapter 5). For a select overview of Derrida's renderings of threshold, see Kamuf, "Introduction: Reading Between the Blinds," xiii-xlii.

<sup>9</sup> On continuity and discontinuity in the linguistic construction of meaning, see my essay, "Let There Be Darkness: Continuity and Discontinuity in the 'Curse' of Job 3."

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Green uses this amalgam imagery to describe Bakhtin's dialogic view of language: "All utterances are alloys, many times over" (*Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical Scholarship*, 58).

<sup>11</sup> Much of this language is common cause for both Derridian deconstruction and intertextuality in the tradition of Bakhtin and Kristeva. The interplay between these critical perspectives helps shared descriptors to resist the reifying tendency of naming and to remain effective as products of the 'differential matrix' to which they would point. On



interpretation begins, already underway;<sup>12</sup> and in the tension between particularity and possibility it ends, fodder for a next beginning.

In keeping with my reading's engagement with these traditions, I want to begin with the most forthcoming of *between-text* positions I know: the text that I am. This point of entry is inspired by Derrida's (dis)claim(er) that we never escape autobiography and by the relatively recent and still marginal legitimation in biblical studies of the hermeneutical approach known as autobiographical criticism.<sup>13</sup> My intent here is not so much to tell my story, nor is it to shed light on a text by situating the details of my life in relation to it. Rather, it is to acknowledge the ideological already-ness from whence every reading of text begins. This avowal is part of who I am and, curiously, it is part of the extended message I read in Psalm 90.

If autobiography is, as Derrida has suggested, a general condition of writing, then interpretation, the ambiguously intermixed writing of a reading, bears a narrative that begs to be told. What is at stake in this "irruption of the 'I'" (the readerly eye) is not the

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naming and the matrix of *différance*, see Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*, 8; see also Derrida's essay, "*Différance*," 1-27.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Brogan situates deconstruction in the tension between "attentiveness" and "disruption," the task of receiving tradition and of "dismantling [its] founding texts." (See the roundtable discussion with Derrida et al. led by John Caputo in Caputo's edited volume, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 8.) What deconstruction dismantles, or at the very least undermines, is the fallacy of founding texts, which tradition can pass on pristine and intact. Brogan's language has special resonance with rhetorical criticism's focus on attention to detail, a position also subject to deconstructive dismantling.

<sup>13</sup> Athalya Brenner makes effective use of autobio-criticism in, "'My' Song of Songs," 567-79.

putatively subjective matter of self-revelation but the always veiled relation of an author to her reading.<sup>14</sup> This is the story I want to tell, however impossible that may be.<sup>15</sup>

In this ‘post’-marked era of increasingly cultivated interdisciplinarity, it is not uncommon to hear academic self-disclosure that begins with: ‘I came to [field A] through the unlikely door of [field B].’ My version of inheritance goes like this. I fell into biblical studies through the trap door of Zen meditation. Sitting on my cushion one day, I heard my quieted self say, ‘I think I’ll go back to school.’ Before long, I was captivated by the study of the Hebrew Bible.

In many respects, what attracted me and attracts me still to the Hebrew canon is its difficulty. The text cannot be reconciled to itself—unless reconciliation means living with the discomfort and uncertainty of a book that is at once troubling and poetic, dangerous and inspiring; a book with an aptitude for “being interrupted from within.”<sup>16</sup> These are ‘pages’ that turn on contradiction: a tolerance for different versions and ill-disguised seams paired with a brutal intolerance for difference in the face of national monotheism;<sup>17</sup> an “insistence on divine incorpality and unrepresentability” opposite the

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<sup>14</sup> On the “irruption of the ‘I’ within the critical task,” see Kitzberger’s introduction to *The Personal Voice in Biblical Interpretation*, 2. For an insightful exposition of the Derridian play between I and eye, see Pyper’s essay, “Other Eyes.”

<sup>15</sup> Just as reading can never be innocent of ideology, so the intent to disclose readerly ideology from the start will always be compromised. Despite our best efforts, it cannot be done. *Nevertheless*, one wants to try. For a theology of “Nevertheless!” see Bultmann, “The Crisis of Faith,” 240-56.

<sup>16</sup> Newton, *Narrative Ethics*, 177; quoted in Fewell, *The Children of Israel*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> The instruction to the invading, inheriting Israelites is “you must not let anything that breathes remain alive” (Deut 20:16). With defeat, the Canaanites become outsiders. Not a trace of them shall remain: “you must utterly destroy them . . . show

anthropomorphized “image of a sexless father god”;<sup>18</sup> an understanding of the one God who is both enemy and protector, arbiter of wrath and respite of enduring grace. Neither can the reader proceed unawares. So often these narratives are borne along by what is not said, by gaps, silences, indecipherable omissions; or by too many possibilities, the density of a multivalent word or the opaqueness of a form used only once in the canon. And then there are the remains. The absence of women in an androcentric narrative leaves traces; bits of erasure stuck in the teeth of a story that would, but cannot, expunge its own other. Unchecked by these schisms, the Tanakh makes for perilous reading. As a theological pursuit, this checking process held considerable promise for me. Here was a religious-literary document, an amalgamated text, in which the principle of non-contradiction could not hold.<sup>19</sup> My Zen self took note.

At the same time, there was for me another ‘self’ addressed by the lure of biblical criticism. I am a musician, by training and by vocation, an occupation I have continued during the years of retooled study. The result is that I shift back and forth between a practice studio and a library, an orchestra and a classroom, a musical score and a literary text. Like many people in our society, I lead a mobile and interrupted life.

There is method in the madness of staying this divided course. It means that I seldom sit down—to play or to write—without crossing a threshold, without a sense of

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them no mercy” (Deut 7:2; cf. also 12:29-31). For examples of the ban or *herem* carried out, see Josh 6:21; 10:40; 11:11-15. On the violence of monotheism in the HB, see Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain*.

<sup>18</sup> Exum, “Feminist Study of the Old Testament,” 105. On the anthropomorphized body of a male God, see also Moore, *God’s Gym*.

<sup>19</sup> See B. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 12.

loss as well as carryover. This strikes me as an advantage. To be divided, reminded of one's own self-difference on a daily basis wards off any number of interpretive evils. It produces a pause, a moment of recollection between disciplines.<sup>20</sup> It allows practice to carry a particular perspective with more candor and intention. And it cautions against believing that one's own experience set up as an analogue for reading is anything more than another occasion for interpretation.

If Zen proved a slippery slope toward the paradoxes of theological inquiry, music seemed to me more like a stage door to reading, a passage from one kind of performance to another. The craft of shaping a phrase is not so different from the skill of crafting a compelling interpretation. In both cases, something is made without which no score would be heard and no text read. To one who has long been fascinated by the play of structure in sound, the study of music played like a rehearsal in progress for reading the multiphonic organizations of literary texts.

In retrospect, I can see how this inadvertent preparation for biblical criticism honed my eye to look for connections within texts, to notice patterns in language, and to enjoy the way textual meaning can be constructed on multiple levels. (Whether structural connections are *in* the text or in the 'eye' is another question.) Surely, I thought, compositional form in music had its counterpart in the composite orders of texts. Take,

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<sup>20</sup> A notable example of this 'advantage' is the payoff of practicing difficult musical passages recursively. Rather than repeating a phrase or figure over and over in quick succession (a routine readily attested by walking down the halls of just about any conservatory practice wing), the addition of a pause, allowing one's mind to catch up, absorb, and adjust, raises the likelihood of improvement exponentially. Without this space or pause, practice tends to be a repetition of ingrained habits and mistakes.

for example, the forward and reverse, upside-down and right side-up crab cannons in Bach's Musical Offering and the repeated use of parallelism and chiasm in the Hebrew Bible. Or, a later expression, the intricately arranged carpet pages of the Leningrad Codex (1008) and George Crumb's score to *Makrokosmos*, in which circular staves strung with complex notation graph the music to be played in the image of "twin suns."<sup>21</sup>

With Bach's recursive structures and Crumb's doubly ordered musical language in my reader's ear, I found myself drawn to rhetorical criticism, a method of reading that focuses on the relationships between various aspects of graphically ordered language, including the relationship between that language and its reading. (Where this order comes from is again another question.) Rhetorical structure, artfully read, seemed to me to make well-crafted text sing.<sup>22</sup> It surfaced as a kind of counterpoint that allowed text to mix 'showing' and 'telling' and invited reading to do the same, to be like what it was about. The effect—on reading and on me—was one of imaginative connection, of a generative complementarity, of poetic resonance even where the subject matter was deeply dissonant. To interpret rhetorical structure was to address a literary composition in a contemporary version of its own language.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> See the fourth movement, "Twin Suns (Doppelgänger aus der Ewigkeit)."

<sup>22</sup> The obvious romanticism of this statement begs qualification. In its exquisite beauty, music has the power to depict and express some of humankind's most unspeakable horrors. Similarly, a text can be beautiful even in its capacity to evoke the ugly. This is not to give language a *carte blanche* with its power, only to say that well-wrought language does have power.

<sup>23</sup> See Moore's description of his "tactic" of "[writing] in a related idiom" in *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives*, xviii. Yvonne Sherwood effectively 'navigates' Jonah with a similar approach in *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*.

There is a sought after coherence in this way of reading text—a coherence perhaps matched by my comparisons of music and Hebrew text, playing and reading. But this is not the whole story. The study of music also gave me a certain kind of preparation for the *incoherence* of reading biblical text; for the dissolution of stable structures and the dislocation of interpreted meaning at large in current practice. By this I mean that the historical movement in music composition and theory away from a fixed key, where C Major is the center of a diatonic universe, to 12-tone systems, the logical culmination of that order, to eventual atonality helped me feel at home in a readerly universe with no fixed center. It also made me aware that this fluidity only makes sense in relation to a more stable past.

But is it stable? True to my time, and to its dialectical ancestry, I would say yes and no.<sup>24</sup> Experience tells me that change requires something to push against—a metaphorical image with clear implications of stability.<sup>25</sup> I have recounted here some of the ways this pushing, with its interplay of continuity and discontinuity, has happened to me. But have I said what *really happened*?<sup>26</sup> Even with a best effort to explain my

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<sup>24</sup> Dialectical theology in the manner of Schleiermacher et al. forms the backdrop against which deconstruction plays. The ‘linguisticity of being’ has emerged as a question of the textuality of being. My own ancestry runs through Jack Forstman, who together with James Duke translated Schleiermacher’s notes on hermeneutics from the German into English (*Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*).

<sup>25</sup> On the relationship of metaphor and categories of imaginative thought to bodily experience, see Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*; also Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

<sup>26</sup> One can no longer use this phrase in academic discourse without citing Leopold van Ranke, the Enlightenment historian who has been lionized and demonized (verily

perspective, have I told the truth? Is there a ‘truth’ to be told, or better yet, a *tell-able* truth? Is there any other kind? The confluence of these questions is where history and language overlap, an intersection—or perhaps a gap—in which biblical criticism has taken a very personal interest of late.

I share that interest in history and in language. And once again, I take comfort in the proddings and displacements that attend it, even where my own historically embedded approach is—as it is—put at risk. Something more to push against? Maybe. But in the ‘brave (re)new(ing) world’ of de-centered reading theory, a stable past is precisely what is called into question. Here, history is the dislodged earth in a post-Copernican universe. With each turn, it shifts on its axis, casting a changing shadow on the never quite blank page of its enigmatic moon. And reading is the sun; blinding if you look straight at it, but otherwise making what sight we have possible.<sup>27</sup>

To be at ease in a changing world is at best a relative advantage. As a woman of biblically oriented faith with a sense of the compromise in both of these positions, I look at the familiarity of division with cautious eyes. On the other hand, language often seems

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stuffed and mounted) by postmodern historians and biblical critics alike—something to push against in the move away from solid facts.

<sup>27</sup> In a way Copernicus would not have imagined, a postmodern constructivist hermeneutics sees reading as the *lamp*, the *mind*, and—to its own undoing—the *ruler* of a textual universe. See the oft-quoted line from Copernicus’ *De revolutionibus*: “Hence the sun is not inappropriately called by some the lamp of the universe, by others its mind, and by others its ruler.” (For the quote and commentary on it, see *The MacTutor History of Mathematics Archive*, s.v. “Copernicus Summary,” <http://www-history.mcs.st-andrews.ac.uk/Mathematicians/Copernicus.html> [accessed January 20, 2005].)

to me like our last, best hope; the beginningless, endless bridge that connects us to we know not what.

So it is that my reading of a text, a prayer to “count our days” (Ps 90:12), puts its store(y) in questions: What is a text? What is history? What is complexity? And as to “the work of our hands” (Ps 90:17): Can theology learn something from a hermeneutics of reading that grows out of the reflexive iterations of a single prayer, and might both perspectives be enlarged in the process? My sense is that Psalm 90 has something to say to these questions, but that remains to be seen.

*Magna Charta or the Lay of the Textual Land*

Despite postmodernism’s “incredulity towards metanarratives,”<sup>28</sup> projects of this size continue to provide their readers with detailed roadmaps and overarching structures. This one is no exception. It is organized into seven chapters, a number whose biblical significance (unity, completion<sup>29</sup>) might raise more than one skeptical poststructuralist eyebrow.<sup>30</sup> I chose this arrangement for a number of reasons.

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<sup>28</sup> Ironically, Lyotard’s “[simplified] to the extreme” definition of postmodernism (cf. *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv) presents its own version of what it rejects. A deconstructive reading might smile and comment that this self-subversion is part of what it means to be postmodern. A rhetorical reading might argue for the effect of the definition: it does what it says.

<sup>29</sup> On the symbolic function of the number seven in the HB, including its “innate mystical power” and its function as a “complete or round number of moderate size,” see Abrahams, “Numbers, Typical and Important,” 1257. Citing the book of Daniel (Dan 7:25; 9:27; 12:7), Abrahams notes that “[t]he half of seven, three and a half, also has a special significance.”

<sup>30</sup> So Athalya Brenner voiced to a class of graduate students her suspicion of any book divided into seven sections (seminar on “Violence and the Hebrew Bible,” Brite Divinity School, October 2001).



Seven belongs, through its association with Sabbath (the seventh day of creation), to the two Sinai texts whose relationship to Psalm 90 this reading will explore: Exodus 32 and 34. The giving of the Sabbath law (YHWH to Moses; Exod 31:12-17) immediately precedes the episode of the golden calf in Exodus 32; and the passing on of the Sabbath law (Moses to the people; Exod 35:1-3) immediately follows the veiling of Moses' face in Exod 34:29-35. Seven thus frames or 'hems in' these curiously divided texts.<sup>31</sup> The seven-part structure of this study reinscribes these intertextual associations.

As an organizing figure, seven displays a nascent hospitality to recursion.<sup>32</sup> Arranged chiastically (3—1—3), its numerals move up/down or in/out beginning with one and culminating in seven—a return, but with a difference. The configuration suggests that similar iterative relationships are also at play between its various members, with one recurring in some changed way in seven, two in a modulating exchange with six, and three refracted by five. Four, according to this model, would relate to—and change—everything.

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<sup>31</sup> Exodus 32 and 34 both take place on or at the "edge" (cf. Exod 19:12) of Mount Sinai. In between, the text's apparent cohesion dissolves in detour. Moses receives the command to "Go, leave this place" (33:1), and the Israelites proceed towards the promised land, only to end up a chapter later back at the foot of Sinai. Departure and an editorial rupture open like a wilderness valley between the two (identical?) mountains of God. Chapters 3 and 5 will address this textual schism.

<sup>32</sup> Recursion is a concept borrowed from nature and articulated in mathematics. Simply understood, it is a process of iteration involving self-similarity and change. Recursive relationships are non-linear and emergent, generating patterns that recur at multiple levels of scale. This project develops the notion of recursion as a model for the reading process. For a more thoroughgoing definition of the term and discussion of its theoretical implications as a model for interpretation, see chapter 6, pp. 206-7.

Seven as an organizing trope is particularly vulnerable to deconstruction. The circular unity its symbolism implies is undermined by the very incursion of meaning that makes symbolism possible. Intertextuality sees to this double bind. Recursively ordered, a seven part structure allows for, perhaps even invites, its own undoing. What ‘comes around’ does not ‘go around’ without change. Finally, where reading is concerned, a metrical model of any kind quickly runs up against its limit. Language passes over and around all such barriers into the living, breathing flux where readerly meaning is constructed. Seven times seven is not enough to contain it.

The seven chapters in this study are laid out along these organizational lines. However, they were not so conceived. My work began with a rhetorical-intertextual analysis of Psalm 90 and grew up in response to a structure I saw ‘happening’ in the psalm.<sup>33</sup> Briefly stated, Psalm 90 can be read in the shape of a mountain. The path of the prayer outlines a content chiasm, beginning and ending in the endlessness of God (vv. 1 and 17), going and returning through the cycles of human life (vv. 3 and 15), and moving from the fact of life and death (v. 6) to the possibility of wisdom (v. 12) by moving through the illuminating (v. 8), annihilating (v. 9) wrath of God.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> I use the term structure somewhat loosely, or perhaps broadly, both in the sense of a process with a recognizable order and a rhetorical space in which reading takes place. This study will develop the idea of rhetorical structure as a ‘spatiality of reading,’ citing recent appropriations of critical space theory into biblical studies as precedent.

<sup>34</sup> The core of the chiasm as envisioned (vv. 7-11), is marked by five references to divine wrath using three different words (אף, vv. 7, 11; חמה, v. 7; עבר, vv. 9, 11). A map of the proposed structure is included in chapter 2, p. 30.

This structure, the lay of the textual land and seed of my study, emerges through the reading of parallels or recursions in the psalm's content. My contention is that reading the connections made visible in the detail of this structure opens up the psalm in new ways and adds richness, or density, as well as rigor to an interpretation of the text.<sup>35</sup> It also unfurls the bloodlines between a powerful prayer attributed by a changed and changing community to its singular emblem of prophecy (Deut 34:10-12) and other 'mountain texts' in the Bible, notably texts in which Moses is figured.

The mountain structure I read in Psalm 90 is also a construct of intertextuality, another expression of recursion. This study makes no claim for Mosaic authorship or for the motives of the tradents who, with the superscription (v. 1a), attributed the psalm to Moses. It does, however, address the association with Moses as another aspect of the text, an aspect that sets in motion a larger matrix of relationships. The richness of these relationships inspired my choice to read Psalm 90 *as if* "a prayer of Moses" (v. 1a), and in that *as if* stance, to see the chiasmic pattern of the psalm in the shape of a mountain.<sup>36</sup>

In chapter 2, I will flesh out my reading of Psalm 90, trekking up and down the craggy sides of its rhetorical construction and making a first pass at making sense of the

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<sup>35</sup> Rigor has a dubious ring to it. Poststructuralism has shown 'exactitude' in reading to be a false idol. Precision, meticulousness, accuracy, and even thoroughness also teeter on the edge of the interpretive altar. Yet rigor is what we continue to seek in our relative pursuits. As a standard of excellence, rigor—a merger of passion and patience—has passed into postmodernism in a notable way in the field of education, where changes in ideas about what constitutes learning are evoking (rigorous) reassessments of how to gauge effective teaching. See, e.g., Doll, *A Post-Modern Perspective*, 174-83.

<sup>36</sup> On reading "as-if," see Brenner, *I AM: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*, xii.

awful fury that descends on its shrouded peak. Rhetoric, space, and intertextuality provide ‘gear’ for the passage, but while *en route* my concern with these conditions of reading is more practical than theoretical. Here, the movement through “wrath” (v. 7; cf. vv. 7-11) to “wisdom” (v. 12) will be read in terms of the prayer’s traditional associations with human mortality and divine continuance.

As a medium of relationship, rhetorical structure is implicated in meaning-making by its participation in the never finally resolved negotiation of identity and difference. The hermeneutical model for this mediation is language, but its biblical prototype is Moses; Moses, the man—of, with, to—God, whose prophetic life earns him a place in the gap of our understanding. *What did he see in the smoke and fire? Of what purpose his death on the [always moving] threshold of promise?*<sup>37</sup> *Why the echo of this distant prayer coming back to Moses in the form of his only psalm and forward in time as a re-told remnant of prophecy?* And a question built on questions: *Does Moses’ prophetic solitude bridge the gap between humanity and God, or merely mark it?*

The middle three chapters of this project turn more directly to the figure of Moses as a means of exploring the intertwined themes of timelessness and transience, wrath and refuge, frailty and sufficiency—themes that belong to Psalm 90, but that also address the pursuit of reading. Here Exodus 32 and 34 string the textual warp (*texturally* speaking) of

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<sup>37</sup> Moses’ death opens up gaps that are, I believe, ingredient to his prophetic function. The reason for his death before ‘crossing over’ into the promised land is never given (cf. Deut 34:4). The place of his burial is never known (Deut 34:6). And what of the paradigmatic prophet’s apparent silence through the first three books of the Psalter?

my reading, while the fractured, already read images of law (תורה), fire (אש), and veil (מסוה)—all associations with Moses—throw the threads of its designing woof.<sup>38</sup>

In these intermediate essays, my goal is to enter the domain of the psalm by enlarging it.<sup>39</sup> While the rhetorical construct of a mountain outlines a path of reading mapped along its surface, an intertextual reading finds that to traverse this marked space is a matter of trespass. On the way ‘up’ the figurative mountain (chapter 3), a study of the breaking and giving of the law and the place of Psalm 90 within the storied shape of the Psalter intrudes on the structure that suggests it—an incursion into the organized space of rhetorical structure inspired by that structure’s own prodding: *what’s inside?* Here I plan to appropriate Derrida’s notions of *différance* and *supplément* as tools of (hi)story-telling, allowing my reading to examine text and history as a single, reiterated question.<sup>40</sup> On the

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<sup>38</sup> These chapters each address in different ways the doubleness and distancing necessary to the linguistic construction of meaning. Chapters 3 and 5 approach these themes through readings of texts whose own conditions of fracture and separation expose something of the fiery chasm underneath the crust of Psalm 90’s structured lament. In chapter 4, I go for the heart of the matter: the fire that, according to biblical tradition, only Moses sees directly (“face to face,” Exod 33:11) and survives.

<sup>39</sup> My hope is founded on received tradition. Harold Bloom described Midrash as “a seeking for the Torah . . . in the mode of making the Torah larger” (*A Map of Misreading*, 42).

<sup>40</sup> In this chapter, I draw on the work of Gerald Wilson (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*) and others to consider the shape of the Psalter as a re-telling of Israelite history, from the rise of the monarchy (Books 1 and 2), to the fall of the Jerusalem temple and the failure of kingship (Book 3), to the return to Mosaic faith as the ground of hope (Books 4 and 5). According to this storied structure, Psalm 90, the opening psalm in Book 4, falls at the critical turn back to a community constituted only by faith—and memory. The psalm’s threefold use of שׁוּב (“turn back,” “return,” vv. 3, 13) and its attribution to Moses take on added significance. So does its mountain structure, which can be read as a recursive hologram of the Psalter as a whole.

way ‘down’ (chapter 5), an inquiry into the enigmatic image of the “veil” (Exod 34:33, 34, 35) and its function in prophecy will aim to walk the crooked path between language, interpretation, and the hybrid character of prophetic relationship.

Between these excursive interlocutions, the image of fire on a mountaintop limns the peak of Psalm 90’s structure (chapter 4). Fire is a strange attractor that plays in my reading like both a climax and recursive ground<sup>41</sup> in music. Its smoky pillar orders and unsettles. The multiform image raises a specter of irreducible complexity: a bush that burns but is not consumed; wrath in whose source humanity hides; the ‘I am with you’ in the face of which no one can survive. And it raises for me as a reader the possibility that what we ‘pass through’ on the way to creative and responsible, but also transformative interpretation—what I will call *wise* reading (cf. Ps 90:12)—is the humbling, destabilizing, endlessly generating and ultimately open matrix of complexity.<sup>42</sup> We ‘pass through,’ and so encounter what John Caputo calls “the irreducible alterity of the world we would construe.”<sup>43</sup> Standing on the ground of what makes reading possible, we come

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<sup>41</sup> Also called *ostinato*, the ground is “a short melodic phrase . . . which is repeated over and over again as a bass line, with varying superstructures (melodies, harmonies) added each time in the upper parts” (*Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 12th ed., s.v. “ground, ground bass”). Each repetition of the ground is heard differently because of the “free display of the imagination” in the counterpoint above it (*ibid.*). Because of the relationships between the parts, a musical ground is not merely repetitive; it is recursive.

<sup>42</sup> Responsibility is a self-deconstructing norm, but one that nevertheless holds a claim on reading. My discussion of the value of responsibility for reading will take off from Derrida’s problematizing of the concept, as, for example, in his essay “Passions: ‘An Oblique Offering,’” in *Derrida: A Critical Reader*, 5-35.

<sup>43</sup> *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, 52.

upon the death-dealing, life-giving limit of complexity and turn, looking in the direction of the unconsumed, always yet-to-be-known other.

In the penultimate chapter of this ‘ultimately’ open study (chapter 6), I return to the focus of chapter two, a rhetorical reading of Psalm 90, now looking at this reading from the point of view of theory and method. My intention is not so much to propose a particular way of interpreting biblical texts as it is to consider how rhetorical criticism, a method much criticized by poststructuralists, might be changed by the encounter with complexity. To this end, I will revisit prevailing criticisms, reframing them in light of the problematic distinction between description and interpretation, and retooling the form-content dialectic in terms of recursion and relationality.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Mieke Bal, Cheryl Exum, and Yvonne Sherwood have been particularly outspoken in their critiques of rhetorical criticism as formulated and practiced by James Muilenburg and Phyllis Tribble. Their arguments, spawned in what Sherwood calls “backwater” approaches, have since ridden the changing tide of convention to what is fast becoming “mainstream” interpretation (see *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*). As Moore notes, deconstruction is also caught up in the flow between invention and convention, such that “conventional deconstruction” can no longer be considered an oxymoron (*Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives*, 4).

## PSALM 90

## 1. A prayer of Moses, the man of God

*Adonai*, you have been our resting place<sup>1</sup>  
from generation to generation.

2. Before the mountains were begotten  
or you brought forth earth and world,  
from endlessness to endlessness,<sup>2</sup>  
you are God.
3. You turn mortals back to dust;  
you say, “Return, children-of-the-ground!”<sup>3</sup>
4. For a thousand years in your sight  
are like yesterday that is past  
like<sup>4</sup> a watch in the night.
5. [You flood them with sleep;<sup>5</sup>]  
in the morning, like grass, they are renewed.
6. In the morning, it flourishes and is renewed;  
in the evening, it fades and withers.
7. For we are consumed by your anger,<sup>6</sup>  
by your wrath we are overwhelmed.

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<sup>1</sup> Detailed notes on *מִעוֹן* are scattered throughout chapter 2. In the psalms, *מִעוֹן* is the “refuge” or “dwelling place” God is for humans (Ps 71:3; 91:9), and the “habitation” of God (Ps 68:6; cf. also Deut 26:15; Jer 25:30). For *מִעוֹן* as the hiding place of animals, see Nah 2:12; Jer 9:10; 10:22; 49:33; 51:37.

<sup>2</sup> See my discussion of *עוֹלָם* in chapter 2, p. 33.

<sup>3</sup> The choice to translate *בְּנֵי-אָדָם*, lit. “sons of humankind” or “sons of Adam,” as “children of the ground” was recommended to me by Mary Colvin Hill. The translation is poetic, reading *אֶדְמָה*. (For an example of Hill’s fine work in feminist biblical translation, see her master’s thesis, “Psalm 68: Song of the Wilderness.”) Hyphenation reflects the Hebrew word-group.

<sup>4</sup> Kraus substitutes the comparative *כִּי* for the conjunction *וְ* in the MT. The correction is not necessary to convey the force of the preceding comparison (GKC, 375).

<sup>5</sup> The text is corrupt and requires reconstruction. *זָרְמָהּ*, which carries the sense of being ‘swept away’ (so the NRSV) or ‘engulfed’ (so the NJPS) is here rendered with the image of a flood. *שָׁנָה*, here “sleep,” can also be rendered “dream.”

<sup>6</sup> On *אֵף* (“anger”), *חַמָּה* (wrath”), and *עֲבָרָה* (“fury”) in vv. 7-11, see chapter 2.



8. You have set our afflictions<sup>7</sup> before you,  
our secrets<sup>8</sup> in the light of your face.
9. For all our days pass away in your fury,  
we end our years like a sigh.
10. The days of our lives last seventy years,  
or if in strength, eighty years;  
but the best of them<sup>9</sup> is toil and trouble  
since they are soon gone, and we fly away.<sup>10</sup>
11. Who understands the power of your anger  
and according to the fear of you your fury?
12. To count our days truly, teach,  
that we may bring forth a heart of wisdom.
13. Return, YHWH! How long?  
Have compassion on your servants!
14. Sate us in the morning with your *hesed*<sup>11</sup>  
that we may rejoice and be glad in all our days.
15. Gladden us as many days as you have afflicted us,  
as many years as we have seen evil.
16. Let be visible<sup>12</sup> to your servants your activity  
and your splendor to their children.
17. Let be the graciousness of *Adonai* our God upon us,  
and the work of our hands, establish<sup>13</sup> beyond us!  
The work of our hands, establish it!

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<sup>7</sup> עונותינו as “our afflictions” reflects the recurrence in עניתנו (“you have afflicted us,” v. 15). The root עון in מעון (v. 1) is also noted. For additional notes, see chapter 2.

<sup>8</sup> The passive participle עלמונו refers to “what is hidden” (so *HALOT*); the root עלם, “to conceal” or “secrete.” The form occurs only in Psalm 90.

<sup>9</sup> רחבם occurs only here in the HB, its meaning uncertain. LXX, Syr, Jerome, and *TgPss* point to רבם (“pride”). Reading with NJPS, “the best of them” carries the sense of a life “span” (NRSV) and of the “much” or “most” (רב) of life.

<sup>10</sup> ונעפּה. Alternately, “and we are in darkness.” See p. 133, note 9.

<sup>11</sup> חסד, typically rendered “steadfast love” or “loving kindness.” On the range of meaning and my choice to transliterate rather than translate, see below, pp. 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> יראה (Niphal impf.), lit. “let be manifest” or “let be seen.” The poetic “let be visible” fits the preposition אל (“to”) and gives a sense of the repetition of the verb יראה in v. 15 (ראינו, “we have seen”). On the pun with רעה (“evil,” v. 15), see below.

<sup>13</sup> כוננה is the Polel impv. form of כון, “to establish,” “constitute,” or “make firm,” a nuance reflected in the כן (“truly,” “rightly,” also “thus”) of v. 12.

## CHAPTER 2

### הַר

#### READING SINAI: THE MOUNTAIN OF PSALM 90

*To count our days truly, teach!*  
Ps 90:12a

And this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.  
Exod 3:12

When Moses turned aside to look at the bush that burned but did not burn up, he stood on the face of a mountain carved out of language. “Beyond the wilderness” (Exod 3:1) the text of Exodus 3 inscribes the edge of ascent, the crossing into heightened territory, with a sequence of words: *mountain . . . God . . . Horeb* (3:1b; cf. the chiasmic inclusio in 3:12b: *God . . . mountain*).<sup>1</sup> “Remove the sandals from your feet” (3:5) Moses is commanded, in a story that marks the beginning of biblical prophecy not so much in time as with a sense of place. There, a sign is given. Not the endless flame or the calling by name, but the very ground on which Moses is standing (3:5): a rocky landscape shaped by the constellation of word and experience into הַר הָאֱלֹהִים, “the mountain of God” (cf. 3:1, 12). The “sign” is one of return. In effect, Moses will understand his own

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this project, citations from Psalm 90 are my own translation. Other Hebrew texts follow the NRSV translation, except where otherwise noted. However, the NRSV rendering of the tetragrammaton as “the LORD” has been changed to “YHWH.” Psalms versifications are from the Hebrew text; otherwise, English versification applies.

prophetic contiguity with God when, after the exodus from slavery, he returns to the place where that connection began.

Space of the kind associated with Mosaic theophany—with the commission to prophecy, the receiving of the Law, the shining face enigmatically veiled—has more to do with the imagination than with history. It is heightened space, space constructed at the intersection of possibility and proclamation, of liminality and agency, of metaphor and materiality. Rooted like Moses' call in the shifting ground of return, this is the space where interpretation 'takes place.'<sup>2</sup> The location is, as Foucault suggests of critical space, more "an ensemble of relations" than a collection of "elements . . . connected on a temporal axis."<sup>3</sup> It is space in flux, given but dependent on what is yet to be, (re)collected but never settled because always relating again to what is other. Space of this kind is at once highly structured and radically de-centering. It invites reading to 'turn aside and look.'

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to say that the loci—of Mosaic prophecy or of interpretation—are not 'real.' Rather, it is to liken such spaces to what Edward Soja, following Lefebvre, calls "thirdspace"; the "*real-and-imagined* places" that, Soja argues, make up "lived space" (*Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real and Imagined Places*). Soja's argument for overriding the dualism of material vs. mental with "a 'thirthing' of the spatial imagination," an option he calls "*thirthing-as-Othering*," addresses social and cultural realities. The same categories offer helpful insights into the interpretive spaces of postmodern textuality. For a summary "firstspace," "secondspace," and "thirdspace epistemologies," see *Thirdspace*, 70-82. For the appropriation of this thought in biblical studies, see the essays in *Imagining Biblical Worlds*. Of particular note is the opening essay by Berquist, "Critical Spatiality and the Construction of the Ancient World," 14-29.

<sup>3</sup> Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," 22-27. The essay formed the basis for a lecture given by Foucault in 1967. Of our space-encrypted epoch, Foucault suggests "our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein" (22). For Moses, the promise of return to the place of beginning reconfigures time's 'then' into a 'now.'

The text of Psalm 90 lends itself to such a construction of space. Recursions in the text's content feed into the striking pattern of a chiasm; a yield of reading that is both emergent and constructive. Within this chiastic framework, the psalm's 'ensemble of relations' presents an order organized around a center area. But so read, that center—v. 9 of the psalm—is profoundly destabilizing, not only of the human life that expires in it (“like a sigh”), but also of every attempt at fixed structuring.

Recursion as a reading strategy does not allow the chiastic structure of Psalm 90 to lie flat on the page. The kinds of connections that make for this structure—recursion, or ‘return with a difference’—also make for intertextual association. In this reading of Psalm 90, the lines and circles by which the lone psalm ascribed to Moses “intersects with its own skein”<sup>4</sup> open out into the shape of a mountain. Rhetoric and intertextuality create the “real-and-imagined”<sup>5</sup> locus of the text: a swath of desert land, the base of a prayer and basis of the orientation it would profess, rising toward an uncertain summit, at once holy and annihilating. The way there and back again is the “lived space” in which this reading takes place.<sup>6</sup>

*Desert Landscape, Mountain Text: The ‘Fraught’ Background of Psalm 90*<sup>7</sup>

We do not enter reading blind. The text presents itself to our ‘eye’ of knowing, the wealth of past experience that rises up to see what can be recognized, to begin *again*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Soja, *Thirdspace*. See above, note 2.

<sup>6</sup> On the “lived space” of reading, see Soja, *Thirdspace*, 74-82; cited above.

<sup>7</sup> Eric Auerbach's famous phrase, “a story fraught with background,” has become an aphorism for biblical criticism. See its use in Fewell, *The Children of Israel*, 128.

at the beginning. Another way of saying this is to say that we make the map as we go. Reading constructs the text by relating it to a web of provisional trails already marked. In other words, reading cannot go forward without going back.

Below is a sketch of the map I intend to follow as I construct this reading (see “Climbing Sinai: Content Chiasm in Psalm 90”). The map is provisional and appears to be more fixed on the page than I will argue the text is. To look at it is to see the psalm as if from above, or from some remove—like a reconnaissance flight over a mountain about to be trekked. To see its points of connection constitutes a first instance of the logic of the psalm’s recursive structure, a movement out and never-quite-back to which this reading will return, in multiple iterations, as it makes its way.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Based on rhetorical and intertextual associations (hence, the mountain shape), the map requires a multi-directional reading; a reading that moves across the text as well as through it to other texts. While the diagram may be considered typical of ‘rhetorical’ readings, a key difference is that this mapping of structure is intended to open the psalm to a more complex way of reading, rather than to close the debate on how this text makes its meaning(s).

Climbing Sinai: Content Chiasm in Psalm 90

For all our days pass away in your fury,  
we end our years like a sigh.

**v. 9**

<b>v. 8</b> Human afflictions exposed/Secrets to light	Human life span/Human condition <b>v. 10</b>
<b>v. 7</b> God's anger/God's wrath	God's anger/God's fury <b>v. 11</b>
<b>v. 6</b> Life/Death	<i>hinnēni</i> /Discernment of wisdom <b>v. 12</b>
<b>v. 5</b> Human transience/Rebirth	God's turnaround/God's compassion <b>v. 13</b>
<b>v. 4</b> God's time/Human time	<i>hesed</i> /Gratitude for the time we have <b>v. 14</b>
<b>v. 3</b> Circle of life/Return to dust	Cycle of joy and misery/Seeing of evil <b>v. 15</b>
<b>v. 2</b> Creation/God's time/God	Create now/God's reality/Progeny <b>v. 16</b>
<b>v. 1</b> God/Refuge/Generations	God/Our work/Enduring <b>v. 17</b>

Psalm 90 has long been read as a meditation on human finitude. It is a communal lament about the deeply personal fact of death and the exigencies of human suffering. It is also a plea for wisdom in the face of life's fleeting brevity and a confession of faith in the one reality whose enduring character can temper suffering, transform sorrow into joy, and outlive death. God alone lives unendingly for all time, even from before the bounds of conceived space. And this very God, in whose "fury" our lives end "like a sigh" (v. 9), is and has been "from generation to generation" (v. 1b) our home, the refuge in which we can hide, our "resting place" (v. 1a, *מַעֲוֶה*).<sup>1</sup>

To read the psalm as a chiasm does not so much alter this interpretation as add to it by bringing certain relationships into sharper relief. What is altered, I believe, is the experience of reading. When Psalm 90 is addressed as a recursively ordered mountain, a passage through 'wrath' to 'wisdom,' no longer can its map of the human condition be understood only in cognitive terms. If wisdom is to be gained, what is read in the text must, in some sense, happen in the reader. This is possible because meaning-making is a self-organizing process. The organization of language that gives the psalm its perceived shape can extend to set of relationships that reshapes the one who reads.<sup>2</sup> Appropriate to

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<sup>1</sup> For a sampling of readings along these lines, see Berlin and Brettler, "Psalms," 1384-5; Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 110-15; McCann, "The Book of Psalms," 1039-45; Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms*, 125-30; and Hossfeld and Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51-100*, 416-25. For an interpretation of Psalm 90 as a response to a particular but unspecified calamity, see Dahood, *Psalms II*, 321-27; Krüger, "Psalm 90 und die 'Vergänglichkeit' des Menschen"; and R. Clifford, "Psalm 90."

<sup>2</sup> On the characteristics of self-organizing systems, linguistic and otherwise, see Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, 89-111. Of particular note for this reading is

the prayer, the figuration of one text provides for the reconfiguration of another. This, as I read it, is at least part of the legacy of the psalm (cf. “the work of our hands,” v. 17).

Organized with v. 9 at its apex, Psalm 90 does not just locate the end of life within its source: we hide from God in God. Structure sets up death in relation to wisdom (cf. vv. 6b and 12b in content chiasm, p. 30) and divine wrath as that which must be crossed through—traversed—in order to live the moment of our lives in fullness; that is, to live ‘sated’ by God (cf. v. 14). Once reading is willing to follow this route, the psalm’s order of change is ineluctable. The one who reads proceeds toward “fury” (עבררה, v. 9) unprotected, even by a map.

The iterations that make for a chiastic structure in Psalm 90, a rhetorical-intertextual event, tend to recur at multiple levels of scale. First, the reader who reads according to this pattern cannot but understand herself as part of the text. To read, then, is to be re-con-figured along with the text.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, reading itself is brought into the purview of Psalm 90’s plea for “wisdom” (v. 12). Addressed by the “fury” (עבררה; vv.9a and 11b) in which all things “pass away” (v. 9a; cf. vv.7-11), reading comes to the end oriented to the *other* for its completion (cf. v.17b).

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Cilliers’ first “attribute” of such systems: “The structure of the system [text] is not the result of an a priori design, nor is it determined directly by external conditions [reading]. It is a result of interaction between the system [text] and its environment [reader]” (91).

<sup>3</sup> It is possible to observe a text organized around transience and change without being changed in the process, but doing so requires reducing a complex system of dynamic relationships to a simple, linear collection of parts. It assumes neutrality in a text that, from the beginning, is about relationship.



Finally, recursion extends the matrix of Psalm 90's chiasmic structure well beyond the rhetoric of a single prayer. The connection with Moses, initially triggered by the psalm's superscription (itself a sign of recursive reading), opens up a watershed of multivalent association. From this divide, the traversing of a prayer about life and death does not just recall Israelite history; it (re)writes it. The "mountain of God" grows dense with story, stories retold by this winding trek up and down Psalm 90.<sup>4</sup>

*Reading Psalm 90: Entering the Wilderness, Ascending the Face of a Prayer*

Psalm 90 begins with all that has come before. The prayer establishes its initial orientation according to the past. In the turning of every generation (בְּדֶר וּדְרָה, v. 1b) and even before the birth of the world, God has been God "for us" (לָנוּ, v. 1a). Once this is confessed, the future opens up. The God of all that has been will be without end (מֵעוֹלָם עַד-עוֹלָם, "from endlessness to endlessness," v. 2b<sup>5</sup>). Somewhere between עוֹלָם and עוֹלָם, the present generation, like the past, makes its home—in God.

The opening two verses of Psalm 90 form a striking and oft-noted chiasm, establishing an order within the psalm's language not unlike the order of the created

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<sup>4</sup> For an overview of biblical references to "the [holy] mountain" and "the mountain of God," see J. Clifford, *The Cosmic Mountain in Canaan and The Old Testament*, 98-181. For an evocative reading of "the mountain of God" as a metaphor for the interior landscape of the spirit, see Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*.

<sup>5</sup> The time word, עוֹלָם, occurs well over 400 times in the HB and is variously nuanced (cf. *TDOT* X: 530-45). In Ps 90:2, the sense of a "long time" is multiplied exponentially (מֵעוֹלָם עַד עוֹלָם) to suggest forever, "eternity," or "all time" (cf. Jenni, "Das Wort 'olam im AT"). For a rendering of this heightened עוֹלָם as "endlessness," see Fischer, *Opening to You*, 115.

world.<sup>6</sup> Within this order, the confession that “You [are] God” (אתה אל, v. 2bβ; cf. “Adonai . . . you,” אתה . . . אדני, v. 1a) encircles the twin aspects of human experience: time and space.<sup>7</sup> Born in the psalm alongside “earth and world” (v. 2), is a paradigm of human existence, with space (vv. 2a and 2α) marked off by the passage of time (vv. 1b and 2b) and with God at the beginningless beginning (v. 1a) and endless end (v. 2bβ) of it all.<sup>8</sup>

Clinton McCann diagrams the literary structure of this introductory unit in a way that underscores its theological persuasion:

A	“Lord, <i>you</i> . . .” (God)	אדני . . . אתה
B	“all generations” (time)	בדר ודר
C	“mountains” (space)	הרים
C <sup>1</sup>	“earth and the world” (space)	ארץ ותבל
B <sup>1</sup>	“everlasting to everlasting” (time)	מעולם עד-עולם
A <sup>1</sup>	“ <i>you</i> are God” (God) <sup>9</sup>	אתה אל

McCann reads the rhetorical patterns of vv. 1-2 with an eye to language ‘doing’ what it says. According to McCann’s description, “The divine ‘You’ is all-encompassing

<sup>6</sup> See below for references.

<sup>7</sup> The implied verb of being in “you [are] God” (אתה אל, v. 2) leaves the divine name revealed to Moses hovering like a whisper between the emphatically personal אתה and the putatively impersonal אל. On אל as a generic Semitic name for God, see *TDOT* I: 242-61. On the divine name represented by the Tetragrammaton, see below.

<sup>8</sup> God is also at the heart of this structure as the ‘mother’ who writhes in the travail of birth pangs (תחולל) to bear the begotten world. For comment on the “primeval event” of the birth of “the hills, the symbols of all that is solid and lasting,” in relation to wisdom poetry, see Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 215. For a counter to Kraus’ argument that the earth, not God, gives birth to the mountains and world in the psalm’s imagery, see Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 440.

<sup>9</sup> “The Book of Psalms,” 1041; also *idem*, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms*, 157. The emphatic pronoun אתה accentuates this framed structure.

of time and space. Human life and the life of the world find their origin and destiny in God.”<sup>10</sup> Time, in this micro-chiasmus, is the mediating measure between the created world (C and C<sup>1</sup>) and God (A and A<sup>1</sup>). It is the grammar by which the psalmist connects the place of humankind’s earthly dwelling (“mountains,” “earth and world,” v. 2a) with mortal life’s most intimate habitat, our “dwelling” or “resting place” (בְּעֵינַי, v. 1a).<sup>11</sup> By the same token, time is the great divide, the gap that holds open the transitory arena in which humans live and die.

From the beginning in Psalm 90, cosmos and anthropos, תְּבִלָּה and אֲנוֹשׁ, are given place, both in the schema of divine provision and in the psalmist’s linguistic imagination. Yet despite its apparent order, this balanced structure is not entirely benign. Its context in the psalm, even within the Psalter as a whole, presents a paradox. While God’s eternal reality may hold the begotten world together and sustain it, the acknowledged limitlessness of God also acts to ‘hem in’ the limits of mortal life. (One thinks of the “fenced in” Job [Job 3:23].) The ambiguity of this double bind is aptly expressed in the range of meaning assigned to בְּעֵינַי, often translated as “dwelling place” or “refuge,” but also as a “hiding place,” even a “lair” from which a wrathful God springs forth.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *The Book of Psalms*, 1041.

<sup>11</sup> For a reading of the בְּעֵינַי of Ps 90:1 as “a *sanctuary presence* that knows no spatial, geographical, or temporal bounds,” see Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 25 (Brown’s italics).

<sup>12</sup> On the multivalence of בְּעֵינַי in 90:1 and consequent ambiguity of the verse, see the commentary on “The Psalms” by Toni Craven and Walter Harrelson in *NISB*, 834: “The opening verse introduces the ambivalence that the psalmist evidently wishes to express: The eternal God holds all persons firmly in the divine care, but the actual course

According to the poetic structure of Psalm 90's genetic confession, humans, it would seem, are framed in more ways than one.

In its chiasmic structure, counterpoising of "human time" (בדר ודר) with "God's time" (מעולם עד עולם), and doubly marked encircling in an endless God, the opening unit of Psalm 90 sounds themes that run throughout the text.<sup>13</sup> It is, as many have noted, a fitting introduction to a prayer that attends to the end of human life. But these opening verses do more than "lay down the parameters of faith."<sup>14</sup> They generate an order that recurs at another level of scale in the larger text. In this, the introduction to Psalm 90 might be likened to a hologram, a part reflecting the whole. It acts both as preface and summary, a "proem"<sup>15</sup> and a précis. As a result, the reader's first steps up the psalm's figurative mountain enter territory already marked by return, cutting through the illusion of beginning even while laying down its textual parameters.

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of life is marked by God's severity in letting the days of life fly by at breakneck speed." In an earlier essay, "A Meditation on the Wrath of God: Psalm 90," Harrelson reads מעון as a sign of "deliberate ambiguity in . . . God's relation to the human community." While God may be understood as "a hiding place and thus a refuge . . . God is also one who hides in [God's] lair . . . ready to come forth in wrath, to spring upon the defenseless and unsuspecting victim" (186). For biblical references to מעון as the hiding place of animals, see above.

<sup>13</sup> On the juxtaposing of human and divine temporalities, see McCann, *The Book of Psalms*, 1041.

<sup>14</sup> Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 111.

<sup>15</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 127.

If the first two verses of Psalm 90 reach back toward what always has been, the last two (vv. 16-17) turn to look beyond the grave.<sup>16</sup> The prayer empties into a jussive plea for the grace of progeny (על־בניהם, v. 16b) and godly provision for work whose substance might endure beyond the reach of the worker (מעשה ידינו כוננה עלינו, v. 17b). As with the ‘hymnic confession’ of vv. 1-2,<sup>17</sup> these emphatic petitions are made in terms of human measure (“children,” v. 16b; cf. the counterpart, “generation to generation,” בדר ודר, v. 1b) and divine power (“establish beyond us,” v. 17b;<sup>18</sup> cf. “everlasting to everlasting,” מעולם עד עולם, v. 2b).<sup>19</sup> The psalm thus concludes on the flip side of where it began, in a hope for future generations and for the possibility that something of our making might persist beyond us by virtue of the gracious activity of an enduring God.

Recursive symmetry between beginning and end anchors the *macro*-chiasmus of Psalm 90 in a space that is open as far as the eye can see. Still, it is space, and therein

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<sup>16</sup> A chiasmic reading reads *across* the text in order to chart a more densely marked path from one line to the next.

<sup>17</sup> The hymnic character of the psalm’s opening address to God is well noted. See, e.g., Mays, *Psalms*, 289; and Anderson, *Out of the Depths*, 197.

<sup>18</sup> Alter translates כוננהו “found for us” (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 126). The NJPS Tanakh and the NRSV render the verb “prosper.” Craven and Harrelson comment: “The poet wants to believe that human labor counts for something, not that one ‘succeed’ in life” (“The Psalms,” 835).

<sup>19</sup> Verses 16-17 also juxtapose human and divine spheres through a play of chiasmic form. The alternation reads:

- v. 16 “your servants” (humans) “your activity” (God)
- “your splendor” (God) “their children” (humans)
- v. 17 “the graciousness of *Adonai*” (God) “upon us” (humans)
- “the work of our hands” (humans) “establish beyond us” (God)

In relation to vv. 1-2, the chiasmic pattern is pared down and sped up; a technique known as diminution in music.

structured; written upon, and therein multiply-marked. The psalm takes place within the bounds of that which can be imagined. What has been and what will be bring order to the text, making its lament—its *present* “in the light of [God’s] face” (v. 8b)—possible.

Far from reducing meaning, this orienting structure invites added connections.<sup>20</sup> So, for instance, the psalm’s chiastic associations (see chiasm map, p. 30) suggest that readers look in the mirror of our wistful longing to endure (v. 17c) and see the reality of God’s abiding endurance—manifest in part through the turning of human generations (v. 1c). Likewise, the reader of this structure is led to consider the relationship of “the work of our hands” (v. 17b) to the place of בֵּית (v. 1b), the home in which a faithful generation ‘rests’ or ‘hides.’ The mountain order of Psalm 90 amplifies these connections and raises a question: Does the reader of this text recognize that whatever comes from the work of reading does not ‘belong’ to her anymore than she can ‘own’ her place of rest?

With these connections under foot, reading in Psalm 90’s chiastic order moves on towards creation (cf. vv. 2 and 16). God is mother of the world, mensuration of time, the everlasting “you” for us (v. 2). Structural associations between vv. 2 and 16 reinforce the founding bond between God-for-all-time and the present generation, time-bound and as individual as the birth of a child. What is confessed about God in absolute terms (v. 2) is drawn into relationship with the particular, immediate, and contingent, and with the future that will bear its name (v. 16). The plea in v. 16 that God act now to “let be visible” is as if answered—manifest by the asking. It can be uttered with confidence in

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<sup>20</sup> On the critique of rhetorical structure as a reduction of meaning, see chapter 6.

light of God's original act of creation. At the same time, the order fashioned by recursion places its own claim on the divine progenitor of "earth and world" (v. 2a). Only with the maintenance of human progeny (cf. v. 16b) will God continue to be praised with the words, "You are God" (v. 2bβ). The repetition with change that generates the psalm's poetic order is necessary to the sustenance of the divinely animated world this prayer espouses.

If recursion is the stuff of texts, it is also the fabric of the human condition. From dust to dust, we arrive and we return (v. 3). Once Psalm 90 has set reading in relation to divine reality, to that which endlessly endures, the prayer goes directly to the heart of the human matter: as "children-of-the-ground" (בני־אֶרֶץ, v. 3b) human creatures die. The God of creation has only to say the word: שׁוּב (vv. 3 a, b)—and we "return" ("turn back," NRSV) to the loamy substance from which we were made. With this word, the text of the psalm turns toward lament, just as it will "return" again (cf. שׁוּבָה in v. 13) once the tethers that hold human affliction and divine wrath together have been crossed.

Reading across the chiasm of Psalm 90 links v. 3 with v. 15. The pattern suggests that the 'Circle of life/Return to dust' visited in v. 3 returns in a different guise in the 'Cycle of joy and misery/Seeing of evil' that describes v. 15 (see chiasm map, p. 30). Verse 3 invites reading up the imagined mountain of the psalm by calling to mind the fact of human mortality and calling forth the divine command that makes it so. Birth to death;

dust to dust.<sup>21</sup> In v. 15, the downward side of the poem's recursive structure, the divine command is answered by a human imperative: "Gladden us [שִׂמְחֵנוּ] as many days as you have afflicted us [עֲנִייתֵנוּ]" (v. 15). The request for parity between joy and suffering measures the parameters of human experience and asks for another kind of coherence. As "dust" yields life (v. 3), so may human suffering yield to joy (v. 15).

When vv. 3b and 15b are read in relationship, their combined resonance ripples across the text like rings of sand on a high desert pass. God's command to the offspring of אָדָם ("ground," "humankind," "Adam") that they "return" (v. 3b) is now identified with the "years" of "evil" those 'groundling' children "have seen" (v. 15b).<sup>22</sup> Death, with

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<sup>21</sup> The phrase בני־אָדָם (literally, "sons of Adam/humankind") says it all with respect to this cycle. Paired with the command to "return" or "turn back," these conjoined words articulate a full turn in the (male identified) wheel of earthly life. The Sanskrit term *duhkha* (Pali *dukkha*) also describes the wheel of life and its dislocated or mal-aligned turn. Duhkha is the nature of human existence, according to the first of the Buddha's Four Ennobling Truths: "Birth is *duhkha*, old age is *duhkha*, illness is *duhkha*, death is *duhkha*. To meet with those we despise is *duhkha*, to part from those we love is *duhkha*. Not to obtain our desires is *duhkha*. In brief, the predisposition to cling to the five components of existence is *duhkha*" ("Turning of the Wheel of Dharma," SN, V, 421; quoted by Habito, *Experiencing Buddhism*, 37; see also Habito's comments, 37-40). The "dust" (אֶבֶר, *dakkā*; Ps 90:3) from which humans are made is the stuff of *duhkha*.

<sup>22</sup> In her groundbreaking work on Genesis 2-3, Phyllis Tribble translated אָדָם in 2:5-7 as "earth creature," reflecting both the punning parallelism with אֶרֶץ and the progression in the text from the "sexually undifferentiated" אָדָם made of "earth" to the בָּשָׂר of "flesh" who is distinct from אֶרֶץ (see *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 75-82). For a powerful poetic midrash using the name "Groundling" for the earthen creature, see Korsak, ". . . et Genetrix," 22-26.



its accompanying loss, is normative for human suffering in Psalm 90. By the same token, “evil” (רעה, v. 15b) casts its troubling pall on the order that brings life to an end.<sup>23</sup>

But to what end this connection? In both vv. 3 and 15, the second half of the verse is a progression from or an intensification of the first.<sup>24</sup> In v. 3, speech enacts death. The description of God’s activity in v. 3a, “you turn mortals back to dust,” becomes a speech-act in v. 3b: “return!” Divine agency in the psalm is not in question. The progression from “dust” (v. 3a) to “children-of-the-ground” (v. 3b) leaves no human remainder in its wake. In v. 15, parallelism advances time and intensifies meaning. “Days” (יָמֵי) turn to “years” (שָׁנֹת<sup>25</sup>) while “affliction” (עָנָה) gives way to “evil” (רעה), a poetic move that swallows all the vicissitudes of mortal life and pronounces them devastating.<sup>26</sup>

This רעה (v. 15b) is not the correlate of the טוב (“good”) which God pronounces of all creation in Genesis 1. While Psalm 90 begins with a primeval image that certainly

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<sup>23</sup> “Evil” is a weighted term, but broad enough and dark enough to convey the depth of the lament. רעה can also be “misery” (NJPS) or “suffering.” On the general meaning of רעה as “that which is harmful,” see *THAT* I: 659; and *BKAT* 14/3:127, cited in *HALOT*. For an example of רעה as suffering or “discomfort,” see Jon 4:6.

<sup>24</sup> Berlin cites verse 3 as an example of “staircase parallelism” (“Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” 304). Alter describes the “dynamics of repetition” as “a fortiori, ‘how much more so’” (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 11). Poetic parallelism is recursion *in nuce*, even where repetition is exact. The aphorism, *it is impossible to say the same thing twice* could have been inspired by the discipline of poetry.

<sup>25</sup> Both of these nouns of time appear in construct in v. 15. Gesenius considers these instances to be “rarer poetic forms” (GKC, 243). The ‘synonymous’ parallelism extends to grammar. Here, as in v. 4, it is possible to translate, again following Gesenius, “the force of the preceding ׀ [as] carried on” from one line to the next (GKC, 375). In this case, “Gladden us as many days as you have afflicted us; as many years as we have seen of evil.” A similar rule holds in v. 4 (see above).

<sup>26</sup> On רעה as “disaster,” see Jer 44:2, 17.

calls to mind the Bible's first creation story, it moves as readily as does the biblical canon to the second version of that account (Genesis 2-3). From a world only just divided into sequences of time (evening-to-morning times seven; cf. Gen 1:5, 10 [טוֹב], 12 [טוֹב], 18 [טוֹב], 21 [טוֹב], 25 [טוֹב], and 31 [טוֹב מְאֹד]), the psalm raises the “dust” (דָּכָא, Ps 90:3) and enjoins opposition. It accedes to a conditional realm where the contrast between good and evil is painfully clear (cf. Ps 90:15; also v. 8), and any possibility of living forever (cf. Gen 3:22) is put to rest.<sup>27</sup>

The words for “dust” in the Hebrew text of Ps 90:3 and Gen 3:19, God's originary ‘dust to dust’ proclamation, are not the same. The psalm uses דָּכָא (“dust,” “pulverized”) to pronounce the cycle that returns groundlings to “the ground” (v. 3), while the creation story describes the stuff of mortal flesh as עֶפֶר (“dust,” “dirt,” Gen 3:19).<sup>28</sup> Yet these words intersect in the imagination, and rightly so. In both Gen 3:19 and Ps 90:3, “dust”—by either name—is bound to “the ground,” directly through parallelism and indirectly through shared images of creation.<sup>29</sup> The verb, שׁוּב (“return” or “turn back”), pivotal in both verses (2x in Gen 3:19; 2x in Ps 90:3), compounds this connection.

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Rest’ shoulders the dual meaning of ‘death’ and ‘peace.’ This is not to say that the death dealt in Psalm 90 is peaceful. On the contrary, “all our days pass away in . . . fury” (v. 9a). But coming to terms with the inevitability of this passing and finding peace in the place of our overwhelming concern with death is a vital part of the prayer's petition (cf. v. 12) and purpose. For more on the ‘rest’ of Psalm 90, see chapter 7.

<sup>28</sup> For the respective semantic fields of these words, see *TDOT* III: 195-208, and *TDOT* XI: 257-265.

<sup>29</sup> See YHWH's “curse” of “the ground” (הָאֲדָמָה) in Gen 3:17; and “curse” of snake, which will of all the animals be closest to the ground: “dust you shall eat” (v. 14).

The argument for reading Ps 90:3 as an intertextual allusion to Genesis 2-3 is not gratuitous. It would be difficult to read the third verse of the psalm without recalling the Hebrew Bible's second creation story. Marking the tracks of this textual exchange serves to highlight particular points of contact (שׁוֹב, אָדָם, עֵפֶר/אֶבֶן) and to raise questions that bring reading in Psalm 90 back to the freighted connection between vv. 3 and 15.

Genesis 2-3 creation weighs in on the question of human willfulness and death from both sides of the scale. On the one hand, death is not part of the sentence leveled against Eve and Adam. The story suggests that, from the beginning, God intends life in the garden to include a natural end.<sup>30</sup> On the other, expulsion from Eden—the result of radical disobedience—is tantamount to death, for it drives the human pair from proximity to “the tree of life” (Gen 3:22, 24).<sup>31</sup> Divine intervention assures that humans, held accountable, will not “take also” of that nuclear fruit, “and live forever” (3:22).<sup>32</sup>

What, then, of the thread of connection that runs between vv. 3 and 15 in Psalm 90 like a river through Eden? Is the ‘circle of life,’ with its return to dust, held in natural balance with the ‘cycle of joy and misery’ (see chiasm map, vv. 3a and 15a)? Or are sin

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<sup>30</sup> Adam's sentence, like Eve's, is to labor but not to death; this despite the threat of Gen 2:17 (“in the day that you eat of it you shall die”). On the shared sentence of hard labor, see Sharon, “The Doom of Paradise,” 51-80, esp. 78-79.

<sup>31</sup> Expulsion, too, is not part of the penalty levied against the woman or the man (cf. Gen 3:16-19). Being “sent forth” (3:23) is part of the “aftermath of judgment” (Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 134) levied by God in defense of divinity (“lest he put forth his hand . . . and live forever,” 3:22 RSV).

<sup>32</sup> The allusion to an ovule, the center of the nucleus that contains the embryo sac, is intentional. The “tree of life” grows “in the midst of the garden” (Gen 2:9). With its fruit of eternal life, the tree is the immortal counterpart to the mortal Eve, “mother of all the living” (3:20), whose children will also die.

and death correlates in this connection, as the chiasmic association of בני־אדם (mapped as ‘Return to dust,’ v. 3b) and רעה (‘Seeing of evil,’ v. 15b) might suggest?

Psalm 90 addresses this question, much as does Genesis 2-3, with a sense of ambiguity. In vv. 3 and 15 of the psalm, multivalent antecedents load respective parallel progressions with a surfeit of meaning.<sup>33</sup> דָּכָא (“dust,” v. 3a) and עָנָה (“afflicted,” v. 15a) resonate with the imagery of being ‘crushed’ or ‘pulverized’ (דָּכָא), ‘bowed down’ or ‘brought low’ (עָנָה), metaphors for the dissolution and decay that are endemic to transient existence. Again, divine agency heightens the condition. (“*You* turn mortals back” [v. 3]; “*You* have afflicted us” [v. 15].) These ciphers of diminution also reach across the psalm to the burden of human “afflictions” brought to light (cf. עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ in v. 8),<sup>34</sup> even as they

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<sup>33</sup> This ‘surfeit of meaning’ is the product of relationship, seeded by imagination. Writing about another “sharable excess” born of relationship (Hannah’s gift of a son, Samuel), Fewell quotes a passage from Elaine Scarry: “[T]he imagination is large-spirited or, at least, has an inherent, incontrovertible tendency toward excess, amplitude, and abundance. Perhaps because it originally comes into being in the midst of acute deprivation, it continues to be, even long after that original ‘given’ has disappeared, a shameless exponent of surfeit” (Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 323; cf. Fewell, *The Children of Israel*, 214).

<sup>34</sup> עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ (v. 8) is often translated as “our iniquities” (NJPS, NRSV, NIV, REB). The affliction in this instance does carry the sense of human failing (cf. the parallelism with עֲלֵמֵנוּ (“our secrets”). But this rendering misses the correlation with עָנִיתָנוּ (“you have afflicted us”) in v. 15. The shared root (עָנָה) highlights the tension, present throughout the psalm, between human action and divine agency.

reach across texts to humankind's first separation from the God of its making.<sup>35</sup> The death of which Psalm 90 speaks comes in many forms.

With the base of its lament 'grounded' in v. 3, the psalm makes its way onward via elaboration.<sup>36</sup> Verses 4-6 call on those canons of experience that fade like memory to poetically describe the fleeting brevity of life: "yesterday" (אֶתְמוּל, v. 4), "a watch in the night" (אֶשְׁמֹרֶה בַּלַּיְלָה, v.4), "morning" (בֶּקֶר, vv. 5, 6), "grass" (חֲצִיר, v. 5)—all 'withered' in the text as soon as they are named (cf. יָבֵשׁ, the last word in v. 6). A lexicon of time spins out the reality of change and the disparity between human and divine perspectives. In God's eyes, a millennium is but a phantom moment, so the psalmist imagines (v. 4). And by God's action, a lifetime, signified by "morning" to "evening," is as impermanent as a day's growth of grass (vv. 5-6).

Time simultaneously heightens and minimizes all things human. That which is made utterly unique by virtue of its momentary existence is, by the same design, rendered unto obscurity. Time moves on; so also the text. The abundance of temporal language in vv. 4-6 has the effect of speeding up the text and of hastening the passing that moves the psalm's reader toward "fury" (cf. vv. 7-11). A chiasmic reading serves to slow this

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<sup>35</sup> The chiasmic connection of בְּנֵי־אֲדָמָה with רָעָה adds to the complexity of this association. Are the "children-of-the-ground" to be judged as evil, or are they merely part of a web that binds them, irrevocably, to suffering?

<sup>36</sup> The ׀ that sets off the following section of text, vv. 4-6, fits well the description of James Muilenburg: "׀ is more than a demonstrative; it is also a deictic word; that is, it points or shows the way forward" ("The Linguistic and Rhetorical Usages of the Particle ׀ in the Old Testament," 136).

passage, offering attention to the detail of structural recursion as a mode of preparation for what lies ahead.

Verse 4 seems to say that human temporality is, for God, so partitive and momentary as to be almost inconsequential. But the structural line drawn between v. 4 (‘God’s time/Human time’) and v. 14 (‘*hesed* /Gratitude for the time we have’) lends this complaint a more muted tenor. The vastness of divine temporality is part of God’s nature, believed to be most perfectly revealed in *hesed*.<sup>37</sup> According to v. 14, one taste of God’s *hesed*—especially if it comes early in life—will suffice, giving us cause to rejoice in those days that do inevitably pass as quickly as a single night’s watch.

The chiasmic link between vv. 5 and 13 relates ‘human transience’ (see map, p. 30) now depicted as being “flooded” or “swept away” (זרמתם, v. 5a), to the plea for another kind of change, a change in God: “Return, YHWH! How long?” (שובה יהוה עד־מתי), v. 13a; cf. ‘God’s turnaround,’ chiasm map, v. 13a). Although “doubtlessly corrupt,” as Kraus indicates, the sense of the text in v. 5a seems to be negative.<sup>38</sup> Likened to “sleep” or a “dream” (שנה), life is erased in the blink of an eye. And God does blink.

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<sup>37</sup> So different is God’s time from humanity’s measure that one might be tempted to speak in terms of divine *atemporality*. But, in biblical terms, this is not the case. God in the Psalms, and throughout the Hebrew Bible, is described as temporal; thinking and acting in a past, present, and future that God is not infrequently called to remember. Even the עולם עד עולם that proclaims God’s being frames “forever” in terms of time (see above). On the temporality of God in the Hebrew Bible, see Fretheim, *The Suffering of God*, 39-44. On the broader issue of time, see Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*.

<sup>38</sup> *Psalms*, 213. Reasoning from scribal errors of haplography and dittography, Kraus reconstructs v. 5a with a more positive nuance: “You seed them year after year.”

Crying out from a tradition that is characteristically psalmic and recollectively Mosaic, Psalm 90 addresses a God who is capable of turning away, of giving in all the way to burning wrath (cf. Exod 32:10), of forgetting to be who God has always been (cf. Ps 90:1-2).<sup>39</sup> God needs to be reminded; even, as in the Exodus 32 story, to be held accountable. By the same token, humans, who stand in the flow of loss because God makes it so, need to call out. Where they are unable to do this—out of fear (cf. Exod 20:18-21), lack of vision (a recurring theme in Isaiah), or for want of words—a prophet like Moses is called upon to step in and fill the breach.

This exchange between divine agency and human response is expressed, with some irony, in the implied chiasmic connection between vv. 5a and v. 13a of the psalm. Verse 5a (“You flood them with sleep”) is an elaboration of v. 3, where the verb שׁוּב (“return”) is twice used with reference to God’s handling of human life. Again, for the psalmist life does not merely ebb and flow as a matter of course; it does so by divine design (“You turn mortals back . . . You say,” v. 3; “You flood them with sleep,” v. 5a; alternately “You sweep them away,” v. 5a NRSV). The response, when v. 13a is read in relation to v. 5a, offers a moment of human urgency to match the divine agency by which humans pass away. Addressed to God, the command to “Return!” (שׁוּבֵהָ, v. 13a) answers the ultimate change God imposes on humankind with a keen sense of divine changeability, transience of another sort. It is mortal creatures who now call God back to

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<sup>39</sup> Brevard Childs reads the divine wish to be left alone (הִנִּיחָהּ) in Exod 32:10 as a pun on “changed his mind” (נָחַח, Exod 32:14; cf. Ps 90:13 [*Exodus*, 567]).

the ‘ground’ of God’s being: וְהִנַּחֵם עַל-עַבְדֶיךָ (“Have compassion on your servants!” v. 13b). God and creature alike stand to be changed by this relationship.

If Psalm 90 is seen as a poetic triptych, v. 6 completes the first of its canvases.<sup>40</sup> The simplest of similes, “morning” and “evening”—‘life and death’ (see chiasm map), closes the frame on this scene of ultimate reality for humankind. Like the grass which “flourishes and is renewed” in the morning, then “fades and withers” at night (v. 6), so are human beings. Morning to evening and a generation passes. A simple fact, however weighted from the passing generation’s perspective.

If the triptych image stands, the readerly eye might naturally gravitate from one hinge to the other, a path also outlined by chiasm. The connection brings v. 12 into play. According to this matrix, life in its flourishing (v. 6a) is recursively related to the ability “to count . . . truly” [לְמִנּוֹת . . . כֵּן] the value of each day (v. 12a). Indeed, on the capacity to live without reserve in the given temporality of “our days” (v. 12a) hinges the psalm’s change of tone, its movement into the imperative voice once the prayer’s interior landscape has been crossed.<sup>41</sup> Yet the same structure that links life with the capacity to receive the day at hand also points to death as integral to the wisdom on which this

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<sup>40</sup> The triptych image divides the psalm into three parts: vv. 1-6; vv. 7-11; and vv. 12-17. The same divisions can be read against my chiasm map. According to these divisions, the first ‘frame’ of the psalm is a confessing lament on life’s transience (vv. 1-6); the middle is a scene of divine burning, consuming, exposing, and swallowing human life (vv. 7-11); the third frame pictures a rhetorical world of divine return, painted in the imperative strokes of prayer (vv. 12-17). For the walk through these images, see below.

<sup>41</sup> Verse 12 is generally seen as pivotal in the psalm’s structure. (See, e.g., Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms*, 112-13; Hossfeld and Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms*, 416-25.) On the string of imperatives in vv. 12-17, see below.



capacious gift is founded. Death (v. 6b), according to this readerly infrastructure, is irrepressibly aligned with the psalm's sought after "heart of wisdom" (לִבֵּב חִכְמָה), v. 12b)—a "disposition" that only the knowledge of God's ways can endow.<sup>42</sup> The connection speaks volumes: To behold God's truth is to accept death.

The Exodus texts that raise and set apart the mountain in the wilderness put this somewhat differently. To come face to face with God is to die (Exod 33:20). Even those who transgress the holy mountain or "touch the edge of it . . . shall be put to death" (Exod 19:12). The chiasmic structure of this reading of Psalm 90, a rhetorical-intertextual structure, transposes the literal threat of death on "the mountain of God" (Exod 3:1; 18:5) to a reading of death in relation to wisdom.

But what might this mean? If reading imagines climbing Psalm 90 like the face of a mountain, the space (a plateau? a chasm?) between vv. 1-6 and vv. 7-11 seems like a good place to stop and consider the view. Having ventured the connection between death (v. 6b) and the bringing forth of wisdom (v. 12b), can reading afford to go on? Were the text able to speak, it might answer: 'First of all, it's too early to tell. As long as the reader is still reading, and therefore alive, what can she know about accepting death? Secondly, look at the clues around you. You will need them to survive the rest of the text.'

One such clue is simply the way reading has come thus far. From resting in an everlasting God (v. 1a) to the fading and withering of "evening" (v. 6b), meaning-making

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<sup>42</sup> Brueggemann writes of wisdom: "It refers to a disposition that is congruent with and responsive to the purposes of Yahweh. Thus, 'wise heart' means discernment of the purposes of Yahweh" (*The Message of the Psalms*, 111).

in the psalm has turned on relationship and change. The process suggests that whatever may have been established (a circuitous mountain path, this interpretation) is highly at risk. Another clue comes in the tether thrown from life and death (v. 6) to wisdom (v. 12), a change of “heart” (v. 12b) associated with seeing our lives for what they are. In the connective tissue of this structure, death can no longer be read only in opposition to life. It emerges as part of the fabric of life-giving wisdom.

Finally, in this purview of the setting vis-à-vis death, structure itself provides a clue, one that I will call discipline. Choices have been made: this ‘passage’ and not another; this text, this time. Here, the Zen saying comes to mind: “Go straight on.”<sup>43</sup> As to how reading dare proceed, given the consuming “wrath” and fearsome “power” that await in vv. 7-11, a partially-traversed Psalm 90 might respond: ‘You are girded with trust by virtue of where you have come from’ (cf. vv. 1-2). As a reader who suffers the power of words, I find the reminder helpful. However, if you prefer to remember that texts alone are “mute,”<sup>44</sup> then I would say, ‘let that silence be your guide.’

Silence as a sign of the presence of the holy has deep roots in biblical tradition. Elijah, that other prophet of Horeb, realized this in his own mountain theophany (cf.

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<sup>43</sup> Case 31 in the collection of koans known as *Mumonkan*; see *Gateless Gate*, trans. with commentary by Zen Master Kōun Yamada, 153-56.

<sup>44</sup> So Ricoeur: “The text is mute. An asymmetric relation obtains between the text and reader, in which only one of the partners speaks for the two” (*Interpretation Theory*, 75). For an early appropriation of this influential adage, see Tribble, *Texts of Terror*, 1. On silence as “God’s final defense against [the] idolatry [of words],” see Taylor, *When God is Silent*, 38.

1 Kgs 19:1-18).<sup>45</sup> Not so for Moses, who hears and bears God’s words at every turn.

Neither is this the case in Psalm 90, where God’s presence in the geography of reality is professed and God’s action is anything but quiet.

To traverse the middle of Psalm 90 is to cross into a geography of annihilation. Divine wrath frames vv. 7-11 in parallel iterations (‘God’s anger/God’s wrath,’ v. 7; ‘God’s anger/God’s fury,’ v. 11, chiasm map). In v. 7, confession—again in the first person plural of vv. 1 and 2—acknowledges the magnitude of God’s anger and surrenders any vestige of human control: “For we are consumed by your anger [אֵן], by your wrath [חַמָּה] we are overwhelmed.” Mortal existence is at stake. In v. 11, the presumption to know is also relinquished: “Who understands the power of your anger [אֵן] and according to the fear of you your fury [עַבְרָה]?”<sup>46</sup> Divine burning illumines the text’s core even as the resulting smoke enshrouds it.<sup>47</sup> Recursive symmetry makes the force of this anger exponential.

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<sup>45</sup> Like Moses in Deut 33:1 and the superscription to Psalm 90, Elijah is also given the title “man of God” (1 Kgs 17:18, 24). Notable is that in his effort to escape Jezebel’s (justifiable) wrath, Elijah retraces Israel’s journey from Sinai through the wilderness to Judah. (See Robert Wilson’s commentary on 1 Kgs in *HCSB*, 550.) Deuteronomistic tradition is clear that Elijah, above all, walks in Moses’ footsteps.

<sup>46</sup> The delusion that we can know or should be able to make logical sense of the ferocity of a divinely ordained world is closely guarded even by questions of theodicy. Psalm 90 may be a response to divine wrath, but the lament does not ask ‘why.’ Nor does the psalm seek to justify God’s ways.

<sup>47</sup> The Hebrew word אֵן is a homonym with the double meaning of “nose” and “anger” (*TDOT* I: 351). The word conjures the image of burning and of smoke, as in Ps 18:8-9: “because [YHWH] was angry, smoke went up from his nostrils.” The word חַמָּה, here translated “wrath,” also implies heat (see the etymology from the root meaning “be hot”), and is most often expressed as a “burning or flaring up” (*TDOT* IV: 464).

Inside this circle of fire, humans are fully exposed. The God who burns also sees with a light which no mortal can escape. Where vv. 7 and 11 evoke an all-consuming mystery, vv. 8 and 10 peel away whatever conceit of protection the “children-of-the-ground” (v. 3) might concoct and reveal the sinew of their sin and suffering. In v. 8, parallelism between “our afflictions” (עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ<sup>48</sup>) and “our secrets” (עֲלֵמֵנוּ) suggests that the *dis-ease* laid bare is the human pretension to withhold, to hide in ourselves rather than find that place of hiding (בְּעֵין) in God. The presumption of autonomy—of independence from God with its attending self-consciousness—catches human beings in their tracks. According to Psalm 90, such ‘affliction’ cannot withstand “the light of God’s face” (v. 8b). Bounded on all sides by divine rage (vv. 7, 9, and 11), deceit and futility (cf. v. 10) turn to ash—“and we fly away” (v. 10).

Once human culpability is brought ‘face to face’ with the ‘light’ and ‘heat’ of God, any explanation evaporates. Words fail, as surely as do the humans who rely on them. But, like the modest allotment of even a robust lifespan (cf. v. 10a), language is what we are given. It is what we know; that mortal organ of wisdom. Who among us has not said of words what Psalm 90 says of the years: “the best of them is toil and trouble” (v. 10b)? And who has not recoiled at the reason: when they are gone, so are we (cf. v.

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<sup>48</sup> The multivalence of עֵין carries the nuance of ‘affliction’ and ‘iniquity’ (so the NJPS and NRSV “iniquities” in v. 8). The recurrence of the word in v. 15 (עֲוִירָנוּ, “you have afflicted us”) complicates any easy assessment of human suffering in the psalm. The shared root עֵין in בְּעֵין (v. 1) also leaves such questions unsettled.

10b)? With this condition brought into the “light” of v. 8, reading does the only thing it can. It makes another connection.

The chiasmic link between ‘Human afflictions/Secrets’ (v. 8) and the brevity and difficulty of the ‘Human condition’ (v. 10, chiasm map) presses the reader of Psalm 90 to consider a relationship between sin and suffering, deceit and mortality. But the pattern of recursion also resists any reading of a one-to-one correspondence. Neither does the psalm make such a claim. God’s “anger” (vv. 7, 11) is set forth as a response to humanity’s guilt—here, that which would be kept hidden and therein separate from God (cf. v. 8). But as with the Genesis 2-3 story, Psalm 90 does not reckon death as a result of human failing.

Nevertheless, death and deceit are related in the psalm. In this respect, Psalm 90 again calls forth echoes of the ‘dust to dust’ version of humanity’s beginnings. When the primordial couple disobeys God and, eating from the tree of knowledge, knows itself to be “naked” (cf. Gen 3:7-11), man and woman are banished from Eden—a symbol encoded with the abundance of life (cf. Gen 3:22). Eden names a place and a time where ‘affliction’—the burden of human suffering and the weight of human sin—is not (yet) known, and where life in intimate proximity to divine care is a “delight.”<sup>49</sup> Whether death might be part of this life is not an issue, until the human couple experiences separation

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<sup>49</sup> The possibility of life without death for the human couple is not introduced until the end of the story, when God mentions the “tree of life” and acts to protect its fruit (Gen 3:22). One etymology for the place name “Eden” notes its connection to a West Semitic stem meaning “delight” (Wallace, “Eden, Garden of,” 281).

from God.<sup>50</sup> This, one might argue, is the more terrifying death, the one that makes life itself difficult to bear.

The vision of death summoned in Psalm 90 is considerably more ominous than in the primal myth of Genesis 2-3 creation. It arises from a time when sins committed (עוונותינו, Ps 90:8) and afflictions suffered (ענינו, v. 15) are painfully, palpably known.<sup>51</sup> And it mingles death with that other complex and multiply marked symbol: divine wrath.

In Psalm 90, God's "anger," "wrath," and "fury" (cf. vv. 7, 9, and 11) envelop affliction (v. 8) and transience (v. 10) such that it is difficult to distinguish between the two. Divine "fury" effectively obliterates any vestige of substance or permanence to which meaning might be attached. Distinctions fail, drawing every form—including the one we read—into question. Whatever divine wrath may entail, human constructs—including the idea that a transient life is a futile one—cannot survive it. According to the psalm, whatever passes through this wrath passes away in it. This is the peak of the chiasmic mountain: "For all our days pass away in your fury, we end our years like a sigh" (v. 9). In God's inescapable burning, we expire.

Despite its inestimable danger, 'the wrath of God' has been scrutinized by biblical exegesis—almost as much as it has been scandalized by religious fundamentalism. Interpretation has done what it can to stave the difficulty of rendering content to an

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<sup>50</sup> In the story, the separation is two-fold. The groundlings break with God's command, thus becoming self-conscious, and God expels them from the garden.

<sup>51</sup> To render עוונותינו as "sins" is to emphasize the root meaning of עון, "guilt." The word can also mean "consequence" or "punishment," as in Gen 4:13 where Cain cries out to God, "My punishment [עוני] is greater than I can bear!"

emotion turned event, a capacity ascribed to God in human terms that no human can fully fathom.<sup>52</sup> Once the larger philosophical, theological, and literary questions about this singularly difficult attribute of YHWH God (judgment so fierce it is willing to destroy the creature) have been raised, scholarly debate has tended to settle on the more accessible problem of interpreting human experience. In this respect, it is possible to say that the ‘wrath of God’ is the dark side of the absolute command: divine sovereignty cracking open the façade of human limitations and shining light on what is sometimes called the ‘human condition.’<sup>53</sup> ‘Fear of the LORD,’ a piety the psalm indirectly professes (v. 11), is the attitude that acknowledges this sovereignty without trying to reduce it to human terms.<sup>54</sup>

With its pretonic stress on resting in *Adonai* and cadence in surrendering the future to “*Adonai* our God” (v. 17), Psalm 90 does inspire reflection on ephemerality, human limitation, and unconditional trust. But there is another way of reading the psalm, and another way of reading the death it evokes. This ‘other’ way is by reading the text not

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<sup>52</sup> Theological discourse rooted in historical criticism continues to ask “whether ‘the wrath of God’ is a rhetorical figure of speech or an ontological reality” (Herion, “Wrath of God [OT],” 990).

<sup>53</sup> See, for example, James Mays’ commentary on Psalm 90: “The wrath of God is a linguistic symbol for the divine limits and pressure placed against human resistance to [God’s] sovereignty” (*Psalms*, 292).

<sup>54</sup> Noting the *inclusio* that frames the book of Proverbs with יראת יהוה (“the fear of the LORD”), Perdue writes that this attitude “is not terror of divine power or what Rudolf Otto calls the religious experience of awe . . . . Rather, it is a religious piety characterized by faith in God as the creator and sustainer of life” (*Wisdom and Creation*, 79). While Psalm 90 shares in biblical wisdom’s grounding in creation, the burning wrath that inhabits the center of the psalm (vv. 7-11) poses a challenge to this domesticated definition of יראת יהוה.

only for what it ‘means’ but also for what it ‘does’; by entering the fire rather than commenting on its heat; and by finding in the process that the dualism which marks the rift between text and reading, life and death, perhaps even humanity and God, goes up in smoke.<sup>55</sup>

To read Psalm 90 in this other way is to cross into the moment of the psalm’s mountain summit and find the reading self subsumed. It is to be drawn past the blinding light that illumines “secrets” (v. 8) and the temporal futility of suffering (cf. “toil and trouble,” v. 10) into a finality that swallows all distinction. It is, if only for a moment, to read the exhale of the psalm’s penultimate “sigh” (אָנָּחַ, v. 9) as a puff of air that extinguishes reading in the act of bringing together reader and text. Perhaps more to the point, to read the “prayer of Moses” (v. 1a) as a mountain structure is to be shown a way to the ‘dying before you die’ that can, as the psalm puts it, “bring forth a heart of wisdom,” a heart that knows how “to count . . . truly” the “days” of this life (v. 12).

Ironically, if reading Psalm 90 according to this account is possible, nothing here said about it is true. If the Archimedean moment—in prayer or in reading—exists, if it *happens*, then nothing at all can be said about it; for such a moment evades language. This is not simply because words are slippery, though they are. As soon as one stands outside the moment in order to describe it, the fact itself is gone. (For all his talking,

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<sup>55</sup> One could list a whole host of dualisms whose gaping oppositions hold open the space filled by the lament’s sense of loss and lack: time and eternity, suffering and joy, before and after, life and death, good and evil, wrath and *hesed*, “children-of-the-ground” and YHWH God.



Moses never speaks of what he saw in the fire and cloud.) In other words, we cannot separate ourselves from the reality that determines who we are. Whether this be named ‘wrath,’ ‘God,’ the ‘present moment,’ or the ‘refuge’ that is both in and from all of these, once caught in the quick of reality—the coil of the psalm—there is no inside or outside, no before or after, no subject to speak and no object subject to description.<sup>56</sup>

To this end, the rhetorical structure of Psalm 90, a construct mapped by recursion, limns the turning moment. But poetic order does not stand alone in calling forth this way of reading the text. The decisive turn in the prayer that fosters a turning of the human heart toward wisdom relies on multiple connections.<sup>57</sup> These arise when the fearsome approach to the middle of the psalm—to wrath (vv. 7, 9, 11), nakedness before God (v. 8), and death (v. 9)—is also, *at the same time*, a drawing near to the summit of Sinai: to the place of meeting God. There, “thick cloud” (Exod 19:16) and blazing “fire” (Exod 19:18; cf. Deut 4:11) render wrath, judgment, and fear more complex. On this mountain,

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<sup>56</sup> Rudolf Bultmann made this point for Protestant theology in his essay, “What Does It Mean to Speak of God?” Readers of the literature of Zen as well as Jewish, Christian, and Sufi mysticism will recognize points of contact. Bultmann insists that the problem of our inability to stand outside of God—and so speak *about* God—renders itself always in categorically historical terms. For more on his essay, see below.

<sup>57</sup> In this connection, the reading I have called “other”—pointing to both an alternate interpretive possibility and a *mysterium*—could just as aptly be seen as a simultaneous or “at the same time” reading of this traditional lament. Put another way, dying before you die does not preclude or put off the death Psalm 90 acknowledges and laments. On the phrase “at the same time” as simultaneous conjunction and disjunction, see Derrida, “The Deconstruction of Actuality,” 93; also Sherwood, who references Derrida in her reading of the simultaneity brought on by the sacrifice of Isaac (“Binding—Unbinding,” 827).

divine fury—the form of “no form” (cf. Deut 4:15)—is bent on multiple meanings.<sup>58</sup> Death likewise takes on added possibility. The face-to-face that threatens mortal life, while also proclaiming intimacy with the one whose name *is* life (the verb of being: אֱלֹהִים אֲשֶׁר אֱלֹהִים, Exod 3:14), opens the singular meaning of death to question.<sup>59</sup>

Into this opening, the great uncertainty rushes. It is curious to me that at this very point in my woman’s reading of a decidedly male construct—the figurative Sinai on which, strictly speaking, no biblical woman ever set foot—the ground underneath my stalwart feet is itself shifting and opening. Instead of rocks and red earth, the imagined features of a mountain-in-the-wilderness exploration, I am overcome by softness, by the give of warm skin, by the mysterious nurture of a text rising toward the dark round. My mountain structure has turned into a breast.

There is ample cause for this transfiguration. The God Moses inherits, the God revealed anew on Sinai, is *Shaddai* (יְדַי, Exod 6:3), an ancient cultic name whose root meaning is “mountain” and/or “breast.”<sup>60</sup> My (con)fusion—a slippage or excess of

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<sup>58</sup> On the aniconism of divine wrath and the danger of idolatrous reading, see chapter 7.

<sup>59</sup> On the mortal threat of getting too close to God, see, e.g., Exod 19:21; 20:19; 33:20. For the proclamation of Moses’ “face to face” (or “mouth to mouth”) proximity to God, see Exod 33:11; Num 12:8; Deut 5:4; 34:10.

<sup>60</sup> On יְדַי as “mountain” and דַּי as “breast,” see *TDOT* XIV: 418-46 and 408-12 respectively. On the dual etymology of יְדַי, see also Lutzky, “Shadday as Goddess Epithet,” 15-36. In Exod 6:2-3, God claims continuity with the past, telling Moses: “I am YHWH. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as *Shaddai*, but by my name ‘YHWH’ I did not make myself know to them.” The specter of inheritance calls to mind Derrida’s dictum on the subject: “Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task.” Derrida goes on to say, “We are inheritors, which does not mean that we have or we receive this or that,

identification—may be (as it were) ‘bred in the bone’ of this prescient metaphor. Or might some latent memory reside just beneath the surface of the mutable form, the tactile noun turned verb-of-being? These questions press in on me as I wonder that  $\aleph$ , the stated geography of my chapter, is itself just another derivative, a noun turned verbal by virtue of its iconic hold on reading. And I consider by what symbolized surface this reading will find its way down, now that the mountain emerges in less solid form. Still, what interests me most is how reading death—encoded in the psalm by consuming heat, exposed secrets, wrath, transience, and a recursive structure—brought about such a visceral shift in my cognitively-loaded symbol (mountain/Sinai/theophany); how a paradigm that was poised ‘from the beginning’ to meet with its own death nevertheless lives on; and how time and text collude in this (re)generation of meaning.

The changing body of my reading generates still more questions: What if death—like the mountain/breast—is a *both/and*? What if the loss that threatens life is also a loss of another kind, a possibility signaled in this reading of Psalm 90 by the intersection of a particular group of texts? And if so, how it is that language can be the scene of such sudden dissolution? Isn’t language itself—a lam across distance and difference—undone by such a collapse of oppositions? Or—and here is the *real* question in all of this—how, if the death that defies expression happens, do we go on? How do we walk back down the mutable mountain?

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but that the being we are is first of all inheritance, like it or not, know it or not” (*Specters of Marx*, 66-67). According to Exod 6:2-3, this can also be said of God.

Psalm 90 moves on with an imperative: “To count our days truly, teach!” (v. 12a). Having ‘crossed’ into the holy mountain and having ‘transgressed’ its death, reading can rephrase this plea in words that are both personal and Mosaically figured: If you come face-to-face with the God of life and death; if, only for a moment, you are striped bare of pretension (cf. v. 8); if you recognize ‘I don’t know’ as the limitless fact before God, an endless end that swallows all justification (cf. v. 11), how then will you go on? With reading, the psalm offers an answer. One step after another: *one, two, three* (or, equally to the point: *one, one, one*).<sup>61</sup> This is counting time after the manner of Psalm 90.

The question, ‘when there is nothing to hang on to and nowhere to go, how do you go on’ is not so different from the existential question Rudolf Bultmann put to theological language: Is it possible to speak about God when, as Bultmann put it, “God is the reality determining all else”?<sup>62</sup> The answer is clearly no. As soon as we say even one word about God, we have separated ourselves from the condition of our being. We have objectified what does not exist for us except as a subject. (Even to say this is impossible!) How then are we to speak at all? *One, two, three*.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Reading theory professes what instinct knows: it is impossible to say the same thing twice (a point I will develop in later chapters). Even if the number is one, and again, one, this is the only day by its given number.

<sup>62</sup> Bultmann, “What Does It Mean To Speak of God?” 80.

<sup>63</sup> Bultmann’s dilemma was anticipated by Wittgenstein when he concluded his *Tractatus*: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (*Tractatus* 7, 188-89). The *Tractatus* was published in German in 1921. Bultmann’s essay was written in 1925. In his 1987 essay, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials,” Derrida takes up Wittgenstein’s “injunction to silence,” developing the demand “one must” [remain silent] into a *must* for speech in what is surely a play on Bultmann’s dialectical ‘must’ (81).

In the biblical canon, this mode of counting calls to mind Qoheleth, a sage who had the courage to take a hard look at human mortality. Qoheleth observes the turning of the world, in its ennui and its transience (Qoh 1:4-11), and offers counsel on the “good” in human existence (5:18). Take hold of joy when it comes, he advises. Be glad, take “pleasure” (שׂמח, cf. “gladden,” Ps 90:15); see the “good” in what is, both in celebration and in work; it is “our lot” given by God (Qoh 5:19). For Qoheleth, joy, however fleeting, gives life purpose. This is what “the Teacher”<sup>64</sup> finds when he “[applies his] mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven” (1:13). He finds life “an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy with” (1:13). He finds “toil” or “effort” (עמל) that ultimately amounts to nothing for the one who does it (2:20-21).<sup>65</sup> And he finds that no matter the strengths with which humans may be endowed, “time and chance happen to them all” (9:11). On this and other evidence, Qoheleth concludes, “All is *hebel*” (הכל הבל, 1:2).<sup>66</sup> Everything is nothing more than a “puff of air.”<sup>67</sup> Qoheleth’s instruction on how to count the days is this: “There is nothing better for

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<sup>64</sup> A possible translation of “Qoheleth” (קהלת, 1:1), the meaning of which is uncertain.

<sup>65</sup> עמל in Qoheleth is both a noun and a verb (Qoh 2:10, 11, 18, 20, 21, 22, 24; 3:9, 13; 4:4, 6, 7, 9; 5:15, 16, 18, 19; 6:7; 9:9). The word is generally rendered “toil” (NJPS, NRSV, OED), which covers both nominal and verbal forms. Cf. עמל in Ps 90:10.

<sup>66</sup> The NRSV reads, “All is vanity.” On the thirty-eight occurrences of *hebel* in Qoheleth and the range of meaning for this key word, see Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 206-8.

<sup>67</sup> Translated literally, *hebel* (הבל) is “breath.”

mortals than to eat and drink, and find enjoyment in their toil” (2:24). Therefore, *carpe diem!* Seize the day!<sup>68</sup>

Qoheleth addresses some of the same themes that tug at the heart of Psalm 90—transience, toil, joy and misery, understanding or wisdom. But the insight drawn from this teacher’s testing of the human condition is a far cry from the cry of Psalm 90 to learn “to count our days truly” (v. 12a). While the psalmist would surely agree that the order of the day is transience, the order by which we live it is also—as this mountain reading of the psalm suggests—a matter of relationship. The joy the psalm asks for has no claim on the future, but it does not ask only on its own behalf. And it does not understand that joy is possible apart from relationship to the God who grants it.

In earlier stages of this study, I considered characterizing the appeal “to count our days truly” (v. 12a) as ‘*carpe diem.*’ The maxim is easily recognizable and worked well in leading the eye across the content chiasm mapped by this study (cf. chiasm map, vv. 6 and 12). ‘Seize the day’ or ‘live to the full the moment at hand’ evokes poignancy and propinquity in relation to the psalm’s depiction of grass: “In the morning, it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening, it fades and withers” (v. 6). In a general sense, this is the imperative to which Psalm 90 gives voice: as the grass flourishes in its time (v. 6a), so teach us to thrive in and with what is given (v. 12a). The plea is for life, for immediacy, for meaning. But on the mountain structure of Psalm 90, another trajectory emerges, a vision of wisdom that rises out of and evokes the psalm’s own eponymous tradition.

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<sup>68</sup> Perdue reads a seven-fold “*carpe diem*” refrain in Qoheleth and structures the book accordingly (*Wisdom and Creation*, 203-5).

Reading with that tradition, I have chosen to signify the chiasmic relationship between vv. 6a and 12a by naming the life-giving plea for wisdom in v. 12a *‘hinnēnî’* (see chiasm map, p. 30).

When Moses stands on the face of Sinai and says *hinnēnî* (הִנְנִי): *Here I am!* (Exod 3:4), he marks his place among the ancestors of Israel’s prophets, and he marks the moment at hand as complete and unconditionally acceptable. He faces God as only he can.<sup>69</sup> Sharing ground with the “flame of fire” (Exod 3:2), Moses says, *Yes! Here! Now!* He ‘counts the day’ without remainder. With *hinnēnî*, Moses, the prototypical supplicant of Psalm 90, drops the construct of before and after, the artifice of a preconceived, post-oriented self, and surrenders time to the present. He speaks the “here-and-now-ness . . . of the situation.”<sup>70</sup> And he predicates his life on relationship.

In the Hebrew Bible, “Here I am!” may be the consummate affirmation of relationship with God.<sup>71</sup> Addressed to God, the expression signals an encounter that is

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<sup>69</sup> As I read it, *hinnēnî* is a declaration of being fully present and standing on one’s own. Buddhist tradition tells that Shakyamuni Buddha, on seeing the morning star and recognizing his true nature, pointed to the sky and the ground and said, “I alone under heaven . . .”. Then, out of compassion, he became a teacher.

<sup>70</sup> Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew*, 168; quoted in Waltke and O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 40.2.1b.

<sup>71</sup> Examples of this affirmation are notable with respect to the ancestors, male and female. The Akedah begins with Abraham’s response, הִנְנִי (Gen 22:1). Jacob answers the angel in his dream, הִנְנִי (Gen 31:11). Joseph answers his brother, Israel, who sends him to his plotting brothers, הִנְנִי (Gen 37:13). Jacob responds to God in a vision when he is told to take his family to Egypt, הִנְנִי (Gen 46:2). The boy Samuel says הִנְנִי five times in his call to prophecy, three times responding to God’s call (1 Sam 3:4, 6, 8), twice responding to Eli (vv. 5, 16). Isaiah responds, הִנְנִי to God’s “Whom shall I send?” (6:8) when he is called in a vision to go and speak the word of God. The address might be likened to

necessarily interdependent. In this sense, *hinnēnî* —*here I am*—can be understood as the human counterpart to the divine name: אֲהִיָּה אֲשֶׁר אֲהִיָּה (“*I am who I am/will be*”).<sup>72</sup> To speak it is to declare oneself present, viable, by way of being engaged with the other. It is to say the whole of what is while making space for interaction. The emphatic *yes-to-the-other* brings the one who speaks to the quick of recognition. At the same time, it counts the all too relative present moment as complete. “Here I am!” withholds nothing. It enters into existence just as it is. According to the chiasmic recursions of Psalm 90, this way of relating is ‘Life’ (see chiasm map, v. 6a). How does it “flourish”? How is it “renewed”? (Ps 90:6a). *One, two, three.*<sup>73</sup>

Of course, one might argue that there is nothing new in this way of counting. Human life proceeds one step at a time regardless of its relationships. As for the language about those steps, it is in the nature of speech to open up gaps in the process of trying to bridge them. No amount of realization or presence in the moment changes this any more than it changes the fact that we die. (Or does it?) When Psalm 90 makes the turn toward

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naming God, but its occurrence in the HB is more gender exclusive. While women do name God (cf. Hagar in Gen 16:13), no woman in the HB addresses God with אֲהִיָּה.

<sup>72</sup> The name revealed to Moses on Sinai in Exod 3:14.

<sup>73</sup> This approach to counting again calls up comparison with Ecclesiastes. It may be that what Psalm 90 and Qoheleth have most in common is that both texts face the fact of death. For Qoheleth, the confrontation raises a philosophical problem, a fact to be tested, analyzed, and resolved for the best by way of deduction. As Koosed articulates, “Qoheleth is an attempt to speak to the absence at the heart of meaning” (“Decomposing Qohelet,” 252). That absence endures for “the Teacher” (Qoh 1:1) because it cannot be filled by conceptual understanding. Psalm 90 is also driven to ‘the heart of meaning’ by the profound loss of death, but the wisdom it seeks knows nothing of philosophy.



“wisdom” (v. 12), the recursions that bring reading down the mountain of this text attest that life in the world is still the same.<sup>74</sup> It is also vastly different.

The difference of returning is reflected in the text of Psalm 90 in several ways. The language of the psalm emerges from the fire and cloud of vv. 7-11 in a new voice. In vv. 12-17, the lament of wrath and death gives way to a series of seven imperatives and two jussives. “Teach!” (הוֹדֵעַ, v. 12), “return!” (שׁוּבוּהָ, v. 13a), “have compassion!” (v. 13b), “sate!” (שִׂבְעֵנוּ, v. 14), “gladden!” (שִׂמְחֵנוּ, v. 15), and “establish!” (כִּוְנֵנָהּ, v. 17, 2x) convey the kind of confidence that comes from the mouths of those who now know themselves to be “servants” (vv. 13, 16) of the God on whom they call.<sup>75</sup> These emphatic pleas construct a rhetorical world that is sacramental: the asking makes it so. “Let be visible” (יִרְאֶה, v. 16) and “let be” (וַיְהִי, v. 17) invite a reality replete with divine “activity” in the present (v. 16a) and open to multiple futures (v. 16b). What this generation is given to know, future generations will taste, albeit differently. What this generation sees, its children may also witness, with their own eyes.

The change in tone in vv. 12-17 also represents a change in perspective. Time on the upward slope of this mountain is the measure of things that pass and decay. Its images are worked into the ground (“earth and world” [v. 2], “dust” [v. 3], “flood” [v. 5], “grass” that “fades and withers” [vv. 4-5]) and cloaked by the darkness of night (“watch in the

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<sup>74</sup> A chiasmic reading relies on the same relationships going and coming. Likewise, the downward side of Psalm 90 does not erase the fact that “we have seen evil” (v. 15).

<sup>75</sup> The seven-fold imperative generates a rhetorical universe that is whole and complete in the asking. On the symbolism of the number seven in the HB, see chapter 1, pp. 16-17.

night,” “sleep,” “evening”). The downward vista of the psalm is lit by “morning” (v. 14) and by the three-fold use of “days” (vv. 12, 14, 15) absent any mention of night.<sup>76</sup> This light seems to brighten as the lines progress. YHWH is called from “compassion” (חַסֵּד, v. 13) to “*hesed*” (חַסֵּד, v.14) to visible “splendor” (פֶּעַל, v. 16) to the “graciousness” of an open-ended future in which “*Adonai* our God” (אֲדֹנָי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, v. 17a) may—or may not—“establish” (כִּוְנֵנָה) something of our making “beyond us” (עַלֵּינוּ, v.17b).

This increase of light on the returning side of Psalm 90 illumines hope, but not by shuttering the prayer against darkness. The vision of reality that follows on the psalm’s plea for wisdom and compassion (vv. 12-13) is distinct in a way that only shadow and contrast can provide. Suffering is not denied. On the contrary, “affliction” and “evil” are etched into the prayer with the force of personal experience (cf. v. 15).<sup>77</sup> God has done these things and they ‘count’; they belong to the reality of who we are. Individual life is formed in its undeniable particularity by the “years . . . we have seen evil” (v. 15b).<sup>78</sup> What is asked on the downward slope of the psalm is not for this life to be other than it is, more tolerable or recast without “affliction” (עֲוֹן; cf. vv. 8, 15), but for life as it is to be

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<sup>76</sup> Alter observes that “significantly, the sole temporal terms from the previous parts of the poem not repeated here [vv. 12-17] are the ones symbolically associated with fitful sleep and death—“evening” and “night” (*The Art of Biblical Poetry*, 128).

<sup>77</sup> Some exegetes take the parallel references to “affliction” by God and “evil” in v. 15 as an indication that the psalm is a response to specific events suffered by the community. See, e.g., Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 217; Tate, *Psalms 51-100*, 438. See also references to Dahood, R. Clifford, and Krüger, cited above.

<sup>78</sup> Suffering or “evil” as a category of experience is always intensely particular with respect to individual identity. For written evidence, see Elaine Scarry’s study of pain, power, and the limits of language, *The Body in Pain*.

balanced, in effect, *sane*,<sup>79</sup> so that joy might have the kind of parity with suffering that gives the whole value and that makes it possible to count the joy as sufficient “in its day” (Exod 16:4).<sup>80</sup>

Sufficiency *is* measured by the ‘day’ in Psalm 90, and it is specific. Despite “toil and trouble,” weakness or relative “strength” (v. 10), one taste of God’s *hesed* “in the morning” makes it possible to “rejoice and be glad in all our days” (v. 14). In a text that conjoins “resting place,” “wrath,” and “wisdom,” it is enough to experience, even once, the life-giving character of God. To do so, according to the prayer, is to be ‘sated’ (cf. שִׂבְעוּ, v. 14a) once and for all. And it is to be called into a relationship that is as unique, particular, and contingent as one’s own life.

Whether *hesed* is identified as ‘steadfast love,’ ‘mercy,’ ‘faithfulness,’ or simply the sound of letters combined with air: *hesed*, the overriding characteristic of this unfixable mode of being is relationship. In the Hebrew Bible, divine *hesed* is variously nuanced, referring to deliverance, protection, forgiveness, or “provision for an essential

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<sup>79</sup> The English word ‘sane’ derives from Latin, *sanus*, to be “healthy,” but tends in current usage to refer to a balanced or sound mind. In French, *sain* includes the sense of “wholeness.” This state of being is reflected in the Hebrew word *šālōm* (שָׁלוֹם), a relational term that conveys “completeness,” “soundness,” “well-being,” and “peace” (cf. *BDB*; *HALOT*). This sense of balance points more directly to the kind of parity or sanity the psalm solicits in v. 15.

<sup>80</sup> The allusion is to Moses and the manna from heaven, Israel’s storied lesson in counting the day. The case in point is Exod 16:4, which reads: “Here-I-am! I will make rain down upon you bread from the heavens, and the people shall go out and gather, a day’s amount *in its day*, in order that I may test them, whether they will walk according to my law or not” (my translation). Psalm 90 does not construe human limitation as a test, but the prayer does recognize the ability to “count our days truly” as dependent upon divine instruction (Ps 90:12).

need,” all expressions of God actively keeping faith with God’s creatures.<sup>81</sup> What unites these actions across texts and across time is that they happen in the context of an ongoing relationship (covenant, political, personal) and they exceed the bounds of expectation within that relationship.<sup>82</sup> God keeps faith in a way that engenders change. The interplay of stability and change, a hallmark of relationship, reflects what Sakenfeld describes as a sign of the simultaneous commitment and “sovereign freedom of God,” a freedom that shows itself in the continual return to engagement, to being-with.<sup>83</sup>

In Psalm 90, the plea for YHWH’s return fills *hesed* with content. Suffering, the likes of which are inscribed by wrath, exposed secrets, and the passing of life, cries out for a compassion whose singular solace will transform “all our days” (v. 14b). One act of *hesed* “in the morning” (v. 14a) alters relationship with everything else. Such confidence evokes one of the core affirmations of the remembered Exodus history of the *Haggadah*: “It is enough!” (וְיָדָא). In the liturgy of the Seder, one by one the events of the Exodus are enumerated, with each step in the sequence punctuated by the refrain, וְיָדָא; often

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<sup>81</sup> Sakenfeld, *The Meaning of Hesed*, 234.

<sup>82</sup> See Sakenfeld’s summary of *hesed* as “deliverance or protection as a responsible keeping of faith with another with whom one is in a relationship” (*The Meaning of Hesed*, 233).

<sup>83</sup> Sakenfeld makes the point that in *hesed*, “the sovereign freedom of God and [God’s] strong commitment to [God’s] chosen people [are] held together in a single word” (*The Meaning of Hesed*, 238). It is notable that *hesed*, like *hebel*, resists translation because any ‘single word’ narrows the field of meaning in a word that, by definition, has no measurable boundary.

transliterated for the congregation: *dayēnû!*<sup>84</sup> Each event in the story is offered on its own, as though it had been the only of God’s gifts on the way from exodus to wilderness wandering, to Sinai, to Torah, to Temple, to (note the full circle) “prophets of truth” and a “holy people.”<sup>85</sup> Had this alone and nothing else happened: *dayēnû!* Put another way, a single experience at the dawn of the community’s life—“in the morning”—so sates the people that they can live in gratitude (“rejoice and be glad,” v. 14) for the rest of their days, whatever those days may bring.<sup>86</sup>

This *dayēnû* is not blind optimism, but the God-taught knowledge that this day, for all its suffering and transience, is of value (cf. v. 12). It is the recognition that what is needed for the day to ‘count’ is provided, regardless of the circumstances. A story from the Hasidic tradition illustrates this with a kind of Exodus-in-reverse, a response to imminent disaster that arrives at its own bleak but decisive *dayēnû*. As the story goes, adversity dismantles memory, one act at a time, stripping away its continuity. Ritual is pared down like time to the only thing the present can offer:

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<sup>84</sup> Conventions of transliteration vary. I have followed the academic style. The congregation might see something more ‘user friendly’ like “*dayeinu*” (see Bronstein, ed., *A Passover Haggadah*) or “*dayenu*” (see Touster, ed., *A Survivor’s Haggadah*; a reproduction of the Haggadah from the first Passover publicly celebrated after the camps in Nazi Germany were liberated).

<sup>85</sup> See *A Passover Haggadah*, ed. Bronstein, 52-3. While all the major events of the Exodus story are told, Moses is not named in the recitation. He is effectively written out of the Haggadah. This contrasts with the final form of the MT Psalter, where Moses’ role in the shaping of Israel is given prominence, a point I will take up in chapter 3.

<sup>86</sup> Harrelson reads the “in the morning” of v. 14 as a recognition that it is better if the experience of divine *hesed* comes early in life rather than later on (“Sixty Years of Bible Study”).

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: “I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.” And it was sufficient.<sup>87</sup>

It is curious how this parable of forgetting has been appropriated by post-Holocaust literature in an effort to keep that most awful of memories alive; curious and also telling. Having lost all bearings toward the once sacred “place in the forest,” those who live beyond horror remind themselves that just to speak is sufficient. This may be the loudest *dayēnû* of all: to go on living until the moment of death even when life itself is death. Simply to live under these conditions is to tell the story.

When the “enough” of *dayēnû* is stripped down to the bones of bare existence, it becomes clear that no one can say this *enough* for another. If unconditional sufficiency receives its fill from the moment at hand, it also casts its lot with one individual at a time. “It is enough” confers value not only on what is, but also on who is. This aspect of *dayēnû*, of the ‘sating’ Psalm 90 implores, was darkly illustrated for me recently when the local PBS station ran a documentary on the making of Auschwitz.<sup>88</sup> As I tuned in, the story focused on the early history of the camp, before Auschwitz became home to the ‘final solution.’ An image filled the screen: old footage of Nazi soldiers throwing torn bits of bread down on a group of starving Russian prisoners of war: ‘manna from heaven.’ The unlikely conjuring of Exodus 16 jolted my imagination. Then the question:

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<sup>87</sup> The story is told by Elie Wiesel as the prologue to his *The Gates of the Forest* and again in *Souls on Fire*, 167-8. Karl Plank quotes this passage in the epilogue to his study of the Holocaust, *Mother of the Wire Fence*, 150.

<sup>88</sup> Footage of this tape was included in the PBS series, *Auschwitz: Inside the Nazi State*, aired on KERA, January 19, 2005.

Is there any way to look at this scene and say *it is enough*? Psalm 90 answers this question in a way that maybe only a prayer can: by pleading for wisdom. What I can say is that the kind of sufficiency *dayēnû* declares makes it impossible to look at the desperate tangle of arms reaching for a falling shred of food without seeing human individuals where otherwise a faceless group of condemned men might be. Though it does nothing to thwart death, this kind of satiety changes the face of who we are.

As a denominator of time, *dayēnû* recognizes what is given as complete by entering into an unconditional present. The expression sees through the human tendency to seek after fairness or to wish endlessly for more—more time, more satisfaction, more meaning; but it does not explain away “evil” (v. 15). Neither does it displace wrath, in the Pesach story, in the murder of innocents, or in Psalm 90. Instead, what the exclamation of sufficiency and immediacy does is prompt a reconsideration of wrath, not only as a call to responsibility and an insistence upon justice, but also as the burning beyond explanation that brings human beings to the nub of who we are; to death, and, so long as we live, back again.

In this, *dayēnû* belongs to the grammar of *hinnēnî*. Both expressions embody a condition that is unique, specific, and irreplaceable by virtue of life’s temporality; both point directly to the individual who alone can live the *this, here, now* of a given situation and who alone can experience its sufficiency; and both say the one thing that, according

to Psalm 90, can be said in the momentary fragility of a single life: “You are God” (v. 2; cf. vv. 1-2).<sup>89</sup>

Psalm 90 returns to this confession, not as an answer to the ‘parity’ that brings as much or more “evil” (v. 15) than any human can bear, but as a means of going on.<sup>90</sup>

With v. 16, the base of the mountain and the conclusion of the psalm come into view:

“Let be visible to your servants your activity and your splendor to their children” (v. 16).

At the same time, the recursions that beget this mountain recall from whence it came:

“Before the mountains were begotten or you brought forth earth and world, from endlessness to endlessness, you are God” (v. 2). Divine creation and human progeny (בְּנֵיהֶם, “their children,” v. 16b<sup>91</sup>) string the psalm’s depiction of a human lifespan between the open margins of before and after, between time immeasurable (עוֹלָם, v. 2) and time that is inaccessible (the future of בְּנֵיהֶם, v. 16). The God who is and was before creation is called on to be in a way that this generation’s offspring will see and recognize (יִרְאוּהוּ, “let be visible,” v. 16a) so that they, too, will be able to say “you are” to God.

This wish for the future matters, both to the structure of the psalm and to the nature of the human reality it portrays; but it is not determinative. Verses 16-17 ask for but do not lay claim to an inheritance. Neither do these verses lay down fixed structural

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<sup>89</sup> In psalmic terms, to say “You are God” is also to say ‘I am here,’ as the dead cannot praise God. (See, e.g., Ps 6:6; 88:11-13.) For commentary on death in the Psalms, see the excursus by Craven and Harrelson in “The Psalms,” 835-36.

<sup>90</sup> With the change to the jussive form and orientation toward the future, vv. 16-17 function like a coda to the psalm, much as vv. 1-2 set up an introduction. See chiasm map, vv. 1-2 and vv. 16-17.

<sup>91</sup> Lit. “their sons.” See note on בְּנֵי־אֲדָם, p. 24.



boundaries. The relationships in the psalm that link the future to the past bring reading to an end that is open and unpredictable—an end rather like the מַעוֹן (“resting place,” v. 1) of the beginning. With v. 17, the psalm’s cascading entreaty for “wisdom” (v. 12), “compassion” (v. 13), right relationship or “*hesed*” (v. 14), “gladness” (v. 15), and a vision of the divine that can be recognized and shared (v. 16) empties out into open hands: “Let be the graciousness of *Adonai* our God upon us, and the work of our hands, establish beyond us!” (v. 17).

If wrath, in this mountain reading, consumes the separate self, *hesed* calls it into being; not as an isolated creature shored against destruction, but as an individual whose life is an expression of the gift received. Psalm 90 ends with a version of this affirmation. The sense of the psalm is that life will go on with some vestige of connection to the present generation, though not one that can be counted on or predicted. One could say it is in relinquishing that kind of counting that the psalm’s wise heart is laid open. There is nothing to hang on to here; nothing that can be itemized, secured, determined. Least of all is there anything that can be projected into a future that does not exist beyond the space at the bottom of the page. What does exist in this transitory gathering of dust is the blessed relief of coming through fire and cloud, flood of sleep and affliction of evil, and knowing that what endures is not up to us. That, according to Psalm 90, is wisdom.

## CHAPTER 3

### תורה

#### MEMORY AND STORY: PSALM 90 AND THE RE/MEMBERED LAW

*Change your mind . . . Remember*  
Exod 32:12-13

Rereading is here suggested at the outset,  
for it alone saves the text from repetition.  
Roland Barthes

This chapter is a repetition of everything I have just written, with a difference. In its most basic iteration, it is a recursion of Psalm 90 at another level of scale. The chapter turns to the Psalter as a whole, reading the order of these books as a narrative re-telling of Israel's formation. The location of Psalm 90 at the beginning of Book 4 marks a turning point in Israel's recounted passage from exodus to exile to new beginning and invites a reading of the five books of Moses in the shape of a mountain. According to this story, the psalm falls at the breach between a failed reliance on human institutions (the rise and fall of monarchy, Books 1-3) and restoration to a singular reliance on God who alone can establish what endures (Books 4 and 5).<sup>1</sup> The return is to a new kind of exodus faith, born of a different mountain encounter and bearing, in a different way, the law.

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<sup>1</sup> Gerald Wilson's work on the shape of the Psalter supports this outline. See Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. My reading of a narrative order in the Psalter

In a related iteration, this chapter looks at the pivotal story of Israel’s breaking and receiving of the law at Sinai (Exodus 32). The golden calf, ground into “dust” (קֶדַח, v. 20) by Moses, provides a parallel for the ascending side of the structure I read in Psalm 90 (vv. 3-6).<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Exodus 32 is read as a mountain text *par excellence*; a text that speaks to the breach wherein God as other—holy and dangerous—is met, while also saying something about the relational paradigm that underlies the law’s endlessly changing return.

To this end, the chapter begins with an extended discussion of memory, history, and narrative, categories of understanding invoked on behalf of this study as the laws of reading. It is to these ‘laws’ that Exodus 32 and Psalm 90 within the shape of the Psalter return as texts that reinscribe the biblical law, texts that intersect at a point of fissure not unlike the mountain cleft where Moses hides so as to see only the backside of God (Exod 33:21-3). The Mosaic call to God to “return” (שׁוּבוּ) and to “change” (הִנְחֵם, Exod 32:12; cf. Ps 90:13) that irrevocably binds these texts to one another thus becomes a command to reading as well.<sup>3</sup> The law as תּוֹרָה and as text demands another reading.

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again assumes an *as if* stance, though it is one I find more historically compelling than the claim of Mosaic authorship for Psalm 90.

<sup>2</sup> עַד אֲשֶׁר-דָּק, lit., “until it was dust.” The NRSV “ground to powder” conveys pulverizing, but association with the stuff of which humans are made is then lost.

<sup>3</sup> NRSV translates the הִנְחֵם of Exod 32:12 as “change your mind” (cf. Ps 110:4); also “renounce” (NJPS), “think better” (REB), “show mercy,” or “have compassion” (as in Ps 90:13). For more on this verb of returning and its place in the Psalter, see below, pp. 107-9.

*The Law(s) of Reading: Memory, History, and Narrative*

The logic of recursion brings this reading of texts back to the beginning, a good place to start again. But beginnings (as has been said before) are elusive. They slip away. Always beginning again, they ask the answerless question: what came first? Beginnings, by definition, displace themselves. The problem of beginning is apparent in history—that belated bearer of multiple *befores*. Language, too, renders meaning in alloy; digging its words in soil long since turned under. This displacement is at least part of what is named in the phrase ‘the human condition,’ and part of what we mean when we speak about our story, our temporality, or our textuality. We cannot begin anymore than we can stop time. Yet beginning is what texts do. To read, then—to begin—is to rest in an unceasingly moving word. It is to enter a text at a point in time.

Memory is key to this ‘entry.’ Without memory, there is no text. Without text, there is no reader; without reader, no time. The regression goes on endlessly, taking reading farther and farther away from the moment at hand.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, it is memory that brings us back. Memory paves the way for recognition. With (or perhaps despite) its penchant for the indirect, memory sets the stage for immediacy. It grants relation.

Memory makes sight possible, makes order viable; makes that which is meaningful. (One

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<sup>4</sup> This description is provisional only and admittedly oversimplified in that it reduces a network of relationships to a linear progression. Despite differing agendas, the move is common in historical criticism and post-structural theory alike. My choice to invoke the notion of regression points to a loss of memory (my intended subject) and to the failure of this sort of linear reduction to capture even a snapshot of the whole; that is, to represent a process that is, in every aspect, interactive. Linear thinking never arrives at the present because it does not allow for the complex relationships that construct and enliven the moment(s) in which we live.

could argue that memory *makes* what is.) If texts are imagined as roadmaps to the present, something I have surely done with Psalm 90, then memory is a necessary vehicle.

How is this so? How is it that memory, a supposed instrument of retrieval, carries perception into the here and now? How, if memory is a referent to the past, does it open up the fresh, the new, the not yet known? How does memory figure in conjuring the present reality? First of all, and more often than not, by getting it wrong.

This is how Adam Zeman puts it when he describes the process by which eye and brain negotiate the act of recognition.<sup>5</sup> But what Zeman says about the role of vision for consciousness translates readily to the process of interpretation and its constitutive link with memory.<sup>6</sup> As an organ of perception, memory tends to see what is as what it is not. It assumes and then adjusts; projects and then re-tracts. (Zeman cites the example of the “twist of dark cotton on the floor that announces itself as SPIDER.”) Like the eye straining to see in a dimly lit room—or a space in which the lights have just been turned on—memory “run[s] ahead of the evidence.”<sup>7</sup> As with sight, it throws a rope toward the future and pulls until the present tense comes into view. It floods the scene with story and waits to see what will be uncovered once the tide recedes.

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<sup>5</sup> *Consciousness: A User's Guide*, 181-3.

<sup>6</sup> Zeman's language makes easy work of 'recognizing' memory as a non-identical repetition of visual cognition, a recursion at another level of scale.

<sup>7</sup> *Consciousness: A User's Guide*, 181.

What is ‘uncovered,’ according to this analogy of tide and time, is not some pristine present, there all along and waiting to be revealed, but the kind of time in which we live and read. Hear, for example, how Zeman describes the interpretive process:

Our knowledge of the world pervades perception: we are always seeking after meaning. Try not deciphering a road sign, or erasing the face of the man in the moon. What we see resonates in the memory of what we have seen; new experience always percolates through old, leaving a hint of its flavor as it passes. We live, in this sense, in a ‘remembered present.’<sup>8</sup>

Likewise, do we read, write and speak in a remembered present. Indeed, memory, with its inclination toward ‘seeing as’ (or as not), is the very fabric of language, whose modus operandi in metaphor strings connections between the known and the unknown.<sup>9</sup> In a remembered present, metaphor proliferates. Like memory, it thrives on the coupling of identity and profusion, of seeing something new in terms of the old and vice versa. It generates meaning and awareness through association. As with memory, metaphor is part and parcel of consciousness, for, as studies of the human mind increasingly suggest, “an

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Zeman borrows the phrase “remembered present” from the work of biologist Gerald Edelman (*The Remembered Present*). Philippa Berry articulates this condition for philosophy when she writes, “It seems that there is now no other place to think than amidst the dereliction of former ideas” (*Shadow of Spirit*, 1). Berry goes on to describe postmodernism’s effacement of temporal differences in a way that calls her own use of “former” into question.

<sup>9</sup> This language recalls Ricoeur’s ‘is/is not’ formulation (cf. *The Rule of Metaphor*) while attempting to skirt some of its problematic assumptions. For a thoughtful critique of the ‘is/is not’ dialectic within theological discourse, see Camp, “Metaphor in Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” 3-36.

individual is . . . conscious if and only if there is something that it is *like* to be him or her.”<sup>10</sup>

Bent on relationship, metaphor throws a rope to the imagination, rescuing language from the oblivion of chaos and the death knell of (w)rote repetition. In this, metaphor’s likeness to memory points to one of the ‘laws’ of reading: every reading is (always already) a rereading.<sup>11</sup> Just as there is no original memory, there is no original text. If there were, there would be no way to read it. This law alone, as Roland Barthes put it, “saves the text from repetition.”<sup>12</sup> It also, in a manner of speaking, saves the reader from herself, for, as Barthes adds (parenthetically), “those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere.”<sup>13</sup>

A remembered present is a present different from itself; that is, a moment fraught with relationship. This difference—a space or division that allows for connection but also

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<sup>10</sup> An excerpt from Sprigge, “Consciousness,” quoted in Zeman, 365. The philosophical counterpart to this biological claim goes back to Wittgenstein’s “seeing as” (*Philosophical Investigations*, 66).

<sup>11</sup> Fundamentalism struggles against this law, making of the text a golden-calved likeness that can be always and everywhere repeated without risk of change. What is operative in and fostered by this kind of reading is not memory but nostalgia. On the difference between the two, see E. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*, 163-170; also Rich, “Resisting Amnesia,” 136-55.

<sup>12</sup> *S/Z*, 3. When we acknowledge the impossibility of a beginning, we see that repetition, the absence of memory, is death. Memory endows identity, but it does not deal in absolutes. Again, notable with respect to fundamentalism is string theory’s observation that not to have a beginning is not to have an explanation.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* Regina Schwartz echoes this idea for memory and identity-making: “When memories are nonidentical, they do not coerce all stories into one story” (*The Curse of Cain*, 162).

insists on open-endedness—can be read as a sign of complexity as well as authenticity.<sup>14</sup> It allows a single text (here, the present) to bear more than one meaning, and it does not gloss the foreignness of what is other. It is a difference memory assumes and attempts to articulate.

Memories, by nature, are not unified. Neither do they exist in isolation.<sup>15</sup> This is clear to me in one way as I work at recalling what I have read on memory, and apparent in another way as I listen to my 95-year-old mother-in-law tell about how different things were in her youth. In either case, what we—metaphorically—refer to as a process of retrieval (as though a memory could be ‘intact’) actually involves a whole network of relations, no point of which can, in itself, rightly be called a memory. With Zeman’s description of the remembered present in mind, hear how Paul Cilliers construes the complex network that is memory:

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<sup>14</sup> Derrida coined the term *différance*, a combination of differ and defer, to signify the mobile or always unfinished difference upon which every identity relies (see “Différance,” 1-27). This self-difference, as Barbara Johnson describes it, “is not engendered in the space between identities; it is what makes all totalization of the identity of a self or the meaning of a text impossible” (*World of Difference*, 4-5). In her own richly self-different reading of Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Johnson goes on to write, “The sign of an authentic voice is thus not self-identity but self-difference” (*A World of Difference*, 164).

<sup>15</sup> Analogy with texts holds.



Memories are not stored in the brain as discrete units that can be recalled as if from a filing cabinet. Memory traces are stored in a distributed fashion and are continuously altered by experience. In a manner of speaking, even though memory is the substrate for all the brain's higher functions, there are no 'memories.'<sup>16</sup>

In other words—and in language a biblical critic can readily understand, memory, where it exists, is unfailingly intertextual. It recalls, evokes, connects, conserves. Yet for all its recollection, memory operates at a loss. For, to remember is to forget—selectively.<sup>17</sup> This can happen by choice, as anyone who has listened to repeated accounts of a family tale can attest; or, on the darker side, as survivors of the world's atrocities struggle to negotiate. Or it can simply occur by memory's rule of attrition: use it or lose it.<sup>18</sup> In the later case, as Cilliers notes, forgetting “creates space” for new information.<sup>19</sup> In the former, the choice to forget makes way for reinvention—a rewriting of text

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<sup>16</sup> *Complexity and Postmodernism*, 108. Cilliers adds (and here 'texts' could be substituted for 'complex systems'): “The fact that information is ‘smeared’ over many units is a vital characteristic of complex systems, not a mere alternative to iconic representation.” On demolishing the Cartesian theater or “chain of command in the brain” theory of consciousness, see Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, especially “How Words Do Things with Us,” 227-52. Dennett writes: “[U]nderstanding is somehow achieved by a process composed of interactions between a host of subsystems none of which understands a thing by itself” (438-39).

<sup>17</sup> Recent studies in memory suggest that my favored analogy for forgetfulness—a mind like a sieve—needs changing. Digital images of a forgetting brain show not a loss of mental activity, but an excess of information. What fails, in part, is the brain's ability to screen out extraneous information. In effect, memory is lost when we can no longer choose what to forget.

<sup>18</sup> Explaining the “use it or lose it” phenomenon in self-organizing or complex systems, Cilliers writes: “Information that is not used simply fades away. This process not only creates space in memory, but, more importantly, it provides a measure of the significance of the stored pattern. The more something is used, the stronger its ‘representation’ in memory will be” (*Complexity and Postmodernism*, 92).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

(memory) that comes into focus with particular acuity in the dissemination of the biblical law.<sup>20</sup>

What we choose to remember, or are enjoined to remember, or sometimes are forced to remember shapes our identity. It tells us who we are. Where memory is fertile, freely (re)generated, and authentic in its inheritance, this can be life-giving. To know from whence we have come is to be able to name the present. It is to find what bell hooks calls a “homeplace,” an orientation that makes it possible to view the open-endedness of identity as a state of freedom and hope.<sup>21</sup> Where memory insists on a past that challenges the dominant story, it can subvert existing structures and hold the present accountable. It can claim the remembered present as here and now.<sup>22</sup>

Interest in memory as a heightened area of critical discourse is a sign of the times in biblical studies.<sup>23</sup> Increasingly, memory is taking the place of history, a model of our

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<sup>20</sup> This theme, to which I will return in some detail, is developed by Regina Schwartz in the final chapter of *The Curse of Cain* (“Inscribing Identity,” 143-76).

<sup>21</sup> bell hooks describes “homeplace” as “a site of resistance,” a safe place made of memory and relationship where authentic identity is nurtured (*Yearning: race, gender, and cultural politics*, 41-49). For hooks, intentional remembering is “a radically subversive political gesture” (43). In *Friends of God and Prophets*, Johnson cites hooks’ “homeplace” as a form of “eschatological memory” (166-67).

<sup>22</sup> In all of this, the old saying that memory makes time stand still takes on a new meaning, a reversal of sorts. The clock stops ticking in the present. When the recursive interplay of memory has not so much to do with time as with relationship, this suggests that time may be nothing other than relationship. What passes is only the space between things that time seeks to measure and reading means to bridge. If this is so, how understandable then that memory’s discernment is not so much about the past as it is the present; and that what is retrieved is not the lost but the future. Therein lies the mobility that keeps relationship going and allows life—and language—to propagate its meanings.

<sup>23</sup> See esp. the essays in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*; and Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. (For a reading of Bhabha, see my chapter 5.)

textuality that has been theorized almost to the breaking point. Yet history has not gone away. It persists in life and in thought. (It haunts memory.) Instead, the emergence of memory as a paradigm for the interpretive process, a site from which to theorize reading, provides history with a feedback loop. New information, the result of new interactions, expands our understanding of this highly contested area of inquiry and changes the way we read; but not without an element of return, that is, not without history.<sup>24</sup> For reading, history remains a necessity, a ‘law’ that memory re-writes in order to proliferate.

This shift or (r)evolution in the critical imagination is itself thoroughly historical. As feminist criticism, along with a growing range of postmodern interrogations of text, continues to challenge the privilege of historical criticism, history as a theoretical discipline is (again) being reconceived. The resulting recursions—in memory, for example, and in narrative—send reading back to the roots of history.

History, along with doubt, came of age during the Enlightenment. Its inception as a modern discipline belonging to the social sciences and humanities is generally traced to Giambattista Vico (1668-1744), the Italian jurist and philosopher whose massive treatise, *Scienza nuova* (*New Science*) has been lauded by hindsight for its historical prescience

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<sup>24</sup> In describing complex systems (such as texts and our interpretations of them), Cilliers writes: “Self-organization is impossible without some form of memory . . . . Without memory, the system can do no better than mirror the environment. A self-organizing system therefore always has a *history*” (*Complexity and Postmoderism*, 90; Cillier’s italics). To say that we read in a remembered present or to liken the text to that multi-temporal model is not to deny the “diachronic component” of history. Rather, it is to describe a different kind of relationship to what we think of as past.

and founding principles. At the heart of these principles lies Vico's insight that study of the past for the purpose of understanding it will necessarily be a self-conscious pursuit.<sup>25</sup>

Vico cut the cord with previous treatments of antiquity by critically addressing not only what we see in history, but also how we go about looking at it. To make the cut he used a double-edged sword. On one side, Vico saw through the folly of provincialism, chastising the intellectual status quo: "When man [sic] is sunk in ignorance, he [sic] makes himself [sic] the measure of the universe."<sup>26</sup> On the other side, Vico understood that while one generation can claim no special privilege over any other, neither can humans make sense of the past without using their own experience as a measure.

Fittingly, Vico found the measure for his new "invention" within his own era. His "science" of history turns on two prevailing "conceits." The first is "the conceit of nations" whereby each culture is wont to believe in the primacy of its own origins and traditions.<sup>27</sup> The other conceit Vico identifies as "the conceit of scholars," an intellectual hubris that leads philosophers and the like to "assert that what they know is as old as the

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<sup>25</sup> Jack Forstman uses similar language in two as yet unpublished manuscripts: "The Nature of My Work and How My Mind Has Changed," presented at Brite Divinity School on October 3, 1996; and "Historical Theology: A Hazardous Occupation or Striving With Irony For a Proper Oxymoron," paper presented to the Association of Disciples for Theological Discussion, Fall 2000.

<sup>26</sup> *New Science*, 75.

<sup>27</sup> Vico credits Diodorus Siculus, the classical Greek historian who authored a massive "universal history," with this notion (cf. *New Science*, sections 53 and 125, pp. 45 and 76). Apparently, what Vico has in mind are the creation myths and founding stories of various primitive societies; that is, the past. Yet the irony of his 'historical' critique smiles broadly at the present. Postmodern readers who argue against all beginnings are enamored by a different kind of 'primacy.' Even the battle against self-satisfaction, against conceit itself, falls prey to the spirit of Vico's "conceit of nations" category. To Vico's credit, it is history that shows this.

world.”<sup>28</sup> As Vico puts it, these “fancies of disordered imaginations” impair any possibility of “true understanding” with respect to events from the past by failing to recognize the difference that lies *outside* current ways of life and thought—a difference whose principles, because history is of human making, can “be found within the modifications of our own human mind.”<sup>29</sup>

Vico’s sense of perspective established history as a discrete discipline on the basis of two insights: the difference of the past and our connection to it.<sup>30</sup> These “facts” of history make interpretation both necessary and possible. They suggest to Vico that the study of history will provide the eye with a mirror by which to see itself.<sup>31</sup> And they allow that, to some extent (here Vico was an optimist), the meaning of ancient texts can be ferreted out through a process of historical analysis.

Vico’s sense of the past as foreign but related, accessible to the present by virtue of difference, has a familiar ring to it. Our day, with its poststructural looking, has seen a relocation of difference and a re-visioning of history. Our “invention,” to use Vico’s language, is a different model; now no longer a “science” of history, but a way of text. Ingredient to that model is the wish to unseat the artifice of unconditioned (‘objective’) seeing and to cut through the seemingly arbitrary strictures of now and then, inside and

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120.

<sup>30</sup> For analysis and commentary on Vico’s anticipation of late eighteenth century classical scholarship as well as modern historicism, see Grafton, “Introduction,” in *New Science*, xiii.

<sup>31</sup> Vico observes that “the eye sees all external objects, but needs a mirror to see itself” (*New Science*, 120).

outside, self and other. Vico's insight into the inescapable provincialism that attends this effort sets up history as one of the laws of reading and addresses the interpretation of text with that law.<sup>32</sup>

In their capacity as theoretical positions and as endless generators of texts, memory and history are multiply intertwined. We cannot think one in isolation from the other, and we cannot do either—remember or construct a history—without drawing on the other. This condition of relatedness opens a gap, a self-difference that thwarts ultimate resolution even as memory and history search (themselves) for the whole. Out of this opening—and into it—flows the stuff of memory and history: the need not for one story but for many, and the narrative shape that all stories tell.<sup>33</sup>

The dream of narrative is totalization.<sup>34</sup> Even when our stories work—as does mine—to convey the mobility and mutability of experience, or openly play amidst a multiplicity of possible meanings, we tell the tale to make it so. We make a world. But from the dream of unity and connection, identity and resolution, we awaken to the

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<sup>32</sup> For a concise presentation of the changing model of history associated with postmodernism, see Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History*.

<sup>33</sup> In his summary essay on narrative in *CTLS* (66-79), Hillis Miller organizes his analysis of this nebulous literary category around three questions: “Why do we need stories at all?” “Why do we need the ‘same’ story over and over?” and “Why do we always need more stories?” In answer to the third and “most difficult” of his questions, Miller points to “the implacable law” of “uncertainty” or open-endedness, which he finds to be “not so much psychological or social as linguistic” (72).

<sup>34</sup> In the words of Wordsworth, “Dreams, books, are each a world” (“Personal Talk” [1807], sonnet 3). On the impulse toward closure or completion in story, see Barbara Johnson's reading, cited below.

impossibility of closure. We realize that the story itself means there will never be an end.<sup>35</sup>

Barbara Johnson beautifully articulates the narrative impulse toward closure in her reading of the conclusion to Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Of stories in general and Hurston's conclusion in particular, Johnson writes:

The search for wholeness, oneness, universality, and totalization can never be put to rest. However rich, healthy, or lucid fragmentation and division may be, narrative seems to have trouble resting content with it, as though a story could not recognize its own end as anything other than a moment of totalization—even when what is totalized is loss.<sup>36</sup>

What is lost when narrative accomplishes its momentary unity is the very difference that draws telling out and allows story to venture a world. In other words, what is lost—momentarily—by ending is the necessarily unending reach toward the other, a difference that may be pressed into the fold of a narrative conclusion, but only to slip out again when a new story begins.<sup>37</sup>

Lest we would reduce this difference to an idea the more readily to dismiss it, Hurston gives her reader a flesh and blood version of it. In the novel, the character Tea Cake is the dangerous and life-giving other to Jamie's authentically self-different self.<sup>38</sup> And he is the never-quite-tamed mystery to the reader's desire to know. At the climax of

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<sup>35</sup> As Adam Newton puts it with respect to narrative: "the story it frequently tells is a story of storytelling" (*Narrative Ethics*, 3).

<sup>36</sup> *A World of Difference*, 164.

<sup>37</sup> To press the metaphor as well as the "difference," if what I am calling "other" could be placed between the pages of a book it would—like humans when we die—only turn to dust.

<sup>38</sup> See Johnson's description of self-difference and authenticity cited above in my discussion of memory (*A World of Difference*, 164).

the story, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog and overcome by a disease that inexorably renders him rabid: a wild animal. In the end, out of a (self-different) mixture of love and self-defense, Jamie shoots her wild beloved. Their love does not die, but now lives on only in her. It is this version of difference Johnson writes as she narrates the final drawing into itself of Hurston's story.

The horizon, with all of life caught in its meshes, is here pulled into the self as a gesture of total recuperation and peace. It is as though self-division could be healed over at last, but *only at the cost of a radical loss of the other*.<sup>39</sup>

A moment's peace; but even an ultimate end in death cannot unify the self-difference that makes narrative possible, the impulse toward othering that unsettles every conclusion. This is evident, as I tell it, in Johnson's story of (Hurston's) story, her conclusion about conclusions: "Narrative, it seems, is an endless fishing expedition with the horizon as both the net and the fish, the big one that always gets away."<sup>40</sup>

It may be that narrative can tolerate the hole in its figurative net or the doubleness of its relation to the other because it knows there will always be another pass at the fish, another horizon to be told. It 'knows' this in at least two ways. First (at the risk of giving an order), narrative evokes repetition. As children demonstrate every time they say

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., my italics. Johnson responds to some of Hurston's most beautiful writing, beauty befitting a conclusion: "The kiss of his memory made pictures of love and light against the wall. Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes!" (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 286; quoted in Johnson, 164).

<sup>40</sup> *A World of Difference*, 171.



“*read it again!*” stories want repeating.<sup>41</sup> The tell-tale shape of othering and uniting, of storying difference within self and between self and world, engrains a structure in which all manner of ventures can safely be imagined. But this is only part of the story.

Narrative *as reading* knows another way. It sees that repetition is but a guise for closure which unmask itself with a seemingly inexhaustible need.<sup>42</sup> (There is no end to repetition.) More to the point, narrative as reading ‘sees’ that stories re-told open up a discursive space for change. They require of us, perhaps induce in us, the very necessity against which repetition safeguards; and stories win the day. (There is no end to the stories we tell.) As a matter of story, if reading could speak, it might call the going and returning of narrative by another name: recursion. It might take up a position of complexity, arguing “[i]t is just as impossible to say the same thing as to say something different.”<sup>43</sup> It might recognize return as just another form of going on, minus the certitude as to how the story will end.

The drive for return, for some form of resolution and (re)union, may be one of the most basic aspects of narrative. Its pattern is endemic to human experience as well. The circle, whether closed or open, provides a provisional border for our imaginations. It (per)forms, as Johnson and others suggest, the horizon of our stories. So Terry Eagleton describes Freud’s classical *fort-da* game, in which a small child throws a toy out of a

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<sup>41</sup> Repetition itself affords security. Literary variations on the dominant narrative structures within a culture serve a similar function. On “repeatability” as “an intrinsic feature of many narrative forms,” see Miller, “Narrative,” 70-2.

<sup>42</sup> See Miller, who notes that repetition in variation “implies that we want stories for something they can do for us, something we inexhaustibly need” (71).

<sup>43</sup> B. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 121.

stroller then retrieves it on a string, each time crying out *fort!* (gone away) and *da!* (here), as “the shortest story we can imagine.”<sup>44</sup> We go out and we come back. But as we get older, we come to know that what is lost can never be fully recovered. (Or we may know, with the wizened child, that nothing is ever really lost.) We learn that what comes back on the string of story is richer, more experienced, but also more delimited than what we tossed into the narrative flux to begin with.

To anyone watching a child at play in the *fort-da* game, or in one of its many variations, the most notable feature of the game is its repetition. Next is the overriding simplicity of the sequence. The child’s discovery is about security, about venturing just far enough away to be surprised by the delight of never having left home.<sup>45</sup> But children grow, as do their stories. They realize—especially if they read—that life is rich and complex, and that leaving may be worth it. In fact, the narrative shape of reading demands just this sort of departure. For as Cilliers observes of complex systems (such as human relationships and texts): “it is not possible to tell a single and exclusive story about something that is really complex.”<sup>46</sup>

Readers of the Bible have ample evidence of recursive complexity. In fact, we *are* the evidence. This book of books, wherein no “single and exclusive story” is permitted to stand alone, extends its rule of relationships to interpretation. In the workings of memory,

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<sup>44</sup> *Literary Theory*, 160.

<sup>45</sup> Citing Freud who in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* read the game as “the infant’s symbolic mastery of its mother’s absence,” Eagleton notes that the repetitive play “can also be read as the first glimmerings of narrative” (*Literary Theory*, 160).

<sup>46</sup> *Complexity and Postmodernism*, viii.

history, and narrative, we fall under the laws of reading. Or, to borrow the language of Zen: in a textual world, the law(s) of reading “cannot be obscured.”<sup>47</sup>

Does this mean interpretation cannot hazard a position without thinking the strictures of every possible relationship? Or that we write at the peril of our own voice in a matrix of ‘absolute relativity’?<sup>48</sup> No. But neither does it allow that for critical reading ‘anything goes.’<sup>49</sup> Reading itself keeps us beholden to the larger conversation. The indebtedness is more than a matter of camaraderie, or enmity as the case may be. It is a discipline governed by law(s). We read within a particular constellation of relationships that construct us much as we construct our memories, histories, and narratives. Again and again, we read ourselves new.

If this sounds like the makings of a tautology, I will argue: not at all. Even the word ‘new’ is extra, coming as it does despite our equivalencies. We read ourselves, but the relationships that make up reading are too complex to maintain redundancy. Difference intervenes, opening a gap in identity; a space repetition can neither bridge nor fill. Having said this before, I am brought back to the beginning. (The laws of reading

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<sup>47</sup> “The law of cause and effect cannot be obscured” provides a turning word in the second koan of the *Mumonkan* or *Gateless Gate* (“Hyakujō and the Fox”). For commentary by Zen master Kōun Yamada, see *Gateless Gate*, 17-22.

<sup>48</sup> We do, I believe, write at our own peril, a danger I will address (with no little trepidation) in the next chapter. The danger I mention here is that if the old laws of binary opposition are applied to deconstruction, unconditional relativism becomes but a new ‘absolute truth.’ This is a kind of legalism that texts, as deconstructing networks, resist.

<sup>49</sup> Early on, the cry ‘anything goes’ was common cause criticism against postmodernism in general and deconstruction in particular.

cannot be obscured!<sup>50</sup>) I return to a reading—already underway—of two related texts; texts whose multiple crossings blur the line between the laws of reading and the *law* that is תורה so as to write again the storied space of the mountain of God.

*Psalm 90 and Exodus 32: Breaking and Entering on Holy Ground*

Torah, a mutable sign of law and scripture, is a seat of beginnings. As the ‘five books of Moses,’<sup>51</sup> the Pentateuch, and the ‘T’ in Tanakh (an acronym for *tōrah*, *nēbî’îm*, and *kētûbîm*), תורה begins the Bible. As the law twice given at Sinai and twice “written with the finger of God” (Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10; cf. Exod 34:1; Deut 10:2, 4), תורה is the beginning of a people under the law, a people capable of breaking the law.<sup>52</sup> As the law represented in “the book of the covenant” (ספר הברית, Exod 24:7), תורה is the beginning of a nation vowed to obedience, a nation in need of cult and priests to protect the law and keep it holy (cf. Exod 19:6).<sup>53</sup> This תורה is the beginning of the ark, the mobile seat of “the commands,” and of the God who gives them (cf. Exod 25:21-22). It is the beginning of the tabernacle, the “blue, purple, and crimson” curtain (26:31), and the “holiest of holy

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<sup>50</sup> This phrase borrows from and echoes out of a famous koan in which Zen master Hyakujo addresses a turning word to an old man who has fallen into the state of a fox for five hundred years. In the case of this koan, that ‘word’ is: “The law of cause and effect cannot be obscured.” See case 2 of *Gateless Gate*, 17-22.

<sup>51</sup> Notably, the first five books of the HB and the Psalter both go by this name.

<sup>52</sup> The difference between Torah and torah is too fluid to maintain. I have chosen to use the Hebrew word throughout as a mutable sign referring to book, law, and tradition, and to assign the word *law* a similarly wide range of meaning.

<sup>53</sup> The oath taken even before the content of the law is made known (Exod 19:8), then reiterated following a reading of “the book of the covenant” (24:7) formally constitutes Israel as a people in covenant relationship with YHWH. The (non-identical) repetition of this swearing of obedience frames the Decalogue, but precedes Moses’ (twofold) descent(s) from the mountain with “tablets” in hand (Exod 32:15; 34:4).

places” that houses the written testimony of the law and keeps separate a place wherein the living source of that mobile law can be met (26:33-34). It is, as Joshua and his priests bear the ark across the parting waters of the Jordan, the beginning of a law not only for “all Israel, alien as well as citizen” (Josh 8:33), but of a תורה that “will go forth” to “all the nations” (Isa 2:2-3).<sup>54</sup> Again and again, תורה is a beginning.

Torah is also an initiator of return. From its place under the “cover” or “mercy seat” (הכפרת, Exod 25:18) of new beginnings, תורה makes its way to the edge of the land of promise (cf. Deut 31:9-13; 24-9). There, together with the story of its journey, the (re)new(ed) law “offers a covenant on a grander scale.”<sup>55</sup> This “second law” or “copy of the law” (Deut 17:18) is a recursion of the first, similar but different; made exponential in its covenantal scope by virtue of the reiterated call to “remember” (5:15; 7:18; 8:2, 18; 9:7, 27; 15:15; 16:3, 12; 24:9, 18, 22; 25:17; 32:7)—not only the law but also the story of the law—and to “return” (30:2).<sup>56</sup> This is the law by whose power to lay bare dry land Joshua builds a “memorial forever” (Josh 4:7); and this is the law—now “the law of

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<sup>54</sup> Citing Lévinas and the Mishnah, Regina Schwartz reads Josh 8:30-32 as the stepping stone to a universal law (“The Revelation of Justice,” 341-42). According to the Mishnah, the scene of altar building at Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim where the law is both inscribed and read aloud ends with an addendum to the tradition: “And they wrote there all the words of the Law in seventy languages, as it is written ‘very plainly’” (Schwartz’s translation).

<sup>55</sup> See Schwartz’s discussion of Deuteronomy in *The Curse of Cain*, 28.

<sup>56</sup> In Deut 30:1-5 (God’s promise of return following exile spoken through Moses), the repeated use of the verb שׁוּב emphasizes the connection between remembering and returning. As the people “return to mind” (שׁוּב, v. 1; my translation) Moses’ words of blessing and curse, so they and their children will “return” (שׁוּב, v. 2) to YHWH their God—and to the land. For to a remembering and returning people YHWH will “return” (שׁוּב, v. 3) prosperity and multiply the blessings of the past (v. 5).

Moses”—Joshua copies in stone, according to the law (cf. Josh 8:31-32; Deut 27:4-8). It is this scroll of law, of תורה, that is ostensibly rediscovered by Josiah when temple repair unearths ספר התורה, “the book of the law” (2 Kgs 22:8-13; 2 Chr 34:14-21). And it is something like this תורה, similar but with a difference, that Jeremiah recalls when he envisions a “new covenant”: YHWH’s תורה, once etched in stone, will be put within the people, written “on their hearts” by a forgiving, forgetting God (Jer 31:33-34).<sup>57</sup>

All that accrues to this law and issues from it returns with the force of a new beginning at the beginning of the Psalter. There “the תורה of YHWH” (Ps 1:2) is the starting place for a righteous and fruitful life, for the collected prayers of the people of God’s law, and—in the narrative shaping of the Psalter—for a (re)telling of the story of those people, itself a new version of the law.<sup>58</sup> According to this scenario, to the shape of the Psalter as story, it is not so much the law that is copied out again in Israel’s passage from monarchy, to failure and fall, to return; from law, to loss of land and temple, to a renewed law; but the relationship of the people to that law. This is the incoming of

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<sup>57</sup> A stunning feature of the new covenant in Jeremiah is God’s promise not only to forgive the sin of the people, but also to forget it: וְלֹחֲטָאֲתָם לֹא אֶזְכֶּר-עוֹד (“and their sin I will remember no more,” 31:34).

<sup>58</sup> Psalm 1:1-2 praises תורה as the source of a relational experience that makes authentic life possible (אשרי). The psalm exults that those who “delight” in and “meditate” on the law “are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season” (vv. 2-3). The same can be said for the Psalter which is planted on the shore of תורה by virtue of the “programmatically introduction” to the collection as a whole, Pss 1-2 (Craven and Harrelson, “The Psalms,” 753).

another beginning; a new measure of תורה that enters the Psalter as the namesake of Moses in Psalm 90.

In itself, Psalm 90 has little to say about the law. The psalm does not mention תורה, neither does it commend “the way of the righteous” (cf. Ps 1:6) or suggest special blessing for the “upright.”<sup>59</sup> It tells nothing of Israel’s ancestral story, of captivity and exodus, wilderness or inheritance of the land. Psalm 90 does not convoke covenant or speak of divine “testimony,”<sup>60</sup> and according to “the fear of YHWH” often associated with תורה, it asks only “who understands?” (v. 11). Least of all does Psalm 90 recall the holy mountain inside whose perimeter the law is (twice) given and at whose base it is (twice) shattered. This text does not call forth Sinai—until Moses is placed on top of it; that is, until it is read.

From the beginning, Moses’ name at the top of Psalm 90 is a sign of recursion. The superscription, added along the way in the psalm’s redaction, makes clear that any reading of this prayer is already a re-reading.<sup>61</sup> (Barthes’ admonition against repetition is

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<sup>59</sup> The theme of God’s special care for the “upright” (ישר) or “righteous” (צדיק) runs throughout the Psalter. For examples, see Pss 5:13; 11:7; 18:21-8; 32:10-11; 36:11; 37:17, 37; 55:23; 58:12; 64:11; 75:11; 92:13; 97:11; 112:1-6; 125:4; 140:14; 146:8-9.

<sup>60</sup> “Testimony” (עדות) generally belongs to the language of coronation and of covenant. In the Psalter, it is more often associated with the “precepts” (פקד), “ordinances” (משפט), and “commandments” (מצות) of תורה. See esp. Psalm 119.

<sup>61</sup> Dating of the Psalms’ superscriptions is speculative and remains controversial. The superscription affixed to Psalm 90 in the MT (and the LXX) is present in several of the psalms scrolls found at Qumran, thus dating no latter than the first century CE. One extant version (11QPsAp<sup>2</sup>) attributes the psalm to David. (See Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls*, 117-18, 126.)

heeded in the psalm “at the outset.”<sup>62</sup>) By virtue of this addition, the text is endowed with the authority of the past, but it is a past subject to endless change.<sup>63</sup> No amount of probing will take reading back to an ‘original.’ In this respect, the psalm begins with a loss, even as it professes a God who has been God “for us” from the beginning (vv. 1-2). This is the inheritance, a law if you will, that establishes the psalm’s terrain and sets reading off on its course of multiple iterations.

To read Psalm 90 as “a prayer of Moses” (v. 1a)—the only prayer of Moses in the order of the Psalter—is to read the psalm as a return of תורה to a returning people. (Where Moses goes, תורה will not be forgotten.) It is to hear in the psalm’s confession and lament—its fiery wrath, plea for wisdom, and giving over to a future rooted in God alone—an echo of Israel’s own formation as a people of YHWH. It is to read the psalm’s entreaty for a future “beyond us” (v. 17b) and recall Moses’ death just this side of promise (Deut 34:1-8), a death mitigated in the Psalter by the name and place of Psalm 90. With this recall, to read Psalm 90 in its location in the Psalter may be to recognize that YHWH’s תורה does not enter the world apart from recursion or absent the laws of language.

To read Psalm 90 as coming from “the man of God” (v. 1a) is to read a whole complex of stories intersecting at a point of new beginning, the beginning of Book 4 in the Psalter. If one imagines that beginning as a juncture in Israel’s reinscribed history, as

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<sup>62</sup> Barthes, *S/Z*, 3. See the ‘superscription’ to this chapter.

<sup>63</sup> In acts of reading, the past is also subject to endless choice. On inheritance and choice as crucial acts of reading, see Sherwood, “Introduction: Derrida’s Bible,” 1-20.



this reading does, then Psalm 90 arrives as a response to the dissolution of the Davidic covenant (cf. Ps 89:39-52) and to the devastation of exile: a response that turns back in the face of everything that has been lost. To read Psalm 90 within this matrix of recursions is to read the shape of the psalm in the shape of the Psalter, and to read the Psalter as a mountain of God writ large.

*The Psalter as a Recursion of Psalm 90*

When Moses prays in the Psalter, the topography of faith and life changes. Not only does תורה come into view in a new way—a *law of return* inscribed in the shape of the prayer; but a book of prayers that begins in praise of תורה (cf. Ps 1:1-2) takes on the shape of the place where God’s law was first made known. The “man of God” (Deut 33:1; Ps 90:1) who called a people into the wilderness and led them by way of Sinai to the threshold of a new land now stands atop a different kind of mountain.

Studies in the shape and shaping of the Psalter have platted the underpinnings of this imagined space and provide what might be thought of as a flat map of its landscape. The map is based on Gerald Wilson’s pioneering work, which sought out editing clues in the final form of the Hebrew Psalter and outlined an organizing grid within the five books.<sup>64</sup> The grid suggests a narrative. Beginning in divine law (cf. תורה in 1:2, and חק,

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<sup>64</sup> *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*. According to this schema, psalms that fall at the seams of books, as does Psalm 90, are particularly deserving of attention. For a summary overview of this work and the development it has undergone in the last two decades, see Wilson’s essay, “King, Messiah, and the Reign of God.”

“decree,” in 2:7) and kingship (Psalm 2),<sup>65</sup> it orders and depicts Israel’s life in relation to YHWH: the flourishing and failure of the Davidic monarchy, destruction of the temple, and loss of the land (Books 1-3); YHWH’s response to the failure of the Davidic covenant and a corresponding reconfiguring of piety (Book 4); and, finally, Israel’s return to YHWH alone as “*eternal king*” (Book 5).<sup>66</sup>

The suggestion that the Psalter is purposefully organized around this story is speculative and remains a point of controversy in Psalms studies.<sup>67</sup> This reading revisits

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<sup>65</sup> Psalms 1 and 2 are here read as an introductory unit, bound together by the word אֲשֶׁרִי (“happy,” “blessed”), which stands at the beginning of Psalm 1 and recurs in the closing line of Psalm 2 (v. 12b). This inclusio is especially noticeable because of the rich role אֲשֶׁרִי plays in the Psalter as an indicator of genuine life. (Craven and Harrelson note that אֲשֶׁרִי occurs 26 times in the Psalter and only 20 times elsewhere in the HB. See their excursus on “Ashre” in “The Psalms,” 754.)

<sup>66</sup> See *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*; especially Wilson’s summary chapter, “The Hebrew Psalter II. The Final ‘Shape’ of the Canonical Collection,” 199-228. See also deClaissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning*.

<sup>67</sup> For an overview of the issues raised and Wilson’s response to these criticisms, see “King, Messiah, and the Reign of God,” 393-405. Of particular note is Anderson’s critique of Wilson’s theory that the last two books of the Psalter mark a turn away from human rule and toward divine rule: “The Achilles’ heel is Psalm 132, which comes after the psalms of God’s enthronement [and represents] . . . a reinstatement of the tenets of Davidic theology” (*Out of the Depths*, 209). Wilson responds with a reading of the conditionality expressed most particularly in Ps 132:11-12. Based on this and other points, he suggests that “Psalm 132 offers a less than unambiguous affirmation of David, and ultimately leaves the re-establishment of the broken covenant of kingship a question for future resolution” (“King, Messiah, and the Reign of God,” 397-98). Wilson also addresses Anderson’s argument that Psalm 110 offers strong evidence that “Israelite interpreters . . . never surrendered the hope for a coming monarch of the Davidic line who would rule as God’s viceregent” (*Out of the Depths*, 209). Reading the verb פָּדָה (“exercise authority”) in the context of the commissioning of priesthood in Ps 110:4a, Wilson finds David in this psalm associated with priesthood rather than kingship (“King, Messiah, and the Reign of God,” 399). Anderson’s argument that the Psalter *could be read* from a perspective that affirms the hope for a Davidic messiah is obviously the case, but

some of the more compelling associations that contribute to the impression of not only an organized Psalter, but a storied one. It also makes note of the incoming of divine compassion (רחם) that accompanies the turn to Moses in Psalm 90 and strikingly frames the last two books of the Psalter. My inspiration for reading the Psalter in the shape of Psalm 90 is not, however, to pursue the artifact of an editorial intention, but to say something more about the order of the psalm by reading another of its recursions. In this, my reading of a structure in the Psalter is itself a story, which explores the five books of Moses as a passage from confession through great loss to wisdom. According to that story, reading in the Psalter turns to Moses at a critical juncture in the life of the people, then comes back down the mountain with empty hands save whatever “*Adonai* our God” may “establish” (Ps 90:17). In the Psalter, the response to this return is *hal’lû-jāh* (הללויה, cf. Pss 146:1, 10; 147:1, 20; 148:1, 14; 149:1, 9; 150:1 [3x], 2 [2x], 6).

Wilson reads the Psalter not so much as the prayer book of the Second Temple, a compilation of hymns or prayers for liturgical use, but as an interwoven collection of sacred texts whose order functions as an object of personal reflection.<sup>68</sup> The order tells a

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this perspective does not appear to be supported by the story that emerges from reading the Psalter as a whole.

<sup>68</sup> Wilson acknowledges the value of studying the psalms individually, a methodology he would only distinguish from his own (see “Methodological Considerations,” in *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 1-11). Yet, he warns against the “unfortunate” practice of viewing the Psalter as a “hymn book,” a perspective that “obscures the indications that in its ‘final form’ the Psalter is a book to be *read* rather than *performed*; to be *meditated over* rather than to be *recited from*” (206-7, Wilson’s italics). Judging from current faith practices (an admitted anachronism), the Book of Psalms could well have been edited with both purposes in mind. On the “torah psalms” as

story, (re)told by Wilson and the body of scholarship that has followed. It is a chronicle framed by blessing (cf. אָשֵׁרִי in 1:1 and 144:15) and the binding contrast between righteousness, inhering in תּוֹרָה, and “the wicked” (רָשָׁעִים, cf. 1:6, 145:20); a patchwork narrative both segmented and held together by the praise of God into which it ultimately flows.<sup>69</sup> The frame is appropriate to a book that, by virtue of its shape, functions as more than a series of psalms, more even than the sum of its parts, however thoroughly (or devoutly) calculated; a book that from beginning to end issues in a single life-ordering prayer.

If the Psalter can be read as an effective narrative shape, a crafted landscape of transformation and return, possibly even a prayer recognizable as a repetition, at another level of scale, of Israel’s defining prayer (exodus-exile-return), then it reads very much like Psalm 90—with, of course, a difference. Like Psalm 90, the Book of Psalms is grounded in a confession of who God is. Psalms 1-2 establish the way of right relationship with YHWH. Where Psalm 90 proclaims God as God in terms of space and time (cf. vv. 1-2), Psalms 1-2 profess the rule of YHWH as revealed in תּוֹרָה and in divinely decreed kingship.<sup>70</sup> The inclusion with “my God and King” (הַמֶּלֶךְ) in Psalm

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reflecting a “type of piety” that shapes the Psalter as a whole, see Mays, “The Place of the Torah Psalms in the Psalter,” 3-12.

<sup>69</sup> Book 5 concludes with a collection of five “Hallelujah psalms” (146-50, each beginning and ending with הַלְלוּ־יְהוָה) which form an extended doxology to the book as a whole.

<sup>70</sup> While Psalm 2 likely reflects the installation of a divinely anointed king (see vv. 7-9), it is YHWH who sits on the heavenly throne (vv. 4-6) and YHWH whom all the “rulers of the earth” shall serve (vv. 11-12). See also the inclusio with “king,” Ps 145:1.

145:1 suggests that not only תורה and divine rule but also the collected texts that proclaim them are set up as the focus of faithful attention. On these the righteous will “meditate [יהגה] day and night” (1:2), an activity strung through the center of Psalm 90 where the same root in the form of a noun (הגה, v. 9) voices the “sigh” or exhalation that ends a mortal life.<sup>71</sup>

Like the introduction to Psalm 90, the opening of the Psalter instills an image of God as “refuge” or “resting place,” a place of return. (cf. מנוח in Ps 90:1, חסה in Ps 2:12). From the outset in the Psalter, this ‘refuge’ is placed at the foot of the mountain of God. In Psalm 3, the “cry aloud to YHWH” receives its response “from [God’s] holy hill” (מוהר קדשו, v. 5).<sup>72</sup> The psalm’s image of a sacred mountain (הר) begins an ascent on a mountain made all the more compelling because Moses in Psalm 90 is placed on top of it.

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<sup>71</sup> The connections strung by הגה serve to further link Psalms 1 and 2 as an introduction to the Psalter. In the opening line of Psalm 2, הגה sets up a stark contrast between the “happy” or “blessed” ones who “meditate [יהגה] day and night” on God’s law (1:2) and “the nations [who] conspire and the peoples [who] plot [meditate on, יהגו] empty things” (2:1; my translation). The multivalence of הגה reinforces the juxtaposition of “righteous” and “wicked” that opens these collected prayers. For comment on הגה as a ‘literary link’ between Psalms 1 and 2, see McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms*, 41-2; and deClaissé-Walford, *Reading From the Beginning*, 44-5. The cluster of meanings around הגה makes sense with respect to meditation, arguably an activity associated with reading the Psalter. Here, absorption in the breath (a “sigh” [הגה]) is key.

<sup>72</sup> As I read it, Psalm 3 falls on the seam between the introduction and the beginning proper of the Psalter. Following on a suggestion by Anton Arens (*Die Psalmen im Gottesdienst des Alten Bundes*, 170), Wilson’s work on the editorial shaping of the Psalter focuses on psalms that appear to be at the ‘seams’ in the Psalter. Wilson does not locate an editorial juncture between Psalms 2 and 3, instead reading Psalm 1 as an added introduction and Psalm 2 as the beginning of Book 1, but his approach supports the observations made here (Wilson, “The Use of Royal Psalms,” 85).

But the mountain figured by these collected songs is not Sinai; not the liminal wilderness of traveling cloud or visible fire. It is a “holy hill” (Pss 2:6; 3:4; 15:1; 43:3; cf. 87:1; 99:9) remade in the image of God who has come home to dwell in the midst of a landed people. The mountain to which the Psalter draws near—in word and, with imagination, in its figurative shape—is Zion. Over and over, the psalms turn toward Zion, the Temple Mount, the dwelling place of God.<sup>73</sup> Again and again, in celebration, petition, longing, loss, dispersion, and in the hope of rebuilding, Zion is the space that endows these prayers with a sense of movement, the tilt of land that makes meditation on the Psalter into a pilgrimage.

To say that the Psalter ascends in its first three books is to call on the imagination in more ways than one. If there is a story line to these books, it is one of dissolution and descent. By the time reading has come to the close of Book 3, the Israelite monarchy in general and Davidic covenant in particular have come to a violent end. The “psalms of David,” which dominate Book 1 (beginning with Psalm 3) and end at the conclusion of Book 2 (cf. the postscript to Psalm 72)<sup>74</sup> give way in Book 3 to vivid descriptions of a

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<sup>73</sup> See, e.g., Pss 2:6; 3:5; 9:11; 14:7; 15:1; 20:2; 24:3; 36:6; 43:3; 48:1-2, 11-12; 50:2; 51:18; 68:16; 74:2; 87:1; 99:9; 125:1.

<sup>74</sup> The greatest concentration of Davidic psalms falls in Book 1, where all but two untitled psalms (Pss 10, 33) are attributed to David (thirty-seven in this collection). Book 2 combines psalms of the Korahites (a collection of seven, Pss 42, 44-49) and one psalm of Asaph (Psalm 50) with all but one (cf. Psalm 86) of the remaining psalms of David (eighteen in this collection, Pss 51-65; 68-70). The book closes with one of the two psalms in the Psalter attributed to Solomon, Psalm 72 (cf. also Psalm 127). On the significance of this order, deClaisé-Walford comments: “[T]he downward spiral of ancient Israel’s political career began even before Solomon’s death. Psalm 72 anticipates

Zion brought down. If this is the story, then the apparent summit of the Psalter's extended meditation on God's תורה is an abyss, or a cloud of wrath so dense it is difficult to discern the approaching tor.

What form does this wrath take in the Psalter? Sheer terror and unmitigated loss; consuming fire and unappeasable judgment. A mountain brought down; a past that is no more. Psalm 74 conjures the destruction:

Direct your steps to the perpetual ruins;  
                   the enemy has destroyed everything in the sanctuary.  
 Your foes have roared within your holy place;  
                   they set up their emblems there.  
 At the upper entrance they hacked  
                   the wooden trellis with axes.  
 And then, with hatchets and hammers,  
                   they smashed all its carved work.  
 They set your sanctuary on fire;  
                   they desecrated the dwelling place of your name,  
                   bringing it to the ground.  
 They said to themselves, "We will utterly subdue them";  
                   they burned all the meeting places of God in the land.  
(Ps 74:3-8)

Psalm 79 sounds the lament:

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the overwhelming cry of the lamenting questions in Psalm 89" (*Reading From the Beginning*, 72).

O God, the nations have come  
 into your inheritance;  
 they have defiled your holy temple;  
 they have laid Jerusalem in ruins.  
 They have given the bodies of your servants  
 to the birds of the air for food,  
 the flesh of your faithful to the  
 wild animals of the earth.  
 They have poured out their blood like water  
 all around Jerusalem,  
 and there was no one to bury them.  
 (Ps 79:1-3)

There is no end to the annihilation in Book 3. Psalm 80 cries that “the walls” have been broken down (v. 12) and the vine God brought out of Egypt, planted, and nurtured has been “burned . . . with fire; they have cut down it down” (v. 16). In Psalm 82, God’s justice has been turned upside down. It is the “wicked” who are now lifted up (v. 2). Psalm 83 pleads with God to rise up against enemies who would wipe out the people such that even the memory of Israel will be destroyed (v. 4). Finally, Psalm 89 intones one of the most poised and lyrical hymns of praise in the Psalter. YHWH’s covenant with David has been established forever, a throne that will endure “for all generations” (v. 4).<sup>75</sup> So steadfast are YHWH’s promises that they can be “sworn on [YHWH’s own] holiness” (v. 36).

I will not violate my covenant,  
 or alter the word that went forth from my lips.  
 Once and for all I have sworn by my holiness;  
 I will not lie to David.  
 (Ps 89:34-35)

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<sup>75</sup> Craven and Harrelson characterize this poem as “the strongest endorsement of the kingship from David’s line found in the OT” (“The Psalms,” 832).



So high is the throne of Davidic continuity that it will endure before God “like the sun” and “the moon . . . in the skies” (Ps 89:36-37). So high indeed that when, in the final stanzas of Psalm 89, the close of Book 3, this throne with all that it stands for is “hurled . . . to the ground” (v. 44), the fall is off the face of the living world. (“Who can escape the power of Sheol?” v. 48; cf. the lament in vv. 38-51). Israel has gone up in flames and all that remains are questions about the brevity and futility of life (v. 47), the inevitability of death (v. 48), and the burning wrath in the face of which can only be asked, “How long?” (v. 46; cf. Ps. 90:13).

How is it, then, that the Zion of the Psalter endures—not the once-inhabited city or the Temple within its walls, but the rise of a holy mountain figured in the shape of a reread text? At the end of Book 3, when everything is lost, the image of Sinai bleeds through the page in the form of a prayer of Moses. Placed at the ‘top’ of Psalm 90, Moses enters the scene of the Psalter at the crest of Book 4.<sup>76</sup> From this position, he overlooks the spiral mix of joy and degradation, rise and fall, life and death that bring the Psalter to this point. At the same time, he oversees a return no other frame of reference can yet imagine. Moses “[stands] in the breach” (Ps 106:23) of the Psalter, much as he once stood between “fierce wrath” and its unabated consequences at Horeb (Exod 32: 7-14;

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<sup>76</sup> Moses is named once in the Psalter prior to Book 4, in 77:20. This agonizing lament seeks relief in recalling God’s “wonders of old” (77:11). All other references to Moses in the Psalter occur in Book 4 (see below).

cf. Ps 106:19-26).<sup>77</sup> Recalling this, the Psalter takes up the tools of memory, history, and narrative to write a return that will bring God's people home.

As the prophet who repeatedly “wrote down” תורה (Exod 24:4; 34:28; Deut 10:4; 31:9) and who “wrote down their starting points, stage by stage” of Israel's exodus from Egypt (Num 33:2), Moses in Psalm 90 writes again; this time at a critical juncture in the prayers of the people. His ‘entry’ in the Psalter marks a change. Book 4 is dominated by psalms that celebrate divine kingship (Pss 93-97) and by the hymns of assurance (Psalm 91), praise, and thanksgiving (Pss 92; 100-101; 103-104) that surround those psalms. The book concludes with two psalms of praise that remember the ancestral covenant (with Abraham, Psalm 105) and rehearse the ancestral history (Pss 105- 106).<sup>78</sup> Moses' presence also dominates this book. The Sinai prophet is named seven times in Book 4 (Pss 90:1; 99:6; 103:7; 105:26; 106:16, 23, 32), a curiously auspicious number and the only naming of Moses (with the exception of Psalm 77) in the Psalter. Four of these seven references come in the paired litanies of Psalms 105 and 106 that close the book and together with the superscription of Psalm 90 encircle its content in Mosaic memory.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Psalm 106 is a litany of Exodus history; vv. 19-26 recount the episode of the golden calf and tell how Moses “stood in the breach” (v. 23).

<sup>78</sup> After Psalm 90, the only other lament in Book 4 is Psalm 102, a psalm that takes solace in the eternal enthronement of YHWH (v. 12) while strongly echoing many of the themes in Psalm 90 (see below).

<sup>79</sup> Psalms 105 and 106 represent the yin and yang of Israel's ancestral history: God's great deeds on Israel's behalf (Psalm 105) and the people's sinfulness in the context of those deeds (Psalm 106). Both accounts focus heavily on the Mosaic history. Psalm 105 gives nearly equal time to God's deeds prior to the exodus, but reduces the covenant with Abraham and his descendents to the promise of land (vv. 8-11), a promise

The incoming of Moses in the Psalter is accompanied by a series of striking references to divine “compassion” (רחם). In Psalm 77, Moses is named for the first time in a lament that comes on the heels of destruction (see above, Psalm 74) and asks,

Will Adonai spurn forever  
and never again be favorable?  
Has God’s *hesed* ceased  
forever?  
Are God’s promises at an end  
for all time?  
Has God in anger shut up God’s  
compassion? [רחמיִן]  
(Ps 77:8-10)<sup>80</sup>

The lament ends by remembering Moses together with Aaron: “You led your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron” (v. 20). From this point on in the Psalter, every instance of the word רחם (“compassion”) but one falls in a psalm that directly or indirectly references Moses (78:38; 102:14; 103:13; 106:45, 46; 106:46; 145:9; cf. also רחם in 90:13; 106:45; and 135:14). The exception is the devastating lament of the loss of

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that culminates in the purpose of keeping God’s “statues” (חקיו) and “laws” (תורתיו), v. 45). (See the comment by Craven and Harrelson, “The Psalms,” 851.) Psalm 106 is a litany of praise and confession that recounts the foibles of the ancestral history beginning in Egypt—the fear, recalcitrance, and greed of exodus and wilderness wandering (vv. 7-18); the calf cast and worshipped (vv. 19-23), the death of Moses (not his fault; vv. 32-33); the impatience at Moab and apostasy in Canaan (vv. 24-31, 34-39); and the dispersion (vv. 40-46). While the psalm ends with the plea that YHWH “gather us from among the nations” (v. 47), the dispersion Israel is said to have brought upon itself (vv. 34-43) is here tempered by divine compassion and a covenant—presumably the covenant with Abraham (cf. 105:8-11)—remembered (vv. 44-46). Note that the covenant with David, referenced four times in Psalm 89, is nowhere mentioned in Book 4.

<sup>80</sup> My translation. The image is of God shutting up God’s “womb.” The single form of רחם means “womb” or “uterus.” On the richness of this metaphor, see Tribble, “God, nature of,” 368-69; and *idem*, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 31-59.

land and temple amidst the “ruins” of Jerusalem in Psalm 79 (vv. 1-4; see above), a psalm that asks for God’s “compassion” to “come speedily” (v. 8).

The association of Moses with divine compassion suggests something of the character of the return a storied Psalter conveys. The litany of these associations and their location in the Psalter adds to the story. Psalm 78 recounts the wilderness wandering with the raining down of “manna” and the “flesh” of “winged birds” (vv. 23-28) and the bringing of the people safely through the “wilderness” to God’s “holy hill, to the mountain that [God’s] right hand had won” (vv. 53-54; here possibly a metaphor for the land of Canaan). In Psalm 90, the ‘voice’ of Moses (according to the superscription) calls God to return in “compassion” (הַנְּחָם, v. 13).<sup>81</sup> Psalm 102 proclaims that God “will rise up and have compassion [תִּרְחַם] on Zion” (v. 14) and strongly recalls the vocabulary and themes of Psalm 90 (“compassion,” Ps 102:13; “your servants,” vv. 14, 28; “the foundation of the earth,” v. 25; progeny, v. 28; and “established,” v. 28). Psalm 103 names Moses (v. 7), quotes from the fourth and final theophany to Moses on Sinai (“The Lord is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love,” v. 8; Exod 34:6), and twice attests to the “compassion” [רַחֵם] of YHWH (Ps 103:13a, b).<sup>82</sup> Psalm 106 closes Book 4 with a long recounting of the exodus story, naming Moses three times (vv. 16, 23, 32), and ends by proclaiming that God has “remembered” the covenant

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<sup>81</sup> The roots נָחַם and רָחַם overlap in their ranges of meaning. On the inclusio between הַנְּחָם in Ps 90:13 and נִחַם in Ps 106:45 and the possible allusion to Exod 32:12, see below, note 83.

<sup>82</sup> For a reading of the attributes of YHWH’s character revealed to Moses on his last trip to the summit of Sinai, see chapter 5.

with Moses and has shown “compassion [יָחַם] according to the abundance of God’s *hesed*” (v. 45; my translation).<sup>83</sup> Parallelism with יָחַם in the following verse (v. 46; “[God] gave them to compassion [יָחַם]”) underscores the relationship between יָחַם and יָחַם and emphasizes the place of divine compassion in this most Mosaic book of the Psalter.

In Book 5, the words for divine compassion, יָחַם and יָחַם, each occur one time. Psalm 135, a hymn of praise, recounts the “signs and wonders” in Egypt (v. 9) and the gift of the land (v.v. 10-12), then expresses the confidence that YHWH “will vindicate his people, and have compassion [יָחַם] on his servants” (v. 14). The last instance of יָחַם in the Psalter comes in the psalm that closes the Psalter proper (Ps 145:8), the final psalm before the book’s closing doxologies (the הַלְלֵהוּ psalms, Pss 146-150). This psalm also recalls Moses by repeating in confession the saying of God’s mercy and *hesed* as it was revealed to Moses in his last encounter with YHWH on Sinai (Ps 145:8; Exod 34:6; cf. Ps 103 where Moses is named alongside this confession [vv. 7-8]).

The relationship of Moses to divine compassion, woven most prominently into Book 4 (and into the seams of Books 4 and 5) speaks to themes that lie at the heart of the Psalter. In his reading of a narrative shape in the Psalter, Wilson points to the theme of

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<sup>83</sup> The inclusio of יָחַם in Ps 90:13 and Ps 106:45 strengthens the association of divine compassion with Moses, expressed in יָחַם with the nuance of divine returning, and emphasizes the Mosaic frame around Book 4. The connection also adds another point of interest to speculation about why Psalm 90 is attributed to Moses, the only figure in the Bible who tells God to “return . . . and have compassion” (שׁוּבָה . . . וְהַנְחֵם), Ps 90:13; Exod 32:12 [see below, pp. 116-17]).

divine kingship, the eternal rule of YHWH, as the key response of Books 4 and 5 to the failure of the Davidic covenant and to the hope for its future restoration.<sup>84</sup> Wilson finds this response “most clearly expressed” in a group of psalms that forms the core of Book 4.<sup>85</sup> Psalms 93 and 95-99, the *yhwh malek* psalms, repeatedly declare and extol the reign of YHWH: “YHWH is king!” (Pss 93:1; 96:10; 97:1; 99:1; cf. also 95:3; 98:6), to be “exalted far above all” others (Ps 97:9). In this proclamation and the clustered psalms that sound it, Wilson locates the “theological ‘heart’ of the expanded final Psalter.”<sup>86</sup>

Wilson’s analysis draws on history and memory to theorize a narrative. The turn to Moses in Psalm 90 and in the order of psalms that follows it adds another dimension to this story. It evokes a shape of the Psalter that does more than raise and respond to questions of covenant and kingship, and more than fosters a return to trust in God alone. This storied Psalter also raises a mountain alight with the memory of Moses, bearer of God’s תורה, and raises YHWH to the top of it. The resulting enthronement returns YHWH to the site of that first holy burning (the theophany to Moses in Exodus 3), while evoking a Zion as mobile as the people who would return to it. For now YHWH reigns not only over Israel, but also over a book of prayers—hymns that chart the way from

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<sup>84</sup> “The Use of the Royal Psalms,” 92.

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

<sup>86</sup> “The Use of Royal Psalms,” 92. Wilson argues that “Pss 90-106 function as the editorial ‘center’ of the final form of the Hebrew Psalter” (*The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, 215); see also *idem*, “King, Messiah, and the Reign of God,” 392. For a diagram of the “Mosaic frame” and comment on its function in Book 4, see Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 75-76.

תורה through death to another reading, and to an incoming of another version of the law.<sup>87</sup>

To identify the Psalter with Moses is nothing new. In the *Midrash Tehillim*, the rabbis liken the five books of the Psalter to the five books of Torah (Pentateuch), penned by Moses according to tradition.

As Moses gave five books of laws to Israel, so David gave five Books of Psalms to Israel, the Book of Psalms entitled *Blessed is the man* (Ps 1:1), the Book entitled *For the Leader: Maschil* (Ps 42:1), the Book, *A Psalm of Asaph* (Ps 73:1), the Book, *A Prayer of Moses* (Ps 90:1), and the Book, *Let the redeemed of the Lord say* (Ps 107:2).<sup>88</sup>

As Moses is to the Torah, so David is to the Psalms. Five books each. Within the shape of the Psalter, the analogy may serve to lift the status of David, as well as to bring a new dimension to the psalms associated with him. Spoken from a book that enthrones YHWH on a reinscribed ‘mountain of God,’ David’s prayers join with the “praises” of the Psalter (תהלים) to become another expression of the law. By that law, he speaks with an authority no turn of history could undermine. If the covenant with David failed, the “word of YHWH” that came to David (Ps 33:4, 6) nevertheless goes out in an enduring form.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Wilson crafts a similar metaphor when he writes of “YHWH who sits enthroned upon the praises of his people” (“The Qumran Psalms Scroll,” 448). My reading of that throne in association with Moses raises it up on a reinscribed mountain of God and suggests that the ‘praises’ of the Psalter ring out as a new form of תורה.

<sup>88</sup> Braude, *Midrash Tehillim*, 1.5.

<sup>89</sup> The form in which תורה is couched in the Psalter, a mountain as I read it, is a reflection of the five-fold shape of the Torah or Pentateuch. Both collections move in (or up) toward law: the Psalms toward Moses in Psalm 90 and the Torah toward Leviticus;

The likeness of Moses and David, of the giving of the law and the giving of the psalms, proclaimed by the rabbis also cuts the other way. When Moses emerges in the Psalter on the face of its five-fold order, he lends his authority as God’s prophet to displacing the eponymous king.<sup>90</sup> If David is the new Moses, Moses is also—in this order of prayer—the (re)new(ed) David. By standing in the breach left vacant by the failure of the Davidic covenant, Moses more than mediates the throne as belonging solely to YHWH. He mediates a law—a תורה—that re-members the past while upending the fixity of space and time. He mediates the ‘laws’ of reading.

This perspective is undeniably poetic, calling up a law that has as much to do with memory, history, and narrative as with תורה. But the displacement of David implied by my rereading of his role is not solely figurative. Wilson lays the groundwork for this perspective with his argument that the MT Psalter represents an order for the last two books of psalms that ‘won out’ over an alternative order in the Qumran Psalms Scroll (11QPs<sup>2</sup>) where the psalms are arranged so that “the status of the Davidic messiah is greatly enhanced.”<sup>91</sup> In the order of this collection, David’s role as the deliverer of

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then back to a retelling of earlier themes. According to this analogy, the rereading of תורה faith expressed in Book 5 of the Psalter finds a parallel in the rereading of tradition that is Deuteronomy (a “second law”).

<sup>90</sup> The end of Book 2 declares: “The prayers of David son of Jesse are ended” (Ps 72:20), possibly a telling insertion given the added superscriptions attributing psalms to David (or to his memory) in each of the books that follow. The phrase “the word of the Lord” occurs once in the Psalter after the end of Book 2 in Ps 105:19, a reference to the “word” that “kept testing” Joseph (cf. vv. 17-19).

<sup>91</sup> “The Qumran Psalms Scroll,” 462. 11QPs<sup>2</sup> does not include the *yhwh malek* psalms.



Jerusalem or Zion is affirmed.<sup>92</sup> Rather than focusing on the kingship of YHWH and culminating in its celebration, the Qumran Psalms Scroll ends “with its vision and hopes firmly focused on the Davidic king” who will deliver and restore Israel.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, the MT Psalter emphasizes the proclamation of YHWH alone as king: “David’s role is diminished.”<sup>94</sup> I would add that Moses’ place in the Psalter strengthens the force of this displacement and does so in a way that the Psalter itself becomes a new expression of תורה. To “meditate day and night” on this law (Ps 1:2) is to draw near to a God who, even in kingship, cannot be contained and whose word to the people of God is endless.

If David and Moses, Sinai and Zion are reread “from the outset” in the Psalter (cf. Barthes’ admonition), the same can be said of תורה. The *law* in the Psalter resists redundancy. It is the absolute command, the “path” or “way” (דרך, Ps 1:1, 6); and it is *other*, emerging from a well-worn past that defies repetition. As a law inseparable from history, a covenant sealed in narrative, a “path of the righteous” (Ps 1:6; my translation) littered with broken stones and shattered lives even before the first step, תורה cannot be reproduced. It flows, as the psalm says, like “streams of water” (Ps 1:3), not to be contained.<sup>95</sup> Moses is a sign of this resistance. He is the law in the same way that the law

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 463.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Swanson, “Qumran and the Psalms,” 259.

<sup>95</sup> The Hebrew word פלגה connotes “stream” or “division.” The verbal form (פלג) generally means to “split” or “divide.” To say that those who delight in and meditate on תורה feed “like trees planted by streams [or divisions] of water” (1:3) is to convey not only the sustenance and constancy of divine instruction, but also its mobility and diversity. Even תורה divides. How else could it proliferate?

is always itself, plus a difference. It is this difference from itself or self-difference of תורה that makes returning possible.

With Moses as its mediator, the תורה commended and celebrated in the Psalter is a law that endures by virtue of change. Moses is a sign of this change. His liminal death at the edge of the land and elusive end in bones never laid (Deut 34:1-8) to rest allow a return less tethered to the past than might otherwise be possible. Instead, Moses stands for an ongoing story and a new chapter in it. The תורה of the Psalter likewise makes room for a new story, and for a text that is as mutable and mobile, as hospitable to rereading, as a book of prayer.

What is the gain in reading the shape of the Psalter as a recursion of Psalm 90? What does it matter that the lone psalm ‘of Moses’ rises up within ‘the five books of Moses’ such that the cusp of that collection, by most accounts an editorial chasm,<sup>96</sup> forms not only a place of return but also a symbol of the holiest of holies; a lumen ground spun out of prayer? And what of the wrath that inhabits this holy ground in Psalm 90 (vv. 7-11, see chiasm map)? What *difference* does it make that meditation on תורה in the Psalter (Ps 1:2) winds by way of the Sinai mountain where תורה is given and broken, and passes through the hands of the prophet whose name is synonymous with its divided history?

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<sup>96</sup> Based on comparison with the Dead Sea Psalms scrolls, Flint posits an early edition of the Psalter consisting of the first three books, in place prior to the Qumran community, onto which was added in various forms and over a period of time, Books 4 and 5. See Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls*, esp. 239. Wilson also posits a later stage addition of the last two books and posits a final redaction of the Psalter “that reflects the concerns of the sages, and intends to offer a response to the questions and hopes raised in the earlier books” (“King, Messiah, and the Reign of God,” 392).

One ‘difference’ made by reading the Psalter in the shape of Psalm 90 may be that the potential triumphalism of תורה—its certain identification with human righteousness—is tempered. The logic of identity, honed on the settled side of wilderness, is disrupted. The mountaintop to which Moses returns in the Psalter is neither one-dimensional nor transparent. It is clouded by holiness and the smoke of divine burning. To say that this fury—a sign of death in Psalm 90—is because of human depravity is to diminish the sheer mystery of the fire. To say that it is undeserved is to abdicate the culpability that תורה demands.

Another difference is that once תורה inhabits this mountain, this (re)read Zion, the duality of תורה and kingship (Pss 1-2) dissolves. With YHWH alone enthroned by the ‘prayers of David’ and the order that befalls them, תורה and kingship intermingle. This is not to say that תורה trumps every distinction with an absolute continuity; a sameness immeasurable by human standards. On the contrary, such totalization (the unrealized dream of narrative) fails alongside the fallen walls of a city on the hill that could not be moved (cf. Ps 89:40). But something happens on the heels of that failure. The need for a reinstatement of the past is absolved. The present comes more “truly” (כן, 90:12) into view. Instead of being broken or forgotten, a relic of hope, the covenant is a sign of a time that is sufficient unto the day because God’s תורה enters into it.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> After Book 3, the Davidic covenant is mentioned only once again in the Psalter, the last occurrence of the word “covenant” (ברית, 132:12). The covenant that continues to

The תורה of these texts is not a law unto itself, but a law of relationship. So it is that when Moses calls out from the middle of the Psalter, “to count our days truly, teach!” (90:12), a manifold web of associations rushes in to catch the lesson. But Moses, for all his immediacy (cf. *hinnēnî*, chiasm map and chapter 2), is not the moment at hand. He may lead reading to the mountaintop, even through wrath, but he cannot—as he does not in the story (cf. Deuteronomy 34)—bring reading ‘across.’ He cannot close the circle.

*Exodus 32: Breaking Before the Law*

The suggestion that Psalm 90 is a text about תורה has roots in tradition. In the Midrash on the Psalms, Moses’ only prayer in the Psalter is associated with the breaking of the law in Exodus 32 (recounted in Deut 9:8-21).<sup>98</sup> The rabbis cite “*destroy not Thy people*” (Exod 32:12; Deut 9:26) to expound “*A prayer of Moses the man of God*” (Ps 90:1).<sup>99</sup> But it is the address to God shared exclusively by Psalm 90 and Exodus 32 that most directly links these texts in the hermeneutic imagination. Moses alone in the Bible “implores the face of YHWH his God” (Exod 32:11) to “return . . . and turn toward other [have compassion]” (שוב . . . והנחם), Exod 32:12; Ps 90:13).<sup>100</sup> These associations

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be celebrated is associated with תורה (Ps 103:18) and with the patriarchal ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Pss 105:8, 9, 10; 106:45).

<sup>98</sup> *Midrash Tehillim*, 85. The rabbis fill in where the superscriptions left off, claiming that Moses wrote eleven psalms corresponding to the eleven tribes. (Simeon is not included.) Ten orphan psalms follow Psalm 90 in the Psalter. The first five of these are specified; the other associations are left to the instruction: “reckon them out for yourself” (87-88).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-86.

<sup>100</sup> My alternate rendering. For various translations, see above, note 3, p. 75. For comparison with the language of Amos, see Freedman, “Other Than Moses,” 56-59.

incline the ear to hear Psalm 90 as the words Moses speaks in the aftermath of the great apostasy at Sinai/Horeb<sup>101</sup>—a sin that looms over all others with its mountain shadow.<sup>102</sup>

There is no doubt that Exodus 32 is a text about תורה. Moses' plea to YHWH to “turn [שׁוּב] from your fierce wrath; *change* your mind [הִנָּחֵם]” (v. 12) follows on the people's flagrant transgressing of the first of God's commandments (cf. Exod 20:4; 34:17).<sup>103</sup> And it anticipates consequences that soak the base of the mountain where the two tablets of the law are twice received with blood. But there is a still more decisive turn in this text; one that comes to the fore when תורה is read at the intersection of Psalm 90, the Psalter, and Exodus 32. There, what rises up along with the golden calf is not only a sacral story *about* the law, but also a story *of* the law.

If the Psalter can be read as a large-scale recursion of Psalm 90, Exodus 32 appears as a microscopic iteration of this turning text. Where Moses in the Psalter mediates תורה across a reread history, Exodus 32 focuses on the moment of rupture. In the golden calf, the law *breaks* into the world in the form of its own difference. Broken before it is received and conveyed even as it is broken, תורה enters the scene as an acute

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<sup>101</sup> The Targum renders Ps 90:1 as “The Prayer that Moses, the prophet to the Lord, prayed when the people of the house of Israel sinned in the desert” (*TgPss*, 173). Following the tradition of the Targum and Midrash, Freedman raises the “possibility . . . that the composer of [Psalm 90] based it on the episode in Exodus 32 and imagined in poetic form how Moses may have spoken in the circumstances of Exodus 32” (“Other Than Moses,” 59).

<sup>102</sup> The rabbis of the Talmud reason: “There is not a misfortune that Israel has suffered which is not partly a retribution for the sin of the calf” (*Sanh.* 102a).

<sup>103</sup> For the narrative retelling of the prohibition against idolatry as the first commandment, see Deut 4:15-19; 5:6-10; 27:15.

returning.<sup>104</sup> This pivotal act assures that the law, which even God’s own hand must copy out again, is reread from the beginning.

Exodus 32 begins in delay. Moses, on the mountain, has been gone too long. In his absence, the people become uncertain: “we do not know what has become of him” (v. 1).<sup>105</sup> They turn to Aaron who devises an alternative. The text narrates the assembling and molding of gold into a “molten calf” (v. 4; retold in v. 8 NJPS).<sup>106</sup> Once ordained, the act provides a substitute, allowing the people to worship, feast, and “revel” (v. 6). But a substitute for what?

The text slips and slides around this question. In language that continues to bemuse translators, the people see the calf and say: “These (This) are (is) your G/god(s) [אלהיך אלהיך], O Israel, *who brought you up* [העליך] *from the land of Egypt!*” (v. 4; recounted by YHWH in v. 8; my translation).<sup>107</sup> From all that is about to be unleashed in

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<sup>104</sup> My reading of this rupture is inspired by the work of Regina Schwartz, especially “The Revelation of Justice,” an essay in which Schwartz takes up Derrida’s reading of the difference between justice and law. Referring to Exodus 32, Schwartz writes: “The Law comes into being as a rupture, an act of violence” (337); and later: “The law is broken *even as* it is given, and enforced *even as* it is given” (Schwartz’s italics). See also *idem*, “Othello and the Horizon of Justice,” 81-104.

<sup>105</sup> The rabbis are at pains to explain this uncertainty. For a brief synopsis, see Aberbach, “Golden Calf,” *EncJud*, 709-13.

<sup>106</sup> Exodus 3:21-22 raises the almost certain likelihood that this gold would have come from the Egyptians and thus would already constitute something foreign.

<sup>107</sup> Note the verb עלה (Hiphil form, “brought up”), which is also the word for a “burnt offering” (see p. 136, note 16). Of the more than forty occurrences of this formula in Exodus-Deuteronomy, only three, outside the call narrative (see below) apply to Moses. These three, Exod 17:3, 33:1, and Num 16:13 use the verb עלה. (In Num 21:5, the people blame YHWH *and* Moses as having “brought us up [העלינו] out of Egypt.”) All other instances, which assign the epithet solely to YHWH, use צא (“brought forth”).

the story, it would certainly seem that this molten statue is intended as a stand-in for YHWH. But the people declare it so in language that elsewhere applies only to Moses.

In Exodus 32, the Israelites speak twice. The object of their first speech is Moses; and of the second, the molten calf. The same appellation applies to both. Moses is “the man who *brought us up* [העלנו] *out of the land of Egypt*” (v. 1; recounted by Aaron in v. 23).<sup>108</sup> As though a form of divestiture, YHWH turns this same language on Moses: “For they have debased themselves, your people, *who you brought up* [העלית] *out of the land of Egypt*” (v. 7; my translation).<sup>109</sup> All eyes point to Moses as the model for the calf.<sup>110</sup>

Curiously, only Moses gets the naming right, and when he does he rightly uses the traditional formula of the exodus narrative. “YHWH, why does your anger burn hot

Deut 20:1 (“YHWH . . . brought you up” [הבטעלך]) is the exception. For examples of texts that name YHWH as the God who “brought forth” the people (from Egypt), see Exod 13:3, 9, 14, 16; 16:6, 32; 18:1; 20:2; 29:46; Lev 19:36; 22:33; 23:43; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13, 45; Num 15:41; 20:16; 23:22; Deut 1:27; 5:6, 15; 6:12, 21, 23; 7:8, 19; 8:14; 9:12, 26, 28; 13:5, 10; 16:1; 26:8; 29:24.

<sup>108</sup> This way of identifying Moses, which begins with his call (cf. Exod 3:10, 11, 12), is as much theological proclamation as historical reminder.

<sup>109</sup> Here I cannot help but think of the pronoun shift that comes into play when our beloved dog at home has committed some offense. ‘Do you know what *your* dog did?’ That YHWH no longer claims the Israelites as “my people” is no joking matter. Not since Moses’ call has YHWH assigned this epithet—and its burden—to the prophet. There the assignment to lead the exodus from slavery is given the formulation that hereafter applies only to YHWH. Moses will “*bring forth* [הוציא] . . . the children-of-Israel out of Egypt” (Exod 3:10; my translation). Once he has “*brought the people out* [בהוציאך] of Egypt, [he] shall worship God on this mountain” (3:12 NRSV).

<sup>110</sup> Also looking at language (the phrase “go before us,” ילכו לפנינו, Exod 32:1), Fretheim argues that the calf is not a substitute for YHWH, but neither is it “simply” a stand-in for Moses. Rather, the calf functions as “an image of the messenger of God,” a messenger only now understood as separable from YHWH. The idol thus grants greater accessibility to God and a measure of independence from both YHWH and Moses. See *Exodus*, 280-82.

against your people, whom *you brought out* [הוֹצֵאתָ] *of the land of Egypt* with great power and a mighty hand?” (Exod 32:11; cf. the repetition in v. 12).<sup>111</sup> Moses identifies God while the people have only managed to transpose their identification with Moses onto a surrogate image. With this, the absence they seek to remedy is itself called into question; doubled. (Moses? YHWH?) The making of a “likeness” (Deut 5:8; cf. Exod 32:4) is perpetrated by the people and the text. This doubling is only the beginning of the trouble in Exodus 32.

By most measures, Exodus 32 begins before its beginning. Instead of a Mosaic superscription (as in Psalm 90) or an added introduction setting forth the way of תוֹרָה (as in the Psalter), the story hangs on the last verse of the preceding chapter. Moses is left standing on top of Mount Sinai, “the two tablets of the covenant” in hand (Exod 31:18). But the people never receive that law. Failing to wait for Moses, they do the very thing the law prohibits. What follows is a figurative inversion of the mountain, a going down into wrath and death that only Moses—who destroys the law he carries “at the foot of the mountain” (Exod 32:19)—can mitigate.

Moses succeeds in turning back divine wrath only to unleash his own. Here again, the text produces a substitute, a ‘likeness’; what reading theory, in its overt iconoclasm,

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<sup>111</sup> Moses reminds YHWH to whom the people belong. See Rashbam’s comment: “*YOUR PEOPLE*, not my people, *WHOM YOU DELIVERED*. I am not the one who brought them out; You did” (*Rashbam’s Commentary on Exodus*, 32:11; see also the exposition of 16:6).



might call a *supplément*.<sup>112</sup> Language portrays Moses' burning anger (וַיִּחַר־אַף בְּזָעַד, "Moses' anger burned hot," v. 19) as a copy of God's (וַיִּחַר־אַפִּי, "that my anger may burn hot," v. 10<sup>113</sup>), a copy with a difference. Descending the mountain, Moses "[sees] the calf and the dancing" (v. 19) and he erupts. He "smashes" (שָׁבַר<sup>114</sup>) the tablets, laying waste to the divinely inscribed sign. The calf, too, is destroyed; burned, ground, and mixed with water in a strange foreshadowing of the trial by ordeal or Sotah in Num 5:11-31.<sup>115</sup> Instead of YHWH consuming them (אִכְלָם, literally "eat them," Exod 32:10, 12<sup>116</sup>), the people are made to "drink" the dust of the idol they have worshipped (v. 20). Moses then gives the command in no uncertain terms: "Thus says YHWH, the God of Israel" (v. 27), and "about three thousand people" are slaughtered (v. 28).<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> The French word *supplément* carries the double sense of addition and substitution. For Derrida, *supplément* ("or surrogate," as in the "*pharmakon*" of "Plato's Pharmacy") is the logic by which writing operates (see *Dissemination*, part II, 120-172). The sign is an addition, an effort to bridge difference; and it is a substitute, a stand-in. In other words, writing *is* the very difference it would overcome. A similar undecidability is at play in Exodus 32, where it is unclear whether the idol of the calf is only a placeholder for YHWH (thus the "festival to YHWH" in v. 5) or if it is meant as a true alternative, an "other god." The same goes for Moses' wrath, which supplants YHWH's burning (with YHWH's change of mind) and adds to it (YHWH sends a plague anyway).

<sup>113</sup> My translation. NJPS reads "blaze forth."

<sup>114</sup> My translation. The text tells the story in the past tense (וַיִּשְׁבַּר, Piel impf.). NJPS renders "shattered."

<sup>115</sup> The possible reference to a priestly ritual in a text that establishes the Levites as a priestly class seems more than plausible. For an argument in support of such a reading, see Brichto, *The Problem of "Curse" in the Hebrew Bible*; and Frankel, "The Destruction of the Golden Calf," 334-36.

<sup>116</sup> Note the use of the same verb in Psalm 90: "For we are consumed [כָּלֵינוּ] by your anger" (v. 7).

<sup>117</sup> This, as the suggestion of Sotah also implies, accomplishes a weeding out process: those who are "on YHWH's side" (v. 26) gather themselves to Moses and those

What kind of judgment is this that would destroy a people innocent of receiving the law they must obey?<sup>118</sup> Drawing on Derrida's essay, "Force of Law," Schwartz argues that it is a justice *prior* to the law.<sup>119</sup> Then she quickly adds: "According to that reading, the story would recount how, having violated justice, the people cannot have the law."<sup>120</sup> This is the kind of linear thinking narrative enjoys. Yet the biblical narrative of the incoming of the law cannot sustain it. Schwartz continues:

[T]his reading quickly collapses before one of the most compelling aspects of this narrative: it is precisely the first command of *the law*—the law, and not a prior justice—that they violate, and thereby disqualify themselves for the law.<sup>121</sup>

The law is here presented as an impossibility. It is total, exacting—as the violence of the text demonstrates beyond any doubt. At the same time, it is irremissibly divided, other than itself. The law is prior. Failing to keep what they have not yet received, the people evoke a law that is always beginning before itself. Like the "perpetual covenant" (ברית עולם, Exod 31:16; cf. "endlessness," Ps 90:2) that returns to the scene of creation again and again, the law will break in—fiercely new every time—as a perpetual

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who presumably are not die by the sword. In the end, YHWH sends a plague on all who are left (v. 35).

<sup>118</sup> One can, of course, reason that the people are aware of the law, having already heard it and agreed to follow it (cf. Exod 24:3). But that is another story. To let previous testimony trump the incongruity of Exodus 32 is to grant speech priority over writing and to miss something of the power of the written emblem. One might even say that such a reading defeats the power of the sign, God's own writing in stone, and threatens to dilute the drama of Moses' smashing the written covenant into the antics of a spoiled child.

<sup>119</sup> "The Revelation of Justice," 337-38.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 338.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*; Schwartz's italics.

returning: a breaking before the law.<sup>122</sup> This is so because of the difference that inheres in the law, a difference one might also call justice.

Justice, as a concept and as a realization, is hard to pin down. In seeking it out, the temptation is there to cut to the chase, to defer the endless debate and mounting commentary and simply say of justice: ‘you know it when you see it.’ But do we *know* it?<sup>123</sup> What if justice as justice requires an orientation toward the unknowable? What if justice is the cleft in the rock of sameness that can never be filled? This is the direction Derrida ventures when he addresses justice as “the *experience of aporia*”: an experience that is of necessity “impossible.”<sup>124</sup>

“Aporia is a nonpath,” writes Derrida: “From this point of view, justice would be the experience of what we are unable to experience.”<sup>125</sup> Aside from evoking something of that aporime experience, Derrida’s language points to the threshold justice *must* but cannot overtake: the threshold of the other. ‘Nonpath’ names the limit between what can be known and what remains infinitely unknown, and it places a demand. There is no

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<sup>122</sup> The “perpetual covenant” of Sabbath observance is the last law in a long sequence of instruction about cultic practice (Exodus 25-31) told to Moses before he receives “the two tablets of testimony” (31:18). The position is appropriate as the Sabbath, a day kept holy for rest and worship, comes at the end of creation, the seventh day (cf. 31:12-17). The infraction of the golden calf is especially heinous coming as it does on the heels of this covenanted description of true worship.

<sup>123</sup> The world attests otherwise, as does the biblical text. (Where, for example, is justice in the violent slaughter of Exodus 32? Or is this rendering more a matter of law?) Indeed, some would say that it is because of our inability to recognize and to live by justice that we need the law.

<sup>124</sup> “Force of Law,” 244; Derrida’s italics.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

going forward, but neither any turning back; there is only the impossible/impassable relationship.

An impassable relationship is one that cannot be resolved. This is the claim the other has on justice. With a nod to Levinas (justice as “the relation to the other”<sup>126</sup>), Derrida acknowledges it as an absolute, an infinite claim: “the heteronomic relation to the other [autrui], to the face of the other that commands me, whose infinity I cannot thematize and whose hostage I am.”<sup>127</sup> But justice also makes its mark on the other, a mark that appears on the face of Derrida’s ‘nonpath’ much as the ‘X’ that crosses out but does not occlude the ‘trace’ in Derrida’s earlier writing.<sup>128</sup> Nonpath signifies the absence that justice, in its imperative to relate to the other, cannot traverse (experience). For such a crossing over is also a crossing out. The other *must* remain other. That is the rub for justice, and one of the reasons that justice has need of the law.

As a model of relationship, justice is always turned toward the other and toward what is other. It faces the gap. But the ‘turn,’ the moving out from self, only brings to bear another decision (a traversal) impossible for justice. This is the decision that takes into account, “for example, respect for equity and universal right, but also for the always

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<sup>126</sup> *Totality and Infinity*, 89; cited by Derrida, 250.

<sup>127</sup> “Force of Law,” 250. Derrida also cites Levinas’ still more positive assertion of justice as “the straightforwardness of the welcome made to the face” (*Totality and Infinity*, 82). But he cannot let the “absolute dissymmetry”—and with it the possible stability—of Levinasian justice lie.

<sup>128</sup> In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida deconstructs Heidegger’s ~~Being~~ to develop his idea of the ~~trace~~ as a sign “*sous rature*” (under erasure; see esp. pp. 18-26). He manages this effect without the slight of hand in ‘nonpath.’ Nonpath means differently from no path. The sign stops the mouth, bars passage, by signifying what is absent. On the X as a sign “written completely otherwise,” see Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking,” 74.

heterogeneous and unique singularity of the unsubsumable example.”<sup>129</sup> What makes such a decision just—if there can be such a thing as a just *decision*—is, in Derridian terms, the “ordeal of the undecidable.”<sup>130</sup> Without this ordeal—of the decision that cannot but *must* be decided, of the *experience* of what cannot be known—no decision will be freely made. Whatever ensues will only be a matter of law.<sup>131</sup>

Justice puts human choice in the grip of impossibility. As an experience of traversal—crossing over and therein crossing out the other—it must be ventured but never overturned (totalized into the possible). According to the laws of reading, justice is a story that will not be unified. It is a memory bound to the present, a history that *must* be rewritten. This instability or ‘undecidability’ is maintained, at least in part, by the difference between justice and the law, a difference Derrida addresses as an aporia with the potential for endless proliferation. He elaborates (to use Derrida’s own verb of proliferation)

a difficult and unstable distinction between justice and law, between justice (infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry, heterogeneous and heterotropic) on the one hand, and, on the other, the exercise of justice as law, legitimacy or legality, a stabilizable, statutory and calculable apparatus [*dispositif*], a system of regulated and coded prescriptions.<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>129</sup> “Force of Law,” 252.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>131</sup> As Derrida explains, any decision that fails to undergo this “test and ordeal . . . would only be the programmable application of the continuous unfolding of a calculable process. It might perhaps be legal; it would not be just” (“Force of Law,” 252).

<sup>132</sup> “Force of Law,” 250; passage quoted in part in Schwartz, “The Revelation of Justice,” 339.

If the relationship between justice and the law is, as Derrida suggests, infinite in its “aporetic potential,” by what rule does Exodus 32 operate? Is it the law or also justice that descends the mountain in the form of God’s own writing? Is it justice or the law that inspires the breaking of the tablets and the burning of the fire? Justice or law that divides and slaughters, blesses, and seeks to atone? What rule is it that brings the justice and the law of this punishing text so close together that the two ‘hands’ (see Derrida’s depiction above) of their proliferate relationship can hardly be distinguished? Answering from the crux of the connection between Psalm 90, the Psalter, and Exodus 32, it is a rule of *return*.

“Turn from your fierce wrath! Change your mind! . . . Remember!” cries Moses from the top of Sinai (Exod 32:12-13); and YHWH does change, the story tells (v. 14). “Then Moses turned and went down” to deliver not only “the two tablets of the testimony . . . written on both sides” (v. 15)—the law—but also the extraordinary justice of turning, recall, and change. The irony of this justice, and the coil of its power, is that it returns to the scene of the crime in the very moment of the law’s breaking. Justice comes *as* the law—(recall the return to the *other*, to YHWH alone, in Book 4 of the Psalter)—and the law comes as its own self-difference.

The coming in of the law, of תורה, as justice and as difference is enacted at every turn in the narrative of Exodus 32. It shows itself in the failure of the people to recognize

the always already of that for which they wait.<sup>133</sup> It arrives in the apostasy that is doubly *before* the law: a breaking “before a law still nonexistent, a law still ahead, still having to and yet to come”<sup>134</sup> and a lapse committed before—that is, in the face of—the one law that precedes all others. No other gods before me. The difference that is also justice comes as YHWH relinquishes total destruction and remits Moses, law in hand, to circumstances wherein he cannot bear the law. It comes when, because the law has been broken, Moses breaks the law; when “the enforcement [of the law] is part of the law-giving”;<sup>135</sup> when the knowledge of the law *as justice* (“infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule . . .”) that is accomplished in the text is absolute, inescapable, and at the same time riven by violence. All of this points to the return that is, in the telling of this story, תורה.

In Exodus 32, justice and the law are so closely intertwined as to seem almost identical. But that would make of justice an idol, something the law strictly prohibits. Difference intervenes. God remembers; changes. Even here, in the mystery of the divine turn, there is room for relationship.<sup>136</sup> Likewise, though graven in stone, the law that Exodus 32 enacts is inherently iconoclastic. It cannot be copied, repeated, because the

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<sup>133</sup> Fretheim addresses this failure from a pastoral theological perspective: “The people seek to create what God has already provided” (*Exodus*, 280).

<sup>134</sup> Derrida, “Force of Law,” 270.

<sup>135</sup> Schwartz, “The Revelation of Justice,” 338. Schwartz makes the point that “what is radical in the biblical instance described in Exodus [32] is that this justice that shows itself as prior to the law also inheres in the law, constituting the law” (340).

<sup>136</sup> Schwartz reads the rupture of violence in Exodus 32 as a coincidence of law and justice, a “radical identity . . . that characterizes revelation in the Hebrew Bible” (“The Revelation of Justice,” 340). Without denying this, I would also say that the rupture in this text is not because law and justice enter the scene as the same, but because they enter the scene at the same time as difference.

always already it enforces is too mobile, too mutable—in short, too alive—to be contained. Yet this is the law that *must* be copied out again, even by the hand of God (cf. Exod 34:1); and will be copied out over and over—in an effusion of texts already read and in readings still to come.<sup>137</sup>

*Going On: Proliferating Like Grass*

The golden calf tears a hole in the text into which time and distance rush. It is as if the “return!” God addresses to the “children-of-the-ground” in Psalm 90 (v. 3) and the “return!” addressed (in turn) to YHWH (Exod 32:12; Ps 90:13) are brought so close as to be *nearly* indistinguishable. In the contraction, the momentary recursion, these repeated imperatives spawn a relationship not unlike that between justice and the law. Human turning and divine are as interdependent as morning and evening (life and death) and as incalculable as the passing of time. The spaces between things are contracted as well. In the absence of Moses, the golden calf presses at the distance between the top of Sinai and its foot. When the illicit fill-in fails, wrath upends the mountain’s prescribed separation.<sup>138</sup> The space between top and bottom, giving and receiving, collapses, with only a hairsbreadth of difference allowing for return. In Exodus 32, this difference persists, however contracted, in the form of the Levites and those who survive, as well as in a God willing to write again.

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<sup>137</sup> Chapter 5 of this effusion of readings will take up where the golden calf narrative leaves off, in the return of Moses to the mountaintop and the rewriting and re-giving of the law (Exodus 33-34).

<sup>138</sup> Exod 19:12 and 23 warn of the “set limits” between the top or even the “edge” of the mountain and the valley below.



Psalm 90 and the Psalter play out the return on a larger scale. The mountain spreads out in all directions, an emblem of the vast endlessness of divine provision (“earth and world,” תורה) and the uncompromising specificity of the human encounter with God. Reading slopes back and forth along a path of change, edging toward a summit heretofore occupied only by Moses (so the story goes). But Moses has returned and will return to a place unrecognized by the limits of old; a place suitable to a new promulgation of תורה. This is a space that opens up where multiple texts—multiple memories, histories, and narratives—cross. What will happen there is unpredictable, every time.

## CHAPTER 4



### FIRE AND CLOUD: READING AT THE ‘TOP’ OF PSALM 90

*For we are consumed by your burning*  
Ps 90:7

The sight of the glory of YHWH was like a consuming fire  
on top of the mountain.  
Exod 24:17

This chapter is about death. If death could talk, it would deny everything I have written up until now. It would leave the page blank. This is the problem for language. Death cannot speak. Neither can we speak for it. YHWH declares as much in the stark admonition: “No one shall see me and live” (Exod 33:20). The divine fire is all consuming. For their part, the people have already understood this when they plead with Moses to intervene: “Do not let God speak to us or we will die” (Exod 20:19). Without mediation the word of YHWH is no word, but the thunderous silence of total annihilation.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There is one exception in the Sinai narrative. The people see the fire and cloud on the mountain and hear “the sound of words” one time before asking Moses to make certain this never happens again (cf. Exod 20:19; Deut 4:11-12; 5:4; 22-27). In the elaborated deuteronomic version, the Israelites marvel that they have “heard the voice of the living God speaking out of fire . . . and remained alive” (Deut 5:26).

Death does not abide mediation. It is or it is not. There is no between.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, death has no need of recursion. If in death something could go out and come back again, death would be there to meet it. Death would be always and entirely itself. In death, there is no risk of repetition as every death is final. Every death is the only one. And every death is the whole matter. Death cuts the chord; it swallows difference. Not even a boundary survives. Unless one is outside of death, no trace remains. So complete, so unfathomable is death.<sup>3</sup>

Death is death, but it is also life. We hear this in the lament of Psalm 90, in the mourning of brevity and in the inevitable mortality that shades “all our days” (v. 9). And we ‘see’ it, according to biblical tradition, in the word that is spoken out of consuming fire—a life-giving word that kills when heard directly.<sup>4</sup> Death is life in that it is *the* difference that holds life in its grip. (At its bleakest, life is said to be a ‘living death.’ At its best, life is all the more precious and immediate because of death.) In a similar way,

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<sup>2</sup> In his essay, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of Death,” Matthew del Nevo comments that this view of death—which is here no assertion but only an observation from the vantage of living—is a common philosophical position, exemplified by Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (del Nevo, 125). From the perspective of writing, death is an either/or; an absolute which writing—despite its seeming pretensions—cannot brook.

<sup>3</sup> This is not my experience of death, but I am not dead. If I *could* speak for death, I would be inclined to talk about mystery, inconceivable freedom, and love without substance. Psalm 90 does not present death in that way. Death is the end of a life, a return to dust. In the Psalter, the dead go to Sheol, a place of deep darkness where God cannot be praised. (See Craven and Harrelson, “Excursus: Death, Future Life, and Sheol,” in “The Psalms,” 835-36.)

<sup>4</sup> Rabbinic commentary on Exodus and Deuteronomy develops the idea that the voice of God is a sound that is both *seen* and heard. See Neudecker, *The Voice of God on Mount Sinai*. Following the rabbis, Neudecker translates the opening portion of Exod 20:18 “And all the people *saw* the voices [את־הקולות]” (37; Neudecker’s italics).

death is life in that it is the *difference* that makes language possible. It is the space language requires to make the leap, to knit together meaning. But death is also life in a way language cannot touch. Here, in the middle—at the peak—of my study of recursion, it is this kind of death I wish to address.

In order to do this, I will read the death I find in Psalm 90 in two ways; one necessary and the other, to borrow from justice, impossible.<sup>5</sup> The first reading will look at death from its stultifying proximity to the “toil and trouble” of this life. Here, as one means of evoking the abyss that haunts human existence, I will imagine the death of exile, figured in the Psalter, together with the radical disorientation of living—and reading—in a world “after Auschwitz.”<sup>6</sup> Because death in this sense is not limited to annihilation, I will also consider how the nearness of death can vivify experience and add value even to days that ‘fade and wither’ (cf. v. 6). For help with this lament, I will turn to the ghetto poems of Yitzhak Katzenelson and Simke Bunem Shayevitsh, the poetic testimony of Nelly Sachs and Kadia Molodowsky, and the writing of Edmonds Jabès.

A second reading will look at death in Psalm 90 not as difference but as the very fact of the turn itself; a fact that is never more clearly expressed than in the moment by moment, word unto word coming forth of things as they are. For the ‘impossible’ task of saying anything at all about this kind of death, I will turn again to images of the divine

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<sup>5</sup> See my discussion of justice and impossibility in the previous chapter.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase has been burned into the collective imagination by wide and effective use. For a benchmark example, see Adorno, “After Auschwitz,” 361-65. See also the early collection of essays by Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: History, Theology, and Contemporary Judaism*.

word on the mountain, to the rabbis, and to a hint from Zen master Dōgen’s teaching on language. In the intersection of these worlds, I hope to signal the cut that knows nothing of before or after, of time or perpetuity; the *cut* that ends once and for all the possibility that recursion (this one included) could be merely another repetition disguised as change. As to whether this cut might also heal the rift between text and reader (whence meaning?) remains a question that only reading can answer.

A brief afterword to this chapter will consider how death leaves the question open. This is not intended as a hedge on the finality of death, but as a fact of reading. Psalm 90 goes on. There is life after the fire in this text, albeit life that is changed. The reader who is willing to traverse the structures of death that shape the psalm’s middle passage has yet to return back down the mountain.

*The Question of Death at the ‘Peak’ of Psalm 90*

My own preference would be to leave a blank page in place of this chapter, but that is not the way of Psalm 90. When death ‘consumes’ the center of the psalm (vv. 7-11; cf. כלה in v. 7), it comes in forms of fire and darkness—forms disturbingly similar to the fire and cloud that guided Israel in the wilderness by night and by day, and descended on the mountain in the “blazing” (Deut 4:11), forbidding glory of divine speech. In Psalm 90, the fire is not so glorious. It is God’s “anger” (אף, “burning,” vv. 7, 11), “wrath” (חמה, “heat,” v. 7), and “fury” (עברה, “flaring up,” vv. 9, 11), together with the “light of

[God's] face" that blazes forth to expose our suffering and sin (v. 8).<sup>7</sup> Nor is the cloud of darkness so compelling.<sup>8</sup> It is the fleeting of our lives in "toil and trouble" that leaves us finally "in darkness" (v. 10).<sup>9</sup>

In their position on 'top' of Psalm 90, these tropes of death are icons of a God whose presence can obliterate; indeed, whose very presence can mean absence. Fire, a multivalent sign, can go either way. An alternate translation of the middle of the psalm affords some sense of the heat generated by this language.

For we are consumed by your burning,  
by your heat we are overcome.  
You have set our afflictions before you,  
our secrets in the glare of your face.  
For all our days turn in your flame  
we consume our years like a sigh.  
The days of our lives last seventy years,  
or if in strength, eighty years;  
but the best of them is toil and trouble  
since they are soon gone, and we are in darkness.  
Who understands the power of your burning  
and according to the fear of you your flame?  
(Ps 90:7-11)

Instead of a blank page, Psalm 90 gives us a page filled with absence. Images of overwhelming heat, of hidden secrets, of time and strength passing into darkness are

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<sup>7</sup> On the association of אָר and חֶמֶד with 'burning' and 'heat,' see above. For the etymology of עֲבֹרָה and its sense as a "surge," "overflow," or "flare up," and the derivative association of passing through fire, see *TDOT* X: 408-18.

<sup>8</sup> The "cloud" of YHWH's presence is repeatedly associated with "darkness" or "thick darkness." See, e.g., Exod 14:20; 20:21; Deut 4:11; 5:22, 23; also Exod 19:9, 16.

<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word, עָרַף, here נִעְפָּף ("we fly away," v. 10), also carries the sense of "darkness" (see *HALOT*, 529b). So the NJPS Tanakh: "They pass by speedily and we are in darkness."

enveloped in a burning that cannot be conceived. This is the weight of the lament; that life is vacuous because expendable (“we are consumed,” v.7), that its lack is ever apparent, that it disappears. Or that life such as ours, transient and lived under judgment (‘under fire’), may be meaningless; that it ultimately amounts to *nothing*. That we are powerless, or worse, what power we have is corrupted, spent for naught. Given the conditions, even “in strength” (v. 10) we are absent before we are gone.

When the mountain landscape takes hold, it is hardly possible to read Psalm 90 without walking through this fire. But neither is it enough to say simply ‘it burns.’ Life does not let go that easily. Even if the conditions of the lament are considered normative (life ends in death), the psalm’s placement in the Psalter lends it to read as the prayer of a people who have seen the bodies of loved ones “given . . . to the birds of the air for food” and their blood “poured out . . . like water all around Jerusalem” (Ps 79:2-3). This is not suffering ‘in general.’ It is pain that, to use Elaine Scarry’s expression, “unmakes the world” one person at a time.<sup>10</sup> And it is loss that goes beyond whatever could be anticipated. One can imagine that those who survived to say something about the desecrating ruin of the holy city and its inhabitants might have described that horror in

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<sup>10</sup> *The Body in Pain*. On pain and the “unmaking” of language, see esp. Scarry’s introduction, 3-23. Poet Brian Turner, recently returned from the Iraq war, expresses the exacting uniqueness of pain and death in his poem, “Here, Bullet”: “If a body is what you want, / then, here is bone and gristle and flesh. / Here is the clavicle-snapped wish, / the aorta’s opened valves, the leap / thought makes at the synaptic gap. . . . here is where I complete the word you bring / hissing through the air . . . because here, bullet, / here is where the world ends, every time” (*Here, Bullet*, 13).

words later elicited by Auschwitz: “more was actual than was possible.”<sup>11</sup> Death of this kind threatens to kill even the living.

With all the fire and flame, the wrath and mystification (“who understands?” v. 11) that descends on Psalm 90, it is not unthinkable to read the middle passage of this prayer as a first-order burning: a Holocaust.<sup>12</sup> But why would anyone want to do that? (I ask.) Does reading this text really have to be that hard? God knows there is every manner of suffering in the world. Our sins are manifold, the varieties of death countless. Already we come to the sign of fire in Psalm 90 and know that whether it is the unconsumed bush, the all-consuming word, the broken law received, the holy of holies breeched, or a wrath from which God may—or may not—return, we will die. Why then rouse the ‘ultimate atrocity’? Why light the brimming mountain with “strange fire”?<sup>13</sup> Is it not enough for reading to figure Sinai and Zion anew, must this climb also conjure a reinscribed Moriah? (And what is Moses doing *there*?)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Morgan, “Introduction,” in his edited collection *A Holocaust Reader*, 3. Morgan attributes the saying to the German-born philosopher, Hans Jonas, whose mother died at Auschwitz.

<sup>12</sup> The genocide of six million Jews drained the word ‘holocaust’ of its capacity to mean apart from the Holocaust. Still, we have need of the ‘generic’ form, *holocaust*, which remains at large in our vocabulary as an ominous place-holder for atrocities yet to come. On the Holocaust as definitive in name and experience, see Linafelt, “Introduction: Strange Fires and Modern,” 17.

<sup>13</sup> On the “strange fire” (Lev 10:1) of wrong sacrifice, see Beal and Linafelt, “Sifting for Cinders: Strange Fires in Leviticus 10:1-5,” 19-32.

<sup>14</sup> Moriah is the name given to the place of Abraham’s averted sacrifice of Isaac (cf. Gen 22:2) and to the mountain in Jerusalem where Solomon “began to build the house of YHWH” (2 Chr 3:1); that is, to Zion. On the possible reasoning behind this conflation, see Davila, “Moriah,” 905.



Before entering this *other* kind of fire and cloud—of chimney smoke and mortal ash—I want also to ask if reading the death through which Psalm 90 passes as a specter of the Shoah is ‘true’ to the psalm’s focal concern with human transience. Does it make any sense at all to impose the ‘Great Destruction’ on the psalm’s probing of dust-to-dust that falls under divine wrath no matter what (“for all our days pass away in your fury,” v. 9) and its vision of how we might go on living even so? But I find it is too late to ask—about the pluriform burning in Psalm 90 or about whether truth can be addressed as an aspect of reading text. It is too late because the mountain is already in flames.<sup>15</sup>

Auschwitz has happened. For us, every horror, every new death falls under the shadow of that *holocaustos* (“wholly burnt”).<sup>16</sup>

(Suddenly, I find myself facing a kind of fire that resists recursion; that flies in the face of reading. Despite writing this far into a study of recursive reading and relying all along on emergent meaning, I am surprised, even caught off guard by this turn in my text. The complexity of Psalm 90 in its iterations as a psalm of Moses, as the mountain(s) of God, Sinai and Zion, as the Psalter, and as a model of *הורה*, yields an equally complex figuration of fire. The burning that appeared as I began writing the ‘wrath’ in this text is

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<sup>15</sup> The recognition that for the Holocaust victims everything is too late is expressed in an untitled reflection by Jerzy Ficowski: “I did not manage to save / a single life . . . / I run to help where no one called / to rescue after the event / I want to be on time / even if I am too late” (*Chronicle of the Lodz Ghetto*, 255; as quoted by Plank, *Mother of the Wire Fence*, 4).

<sup>16</sup> Linafelt makes a point of this etymology, relating it to the Hebrew *עלה*, to “go up,” the word used in its substantive form for “burnt offering” or “that which goes up” in smoke (“Introduction: Strange Fires and Modern,” 15).

not what I anticipated. My intent was to allow for all things Moses, but that intertextual ad-venture has now spilled over into associations that seem beyond control. Yes, I could stop and decide to read differently, but I am shaken in a way that may be more relevant to this text than anything I could construct. So I will go on, into a host of memories that now ignite the scene of reading with the most foreign fire I know.)

The memories of this fire are not rightfully ours. They belong, as many have said, to the dead. ‘After Auschwitz,’ we are left with a second-hand destitution, with what Elie Wiesel calls “the defeat of the intellect,” and with questions.<sup>17</sup> In this condition of abandonment even our questions are called into question. (What *difference* does it make if the burning is divine wrath and/or guiding presence? Can we anymore imagine ‘truth’ as a standard, in reading or otherwise?) As for reading another recursion of Psalm 90, the absurdity of entering the fire of one’s own accord threatens to stop interpretation altogether. (Again, the blank page.) The psalm, however, persists: *teach!* (v. 12). Can the questions at hand be reframed? Could the dead who cannot speak interrogate the text in a different way? Or could we in their stead ask: When did the mountain of God, the iconic ground of Moses and fount of תורה, become a Moriah and how did it happen? Does this ‘end’ signal a point at which recursion fails to generate a new word? What wrath is it that reading must risk before it can begin, as in Psalm 90, “to count . . . truly” (v. 12)?

Moses, it turns out, can speak to this. The mountain becomes an unaverted Moriah and the bush an unholy fire when the command to Moses, “Go, go up!” (לך עלה), Exod

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<sup>17</sup> Wiesel, “A Plea for the Dead,” 71.

33:1; my translation) assumes the ominous cast of a ghetto people departing, not for a land of promise, but for a “going up” (עלה) of unprecedented sacrifice.<sup>18</sup> Moses, on intimate terms with consuming fire, can lead the procession. (Indeed, the deported Jews do leave, many of them, with prayer books in hand; and more than a little of the writing that survives the ordeal calls on Moses or the exiled Jeremiah for help.) But in this ‘final exodus’ there is no changing God’s mind against total destruction—just as on this Moriah there is no angel of YHWH appearing and no provision of a ram made.<sup>19</sup> There is not even the purgatory of exile—but for the ‘lucky’ few—with its possibility, however improbable, of return.

Of course, the casting in this dense intertextual tangle is all wrong. Abraham attends the *Akedah*, not Moses.<sup>20</sup> Yet the illogic by which their separate identities fuse and interact provides a way for ‘suffering of biblical proportions’ to record its testimony. In that record, the dissimulation of association—stories of the Bible with the reality of experience—trades one mountain for another and one going up for another in order to locate an unimaginable displacement. The effect is more than one of allusion. Sinai, Zion,

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<sup>18</sup> On עלה as “burnt offering,” see above, note 16.

<sup>19</sup> See Exod 32:11-14 and Gen 22:13. Moses’ intercessions with YHWH on behalf of the people during the wilderness wandering are legendary (see, e.g., Num 11:2, 10-15). No such intercession spares the Jews from the Holocaust.

<sup>20</sup> Isaac also ‘attends’ the *Akedah* and something of him surely is sacrificed there. Elie Wiesel remembers Isaac as the first survivor. See *Messengers of God*, xiii and 69-97; also “Freedom of Conscience—A Jewish Commentary,” 638-49. Both references are cited in Plank, *Mother of the Wire Fence*, 100. On the “sacrifice” of Isaac and of Sarah, see Sherwood, “Binding—Unbinding: Divided Responses of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the ‘Sacrifice’ of Abraham’s Beloved Son,” 821-61; and “And Sarah Died,” 261-92; see also Tribble, “Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah,” 1-19.

and Moriah, as well as the ancestral fathers and mothers, are the accumulated past that in the insanity of the present condemns the descendants of those people and places to die.

The mountain of God is a Moriah when the testimony that issues from it, wrapped in the folds of Torah, is a word of unmitigated dying. This dark transfiguration happens for writing in a meticulously structured dirge by the celebrated poet Yitzhak Katzenelson. In “The Song of the Murdered Jewish People,” Katzenelson consoles empty railroad cars with the Mosaic command to depart—filled—into the wilderness: “It’s not your fault, they load you and tell you: Go!” (cf. the command to Moses, Exod 4:11).<sup>21</sup> Likewise, the mountain becomes a Moriah when the experience of European Jewry rewrites the cloud and fire of the desert into “the smoke coils” and night flames of “the end” (see below).

Again, Katzenelson’s bitter irony:

The end. At night, the sky is aflame. By day the smoke coils and at night it  
blazes out again. Awe!  
Like our beginning in the desert: A pillar of cloud by day, a pillar of fire  
by night.<sup>22</sup>

Katzenelson, whose wife and two small children have already been taken, who knows of the camps, and who has witnessed the “wagons of pain, laden with the living carried to death,” sings as one “left alone in the wilderness.”<sup>23</sup> Pressing at the outer edges of the sacred mountain, he circumscribes the seriousness of a two-year-old girl (“the two-

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<sup>21</sup> Written in fifteen cantos with fifteen stanzas each, Katzenelson’s lament is published with some omission in *Literature of Destruction*, 531-47. The quotation is from canto IV, stanza 15. For analysis of the poem as a chiasmic structure centered on canto IX, see the commentary by David Roskies, 516-17.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, canto XV, stanza 1.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, canto III, stanza 12; and canto I, stanza 2, respectively.

year-old grandmother”) as “a Torah, a prophecy, a holy writ for the world.”<sup>24</sup> He cries out to the prophets—Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Moses, and Isaiah; but no answer avails.

Evoke not Ezekiel, evoke not Jeremiah . . . I don’t need them.  
I called them: O help, come to my aid!  
But I will not wait for them with my last song—  
They have their prophecy and I my great pains.<sup>25</sup>

Kazenelson’s word wants to banish God: “Away! Away! You have deceived us.”<sup>26</sup> But he cannot banish the point of reference, though the reality—now burning—is changed beyond recognition.

Have we so changed that you don’t recognize us, as of old? [. . .]  
Not I . . . Not I will to the prophets be compared, lo and behold!  
But they, the millions of my murdered ones,  
those murdered out of hand—<sup>27</sup>

The mountain of God becomes a Moriah—a place lit with ‘strange fire’—when the testimony of “those murdered out of hand” is offered up as though on holy ground; when the only ground left to the Sinai people is a place of unabated sacrifice. This is the fire that burns in Simke Bunem Shayeitsh’s epic lament, “*Lekh-lekho*,” where testimony from the Lodz ghetto is meted out like a ‘law’ of unthinkable destruction.<sup>28</sup> Facing imminent deportation to a “destination . . . yet imagined in horror,” Shayeitsh rewrites

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, canto VI, stanzas 6 and 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, canto II, stanza 15

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, canto IX, stanza 5.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, canto IX, stanza 7.

<sup>28</sup> Published in *Literature of Destruction*, 520-30. On the law (תורה) as the “testimony” (עדות) given on Mount Sinai, see Exod 31:18; 32:15; and 34:29.

the biblical imperative to Abraham, “Go, go forth!” (Gen 12:1; 22:2; my translation) into a harrowing *kiddush* (Sabbath blessing) addressed to his young daughter, Blimele.<sup>29</sup>

And now, Blimele, dear child  
 Restrain your childish joy  
 —That mercurial stream within you—  
 Let us be ready for the unknown road.

Do not gaze in wonder at me  
 With your great brown eyes  
 And do not ask any questions why  
 We have to leave our home.

...  
 Do not gaze in wonder at me  
 With your great brown eyes, surprised  
 That on a weekday Wednesday  
 I recite the Sabbath *kiddush*.<sup>30</sup>

The wide-eyed wonder in a child’s eyes flies in the face of what is about to happen to this family. Their “unknown road” will indeed be no place for “childish joy.” But what catastrophic disruption is it that could drive a family from their last precious home? In begging his daughter not to “ask any questions why,” Shayevitsh enters into a liturgy that recalls not only the first Sabbath—God’s day of rest as the culmination of creation—but also the occasion of its keeping: the exodus. On the night before that leave-taking, all manner of things were done differently. Thus the *Haggadah* begins with a series of questions that drive its saving narrative. The questions are asked by a child if

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<sup>29</sup> The centerpiece of Plank’s study of the Holocaust is an extended reading of Shayevitsh’s poem (*Mother of the Wire Fence*, 60-93). In describing the setting and structure of “*Lekh-Lekho*,” Plank writes, “[T]he poem’s world is anything but secure. It . . . stands at a point of laden passage as this family prepares to journey to a destination unknown, yet imagined in horror” (61).

<sup>30</sup> “*Lekh-Lekho*,” 520-21 (lines 1-8, and 61-64; lines 5-8 repeat in lines 41-44).

one is present, beginning with the question which, above all, Blimele must not ask: “Why is this night different from all other nights?”<sup>31</sup>

Shayevitsh replaces his daughter’s silenced questions with a lyric of his own. Not to be asked is “why, instead of village or town, / Terror should come to meet us; / And why we are ready to be cast out like rubbish / For every kind of suffering.”<sup>32</sup> These are the questions that introduce a flight not away from, but into a “strange, strange land”; a netherworld of exile and death.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, and all the more so, Shayevitsh will carry out the Sabbath ritual in every available detail. This includes the anathema for an orthodox Jewish father of having to “teach . . . a little girl / The terrible chapter: ‘*Lekh-lekho*.’”<sup>34</sup>

Were it not for the poem’s Sabbath setting and the multiple references to an exodus already going on, Shayevitsh’s reader would surely think the chapter about to be taught is the “*lekh-lekho*” of Genesis 22, the *Akedah*. And wouldn’t the command of that chapter then read: “Take your daughter, your only daughter Blimele, whom you love, and go, go forth to the land of Moriah, and offer her there as a burnt offering on one of the

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<sup>31</sup> Touster, ed., *A Survivor’s Haggadah*, 17 (see reference in chapter 2, p. 69, note 92). The *Haggadah* has many versions, all containing the recognizable liturgy of questions and answers.

<sup>32</sup> “*Lekh-lekho*,” 521 (lines 46-49).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 524 (line 168). Although a Sabbath with its grounding in exodus is celebrated, Shayevitsh watches and prepares for what will be a “wandering into Exile” (line 331).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 528 (lines 339-40).

mountains that I will show you”<sup>35</sup> These words go unspoken. (Under the circumstances, any such ‘test’ would be bogus, for neither father nor daughter has any choice in the matter.) Instead, Shayevitsh’s “*Lekh-lekho*” quotes the appointed text, the *go go-forth* first commanded to “grandfather Abraham,” the one full of promise, the one where land and progeny figure as signs of God’s blessing.<sup>36</sup> Moriah, however, lurks in the background and the confounded word of hope cannot override its dark purpose.

In the “Sabbath world” of his poem, Shayevitsh reads the *parasha* or “portion” of biblical text assigned to the day (Genesis 12) only after he dismisses the celebrated passage as incomparable to the suffering it names: “But how can one compare it / To the bloody ‘*Lekh-lekho*’ of today?”<sup>37</sup> And only after he acknowledges—within a tradition that disavows a daughter’s learning—that to read “the terrible chapter,” on this day, is to teach first hand its “bloody” content. Shayevitsh goes on to do this, to recite the bleak and brutal going forth his people will undertake; but even his rewritten Torah lesson cannot compare to the terrible reality once it comes.

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<sup>35</sup> A re-vision of Gen 22:2, the command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac.

<sup>36</sup> The text ‘read’ in Shayevitsh’s poem is Gen 12:1-2a. As a final prelude to his family’s embarkation and to the end of the Sabbath day, Shayevitsh writes: “So greetings to you, grandfather Abraham! / We go on your hard journey / But won’t you be ashamed / Of your grandchildren’s bloody tears?” (“*Lekh-lekho*,” 529 [lines 409-12]).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 528 (lines 341-42). On Plank’s description of the “Sabbath world that deportation will suspend and put out of time,” see above, note 29. Plank notes that the home, which Shayevitsh and his family must leave behind, is “itself a metonym of the Sabbath world” (*Mother of the Wire Fence*, 67).



Dense with allusion and disciplined by Sabbath forms, Shayevitsh's poem makes of deportation an "anti-Exodus," a going forth in every sense.<sup>38</sup> Left behind are all things "[held] dear . . . each tiny thing" in a life lived together.<sup>39</sup> These will "[run] after us life fire," writes Shayevitsh.<sup>40</sup> Also left is the "dwelling place" or "refuge" (בִּיעוּן) that opens Psalm 90 (v. 1; the first word following the address to *Adonai*) and recurs at the center or 'high' point of Psalm 91 (v. 9, cf. the name for God, "Most High," עֲלִיּוֹן), God's assurance of safety following the wrath and transience of Moses' lament.<sup>41</sup> There will be no assurance in response to Shayevitsh's lament, just as there will be no עֲלִיּוֹן to "guard" (שָׁמַר) this journey from on high (cf. Ps 91:11). So complete is the ghetto leave taking that only a forsaking God can watch over it.

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<sup>38</sup> On the likeness of deportation from the ghetto to the "going forth" of the exodus," Plank writes: "The poem, however, unsettles this analogy and recollects the Exodus primarily to show its difference: What Blimele and her father face is no Exodus, but an *anti-Exodus*—a journey into bondage and death" (*Mother of the Wire Fence*, 66; my italics).

<sup>39</sup> "Lekh-Lekho," 524 (lines 186-97). Shayevitsh's text lingers over the precious elements of their family life: the kitchen table; the "poor house . . . wrapped / In a sharp forest smell" (lines 219-20); the mirrored "wardrobe . . . / Which quietly saw everything" (lines 229-44); the "cupboard" filled with laundry and memories (245-56); the books—"Holy books, / Worldly books, my manuscripts" (lines 257-58); and the marital couple's "gracious, holy bed" (line 325), "testimony . . . / To a new Genesis (lines 303-4).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 524 (line 188).

<sup>41</sup> The theme of dwelling in God or finding refuge continues throughout Psalm 91. In addition to בִּיעוּן in v. 9b, see מְחַסֶּה in vv. 2 and 9a; and the verbal form חָסָה in v. 4. Verse 9, which falls at the center of the psalm—as if on "high"—reads: "Because you have made YHWH your refuge, the Most High (עֲלִיּוֹן) your dwelling place (בִּיעוּן)" (NRSV). The association between the name for God in Psalm 91, עֲלִיּוֹן (vv. 1, 9), and the "burnt offering" (עֹלָה) to be offered up on Moriah (Gen 22:6, 7, 8, 13 [2x]) should not be missed (see below).

The final Sabbath of “*Lekh-lekho*” begins and ends, as does the traditional Sabbath liturgy, with references to Psalm 91.<sup>42</sup> In the rhythm of the sacred day, the “nest” Shayevitsh blesses is perched on the ethos of the psalm’s unassailable “refuge” (“cover[ed] with [God’s] pinions” and “under [God’s] wings,” v. 4); and the “angels” he invokes, again in a terrible twist of fate, fill the air with the divine charge “to guard you in all your ways” (Ps 91:11).<sup>43</sup> But instead of securing the day in a frame of divine care (shelter and the protection of angels), Shayevitsh’s recall of Psalm 91 elicits yet another reminder of what will be left behind—even a ‘reminder’ that Shayevitsh himself may not have foreseen. Meanwhile, the fragile bird of “*Lekh-lekho*” is driven “out of its nest” and the traditional hymn of Sabbath joy is sung to “two angel guests” who, as it turns out, will not live to make the deadly journey.<sup>44</sup>

When Shayevitsh situates “*Lekh-lekho*” in relation to Psalm 91, his faithful allusion calls forth the mountain of God with a reinscribed complexity. Again, Moses enters the scene, as does Psalm 90. The recurring vocabulary of “refuge” in Psalm 91

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<sup>42</sup> The psalm is recited in its entirety in both the morning and evening Sabbath services. (See *Daily Prayer Book*, 309-12.) A third reference to Psalm 91 comes when v. 11 is sung as part of the hymn, “*Sholem-aleikhem*” (see “*Lekh-lekho*,” line 68) just before the evening *kiddush* (ibid., 283-84). Plank notes these connections and comments on them (*Mother of the Wire Fence*, 67-69, 96). See also the marginal notes in Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, 521.

<sup>43</sup> Shayevitsh repeatedly describes their ghetto home as a “nest” (lines 12, 66, 81). For the full extent of “avian imagery” in “*Lekh-lekho*,” see Plank, *Mother of the Wire Fence*, 67-68. Angels are twice invoked in “*Lekh-lekho*,” once near the beginning (line 73) and again at the poem’s conclusion (lines 441-44).

<sup>44</sup> “*Lekh-lekho*,” 520 (lines 10-11) and 521 (lines 73-73), respectively. Blimele is taken in a roundup of children in September 1942. The next morning, Shayevitsh’s wife and new born baby are taken (documented by Jozef Zelkowicz in *Lodz Ghetto*, 342-46).

together with the concluding promise, “With long life [“days,” ימים] I will satisfy [שבֹּעַ] them” (v. 16; cf. שבֹּעַ in Ps 90:14) connect these consecutive psalms as if question and answer. Similarities in the shapes of the two psalms as well as a structural fold in the middle of Psalm 91 (cf. “Most High,” vv. 1 and 9; “dwelling place,” v. 9) suggest a carry-over of the mountain image. The naming of God as “Most High” (עֲלִיֹן)—arguably placed at the ‘high point’ of Psalm 91 (v. 9)—powerfully reinforces this impression.

If Psalm 90—with its fire in high places—begins to bleed through the page of “*Lekh-lekho*,” how much more does Moriah rise up to overtake the poem’s Sabbath affiliations? (Surely the only mountain in sight is a place of sacrifice.) How much more does the עֲלִיֹן of Psalm 91—and of Shayevitsh’s anti-Exodus—evoke a “Most High” who not only demands a “burnt offering” (עֹלָה) but also must, in the deportation-unto-death, be one. Despite the magnitude of the sacrifice, the remains of this burning measure as only another cup of ash in the mount to mount of suffering the people will endure.

The dense intertextual associations that limn the ground of “*Lekh-lekho*” as a mountain on fire also mingle the flames of a divine auto-da-fe with the mysterious fire on Sinai and with the burning that will overtake Blimele and her family. Indeed, read in relation to the death in Psalm 90, these fires become one and the same. (In death distinction fails.) Ironically, Shayevitsh backs away from a final identification of human burning and divine as he backs away from paralyzing despair in order to be able to keep going into the fire. Thus, the closing stanzas of “*Lekh-lekho*” sound an anti-lament: “let us not weep / Let us not lament,” a restraint invoked by “the power of our grandfathers /

Who in all generations / Climbed atop so many Moriahs.”<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, there is the going forth. Even while “God’s Presence” hovers overhead, every known thing will be lost.<sup>46</sup> And even while the “old proclamation of Oneness” is devoutly “renewed,” the mountaintop God the people have known and declared in days gone by will be offered up in a burning that no longer distinguishes hope from death.<sup>47</sup>

In flames, the mountain of God cries out for testimony that Sinai alone cannot provide. The ghetto poems of Kazenelson and Shayevitsh tender this testimony in the form of a new Torah, a word to be witnessed according to the law(s) it inscribes.<sup>48</sup> Yet no matter how powerful they may be, exclusively male voices fail to tell the all-consuming death without obscuring its scope. One of the sad facts of the Holocaust is how long surviving women’s experience of the destruction went unattested and how rarely male-dominated interrogations have noted the vast lapse, the doubled silencing of death after

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<sup>45</sup> “*Lekh-lekho*,” 530 (lines 422-24). That Shayevitsh fails to mention the ‘grandmothers’ is yet another loss he inadvertently commemorates. Biblical women have no place in the recall of this lamenting procession.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 530 (line 446).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 530 (lines 448-49).

<sup>48</sup> As the place where the divine testimony is given, Sinai becomes the figurative ground for all future testimony. (On the giving and receiving of “the two tablets of testimony [עֲדוּת]” on Mount Sinai, see Exod 31:18; 32:15; and 34:29). The place need not be named for its power to be reasserted. Primo Levi confirms this in his own famous testimony of “sorrowful, cruel and moving . . . stories, all different and all full of a tragic, disturbing necessity.” Levi asks of these “simple and incomprehensible” stories, “Are they not themselves stories of a new Bible?” (*Survival in Auschwitz*, 59). For a reading of Levi’s testimony in its continuity and discontinuity with biblical tradition, see Plank, *Mother of the Wire Fence*, 44-57.

death.<sup>49</sup> The testimony of fathers and sons bespeaks a loss our practiced categories of death founder to conceive. It falls to women to articulate the breach wherein mothers and daughters lay down their lives in absence and see the fiery word with their own eyes.

In the course of this recursive reading of Psalm 90, I cannot forget that the mountain on which YHWH's glorious burning (cf. Exod 24:17) and fearsome wrath (cf. Ps 90:11) descends may be also a breast on fire (cf. chapter 2). The sign is complex, and—like death—profoundly inclusive. Neither can I forget the soft boundary between life and death when I read the testimony of Nelly Sachs, who writes “like one in flames” of the “meridian of pain” that divides her world.<sup>50</sup>

Sachs authors one of the most memorable ciphers of the fire and cloud in her poem “O the Chimneys”:

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<sup>49</sup> For a relatively early study on how “the experiences and perceptions of Jewish women have been obscured or absorbed into descriptions of men’s lives,” see Ringelheim, “Women in the Holocaust: A Reconsideration of Research,” 741-61. For the growing body of literature on women’s experience of the Holocaust, see Ofer and Weitzman, eds., *Women in the Holocaust*, the first volume of its kind (1998); and Fuchs, who raises “[q]uestions about the invisibility of women in Holocaust Studies” at the outset of her edited volume, *Women and the Holocaust: Narrative and Representation*. Other examples include Goldenberg, “Different Horrors, Same Hell,” 150-66; Rittner and Roth, eds., *Different Voices: Women and the Holocaust*; Kremer, *Women’s Holocaust Writing*; and Kahane, “Dark Mirrors: A Feminist Reflection on Holocaust Narratives and the Maternal Metaphor.” Of note within traditional male-dominated Holocaust scholarship is the inclusion of Hannah Arendt, often as the lone woman’s voice. See, e.g., the reprint of Arendt, “The Concentration Camps,” in Morgan, *A Holocaust Reader*, 47-63.

<sup>50</sup> Ursula Rudnick quotes Sachs as saying, “I wrote to survive. I wrote like one in flames” (*Post-Shoa Religious Metaphors*, 32; quoted in translation from Sager, *Untersuchungen*, 23). In his correspondence with Sachs, Paul Celan began a letter, “You once wrote to me that the meridian of pain runs between Stockholm and Paris” (*Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs: Correspondence*, 81).

O the chimneys  
 On the ingeniously devised habitations of death  
 When Israel's body drifted as smoke  
 Through the air –  
 Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,  
 a star turned black  
 Or was it a ray of sun?

O the chimneys!  
 Freedomway for Jeremiah and Job's dust –  
 Who devised you and laid stone upon stone  
 The road for refugees of smoke?

O the habitations of death,  
 Invitingly appointed  
 For the host who used to be a guest –  
 O you fingers  
 Laying the threshold  
 Like a knife between life and death –

O you chimneys,  
 O you fingers  
 And Israel's body as smoke through the air!<sup>51</sup>

When the Polish-born Yiddish poet, Kadya Molodowsky, heard an early report of the terrible destruction Sachs would later render as “fingers / Laying the threshold,” she tore at the flesh of her own fingers until “[o]ne finger became so badly infected that it required surgery.”<sup>52</sup> But Molodowsky continued to write. At the war's end, she published a collection of poems that opened with the chilling parody, “Merciful God,” an anti-

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<sup>51</sup> Translated by Michael Roloff. German and English versions are published side-by-side in *O the Chimneys*, 2-3.

<sup>52</sup> *Svive*, 59; quoted in Hellerstein, introduction to *Paper Bridges*, 41. *Svive* is the Yiddish literary journal Molodowsky co-founded and edited from 1943-44 and 1960-74.

prayer that can readily be imagined as the funereal counterpart to Shayevitsh's Sabbath lament.<sup>53</sup>

Molodowsky's poem appeals to the mercy of God to abandon the covenant with Israel and instead "bestow this blessing, now perceived as a curse," on those who have propagated destruction.<sup>54</sup> With hands full of death, the prayer throws down the images of mountain, ash, and fire to make a final request:

Merciful God,  
 Choose another people,  
 Elect another.  
 We are tired of death and dying,  
 We have no more prayers.  
 Choose another people,  
 Elect another.  
 We have no more blood  
 To be a sacrifice.  
 Our house has become a desert.  
 The earth is insufficient for our graves,  
 No more laments for us,  
 No more dirges  
 In the old, holy books.

Merciful God,  
 Sanctify another country,  
 Another mountain.  
 We have strewn all the fields and every stone  
 With ash, with holy ash.  
 With the aged,  
 With the youthful,  
 And with babies, we have paid  
 For every letter of your Commandments.

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<sup>53</sup> *Der melekh dovid aleyh iz geblibn (Only King David Remained).*

<sup>54</sup> See Hellerstein's introduction to *Paper Bridges*, 43.

Merciful God,  
 Raise your fiery brow,  
 And see the peoples of the world—  
 Give them the prophecies and the Days of Awe.  
 Your word is babbled in every language—  
 Teach them the deeds,  
 The ways of temptation.

Merciful God,  
 Give us simple garments  
 Of shepherds with their sheep,  
 Blacksmiths at their hammers,  
 Laundry-washers, skin-flayers,  
 And even the more base.  
 And do us one more favor;  
 Merciful God,  
 Deprive us of the Divine Presence of genius.<sup>55</sup>

If there is a ritual to the language of “Merciful God,” it is one of divestment. The sacral world has been emptied of every living thing. Its words are spent; its people and places turned to ash. The poem has no use for a Moriah as nothing remains to be sacrificed. It dispenses with wilderness wandering as every Jewish “house has become a desert.” Instead of the Haggadic *dayēnû* (“it is enough!”) called to mind by Shayevitsh’s anti-Exodus liturgy, Molodowsky’s anti-prayer appeals for “no more.” It impales the sufficiency of death on a last lack: “The earth is insufficient for our graves.” Rather than invoking the mountain of God, Molodowsky’s plea for finality begs God to take holiness elsewhere: “Sanctify . . . / Another mountain.”<sup>56</sup> Rather than bowing in fear or wonder

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<sup>55</sup> *Paper Bridges*, 353; original Yiddish text appears on previous page. For an alternate translation, see Roskies, *Literature of Destruction*, 570-71.

<sup>56</sup> Roskies translates, “Sanctify . . . / Another Sinai” (*Literature of Destruction*, 570).



before the divine fire, it incites God's "fiery brow" to rise up and look elsewhere. This people has seen more fire than it can stand. Where God's "word is babbled in every language," let its awful fate be taught there. And let every knowing of God depart so that, deprived of God's presence, those who remain after the great death might live in peace, however "base."

Molodowsky's prayer is like the flame that burns close and hot on dying embers. She published it as "a tombstone for a life that had vanished" and the poem does read as an epitaph—for those who died and for all that God required of them.<sup>57</sup> But it also reads, by virtue of its own *modus operandi* of inversion, as the fire that burns without ceasing atop Psalm 90.

In "Merciful God," the Mosaic nuances of election, desert, mountain, and Torah ("every letter of your commandments") are turned under in ground "strewn . . . with [the] holy ash" of slaughter. Buried in death are the sanctified notions of dwelling place ("our house"), fire, and mercy (cf. מַחֲנֶה, Ps 90:13)—the very attributes of God that mark the movement from past ("generation to generation," v. 1) to future ("establish beyond us," v. 17) in Psalm 90. Likewise, the teaching plead in "Merciful God" ("Teach them the deeds / The ways of temptation") is the antithesis of the wisdom Psalm 90 seeks on the other side of fire ("To count our days truly, teach!" v. 12). The effect of this appeal for negation is a subversion of the sacred terms of life *and* of death, a turning of the flame on

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<sup>57</sup> See Molodowsky's description of *Only King David Remained in Svive*, 60; quoted in Hellerstein, *Paper Bridges*, 42. Published as the first poem in the collection, "Merciful God" acts as the 'face' of the tombstone.

the God in whom life and death co-exist with apparent indifference.<sup>58</sup> But God as fire will not be consumed. One has the sense that Molodowsky, despite her witness to “burn layered upon burn,” and despite “the pallet of agony” and “mountain of ash” from which she writes, must—like the shofar blower in another of her poems—continue to “[keen] . . . / An old melody to God.”<sup>59</sup>

Read as a sign of the fire on the mountain, Molodowsky’s prayer for mercy distills the whole of Psalm 90 into a single burning. The psalm’s sense of time and endlessness, its lament and its joy, implode in a conflagration of life and word: *all our days pass away in your flame* (v. 9<sup>60</sup>). What also passes away in this reading—as in the hands and minds of so many Holocaust writers—is language as we know it.<sup>61</sup> The old laws of intelligibility no longer hold. The same words are used—words like God, law, fire, death, and word—but they mean in a way that points to something that cannot be said, even something that

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<sup>58</sup> In an evocative reading of Paul Celan’s poem, “Death,” Francis Landy describes the death Celan writes as “the death of holocaust victims, but also the death of all of us, the death of the death-event” (“The Covenant with Death,” 222).

<sup>59</sup> The quotes are taken from two of Molodowsky’s poems included in *Only King David Remained*, “The Fife-Player of Sodom” and “The Shofar Blower” (*Paper Bridges*, 401-3 and 369, respectively).

<sup>60</sup> See my alternate translation of Ps 90:7-11, p. 134.

<sup>61</sup> On the “need of a new word” to speak the radical disjunction of life in Auschwitz, Primo Levi writes: “We say ‘hunger,’ we say ‘tiredness,’ ‘fear,’ ‘pain,’ we say ‘winter’ and they are different things. . . . If the Lagers had lasted longer a new, harsh language would have been born; and only this language could express what it means . . .” (*Survival in Auschwitz*, 112-13). On the disjunction in language in the wake of the Holocaust, see my essay, “Let There Be Darkness: Continuity and Discontinuity in the ‘Curse’ of Job 3” (cited above); see also Plank’s bibliography in *Mother of the Wire Fence*.

*is not*. Or, as the exiled Jewish writer Edmond Jabès put it, they mean in a way that can only “resemble” what is dead.<sup>62</sup>

“*God is the burning Book, and I am only smoke of words,*” writes Jabès in the second of his *Book of Resemblances*.<sup>63</sup> The saying evokes a dual image: the fires of the Holocaust and the divine presence on Mount Sinai. But Jabès offers another resemblance. He receives these words from the hand of Reb Labban (“*Reb Labban had written*”), suggesting that no matter the fire or smoke, it is the *heart* that burns.<sup>64</sup> Lest the reader take this allusion as something to grasp hold of, a unity or perhaps a reassurance about death, Jabès begins his first volume of *Resemblances* by raising the question, what is resemblance? (“Can we agree on [it]?”). To this he answers: “Appearances dissemble. Resemblance is a glitter of appearance.”<sup>65</sup> The dissembling “glitter,” the flicker of flame, leaves the reader wondering if the “*burning Book*” is ‘the Book’ that is never named but only resembled or Jabès’ own *Book of Questions*.<sup>66</sup> Or is the fire, like death, an

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<sup>62</sup> See Jabès’ list of “obsessive words” which he elaborates: “God as extreme name of the abyss; Jew as figure of exile, wandering, strangeness and separation, which is also the writer’s condition; Book as impossibility of the book or, rather, as the place and non-place of all possible construction of a book; Eye which means law . . . ; Name as the unutterable Name, repeal of all names, the silent Name of God . . .” (*Book of Resemblances* 2, 70-1).

<sup>63</sup> *Book of Resemblances* 2, 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.* The name appears to be derived from the Hebrew word for heart, לב or לבב. All the names in Jabès’ books carry such allusions.

<sup>65</sup> *Book of Resemblances*, 5.

<sup>66</sup> The *Resemblances* are presented as fragmented reflections on Jabès seven volumes of *Questions*. In the first scene, Sarah, who dies in the *Book of Questions*, stands before a mirror looking at her naked body. Jabès writes, “If she takes her time to examine it closely, it is because she knows it escapes her” (5). Jabès writes similarly about “the

“*unsilvered mirror*,” a resemblance of “the same inexhaustible book . . . [that] will always remain to be read”<sup>67</sup>

Jabès writes the annihilation of the Holocaust in a language befitting the paradox of fiery darkness: a language of absence. Set within the first volume of *Book of Questions*, “The Book of the Absent” begins with a saying by Reb Tal: “All letters give form to absence. Hence, God is the child of His [*sic*] name.”<sup>68</sup> For Jabès, whose books are populated by spectral rabbis and written in forms that hauntingly resemble the sacred texts, this is a holy and necessary language. “I name you. You were,” writes Reb Vita, inscribing the void in the name of ‘life’ in a book that is at once written and dead, “absent.”<sup>69</sup> (After Auschwitz, we are always already dead.) The Reb’s wisdom is no more about the past than is the name a placeholder for something that can be retrieved. Rather, it is Jabès’ way of writing absence, of “[marking] . . . the wound” which Jabès warns is “invisible” at the threshold of the book; a wound that in the end, like death, is “distinctly legible in every word.”<sup>70</sup>

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Book of God, through which God questions himself [*sic*]” (*Book of Questions*, 20), a book interrogated without a trace and, like all books, “unrecoverable” (*Book of Resemblances* 2, 115).

<sup>67</sup> *Book of Resemblances*, 47 and 9, respectively.

<sup>68</sup> *Book of Questions*, 47. In his reading of Jabès, Derrida translates the passage, “All letters form absence” (*Writing and Difference*, 71). Notably, the Hebrew word תלה means to “hang” or to “hang up” (cf. *HALOT*), a curious multivalence for Reb Tal’s wisdom saying.

<sup>69</sup> *Book of Questions*, 37.

<sup>70</sup> Jabès’ opens the first volume of *Book of Questions* with the section, “At the Threshold of the Book” and an accompanying epigraph by Reb Alcé: “Mark the first page of the book with a red marker. For, in the beginning, the wound is invisible” (13).

After Auschwitz, human solitude has become impervious to mediation: “the thread has been cut.”<sup>71</sup> How, then, can the book be anything but a burning? How can God? (“If God is, it is because He [*sic*] is in the book,” writes Jabès in his own voice.<sup>72</sup>) When Jabès arrives at “EL, OR THE LAST BOOK” where “the cycle” of *Book of Questions* concludes, he asks: “Have I reached the crest of the unimaginable death . . . that rejected letters and words and thus escaped all possession, therefore the book?”<sup>73</sup> (Has he reached the top of the mountain?) With a reference to “the eye” (*oeil*) as “the law” (*loi*) which “turns to stone [tablets?] with the final period of the book,” Jabès looks into “the void . . . [with] no name”—into the *burning*—and continues to write: “No word has been pronounced since.”<sup>74</sup>

The *Endlösung* or ‘final solution’ darkens the “years . . . we have seen evil” (Ps 90:15) and judges our days as “thereafter.”<sup>75</sup> What this means is hard to conceive. We still suffer, and with no less passion, but there is something that our suffering is *not*. Our toughest pain, our most heinous crimes cannot be fully thought because the unthinkable

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Near the end of the final volume of *Book of Resemblances*, Reb Assin addresses “death, distinctly legible in every page” (88).

<sup>71</sup> *Book of Resemblances* 2, 61. See the quote and comment in del Nevo, “Edmond Jabès and the Question of Death,” 124.

<sup>72</sup> *Book of Questions*, 31.

<sup>73</sup> *Book of Resemblances*, 17. In a gesture of hope more palpable in Jabès’s later work, he asks, “Does a circular work find its logical conclusion in a point? / This point—the ultimate trace—is perhaps also the place and the precise moment of the eternal rebirth of the book” (*ibid.*).

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 17. For Jabès, writing *is* the law: “The law is the word. I write. I apply the law” (*Book of Questions*, 222). “Every look contains the law” (*Book of Resemblances*, 16). And yet there is the “fire . . . that no eye can rest on, for what eye could be faster than flames?” (*Book of Resemblances* 3, 3).

<sup>75</sup> Morgan, “Introduction,” 4.

has happened. And even when the deaths we inflict or subsidize or tolerate take on a scale that allows them, in our truncated imaginations, to be faceless (Rwanda, Darfur, Iraq), there is already the unspeakable breach to which they compare. The human world has been exposed and it is fearful (cf. Ps 90:8, 11).

What is followed upon in the *thereafter* is not only a recalculating of human evil; it is a great void. We live now in absence: the absence of six million dead, the absence of the human face of death, the absence—according to those who survived to tell it—of God. We also live with culpability, with memory—or revelation, and with what Irving Greenberg qualifies as the necessity to weigh whatever we say or do in this our day as a response that would be “credible in the presence of the burning children.”<sup>76</sup> The standard seems impossible, and it may be. On the other hand, the unbearable criterion points to the value of our every act, whether we live up to that value or not. And it calls up the ever so poignant fact that while death can kill beyond all reason, most of us, given the chance, hold to life and want to live it.

In his later reflections on surviving in Auschwitz, Primo Levi wrote of attention to the other—“turned to the world and to the human beings around me”—as both a symptom and a cause (“an important factor”) of his ability to endure.<sup>77</sup> Levi found such a turn salvific, even as he recalled the sickening specificity of his own sense perceptions in

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<sup>76</sup> “Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire,” 107-8. Greenberg’s essay quotes from the Nuremberg trial record, describing in brief but vivid detail how children in the death camps were “destroyed.” After reading it, I found it almost impossible to write. An expression as ordinary as “for example” cannot withstand the light from burning children’s bodies, many of them burned alive.

<sup>77</sup> *Moments of Reprieve*, 11.

the lager. Neither did Levi succumb to what he called “the survivor’s disease,” a condition that took its toll on one more victim for whom Levi cared: “his margin of love for life had thinned, almost disappeared.”<sup>78</sup>

What keeps the margin of love for life open, wide? In part, at least, it is death; our own death which speeds toward us and the deaths of others. It is “our essential fragility,” so precious and difficult to bear, which overwhelms us even “in strength” (Ps 90:10).<sup>79</sup> Levi ends his memoir with a reminder “that all of us are in the ghetto, that the ghetto is fenced in, that beyond the fence stand the lords of death, and not far away the train is waiting.”<sup>80</sup> This is dark language, and darker still is our fluency to know what he means. But Levi offers the prompt of death as a “reprieve.”<sup>81</sup> Inside the fence, we are alive; sometimes very alive.

Of our life circumscribed by death Psalm 90 will not let us forget.

*Fire and Light: The Covenant with Death*

To read the fire on Psalm 90 as a Holocaust burning is to recall the words of another prophet and the dealing in death of another time:

“We have made a covenant with death,  
and with Sheol we have an agreement . . .

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 159-60. The man whom Levi describes once had the means to help others, but now those opportunities were gone.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 172. The danger is that we forget the innate fragility which death insures, that we presume otherwise.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> The final story in *Moments of Reprieve* (163-72) is sinister, but even so its focus is tuned to the potential value of life.

for we have made lies our refuge,  
and in falsehood we have taken shelter.”  
(Isa 28:15)

Speaking “the word of YHWH,” Isaiah berates the “scoffers who rule . . . Jerusalem” (28:14) on the way to its “scourge” (28:18) at the hands of the Assyrians by throwing their own words back at them. The claim to safety, no doubt rephrased by the prophet, comes back as judgment. From the ‘top’ of Psalm 90, no such mediated condemnation is necessary. The people’s words, recharged by YHWH/Isaiah, come naturally to our mouths. They read as a confession. “We have made a covenant with death”—as though an alliance with fire could protect us from being burned. We have done this. We are exposed.

From the beginning, Psalm 90 mitigates against the impress of false concealment by confessing God as refuge (v. 1), by setting aflame the “light” that reveals “our afflictions” and “our secrets” (v. 8), and by reminding the reader that we will die. This is part of the human irony: because of death no “covenant with death” can stand. Though we may propagate death while we live, death will put an end to it. (The same goes for propagating life.) We will inevitably be stripped of our pretensions. With its passage through wrath to unconditional joy (cf. v. 14), the psalm offers the possibility—or at least the prayer—that this insight might come *before* death. That recognizing our mortality might dispose us to see the merciful activity of God in the world (cf. v. 16), even this broken world, and be sated by it.

Is this the wisdom that makes us “count our days truly” (Ps 90:12)? Does facing the fact that we die, in effect conceiving our absolute relativity—or, more theologically



speaking, our utter dependence—grant the insight to live rightly the value of each day, of a life span? Perhaps.<sup>82</sup> It can happen that acknowledging our own mortality predisposes us to receive the goodness of life with gratitude and to be more sympathetic to those for whom life is not good, a disposition with deep roots in the Hebrew Bible. But, as Francis Landy writes in his poetic essay on death after the Holocaust, the notion that death humanizes us (following Hegel) is also “our greatest illusion.”<sup>83</sup> Rather it is we who try to humanize death, to render it less than dead. Despite our efforts, whether we conjure up a villain, a phantom, or sometimes a friend, death is other than what we are. Whatever we do with death (before dying), we only fall back upon ourselves.

There is another more trenchant limitation in this reading of the psalm’s sought after “heart of wisdom” (v. 12), one that surfaces in the Israelites plea to Moses: “Do not let God speak to us or we will die” (Exod 20:19). That is, we are not *capable* of facing the fact that we die any more than we are capable of coming face to face with the fire—without dying. Experience alone bears this out. I may come to terms with the idea of

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<sup>82</sup> Qoheleth arrives at a version of this wisdom. Because everything is impermanent—*hebel*—wisdom lies in enjoying to the full the day at hand (see chapter 2, pp. 60-62). A Buddhist view might see this as lacking in compassion, which is the cornerstone of wisdom. The Christian theological perspective of faith as “the consciousness of being absolutely dependent” is given paradigmatic expression in Schleiermacher (*The Christian Faith*, 12).

<sup>83</sup> “The Covenant with Death,” 220. Death is dead; silent; immune to mediation. As Landy puts it, “[D]eath is that which does not speak, at least to us, which can only be incorporated, as a silent companion, an object of fear, fantasy, decomposition, as a dead weight. Death also as unspeakable, as a transcendent of language, and humanity. Which turns our life into death. . . . Death is that which cannot be written, which intervenes in the gaps, the silences, between words and letters, attests to the discontinuity in Being and in God” (220-21). Landy’s rhapsody on death is consistent with Sheol as a place where the dead can no longer praise or communicate with God.

death, may even summon the courage to gaze into the darkness (or the fire); but as long as I am here looking, the fact of death will be deferred. Death will remain as the rift that divides; divides humans from one another, divides concepts from reality, divides mortal experience from the “activity” of God (Ps 90:16).<sup>84</sup>

*Language and Death: Reading as Deferral*

Language imparts a provisional model of this rift; not because it can “say” death, but precisely because it cannot. “[L]anguage is the *rupture* with totality itself,” writes Derrida, in an extended reflection on Jabès’ maxim, “All letters form absence.”<sup>85</sup> The gap, the “lapse,” or “caesura” that allows (that requires) language to differentiate and therefore relate is not a space to be reduced or commandeered by writing.<sup>86</sup> It is the infinite because never bridged gaping; the blankness that no explanation can penetrate and no amount of writing can fill. It is also the vacuum that keeps language always on the move; the boundless backdrop to a system of deferrals that cannot say the thing itself—even if the ‘thing itself’ is language.<sup>87</sup>

For language, death is the unspeaking unspeakable. It is that *about* which we speak and *around* which we move. “Death strolls between letters,” writes Derrida in a

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<sup>84</sup> I do not mean to be making ontological claims here. Rather, I am using language to make an epistemological inquiry. A constructivist view of reality modeled on language (as in Wittgenstein’s language games) also admits the lapse of artifice, the difference between a map and the landscape it depicts, even if the landscape is linguistic.

<sup>85</sup> *Writing and Difference*, 71.

<sup>86</sup> Derrida codes the necessary break between signs in the temporal terms of “lapse” and “caesura” (*Writing and Difference*, 71).

<sup>87</sup> Derrida’s system of differential traces or self-difference, apart from which language cannot mean, does not allow for a “thing itself.” Within this system, language can only ‘say itself’ in analogy with death, which is the end of language.

move that humanizes death while also underscoring the risk of writing.<sup>88</sup> And yet, Derrida wants to say, the absence that everywhere threatens meaning with its silent totality is as indispensable to language as air is to life, “the letter’s ether and respiration.”

The letter is the separation and limit in which meaning is liberated from its imprisonment in aphoristic solitude. No ‘logic,’ no proliferation of conjunctive undergrowth can reach the end of its essential discontinuity and noncontemporaneousness, the ingenuity of its *under-stood* [*sous-entendu*] silences. The other originally collaborates with meaning. . . . [T]he caesura makes meaning emerge. It does not do so alone, of course; but without interruption . . . no signification could be awakened.<sup>89</sup>

True to his muse, language, Derrida does not address the absence that figuratively corresponds to death head on. Such an address, as the passage explains, would be impossible. Yet in a way befitting the binary proclivities of a linguistic world, two aspects of the divide that characterizes life and language come to the fore in Derrida’s elaboration of the gap. The first can be summed up in one of Derrida’s more famous maxims: “There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of differences.”<sup>90</sup> Silence, the lapse or ‘interrupt,’ gives rise to speech and therein fills our speaking “everywhere” with “traces” of the not yet said. The other aspect of the divide, like the consuming burning here read in Psalm 90, is more exacting (see below).

Derrida’s tête-à-tête between death as the carved out letter (“separation and limit”) and Death as totality (“aphoristic solitude”) calls to mind Francis Landy’s rebuke against the illusion that death humanizes us. We can no more make sense of total silence

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<sup>88</sup> *Writing and Difference*, 71.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Positions*, 26.

than we can engage death in conversation. Neither is language the death of Death, as Psalm 90 makes so palpably clear. For “children-of-the-ground” (Ps 90:3<sup>91</sup>), the word must be divided, mediated, circumventing. To hear otherwise is to die.

The analogy between death and language cuts two ways; both of which can be counted among human “afflictions” (Ps 90:8). On the one hand, death is the silent unknown, humanized by language and faced only obliquely so that we might speak. Death is the cut words cannot access. All words express this lack. But words are only a pale reflection of the reality, as Holocaust poetry, for example, attests. On the other hand, death soaks human life with pain and loss such that it is possible to die incrementally all the while living, to die up to the moment when life ends “like a sigh” (v. 9). This gradual denying of life may be the more deadly side of death.

Language puts the question of life and death—here deferred by this excursus on language—in its own terms. How, if human counting is marred by death, can we count our way to life-giving wisdom? How can we, for whom our very mode of relating is shot through with lack, come to be sated as in Psalm 90 such that “we may rejoice and be glad in all our days” (v. 14)—even the days when “we have seen evil” (v. 15)? Again, the hermeneutic possibility: Is acceptance the attitude that brings on the kind of wisdom Psalm 90 implores? Is “fear of YHWH” (cf. v. 11)? Does confessing one’s mortality and linguisticity with all its division and deficiency—alongside confessing, with the psalm, God’s “endlessness” (v. 2), “wrath” (v. 7), and “*hesed*” (v. 13)—engender the kind of

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<sup>91</sup> See my translation of Psalm 90 and the note on בְּנֵי-אֲדָמָה (v. 3), p. 24.

change that appears to unfold in Psalm 90? Perhaps. But there is another kind of change and another kind of death brought into view by this mountain reading of Psalm 90. There is another question addressed by the hybrid sign of fire.<sup>92</sup>

*Fire and Word: Who dies?*

From a vantage at the peak of the mountain of God, a high holy place constructed at the confluence of multiple texts, the image of fire dazzles with inconsumable meaning. The sign has already been read—bush, name, word, law, wrath, light. The stories that got us here have been spun again (Moses, Israel, Psalter, Zion; and the stories of reading—rhetoric, recursion, intertextual allusion, imagination at play). Yet when reading comes upon the burning mountain and consents to “we are overwhelmed” (Ps 90:7), it meets with mystery. What manner of sign is it that, when translated for reading (an encounter between texts), purports to annihilate the reader while at the same time remaining inexhaustibly read? What is “this great sight” (Exod 3:3) and what might it mean for reading to take off its shoes and stand on “holy ground” (Exod 3:5)?

If this language seems elusive, so is the moment to which it points. It is a moment (an encounter) so transitory and engulfing that for one immeasurable passing there is nothing at all. The landscape of this moment in Psalm 90 is a cluster of images fueled by an all-consuming burning: “we are consumed” (v. 7), “before you,” “the light of your face” (v. 8), “pass away,” “end” (v. 9), “gone,” “we are in darkness” (v. 10<sup>93</sup>), and “who

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<sup>92</sup> On hybridity as an aspect of figuration and of experience, see chapter 5, esp. pp. 195-202.

<sup>93</sup> NJPS. See also my alternate translation of vv. 7-11, p. 134.

understands?” (v. 11). But at the cusp of the psalm not even these images endure. Even to say the word “dust” (v. 3) in the face of this fire is extra—an illusion; a chimera of time.

“Come no closer!” says YHWH to Moses, who hides his face for fear of seeing the God whose voice he hears (Exod 3:5-6). But Psalm 90 does come closer. Read as a pattern of recursion, a spiral of non-identical repetition at multiple levels of scale, the psalm ignites a mountaintop rereading for which there is no protection, no maintenance of proximity. Here, the mountain *is* the fire. To read is to “pass away” (Ps 90:9). This is recursion at a momentary level of scale: the whole of Psalm 90 in an instant.

In this reading, distance and difference dissolve—momentarily—in the fire without ash. The “dwelling place” of all generations (v. 1) mingles with divine “fury” (v. 9), and the “toil and trouble” of the day (v. 10) draw near to “*hesed*” (v. 14). At this level of scale, the going and coming of returning are swallowed up. Recursion is manifest in the here and now of this “morning,” this “evening” (v. 6), this “sigh” (v. 9). (According to the illogic of such immediacy, the call, “Return, YHWH! How long?” [v. 13] *is* the turning. And the plea to be sated and gladdened [vv. 14-15] is an expression of the “activity” [v. 16] that accomplishes such fulfillment.) At this ‘level’ of impermanence, the appeal in Psalm 90 for the future, for an enduring contribution to the world by virtue of *Adonai*’s grace (vv. 16-17), is brought entirely into the present. Like hope and like gratitude, this prayer, too, is an expression of the ineffable burning. In its flame, ‘before’ and ‘after’ go up in smoke. “Generation to generation” (v. 1) is emptied of time, poured

out in the unrepeatable arising of the day at hand. This moment is all there is, and it is complete.<sup>94</sup>

As impossible as it is to convey a reading—a moment—as fleeting and insubstantial as this, intertextuality offers pointers. If the fire met with in reading Psalm 90 is immediacy, if it is impermanence, it is also a sign of the word that emanates from Sinai. In Exodus 3, this word is the sound of the fire naming itself: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה (v. 14). The sign, a burning bush, is at once absolute (endlessly burning) and devoid of substance (unconsumed). The sound, God’s self-naming, is recursive (אֶהְיֶה — אֶהְיֶה) and singular, unrepeatable.<sup>95</sup> In Exod 20:2-17 (recalled by Moses in Deut 5:6-21), the word on Sinai is the law spoken by God—just this once—directly to the people.<sup>96</sup> Like the turning moment in Psalm 90, it is a word that both kills and gives life.

The rabbis are not shy to say of “all these words” (Exod 20:1) that they are one. According to midrashic tradition, the ten “Words” or commandments spoken on Sinai are

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<sup>94</sup> Language theory, dialectical theology, and human nature attest that on this side of death, nothing is ever complete. This reading is an attempt to look at time from another perspective. The ‘complete’ here named as ‘moment’ is not the antithesis or apotheosis of fragmentation, but the emptying of it. On ‘complete’ as a satiety that relinquishes the opposition between having and not-having, see below.

<sup>95</sup> Just as אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה eludes translation (variously, *I-am that/who/what I-am*, *I-cause-to-happen what I-cause-to-happen*, *I-will-be-present as I-will-be-present*, etc.), neither can the divine name be repeated. No one knows what it sounds like. For discussion of the divine name, see chapter 1, pp. 3-4 and p. 63.

<sup>96</sup> So Deut 5:4, “YHWH spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.” When, in Exodus 34, the two tablets of the law are written out again, now by Moses’ hand, the text makes clear that only Moses witnesses the cloud and only Moses hears the voice (cf. Exod 34:1-28).

one and “the same,” as are the different versions given in Exodus and Deuteronomy.<sup>97</sup> They are “heard . . . in one single sound (*qol*), as the [human] mouth cannot speak and the [human] ear cannot hear.”<sup>98</sup> Indeed, so complete is the immediacy and undividedness of the giving and receiving of Torah that understanding and the whole of interpretation is instantaneous. (Rabbi Ishmael writes of the Israelites at Sinai: “as soon as they heard the [divine] utterance they interpreted it.” The *Sifre* on Deuteronomy adds, “When the utterance came forth . . . the Israelites saw it, acquired understanding through it, and knew the amount of Midrash, Halakhah, inferences from the minor to the major and analogies that were contained in it.”<sup>99</sup>) All of this feeds into what Neudecker calls the “rabbinic principle” that, as with the fire on Sinai, “there is no ‘earlier’ or ‘later’ in the Torah.”<sup>100</sup> The word of YHWH has no end and to it nothing can be added.<sup>101</sup> It is immediate, singular, and complete.

What has this to do with a reading of Psalm 90 in which an encounter with fire on a mountain likened to Sinai brings forth the wisdom to rightly account for the “days” of

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<sup>97</sup> *Mekhilta* de-R. Simeon benYohai, 145-46. For the passage and further associations, see Neudecker, *Voice of God on Mount Sinai*, 34-35. See also the *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Deut 5:19, cited below. Tradition extends the *Shema*’s declaration of oneness to YHWH’s word as well (cf. Deut 6:4).

<sup>98</sup> *Midrash ha-Gadol*, Deut 5:19, ed. Fisch, 120. The passage is quoted in full by Neudecker, *Voice of God on Mount Sinai*, 35.

<sup>99</sup> *Sifre Deuteronomy* 313, ed. Finkelstein, 355; quoted in Neudecker, *Voice of God on Mount Sinai*, 50.

<sup>100</sup> *Voice of God on Mount Sinai*, 36-7. Neudecker cites Bacher, *Die bibelexegetische Terminologie der Tannaiten* (Leipzig 1899; Darmstadt 1965), 167-68.

<sup>101</sup> The rabbis expound this from the words אֱלֹהִים יִסַּף (“and he did not add”) in Deut 5:22 (*Midrash ha-Gadol*, Deut 5:19, ed. Fisch, 120; cited in Neudecker, *Voice of God on Mount Sinai*, 35).



this life? Nothing, if one makes the claim that Psalm 90 is an immutable ‘word’ or that reading a text grants access to the mind of God. As Jabès put it, after the Holocaust any such ‘Book’ is dead.<sup>102</sup> But if it is a turning moment in Psalm 90 to which reading would point, a moment that is not the construction of God but the deconstruction of the self, then the rabbis’ words about divine fire may fuel the burning. So, too, may the words of Eihei Dōgen, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Zen master whose play with language set aflame the assumed duality of all verbal expression and showed a way to count each of our transitory interpretations to the full.

Dōgen comes from a tradition far removed from the Psalms or, for that matter, literary theory; but his facile use of difference to unsettle the fixed bifurcations of language is in many instances remarkably close to Derrida (or vice versa!). Both Derrida and Dōgen are intent upon subverting the subject-object dualism that characterizes the way we think and informs our assumptions about reality, linguistic and otherwise. Both find no end to what deconstruction calls the ‘economy’ (*oikonomia*) of differences; that is, no unconditioned ground that lies outside language and ultimately stops the freefall of all our constructions of meaning. The difference is that Dōgen sees the relative and mutable nature of all words as an end in itself. This is possible because for Dōgen language, like all the ‘myriad things’ in this world, is an all-consuming expression of what is. No matter how halting or effective it may be, each effort at language is, as Dōgen

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<sup>102</sup> The death of the ‘Book’ is a theme that runs throughout Jabès’ work. See the discussion earlier in this chapter, pp. 155-57.

puts it, “the total exertion of a single dharma.”<sup>103</sup> In the fullness of what Dōgen calls the “time-being,” each effort is immediate, singular, and complete.<sup>104</sup>

Dōgen’s thought is renowned for its complexity, most of which goes beyond the scope of this study. But a sideways glance at Dōgen’s view of linguistic expression as not only an instrument of meaning-making but an end to the divide between self and world may give a glimpse of another way to read the death that is an “end” (v. 9) in Psalm 90. (Here, I sheepishly imagine Dōgen as a Moses standing between Derrida and the rabbis.) To this end I am inclined to ask of Dōgen: How is it that language could swallow up or *consume* the duality which language so clearly inscribes? Does it mean anything at all to say that language—that reading—*realizes* itself? (What, then, of the burning on Psalm 90; what of the fire and cloud that descend like a “dream within a dream” on a multiply-inscribed mountain?<sup>105</sup>) If reading the ‘top’ of Psalm 90 is an end, *who dies*?

Dōgen’s play with language has been beautifully commentated by Hee-Jin Kim and David Loy in their respective essays, “‘The Reason of Words and Letters’: Dōgen

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<sup>103</sup> See Hee-Jin Kim’s translation and discussion in *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*, 66 and 51-106 *passim*.

<sup>104</sup> Again, this ‘complete’ is not the antonym or antidote to the complexity of fragmentation and difference (see above). Similarly, this ‘singular’ is not the other side of plurality; rather, it is the fact of plurality or difference expressed in the sudden present. For translation of the *Uji* (“The Time Being”) fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, see *Moon in a Dewdrop* (76-83) and *Enlightenment Unfolds* (69-76), both edited by Tanahashi.

<sup>105</sup> The phrase “the dream within a dream” is adopted by Dōgen as an expression of realization, that is, of reality coming forth. (See the *Fukakusa* fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, translated as “Within a Dream Expressing a Dream” in *Enlightenment Unfolds*, ed., Tanahashi, 165-75.) The recuperating of the metaphor of dreams and dreaming from its previously pejorative usage in Zen traditions is an example of Dōgen’s skill at using concepts to cut through the assumed divisions of conceptual reality.

and Kōan Language” and “Dead Words, Living Words, and Healing Words: The Disseminations of Dōgen and Eckhart.”<sup>106</sup> Kim, a translator of Dōgen, analyzes in some detail how Dōgen transposes the lexical and grammatical elements of a phrase or idiom—in effect, shifting spellings, word order, spacing or divisions, and grammatical forms—to break open fixed notions of meaning.<sup>107</sup> Loy notes examples of character reversals that render “reaching the other shore” into “the other shore’s arrival” and “preaching the dharma” into “the dharma’s preaching”; also Dōgen’s classic refiguring of “I think of not-thinking” into “Thinking is not thinking.”<sup>108</sup> Using this approach, Dōgen is able to transform the tradition he receives without negating it. He is able to use “words and letters” to show a world that words and letters cannot grasp.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> See also Kim’s more detailed analysis of Dōgen’s use of language in his full-length study, *Eihei Dōgen: Mystical Realist*.

<sup>107</sup> Kim writes, “Throughout the *Shōbōgenzō*, Dōgen painstakingly dissects a given passage and explores its semantic possibilities at every turn, literally turning the conventional diction upside down and inside out. The result is a dramatic shift in our perception and understanding of the original passage” (“The Reason of Words and Letters,” 60). Again, Derrida’s writing on *différance* comes to mind: “Let us space. The art of this text is the air it causes to circulate between its screens. The chainings are invisible, everything seems improvised or juxtaposed. This text induces by agglutinating rather than by demonstrating, by coupling and uncoupling, gluing and ungluing rather than by exhibiting the continuous, and analogical, instructive, suffocating necessity of a discursive rhetoric” (*Glas*, 75; quoted in Kamuf, ed., *Between the Blinds*, 1.) Dōgen’s play with text includes unsettling the oppositions that Derrida sets up.

<sup>108</sup> “Dead Words, Living Words, Healing Words,” 41.

<sup>109</sup> The phrase “words and letters” is a common idiom in Dōgen, used to denote the net of conceptual thought as well as a “way of realization.” See, e.g., Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 150; and Kim, “The Reason of Words and Letters,” 60.

The tradition Dōgen rewrites, and thus remakes, comes from the language of koan study.<sup>110</sup> Collected from the sayings and recorded experiences of Zen masters, koans are questions or anecdotes which point to the fundamental nature of who we are. In practice, they are often used as tools for silencing the logic of everyday dualistic thought and loosening or clearing away the (delusive) self's hard-fought attachment to separation and lack.<sup>111</sup> Koans are, or can be, instruments of realization. That is, they can provide a point of entry for a non-dual experience of reality, an experience Dōgen described as the "dropping off of body and mind."<sup>112</sup> Yet where this is the case, it is not because the koan breaks open some new, previously non-existent way of being in the world, but because the koan shows itself to *be* the realization of what was there all along. Another way of putting this would be to say that the language of a koan enacts the reality it describes, including all the wielding of difference that goes into forming any description.

Koan language is enigmatic, to say the least, and often appears to be incomprehensible. (The same has on occasion been said of Derrida!) Given this apparent

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<sup>110</sup> Kim makes the point that "[t]o Dōgen . . . the experimentation with language is equivalent to the construction of reality" ("The Reason of Words and Letters," 60). To say is to make. In this sense, Dōgen might be thought of as an early member of the constructivist side of the philosophical debate, except that for Dōgen what is constructed is a direct expression of essential reality.

<sup>111</sup> Delusive because the separate self, sometimes called the ego, imagines that it can defend itself against impermanence and loss; imagines that by hanging onto the constructs of separation and lack it can secure its place in this dust to dust existence.

<sup>112</sup> The phrase is variously translated, this version passed on in oral tradition. It comes from a famous passage in Dōgen's *Genjō-kōan* fascicle: "To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly" (Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 70).

opacity, it is possible, and not entirely uncommon, to view the koan as a device for running the rational mind into a dead-end (“phrases which cut off tangling vines”) and to conceive koan practice as a means of breaking through to some non-rational, precognitive or pre-linguistic state of awareness (“prior to the emergence of any incipient sign”).<sup>113</sup> From this perspective, one imagines non-duality as a formlessness that denies and transcends the duality of form; in this case, language. Dōgen railed against this view, arguing that koan practice *is* the moment-by-moment embodiment of realization (Dōgen coined the term “*genjo-kōan*” or “realization-koan”) and that what is realized in the language of the koan is non other than “discriminating thought.”<sup>114</sup>

To the discursive mind this might sound like circular reasoning. And it is, in the sense that linear thought, with its commitment to time as a fixed sequence of discrete moments and objectivity as a reliable measure, cannot conceive a world (or a text) so interconnected and insubstantial that phrases like “the sky skys the sky” or *reading reads* make sense.<sup>115</sup> But Dōgen is not describing an endless cycle any more than he is deferring the question of who reads. Rather, he is simply speaking the way of the world

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<sup>113</sup> The quotes are from Dōgen’s mocking critique of this position in the *Sansuikyō* fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, quoted in Hori, “Kōan and *Kenshō* in Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” 280.

<sup>114</sup> See the *Sansuikyō* fascicle of the *Shōbōgenzō*, here taken from Kim’s translation in “The Reason of Words and Letters,” 57. Dōgen’s insight that practice, even halting or divided practice, *is* realization because both practice and realization are full expressions of essential nature is fundamental to his understanding. Likewise, Dōgen argues for the non-duality of illusion and reality in that both are empty of any independent existence; both, for Dōgen, are “totally realized and present” (see the *Kuge* or “Flowers in the Sky” fascicle in *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays*, trans., Cleary, 66-75).

<sup>115</sup> See Loy, “Dead Words, Living Words, and Healing Words,” 41.

in words that are themselves “alive” with the realization they express.<sup>116</sup> He is plunging into the ‘fact’ that pours itself forth—now in words, now in reading—without a trace; without a trace because gone in an instant (what is there to hang on to?); without a trace because having no inside or outside (where could one draw the line?); without remainder because empty from the start (where is there something as opposed to nothing?).<sup>117</sup> From such an ‘inundated’ perspective, language bespeaks a non-duality not born of or dependent upon opposition, but inclusive of it. In each instance, language is a singular expression of that which makes language possible.

Such is the capacity of words for Dōgen; that they can say something specific and discriminating and, at the same time, express that which makes all words one.<sup>118</sup> Words

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<sup>116</sup> Loy, following Kim, picks up Dōgen’s characterization of words as “alive” and explains some of the philosophical background behind such a dynamic understanding of language. See “Dead Words, Living Words, and Healing Words,” 43-44.

<sup>117</sup> The ‘fact’ in which Dōgen is inundated is not objective in that it cannot be divided, isolated, or measured. Neither is it subjective, for where in ‘the sky skys’ or ‘thinking thinks’ is there a separate subject to be found? On the question of emptiness, readers of the Hebrew Bible will recall Qoheleth’s coming to the ‘zero point’ that everything is הבל (1:2, 14; 2:11, 17, 26; 4:4, 16; 6:9; 12:8), and the teacher’s insistent question, “What remains?” (מה־יתרוֹן, 1:3; 3:9; 5:15; cf. 2:11, 13; 5:9; 7:12; 10:10, 11). The translation of הבל as “breath” or “ephemerality” suggests a resonance with Zen practice, which continually comes back to the breath, but Qoheleth’s root desire to hold onto the “vital spirit” of life sharply contrasts with the insight, repeatedly expressed by Dōgen, that nothing can separate us from the breath; to it nothing can be added and from it nothing can be taken away. For translation of רוּחַ as “vital spirit” and a thoughtful reading of other key words in Qoheleth, see Perdue, *Wisdom and Creation*, 206-242, cited above. For more on Qoheleth in relation to Psalm 90, see chapter 2.

<sup>118</sup> Just as language enunciates this oneness, each enunciation is said to be whole. This ‘whole’ is not holism or teleology, for there is no fixed ground on which to erect an ‘ism’ and no accumulation, no time, with which to establish progress. Throughout his

can freely manifest the “suchness” that enlightens or vivifies all things, including the idle—or sometimes not so idle—ruminations of our minds.<sup>119</sup> As Dōgen puts it, “words and phrases *liberate* discriminating thought.”<sup>120</sup> Liberate it to be just as it is. Whatever this freedom may entail, it is clear that Dōgen sees in the ordinary reality of words something far more vast and boundless, more immediate and inexhaustible than words themselves can convey. In this, Dōgen’s view of language points to a kind of expression not unlike what the rabbis expound when they describe the word of God as immediate and timeless; as undivided, once-and-for-all, spoken again and again; as all-consuming and life-giving.

Dōgen does not arrive at his view of language by taking transience and separation—what reading theory calls the infinite regression of meaning—to its logical conclusion, but by a leap. He makes a leap from the endless dissemination of difference with its relative transience (always dying but never dead) to the absolute interdependence and impermanence of what is, as it is. He makes a leap into the present moment. There he finds what Derrida deconstructs as the (spurious) notion of a “transcendental signified” or unified “self-presence” wiped away.<sup>121</sup> This is not a fixed present but an *empty* one.

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writing, Dōgen is intent upon showing the “undivided activity” that manifests itself in all things, including words. For an example of Dōgen’s teaching on this phrase, see *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 94.

<sup>119</sup> See Dōgen’s fascicle on “Such” or “Suchness” (*Immo*) in Cleary, trans., *Shōbōgenzō: Zen Essays*, 49-56.

<sup>120</sup> From the *Sansuikyō* fascicle. The passage is translated and quoted at length in Kim, “The Reason of Words and Letters,” 57.

<sup>121</sup> See Derrida, *Positions*, 26; cited in Loy, “Dead Words, Healing Words, and Living Words,” 34. Reasoning from the interpenetration of reality and non-duality of

Indeed, Dōgen ‘finds’ (here one can only speak in metaphor) any construct of an enduring self or an externalized, conceptualized other dissolved as so much dust; for where in the moment at hand is there time to find anything at all? Leaping again and again (without moving a muscle!), Dōgen rests in a present that cannot be measured; he abides in a world that can never be grasped—only lived (cf. בְּעֵינַי, Ps 90: 1). With time like Torah, having no before and no after, Dōgen marvels at this world in language befitting a psalmist: “How is it that mountains, rivers, and the great earth suddenly appear?”<sup>122</sup> Just as *suddenly* the reader of Psalm 90 might wonder: How is it that time passes like a flash and ends “like a sigh” (v. 9)? How is it that we flourish, renewed; that we fade and wither (cf. v. 6)? How is it that we live, perhaps “in strength,” and before long are “soon gone” (v. 10)?

These are questions for which no conceptual answer will suffice. They are expressions of wonder which no worldly logic can quell. They suggest, with Psalm 90, that what satisfies the human heart is not more time, or less, but something timeless that appears (cf. יִבְרָא, “let be visible,” v. 16) in the moment-by-moment activity of our daily lives, in our living and in our dying. Enunciated in the hybrid space between Dōgen and

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word and world, Loy makes a helpful distinction between “presencing,” which can only happen in the present moment, and the “self-presencing,” which Derrida’s notion of *différance* rightly refutes.

<sup>122</sup> From a collection of “Cases for Study,” included in the *Shōbōgenzō*. The words are attributed to Zen Master Langye. See Tanahashi, ed., *Enlightenment Unfolds*, 41. On the immediacy and timelessness of Torah, see Neudecker, 35-37, cited above.



Sinai, these questions also suggest that one way to bring forth wisdom that knows the value of “our days” (vv. 9, 12) is to read Psalm 90 as a koan.<sup>123</sup>

What then? What if the imagined shape of Psalm 90, with its recursion and its peak, is something to be embodied rather than read? What if to read the psalm is to *realize* it? What if the question ‘*who dies?*’ or ‘*what is this dying all about?*’ or ‘*is reading a text really so deadly?*’ invites an experience rather than a conceptual answer? Is it possible that the reader of a text might catch a glimpse of fire—or wrath—or death—in a way that is, momentarily, all-consuming? (The rabbis and Dōgen might agree that such a glimpse must be ‘seen without eyes.’<sup>124</sup>) What if “all our days pass away in your flame” (v. 9) could be realized for what it is, without remainder? What if, while reading, the question ‘*who dies?*’ suddenly becomes ‘*who reads?*’

Writing in this way about Psalm 90 is like piling dust on dust. A koan can be answered only in practice. Whatever insight might come from it will be direct and particular; realized in time and space. Yet in keeping with the koan tradition, Psalm 90

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<sup>123</sup> Again, as one who delights in the detail of rhetorical structures, it intrigues me that *בְּיָמֵינוּ* (“our days”) occurs at what I read as the point of death in Psalm 90—v. 9, the ‘top’ of the multfigured mountain, and again in the bringing forth of wisdom, v. 12. Rhetoric relates death and wisdom through the time of our living. A third occurrence of the phrase in v. 14 suggests the kind of transformation such wisdom brings about (see chapter 5).

<sup>124</sup> This language is common in Zen and only read into the rabbis. Cf. the Midrash that the Israelites *saw* “the [divine] utterance” (Sifre Deuteronomy 313, cited above, note 97) and “heard . . . the first two Words [of Torah] in one single sound” (*Midrash ha-Gadol*, Deut 5:19, cited above, note 101). A mystical synaesthesia pervades these passages.

does seem to offer a ‘checking question.’<sup>125</sup> That is, should the reader come to a turning moment and “bring forth” the wisdom Psalm 90 seeks (v. 12), the expression of that wisdom will be compassion. (Strictly speaking, a Zen teacher might say something like, “If you have truly realized the wisdom to count your days in a way that gives you peace and freedom whether you live or die, show me the meaning of ‘Have compassion on your servants!’ [v. 13].”) In the psalm, the incoming of compassion is a vision of life that receives and responds without reserve, rejoicing unconditionally in “all our days” (v. 14) and serving a God of grace with open hands.

As to the question of who reads (another way of asking whence meaning in a text), one simply reads on, aware that countless words have been and likely will be written on the subject. Possibly also aware that reading itself offers an answer that cuts through the difference between text and reader much as the present moment (suddenly, momentarily) cuts through the difference between everlasting reality and utter transience. If this is so, however, death once again figures in. For as soon as it is said—or written, *‘This is it!’* or *‘Look, fire and cloud!’* or *‘There is no one reading,’* the moment is gone

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<sup>125</sup> Following a koan with checking questions to authenticate and clarify a student’s experience is common in Zen practice. Hori offers a list of traditional checking questions associated with the famous opening koan of the Mumonkan, Joshu’s *Mu*, in his essay, “Kōan and *Kenshō* in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” cited above. For a comprehensive anthology of Zen capping phrases, possibly the earliest form of this practice, see Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice*.

“like a sigh” (v. 9). Then, with the Zen master who found a way to the mountaintop and back, the reader can only say, “alas.”<sup>126</sup> Reading is left with but a trace.

*Afterword: Reading After Death*

This chapter began with the wish for a blank page, death for an author. It ends with many pages of writing about two kinds of death. The first kind, deadly in every respect, took on the form of a hateful and murderous epoch in human history, whose abjection and loss cuts to the bone. The second kind of death, an end which can be life-giving, was obliquely presented in terms borrowed from Zen and echoed in some of the Midrash on the Sinai experience. Both of these ways of considering death emerged in the course of reading Psalm 90 in the figure of a mountain lit with the icon of unending fire.

When the psalm first appeared to me in this way, the repercussions of such a reading seemed at least two-fold. First, wisdom takes on a particularity when it is born of or hewn by experience (such as passing through fire) rather than only generically conceived. And certainly the wisdom that comes from rightly counting our days will be specific and embodied, like the human heart. According to this reading, the wisdom that counts in Psalm 90 shows itself in compassion that endlessly suffers the fires of *holocaustos* while not being consumed by them.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Master Chokey’s words in Case 23 of the *Hekiganroku* or *Blue Cliff Record* (see Sekida, trans., *Two Zen Classics*, 208).

<sup>127</sup> These two sides of compassion correspond to the two ways of reading death in this chapter. Each side is essential to the vitality of the other. Without one, compassion would be overwhelmed by suffering; without the other, it would be unmoved.

A second ramification that came to mind as this mountain reading took shape deals more directly with language. The encounter with death—figurative or perchance otherwise—holds out a prospect for solving, or dissolving, what Martin Luther called “the curvature of the self in upon itself” for reading.<sup>128</sup> In my generation, literary theory has argued the death of the author with all the fervor of the death of God, a polemic that has prodded the discussion of meaning-making in provocative and productive directions. This reading of Psalm 90 does not quarrel with ‘no text outside the reader,’ but only adds, from the turn in the text, neither is there any enduring self reading.

How is reading to go on without a text or a reader? From the ‘peak’ of Psalm 90, is there *reading after death*? Although reading is surely a kind of play, whatever levity might be implied by these questions is tragically tempered by the annulment of life when death invades the human spirit. Yet even this dark breach offers an answer of sorts as to how to read on. Another answer is *reading reads*, but that is already beside the point. Instead, a brief conclusion:

To encounter a turning moment in Psalm 90—to “see this great seeing”<sup>129</sup> on *this* mountain—is to read the psalm not only as a text about impermanence, but also as an

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<sup>128</sup> Luther’s phrase is “the human bent [verkrümmert] in upon itself (incurvatus in se).” (Translated by Jack Forstman [personal communication]; for the German text, see Luther, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 2, 161, l. 35.) I do not see this as the only way out of the coiled cocoon of self-reflexive (repetitive) reading, and only offer it here as a nudge. It strikes me that work in post-colonial cultural criticism (drawn on in chapter 5) and theories of change will see to it that the pendulum of our textuality continues to swing.

<sup>129</sup> My translation of Exod 3:3 (וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־הַמְּרֹאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה) (וַיֹּאמֶר אֶת־הַמְּרֹאֶה הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה), which may be read as reflecting something of rabbinical and Zen perspectives.

expression of it. And it is to realize that nothing we do or read is anything but such an expression. It is also to be brought into close proximity with the suffering in this world, suffering that burns like the fires of the Holocaust which cannot be extinguished.

Psalm 90 asks for the wisdom to make sense of such a world, and in the asking offers an answer; not a resolution but a way. It is a way that, according to this reading, leads into the fire rather than away from it and ends up where it started, facing death and turning to the God who has and will be a God of life and death.

## CHAPTER 5

### מִסֹּרֶה

#### DESCENDING THE MOUNTAIN: THE VEILED SHINING OF ‘ALL OUR DAYS’

*Let be visible to your servants your activity*  
Ps 90:16

[T]he Israelites would see the face of Moses, that the skin of his face was shining;  
and Moses would put the veil on his face again  
Exod 34:35

This chapter is a reading of the descent from the mountaintop in Psalm 90. It seeks to answer, as only reading can, the question: how does reading go on ‘after death’? In this, the chapter continues to ‘practice’ with Psalm 90 as a koan, an enunciation of the reality for which the psalm prays. And it continues to read in the hybrid temporality of *after*—the return without end of human affliction (‘after Auschwitz’) and the sufficiency of the day at hand, brought to bear in this reading by the passage through wrath and death to wisdom. When the psalm brings forth its plea “to count our days truly, teach!” (v. 12) and begins a turn toward home, the imperative scenario of divine returning that follows makes clear the time in question is *now*.

The way down this mountain is a way of recursion. The same kinds of contiguities that constructed the ascending face of this reading come into play in mapping a return (see chiasm map). In vv. 12-17, themes of life and death, transience and return,

human temporality and divine endlessness are recast in a series of imperatives that sets this section off from the rest of the psalm while bringing it back to an end very like the beginning. Yet where Psalm 90 begins and ends in “*Adonai*” (vv. 1 and 17), begins and ends in unavailable time (past, v. 1, and future, v. 17), vv. 12-17 evoke the *difference* that makes the psalm’s returning a matter of transformation rather than reiteration, a rereading rather than a repetition. In these verses, absent the language of wrath or death, a rhetorical world of grace emerges. What is brought forth—or inscribed on the homeward face of this readerly terrain—is not a figment of life without death, but a text that trades inescapable opposition for mobile inclusion and refigures difference as a way of being sated in the world.

This chapter proceeds under the sign of the ‘veil’ (מַסְוֶה).<sup>1</sup> Its interests tend to the ocular: to the vision in Psalm 90 of a life sated by “*hesed*” (v. 14), including the appeal to “let be *visible*” (יִרְאֶה) the “activity” and “splendor” of God (v. 16); and to the image of Moses’ face (Exod 34:29-35), shining and veiled as a result of seeing, only in passing, the backside of God’s “glory” (כְּבוֹד; 33:21-23). To illumine the way, the shining and the veil

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<sup>1</sup> מַסְוֶה can also be rendered “mask” (cf. Gressmann, *Moses*, 240-51). *HALOT* suggests “covering, veil, pod, hull” as a range of meaning for this *hapax* (see note 13 in this chapter). Relationship to the noun סוּתָה in Gen 49:11 would seem to indicate an article of clothing (cf. Dozemann, “Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 24). I have followed the tradition of NJPS, NRSV, REB, JB, and E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* to translate as “veil,” a figure that can be read as a form of mask and is also well-suited to the mobility and mutability of signs explored in this chapter. Dozemann translates “veil” then reads the veil as a mask (“Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority”). Modern Hebrew regularly translates מַסְוֶה as “mask.” In the HB, lack of context(s) hangs a veil on this ambiguous sign.

will be taken up as amalgam signifiers of ambiguity and difference, conditions I read as part and parcel of the wisdom Psalm 90 reckons unto the day. In keeping with the reading strategies that constructed the multiform figure of my rhetorical mountain (recursion and intertextuality), the chapter will focus on Moses' descent from Sinai in Exod 34:29-35. My hope is that reading this related text, a model of recursion in its own right, will mediate the return in Psalm 90, adding a complexity that allows for reading at different levels of scale and making way for the relational interplay out of which unforeseen meanings emerge.

There is a larger logic—another level of scale—at work in the choice to read the descent from theophany in Exodus 34 as a paradigm for the 'descent' from wrath and death in Psalm 90. The relationship between Sinai and Psalm 90, spawned by reading the psalm in its putative or creative identification with Moses (*as if*), has been developed throughout this project. Chapter 3, in the place of ascent in my own writing of the mountain, read the play of difference in Exodus 32 as an iteration of the recursive shape of Psalm 90. Under the sign of the law (תּוֹרָה), that chapter explored the dynamic of enunciation that emanates from Sinai/Zion/Psalter as an always already returning. This chapter envisions Exodus 34 as the downward slope to Exodus 32; a recursion in which the broken tablets are replaced with new ones and Moses' repeated trips to Mount Sinai are brought to an open-ended close.

Reading Exodus 32 and 34 as different slants on a rhetorical mountain draws the intervening narrative into the picture as well. Of particular interest to this reading is the



abundance of ocular language in Exod 33:12-23, a passage that culminates in Moses' conditional theophany (seeing the "back" but not the "face") with YHWH's own hand providing the veil (vv. 22-23). Also of note is the Sabbath frame around these chapters (Exod 31:12-17 and 35:1-3). The doubled giving of the law to keep the Sabbath day holy envelopes Exodus 32-34 in creation and return, setting apart this larger mountain passage with themes that redound in Psalm 90.<sup>2</sup>

The multiple levels of association in this chapter belie the relative ease of the descending path in mountain climbing. This is not to say that orientation goes unchanged in vv. 12-17. Recursion argues *otherwise*: returning in Psalm 90 is replete with difference. Rather, it is an indication that within this study questions of reading persist. These will be addressed as they arise, in the connections between texts and in a return to the end of Psalm 90.<sup>3</sup>

*Prophetic Return: Moses' Descent from Sinai*

When Moses descends Mount Sinai in Exod 34:29, it is—according to the Hebrew canon—for the last time. Hereafter, the "man of God" (Ps 90:1) will speak with YHWH by going inside rather than up, by passing through into the veiled space of Tent

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<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann refers to "the great triad of Exodus 32-34," reading a chapter by chapter progression from "broken covenant" to "intercession and the crisis of presence" to "renewed, restored covenant" ("Exodus," 945). A mountain does not lie so flat on the page. My hope is that the crevices and ridges of this imagined terrain, a recursing Sinai, will bring the seams and disruptions in the text into the picture, allowing for a reading of 'progression' (the bringing forth of wisdom) that is not linear and a reading of structure that is not fixed.

<sup>3</sup> This follows on my discussion of the 'death of the author' and the location of meaning-making in the last chapter, pp. 179-81.

or Tabernacle rather than ascending into the rocky ether of fire and cloud.<sup>4</sup> Moses has *gone up* (עלה) to “the top of the mountain” (Exod 34:2) carrying “two [blank] tablets of stone” cut, YHWH tells him, to match “the first ones which you broke” (v. 1).<sup>5</sup> He comes down with a new copy of the testimony—“the ten words” (עשרת הדברים, v. 28; my translation)—this time written in the prophet’s own hand.<sup>6</sup>

Moses returns to the people laden with signs of covenant and authority: in his hands, the law, which he can see and say; and on his face the appearance of “shining” (קרן) which, the text narrates, Moses “did not know” (לא ידע, Exod 34:29).<sup>7</sup> Both of

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<sup>4</sup> Once the “tabernacle” (משכן; Everett Fox translates “Dwelling”) or “tent of meeting” is set up, the cloud by day and fire by night settle on it, lifting and moving to guide the Israelites on each stage of their wilderness passage (Exod 40:34-38).

<sup>5</sup> My translation. On עלה as the verb of exodus identified with Moses, see chapter 3, p. 118, note 106.

<sup>6</sup> See Exod 33:27-28. The text makes clear that the first tablets, which Moses smashes at the scene of the golden calf, are “written with the finger of God” (Exod 31:18; Deut 9:10). The canon is divided as to who writes on the second set of tablets. In Exodus, YHWH promises to write (Exod 34:1) but ends up dictating to Moses (vv. 27-28). In Deuteronomy (the “second law”), YHWH does the writing: “the same words as before” (Deut 10:4).

<sup>7</sup> קרן in this passage is commonly interpreted as a “shining” that significantly alters the appearance of Moses’ face. Comparison is made to Hab 3:4 where קרנים is “rays” of light and to the *melammu* or light in ancient Near Eastern Iconography (Haran, “The Shining of Moses’ Face,” 167-68; cf. also Dozemann, “Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 23-24). Propp cites Pseudo-Philo as the earliest known interpreter to read the קרן in Exodus 34 as radiance and notes Rashi’s definition of קרן as a “horn” of light (“The Skin of Moses’ Face,” 375-76). For a reading of קרן as “shining” and additional references, see Dozemann, “Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 23-24. An alternate translation of קרן as “became horned” dates back to Jerome’s Vulgate. The image of Moses as veiled and as horned, sometimes simultaneously veiled and horned, is well-represented in art. For examples, see Britt, *Rewriting Moses*, 82-115; see also Mellinkoff, *The Horned Moses in Medieval Art*, 23-27, 81-82.

these signs figure in the ritual of mediation that unfolds. Their bearing calls for a third sign, a veil that will cloak the site of trans/figuration with a supplement to revelation and, in covering and exposing, communicate the difference now inscribed on the body of God's prophet.

Moses is met by a response that recalls the mortal danger of seeing the face of God. With Aaron at the helm, a signal of the priestly concerns of the text, the Israelites see the skin of Moses' face and recoil. They are "afraid to come near him" (v. 30). Only when the prophet speaks ("But Moses called to them," ויקרא אל־הם משה), in a voice still intact, do "Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation [return] [שוב] to him" (v. 31).<sup>8</sup> Moses gives to this priestly group an exclusive word. Even the reader is not let in on what is said. "Afterward," the text tells, "all the Israelites came near, and [Moses] gave them in commandment all that YHWH had spoken with him on Mount Sinai" (v. 32).

The fear of *seeing* the face only once removed from God has apparently been contained, allayed by the spoken word and the hierarchical order of its hearing. But the text introduces another division. In a change of revelatory movement from 'up/down' to 'in/out,' Moses finishes speaking with the people and veils his face until he goes in again

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<sup>8</sup> It is curious that the sound of Moses' voice resolves the distance. In the Mosaic call narrative, the prophet-to-be resists God's call with three complaints of inadequacy. The third, and perhaps most desperate, is that he has "never been eloquent" and is "slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exod 4:10). YHWH responds, "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak" (v. 12), apparently transforming Moses' "mouth" (see also Isa 6:7) at that time.

“before YHWH to speak with [God]” (v. 34).<sup>9</sup> This begins a process of veiling and unveiling that sets apart Moses’ mediation of divine speech and hides the refigured face of the prophet from the prosaic world.

In his analysis of the literary structure of this episode of descent and dissemination, Thomas Dozeman finds two temporalities at work.<sup>10</sup> The passage begins with a “past narrative,” ever so immediately told, of Moses’ return: the descent from theophany, encounter with the people, and prophetic speech (34:29-32), ending with: “When Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil [מסוה] on his face” (v. 33).<sup>11</sup> This is what happened. The text then shifts to a future modality. In what Brevard Childs calls the ‘frequentative tense,’ vv. 34-35 turn the numinous drama of Moses’ final descent from Sinai into “a paradigm for continual ritual practice.”<sup>12</sup> From now on, with no further mention to refute or confirm the condition, Moses’ face will remain covered except when the prophet speaks to and for God.

As it happens, the text that brings closure of sorts to the great saga of Sinai theophany and establishes an opening, albeit highly ritualized, for future mediation, divides at the point of the veil. The past and future meet at the boundary of revelation. In v. 33, the hapax מסוה (“veil”) falls across Moses’ face like a gate closing, a vellum cloak

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<sup>9</sup> Going in and coming out are implied by the verbs בא, “to come” or “go” (in place of עלה, “to go up,” as in 34:2) and יצא, “to go out” (in place of ירד, to “go down” or “descend,” as in 34:29). On יצא as the verb by which YHWH “brought out” the people from bondage in Egypt, see chapter 3, p. 118, note 106.

<sup>10</sup> Dozeman, “Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 21-45.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 21-22. On the frequentative tense, Dozeman cites Childs, *Exodus*, 609-10.

that protects YHWH's inscribed glory from defilement and protects the Israelites from seeing more of that glory than the relative world can survive.<sup>13</sup> That it is Moses who does the veiling makes the act, broadly speaking, a gesture of prophecy. And, indeed, the scene recalls the command given to Moses on Sinai to establish the distance that would make it safe enough for the people to see the mountain shrouded in divine presence and receive, in mediated form, the Torah: "Set limits around the mountain and keep it holy" (Exod 19:23; cf. v. 12). This time, it is the prophet's own face—now "invaded by divine light"—that must be set apart.<sup>14</sup> The mobile repetitions of cultic practice rather than the divine command will safeguard the radical otherness emblazoned on the body of Moses, who, the text seems to suggest, is *with* but no longer *of* the people.

If Moses' veiling enacts a mutable version of the "limits" at the foot of Mount Sinai, it also reenacts the saving and delimiting gesture of YHWH on the mountaintop. When Moses pleads with YHWH to see the divine "glory" (כבוד)—the *face* of God, as rejection of the request implies, YHWH responds with a foreshadowing of revelation so powerful it will refigure prophetic identity:

I myself will cause all my goodness to pass before your face, and I will call out by name YHWH before your face; and I-will-be-gracious to whom [that] I-will-be-gracious and I-will-be-merciful to whom [that] I-will-be-merciful (Exod 33:19; cf. 34:6-7).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> The word מִסוּהָ does not appear elsewhere in the HB. It occurs three times in this episode (vv. 33, 34, 35), thus matching the passage's three occurrences of the also elusive קָרַן ("shining," vv. 29, 30, 35).

<sup>14</sup> Dozeman, "Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority," 29.

<sup>15</sup> My translation; see also E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*.

All of this Moses would see head on but for the hand of YHWH, which places the prophet “in a cleft of the rock” and covers him like a veil until the penultimate moment of God’s passing (33:22-23). For to see directly, no matter who is looking, would be to die (cf. v. 20).<sup>16</sup>

Yet—and this is where all the seeming clarity around established boundaries breaks down—Moses *does* die; not a visceral death, but a personal one. When the divine drama of revealing and concealing is transposed to the foot of the mountain and beyond, Moses’ own features are subsumed in the process. Not only is his face—the seat of the eye/I—so seared by light as to be illumined beyond recognition, but the imprint of the divine hand remains as well.<sup>17</sup> Shining and veiled, Moses is, as Thomas Dozeman compellingly argues, “doubly masked.”<sup>18</sup> He is twice effaced and twice endowed; twice re-figured in signs of alterity. Moses appears (twice, according to this paradigm), but as otherness. In this doubled dis/guise, the prophet embodies not only the power of his vision, but also the paradox of the revelation that made it so.

Moses returns to the foot of the mountain as a liminal figure. His body, both written upon and erased, conveys the numinosity of divine glory as well as the limits of

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<sup>16</sup> This stands in contrast to the tradition in Exod 33:11 and Deut 34:10 (cf. also Num 12:8) that Moses speaks with and knows God face to face. In Deut 5:4, Moses proclaims to the people, “YHWH spoke with you face to face at the mountain, out of the fire.” But he adds, “I was standing between YHWH and you to declare to you the words of YHWH; for you were afraid because of the fire and did not go up the mountain” (v. 5).

<sup>17</sup> For a Derridian reading of the play of the “eye/I” trope in relation to veiling and unveiling, see Hugh Pyper’s playful essay, “Other Eyes: Reading and Not Reading the Hebrew Scriptures/Old Testament with a Little Help from Derrida and Cixous,” 159-73.

<sup>18</sup> “Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 29.

human seeing. In an ulterior way, the veil, another sign of liminality, does the same. With its addition, Moses is shrouded in the tokens of his office as bearer of the word. He dwells *between* signs. But how are these signs to be read? How do the shining and the veil function in a story that is itself a re-limning of the mountain's edge? If Moses is figured as the mediator of Torah by occupying the undecidable space between doubled and divided signs of mediation, what does this figuration say about the nature of the word? What wisdom is it that relies on the difference, even the duplicity of signs to establish the site of prophecy at the foot of the mountain and beyond?

The suggestion, developed by Dozeman, that the shining on Moses' face and the veil that enshrines it are forms of masks sets up masking as a provisional template for engaging reading in these questions. Masking as a trope turns on the doubling and deferral that is inherent in figuration. Masks operate out of duplicity—in both senses of the word. They replicate and deceive, but to genuine effect. They reveal by concealing, but not entirely. The act of covering is ingredient to the meaning masking conveys. In this, masks are figures of figuration. They signify difference—in the shining, an *other* face; in the veil, a being set apart—by showing the play of unresolved differences through which meaning is generated. Cultic masking involves a similar kind of play. As tokens belonging to the realm of the occult, masks endow their wearer with transcendent power and its accompanying authority. They confer new identity. At the same time, part of the ethos of a mask is doubt. How and to what extent this uncertainty is figured in a reading of the shining and the veil speaks to the tug in masking—and in reading—between ritual control (repetition, totalization) and the linguisticity of signs (recursion,

self-difference) and shapes the revelation that will issue from between the signs in Exod 34:29-35.

Masking thus described is a kind of mini-narrative, at once bent on closure and dependent upon the destabilizing forces of retelling. It shares in the logic of story, a logic in which the opposition between showing and hiding, unifying and dividing does not hold up. This, according to Barbara Johnson, is the “different logic” of figuration:

The logic of figure is such that it makes the logic of contradiction dysfunction. It suspends the system of binary oppositions on which contradiction is based . . . but without reducing these oppositions to the same. The gap described by such polarities remains as irreducible as it is undecidable, for while each pole can cross over to the other, it is not thereby totally erased.<sup>19</sup>

Masking betrays the limits of its representations by unsettling the dialectical strategy that reads them. Masks do not lend themselves to clear boundaries. As tokens of power and authority, they leak the banality of their own figuration. As icons of difference, they highlight the necessity of a sign to the figuration of other. However dis-identified a mask might be from the one it covers, the gesture of covering remains. Paradoxically, this residue of instability accounts, in part, for the staying power of masks.

Masking is a particularly telling way of reading the scene in Exod 34:29-35, which is typically understood as a narrative encoding of Mosaic authority and cultic practice.<sup>20</sup> On the one hand, the analogy allows for a transfer of power and a ‘putting on’ of purpose. Moses is divested of self (his face) in order to be fully vested in the authority

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<sup>19</sup> *A World of Difference*, 111.

<sup>20</sup> Examples cited by Dozeman include B. Childs, *Exodus*; Coats, *Moses: Heroic Man, Man of God*; Neusner, “Religious Authority in Judaism”; and Noth, *Exodus* (“Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 21-45). See also Meyers, *Exodus*, 264-67.



of YHWH. He is dis-identified with “his own personality and charisma” so as to become uniquely identified with Torah.<sup>21</sup> The capacity of masks to endow what they cover ‘fits’ this reading. Yet at the same time, masking as a trope invades any linear exchange between identity and authority with an excess of meaning. (Something more is going on here.) It presents this reading with a problem: If authority and cult are instated and secured at the expense of the double, the *figure*, the inerasable act of occlusion, then the analogy with masking loses its richness. Similarly, the analogy with divine revelation is tamed of its fierce mystery. For in place of paradox—on top and at the bottom of the mountain—the story defaults to fixed opposition, and in place of ambiguity it gives in to the narrative ‘dream’ of totalization.<sup>22</sup> Such a story may reflect the desire of the cult to guard the word—the *Law of Moses*—through the maintenance of boundaries, but it does not convey the difference and distancing that are vital to the dissemination of the word.

Dozeman’s analysis of the shining and the veil as masks of “concretion” and “concealment” tells something of this story. In it, hiding and showing interact in a strategy of exchange: Mosaic identity for divine authority, the slippage of the veil for a firm grounding in the Law. An apparent contradiction—revealing and concealing, shining and veiling—fuels this exchange, but it is resolved in rendering the veil as a sign of “unification,” in reading the veil as secondary to the shining, and in the set limits within

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<sup>21</sup> Dozeman, “Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 29. The silence in canon surrounding Moses’ burial site and YHWH’s decision that the Law enter the land without Moses bear this out. Moses, as Dozeman says, is not the hero of his own life; God is.

<sup>22</sup> On totalization, unity, or ultimate resolution as the “dream” of every narrative, see my discussion of narrative in chapter 3, pp. 86-92.

which future readings are given to repeat the exchange. With this resolution, Dozeman's reading effectively does what it says. It re-inscribes the dialectic by which divine authority is instantiated in Moses and the cult. It also demonstrates the limitations of a paradigm for prophecy that does not cloak *itself*, at least partially, in a re-figuration of the veil.

Dozeman makes a good case for associating the shining *and* the veil in Exod 34:29-35 with categories of ritual masks.<sup>23</sup> He builds on the logic of this association, reasoning that while masks in general transform identity by concealing and revealing, the paradox of disguise is played out on a larger scale in the relationship between the shining, which reveals or 'concretizes' the transcendent invasion of Moses' face, and the veil, which conceals the power behind the mask. Together, these signs give place to divine revelation while displacing Moses. Concealed but for the shining, Moses as prophet can be fully identified with Torah.

Dozeman describes an interaction between the shining and the veil that maximizes Mosaic authority. In particular, he notes the de-personalizing function of the veil, which "directs attention to Moses as its wearer," but when lifted "reveals divine light, not the person."<sup>24</sup> Moses is there, but gone. He is erased while his function as a place-holder for divine communication is heightened. According to Dozeman, it is this

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<sup>23</sup> To make his case, Dozeman picks up on Gressman's earlier suggestion that the veil is a mask (*Moses*, 249-51) and develops further it by analyzing studies of the various functions of ritual masks. For a response to Britt's counter that the veil does not function as "a kind of cultic mask" because Moses takes it off when he "performs as a prophet" (*Rewriting Moses*, 85-86), see my analysis of the veil below.

<sup>24</sup> "Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority," 39.

“slight of hand” in Torah’s “idealization of Moses” that “allows competing traditions [pre-Priestly and Priestly] to lay claim to the divine invasion of Moses’ face, without harmonizing them.”<sup>25</sup> Out of this relative dissonance, the “dynamic quality” of canon emerges and continues.<sup>26</sup> The enduring legacy of the conflicting renderings of Mosaic authority in Tent and Tabernacle, oracle and cult, and the seemingly endless ways of reading the relationship between these are, for Dozeman, the work of the veil.

So read, the figure of the veil participates in dissemination, but in the highly controlled setting of canon and “competing traditions.” Interpretation must negotiate between alternate claims to revelation, a difference tolerated within canon because Mosaic authority is grounded, at least in part, in Mosaic occlusion. The word that goes out from this negotiation varies within the limited space between fixed signs: Moses (God)/Torah, Tent/Tabernacle, oracle/cult. It will not challenge the authority of those signs—or of readings that submit to them—because the difference that would allow for uncertainty has been figured, finally, as identification.

In this setting, the unsettling effect of Moses’ absence-in-presence, his visible gone-ness, is reigned in by the veil’s stabilizing function in propagating control. Indeed, the veil becomes an icon of control. It is, as Dozeman suggests, a symbol of “unification and consolidation of judicial authority in Moses.”<sup>27</sup> As such, the veil can be dispensed with once it is read. (New readings, bound by the constraints of canon and fixed

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

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

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

opposition, will incline toward repetition.<sup>28</sup>) It cannot compare with the shining that is “the point of emphasis in Exodus 33-34.”<sup>29</sup>

Dozeman’s reading paints a vivid picture of how the shining and the veil accomplish a revelation in Moses so traceless of remainder that tradition can equate the prophet with the Torah that takes his place. Moses and the Law can thus be read as absolutes, even by traditions that represent—and wield—the authority of those absolutes in different ways. The tell-tale sign in this reading, however, is the mutable veil become mask, a sign that resists the unification and consolidation of its meanings. Like language—not ‘the letter of the Law’ but the indispensable medium of its revelation—the veil divides and defers. It cannot be resolved or dismissed because, along with revealing the face, removal of the veil exposes reading to the workings of its own devices. As Derrida put it, “the unveiling will still remain a movement of the veil.”<sup>30</sup>

To read the veil as a mask highlights the “plurality of forces” at work in the sign and calls into question authority that operates by suppressing its own self-difference, as well as that of its subjects.<sup>31</sup> In this respect, Dozeman’s reading—which I have donned as a mask of sorts for my own reading of difference—is doubly revealing. It raises the specter of the split image of Moses’ face, masked by God’s light and divided again by God’s prophet, and shows how cult and canon variously appropriated this text to authorize the maintenance of divine revelation. Yet if the veil serves this reading as a

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<sup>28</sup> See my discussion of repetition and rereading in chapter 3, pp. 76-92.

<sup>29</sup> “Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority,” 35.

<sup>30</sup> “A Silkworm of One’s Own,” in Cixous and Derrida, *Veils*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> See B. Johnson, *A World of Difference*, 85.

boundary behind which lies the unity of difference—Moses entirely subsumed in a now visible God, author of Torah, it also projects the remnant and recognizable voice of the prophet. This suggests, as does the text of Exodus 33-34, that the mystery of divine revelation does not conform to unity. And it confirms that the textuality of Torah is part of what is at stake in reading Exod 34:29-35.<sup>32</sup>

It is easy to understand how the shining might dominate the scene at the foot of the mountain. When YHWH's "glory" (כבוד) passed by Moses on the mountaintop, the cleft of rock and divine hand may well have seemed secondary. The text, however, indicates that these life-saving measures were more than incidental. But what does it mean to save life when the life in question is a text about how the word of God enters the world? Is interpretation, dazzled by the signs of glory, bent on guarding the word from the profligacy of its own devices; the undermining of its analogies and unsettling of its binary fixations? Should it be? As a sign of prophetic office, the veil offers a divided answer: yes and no—with an uncertain slippage in between. It therein calls for another reading.

*Prophetic Veiling and Embodied Enunciation: The Word in the World*

Exodus 34 is often read as a response to Exodus 32, a setting right of what went wrong the first time Moses mediated a covenant between the 'children of Israel' and YHWH, their God. The law that was violated in the molten calf then smashed into pieces

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<sup>32</sup> Britt makes a similar point when he looks at how "post-biblical tradition" dealt with the veiling of Moses and suggests that "the repression of the veil entails a repression of text and textuality" (*Rewriting Moses*, 82-83).

by Moses (Exodus 32) is now inscribed by Moses and mediated in a shining likeness of God's glory (Exodus 34). Covenant is renewed, the broken relationship restored. Balance is also brought to bear in the text. But it is a shifting balance, subject, like Torah, to reading. The veil is a sign of this mobile restoration, lacking as it is in Exodus 32 where the stand-in for the divine word (in the absence of its messenger) is as unambiguous as inanimate gold.<sup>33</sup> When the veil is hung, the separation and deferral that could not be tolerated in that fateful scene are restored to an incoming ongoing word. The agency of Moses is transfigured, doubly, according to the holiness of God and the site of prophecy is refigured after the manner of language. With this, the multiple episodes around the receiving of Torah are brought to an open-ended close ("and Moses would put the veil on his face again until he went in to speak with [God]" [34:35b]).

Whether it is seeing the "back" of YHWH (Exod 33:23) or hearing, through the hand, the divine name enunciated with unprecedented clarity—"YHWH, YHWH, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love [*hesed*] and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin . . ." (34:6-7)—the result of this proximity turns Moses into a form of enunciation. He does not only bear the word; he is the word. And he is the difference

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<sup>33</sup> Dozeman indirectly addresses the lack of a veil in Exodus 32 when he reads the golden calf as an illustration of "the danger of covenant without cult" ("Masking Moses and Mosaic Authority," 33). The image of the veil reappears in the temple curtain which separates "the holy place from the most holy" (Exod 26:33), a ready association with cult. To claim that the veil also functions as a figuration of language is, among other things, to address cult as a form of interpretation. Then, in its valence with Exodus 32, Exodus 34 might be read as an illustration of the 'danger' of covenant without language, a peril averted by the doubled and doubling signs of the shining and the veil.

and deferral necessary to its understanding.<sup>34</sup> The veil, a cover whose remainder persists even in removal, signifies this difference. But what *difference* does it make? If the veil is a second skin on the revelation embodied by Moses, what does it say about the character of that revelation? Taking a cue from YHWH's self-disclosure, what attributes are conveyed through this sign of how the word comes into the world?

Jewish liturgy recalls the catalogued character of God whose proclaiming is emblazoned on Moses' face as the Thirteen Attributes.<sup>35</sup> Most notable among these is mercy. God returns.<sup>36</sup> What passes through the veil when read as a figure of language is more modest, but returning is again a prominent feature. Its activity can be seen in three aspects of the difference ascribed to language—and to its prophetic figuration—by this reading of the veil. That is, the veil is a *hybrid* sign; it acts as a *supplement* to revelation;

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<sup>34</sup> It should be clear by now that what I mean by 'the word' is not a transparent originary, but a set of signs that arrive in self-difference. The shining 'written upon' Moses' body is such a sign. Moses mediates the *other* by being other than himself. He embodies the *way* of the word, which, like the hand and the veil, is a vital aspect of revelation.

<sup>35</sup> Enumerated from Exod 34:6-7, the Thirteen Attributes (as the rabbis named them) include the divine name twice, followed by: "God, Full of Compassion, Gracious, Slow to anger, Abounding in kindness, And Faithfulness, Extending kindness to the thousandth generation, Forgiving iniquity, Transgression, And sin, and Granting pardon." (See Pesner, "The Thirteen Attributes of Divine Mercy," <http://www.tisrael.org/worship/index.php?page=2317> [accessed January 3, 2007].) Variants of the biblical proclamation appear in Num 14:18; Neh 9:17; Pss 86:15; 103:8; 145:8; Jer 32:18; Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2; and Nah 1:3.

<sup>36</sup> In his comments on Exod 34:6-9, Dozeman notes that the revelation of divine mercy at this point in the Exodus saga introduces a "new dimension of God [which] allows Moses to succeed in interceding for the Israelites" (*NISB*, 136). It is also possible to understand the moment of election as the incoming of divine mercy. God hears the "cry" from bondage and declares of these people: "my people" (Exod 3:7-10). From the beginning, YHWH enters into relationship as a God of return.

and it is a vehicle for *recursion*. These characteristics contribute to the complexity of what is revealed when Torah is brought down the mountain, figuratively, in Exod 34:29-35 and to the difference (re)reading the veil makes for interpretation.

As a figure of the linguisticity of revelation, the veiling of Moses' face introduces what Homi Bhabha calls "the ambivalence of hybridity."<sup>37</sup> Bhabha develops the notion of hybridity as a way of theorizing the process whereby postcolonial cultures might overturn the effects of colonial power by disavowing the discriminatory structures of authority and identity that provide for such domination. In other words, for Bhabha, hybridity offers a way of thinking cultural difference by rethinking the strict notions of difference that undergird empire and produce its discriminating effects. Bhabha's model for this cultural disavowal is language, specifically the *différance* that generates meaning by unsettling rather than opposing binary constructions and by resisting unity through the self-difference of its own signs. The shared model of language suggests that Bhabha's insights into hybridity as a cipher of cultural production and a site of social change apply to the veil as well. In both cases, the negotiation of a hybrid difference makes way for a prophetic word.

A hybrid, as Bhabha explains, is "neither the one thing nor the other."<sup>38</sup> It is "*something else besides*," an ambivalent third addition to the polarity of 'this' or 'that.'<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *The Location of Culture*, 162.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 41; Bhabha's italics.



As a descriptor of the textuality of cultures and signs (and their interpretations), hybridity elicits a kind of *else*-ness or difference that is irreducibly mixed. The parts cannot be separated out, nor can mingled boundaries be disentwined. The difference of hybridity is also a *complex* difference. The composite of a hybrid exceeds the sum of its parts and no part has the capacity to represent the whole.<sup>40</sup> Because of the complexity of its otherness, hybridity does not accommodate antithesis. A hybrid is host to multiple relationships that “[break] down the symmetry and duality of self/other, inside/outside” and keep the identifications that emerge from the mix in flux.<sup>41</sup> Bhabha’s thinking of culture exemplifies this flux: hybridity is not the opposite of unity—or of purity or a transparent originary, but an overturning of the distinct boundaries of difference upon which these would-be polarities depend. In analogy with language, hybridity expresses a doubled difference, with a doubly unsettling effect. It differs from the other, which as ‘this’ *and* ‘that’ in relation to the third thing of a hybrid cannot sustain the antithesis of unity or uniformity without succumbing to ambiguity. And hybridity differs from itself. It gives expression to the manifold richness of human beings and of the texts we construct: “the difference of the same.”<sup>42</sup> Out of this doubled difference comes the possibility of countering or critiquing the constraints of the past without re-inscribing them. Out of this

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<sup>40</sup> A hybrid text differs from a hybrid machine (think Toyota). A hybrid text is not a linear mechanism that can be taken apart and reassembled; that can, without excess or remainder, be repeated. On the characteristics of complex systems and the association with language, see Cilliers, *Complexity and Postmodernism*, esp. 91-93 and 119-26.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

doubled difference comes language: a site of “negotiation rather than negation” and a “space of translation” from which new hybrid forms emerge.<sup>43</sup>

To read the veil in Exodus 34 as a hybrid sign is to read the difference the veil conveys as mixed, ambiguous, ‘neither the one thing nor the other.’ This can be said of the boundary Moses *opens up* when he covers himself in a sign of difference that cannot keep separate the territory on either side of it. To read the veil as a sign of hybridity is to ascribe to it the fluidity and heterogeneity—the complexity—of self-difference. This can be seen in the doubling effect of the veil: the splitting of Moses’ face into a hybrid image, neither entirely hidden nor entirely revealed, but emerging as transformed; an image represented in art as half-veiled, veiled and yet visible through or to the side of the veil, occasionally both veiled and horned.<sup>44</sup> To note the yield of hybridity is to read the veil as a ‘space of translation’ rather than a sign of transposition. And it is to read the never entirely unveiled word—the word at the foot of the mountain—likewise. Borrowing again from Bhabha, the hybridity of Moses’ veil “ensures [so far as uncertainty will allow!] that meaning is never simply mimetic and transparent.”<sup>45</sup> Least of all, the veiling of Moses suggests, the meaning(s) of Torah.

Another aspect of the sign of the veil in Exodus 34 is that it acts as a supplement to revelation. The veil, like the divine hand, counts as part of what is revealed. (What did Moses see from the earthbound side of the hand? Is the skin of God’s hand the same

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>44</sup> For examples of these images, see Britt, *Rewriting Moses*, 91-115.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

organ that covers God's face?) But *how* does it count? Might the revelation of the veil count like the words Moses speaks to "Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation" (Exod 34:31) but the text refrains from telling? Might the veil as a supplement count like the difference emblazoned on Moses' face that spares the voice but requires the veil? Might the supplement of the veil count like reading counts when it comes to 'hearing' the word of God? In other words, and to return to the question, what *difference* does the veil make in establishing the site of prophecy at the foot of the mountain?

As a supplement to revelation, Moses' self-veiling appends a doubling difference. That is, it follows the logic of writing. The veil is an *addition* to the shining, doubling the signs of Moses' revelatory transformation. It marks and sets apart the space from which the divine word will be conveyed. When hung, the veil supplants the shining, *substituting* as a visible sign of Moses' prophetic office.<sup>46</sup> In this dual role, the veil creates absence—the necessary absence of the glorified 'face' from ordinary (unprotected) life. At the same time, the veil provides a remedy for absence, signaling the presence of an altered Moses and of God's glory behind the divide of the doubling cover. The veil thus performs one of the functions of priesthood: to draw the people near to the holy while shielding them from coming too near. But the veil also *exceeds* this function by letting slip a trace of

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<sup>46</sup> In his chapter, ". . . That Dangerous Supplement . . .," Derrida adapts the idea of the supplement (*supplément*) from Rousseau and devises it into a rule of the "economy of signs" in writing, much like *différance* (*Of Grammatology*, 141-64). *Supplément* bears the dual signification of an addition and a substitute, a displacement necessary to the linguistic elaboration of meaning. Derrida develops his notion of the supplementarity of signs at length in Part II of *Of Grammatology*.

revelation that cannot be controlled. In this sense the veil of Moses is, as Johnson writes of writing, “the very *différance* for which a remedy must be sought.”<sup>47</sup>

What ‘remedy’ is there for Moses’ veil but to read it? Once the veil is hung, its disseminating reflection adheres to the place of prophecy just as Moses’ re/membered face adheres to the shining that (all but) erases it. The trace, like the remains of Moses, will not be put to rest. But if the veil eludes removal (re-moving is the way of signs), it also eludes any grasp that would hold it in place—including the grasp of tropes like *différance* and *supplément*. For as with the trace, to hold onto the veil is to lose it; to lose the difference it makes and the self-difference it signifies.<sup>48</sup> This is so, as Derrida writes, because like the trace, the veil “arrives only on the condition of effacing itself.”<sup>49</sup> It ‘arrives’ and locates prophecy in the necessary displacement of words.

In disseminating its trace, the veiling of Moses counts as the “undecidable stroke” with which “writing both marks [veils] and goes back over its mark [unveils].”<sup>50</sup> The gesture counts as prophetic not only because it is Moses’ hand that hangs the unveiling veil, but because—in a scene that follows on Moses’ own writing of the two tablets—the veil, like its shining double, conveys a word of truth. This is not the truth, enshrined with

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<sup>47</sup> “Writing,” 45.

<sup>48</sup> To his dear friend, Cixous, who has been healed of severe myopia but not of the lifting of the veil, Derrida writes, “Finishing with the veil is finishing with the self” (“A Silkworm of One’s Own,” in Cixous and Derrida, *Veils*, 28).

<sup>49</sup> Kamuf’s translation of Derrida’s famous phrase (“*la trace n’arrive qu’à s’effacer*”). See her “Introduction: Reading Between the Blinds,” xxxv. Kamuf discusses the problem of the grasp in the same passage, noting that “by being kept, held, grasped—in a concept, a name—the trace gets lost.” As I will address below, to ‘hold’ the trace and therein lose it is to deprive the word of return.

<sup>50</sup> Derrida, *Dissemination*, 193.

a capital ‘T,’ of a transparent, unchanging, and thus repeatable word; but a truth woven into the interstices of language and therein suited to the wilderness wandering that carries on so long as texts endure. Of the “undecidable stroke” here inscribed by the veil, Derrida writes:

This double mark escapes the pertinence or authority of truth: it does not overturn it but rather inscribes it within its play as one of its functions or parts. This displacement does not take place, has not taken place once, as an *event*. It does not occupy a simple place. It does not take place *in* writing. This dis-location (is what) writes/is written.<sup>51</sup>

Can it be said that the veil, always already moving, always bearing the trace of Moses’ hand, is what writes/is written?<sup>52</sup> If from the beginning the veil is understood as a supplement, this reading of the veil ventures to say yes. To elaborate, Bhabha’s related take on what might, at some risk, be called the ‘truth of signs,’ or, more locally, the ‘writing of the veil’ offers an example. With his reading of hybridity, Bhabha supplements Derrida’s description of the displacement of truth, arguing that the complex and emergent play of critical language involves precisely a kind of overturning. According to Bhabha, the hybrid play of signs does not oppose the unity or uniformity often ascribed to truth (and sometimes to even a ‘dynamically diverse’ Torah). Instead, its effect “overcomes the given grounds of opposition.”<sup>53</sup> Bhabha’s own writing does this,

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. Derrida’s italics.

<sup>52</sup> Here I could add ‘figuratively speaking,’ but that would be a redundancy. All writing, like reading, is figurative. The failure to acknowledge this richness is but one of the problems associated with the claim to a plain meaning ‘in’ a text.

<sup>53</sup> *The Location of Culture*, 37. Bhabha contrasts difference with the notion of diversity, arguing that ‘cultural diversity’ is a construct that treats “culture as an object of empirical knowledge” rather than a process of emergent identification (49-50). His

with respect to Derrida, by “[trying] to indicate something of the . . . location of the event of theoretical critique” in the dislocation of self-difference.<sup>54</sup> That event, Bhabha goes on to say, “does not *contain* the truth . . . . The ‘true’ is always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself.”<sup>55</sup> This, I would add, is the writing of the veil.

Like the veil in Exod 34:29-35, Derrida’s double mark brings the ambivalent process of reading into “the zone of *occult instability* where the people dwell.”<sup>56</sup> It also brings to mind another way of addressing the playful complexity that does not *locate* truth but expresses it in the mutable relationships of meaning making—most notably, from the perspective of Psalm 90, relationship with God. This ‘other’ way, a third attribute of the veil, is recursion.

Recursion is a concept borrowed from nature and articulated in mathematics. Its trajectory of applications runs through studies of artificial intelligence, music, visual art, theoretical physics, postmodern education, chaos theory, complex systems, and language

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argument gives pause to the institutional thinking of diversity as a catch-all for cultural intertextuality and stand-in for genuine relationality. It calls to account the use of difference to legitimate self.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 33. Bhabha’s italics.

<sup>56</sup> The excerpt is from Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, 158. The passage is quoted at length in *The Location of Culture*, 51; Bhabha’s italics. Bhabha refers to the complex process of emergence as the “enunciative process,” a trope I have associated with the figure of Moses at the foot of the mountain (see above). Theophany turns the prophet into a ‘form of enunciation.’ The shining draws Moses with a double mark, a sign refigured in the hanging of the veil. It is a moment of change, in Bhabha’s sense of event as process. Bhabha quotes Fanon’s enunciation from another time of “extremely radical changes” (Fanon, 157) in order to evoke something of the uncertainty of emergent meaning and its potentially liberatory effect. Quoting is an exemplary expression of supplementarity.

analysis.<sup>57</sup> Generally, recursion is a process of iteration involving self-similarity and change. More specifically, recursion refers to “a function [which], in order to accomplish a task, calls itself with some part of the task.”<sup>58</sup> This function is non-linear. It generates a progression or series of connections that is not one after the other, the way we imagine time, but is a set of ever more complex relationships happening at different levels of scale. Recursion is self-reflexive but not mimetic. Its pattern of change includes uncertainty. Adapted as a way of speaking about texts and how we read them, recursion names a connection (or re/cognition) with a difference that yields new relationships within the always already changing self-difference of textuality.<sup>59</sup> In other words, recursion names a way of return.

In the most basic sense, Moses’ veil is a recursive sign: it moves. Correlated with prophetic speech, the veil is “put on” (וַיִּתֵּן, 34:33), “removed” (וַיִּסֶר, 34:34), and “put on again”—literally, “returned” (וַיָּשִׁיב, 34:35) to Moses’ shining face.<sup>60</sup> With each of these gestures, the veil—by virtue of its reading—loops out and back, dividing and showing, doubling and deferring, “[calling] itself with some part of the task” of pointing to what is

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<sup>57</sup> Hofstadter’s famous study of recursive patterns in mathematics, art, and music (*Gödel, Escher, Bach*) includes an analysis of recursion in language (see esp. pp. 130-34). For a primer on recursive fractals and theoretical physics, see Stauffer and Stanley, *From Newton to Mandelbrot*. Katherine Halyes has written extensively on the recursive symmetries between chaos theory and language. See references to her work cited below.

<sup>58</sup> Black and Rogers, “Recursion,” in *Dictionary of Algorithms and Data Structures*, <http://www.nist.gov/dads/HTML/recursion.html> (accessed February 2, 2007).

<sup>59</sup> On recognition as an act of recursion, see my discussion of memory as one of the ‘laws’ of reading in chapter 3, pp. 76-82.

<sup>60</sup> Woodenly rendered, the passage reads: “and Moses would cause to return the veil to his face” (וַיָּשִׁיב מֹשֶׁה אֶת־הַמָּסוּחַ עַל־פָּנָיו, Exod 34:35).

other.<sup>61</sup> With each gesture and within the larger scale of the scene as a whole, the veil *returns*. It returns as the sign of a boundary that will not hold still. It returns as a sign of difference whose manifold representations drape reading in the folds of hybridity. It returns as a figure of an emerging word, a “bridge [that] gathers” as it signifies.<sup>62</sup> It returns as a sign of mediation, an “interstitial passage” between a beyond that can never quite be grasped and an always changing present.<sup>63</sup> In all of this, the veil returns as a sign of *relationship*—between Moses and God, between God’s word (through the place held open by Moses’ shining absence) and the community, between the multiple loops or “nodal points” in the web of recursions through which communication passes.<sup>64</sup>

If the movement of the veil is a moment of return it is also a moment of change. The veil enters the scene in Exod 34:29-35 bringing in a shift from past narrative to the future or frequentative tense (what will happen again and again).<sup>65</sup> It divides time. Similarly, the veil divides the sacred times of Moses’ activity as a prophet from ordinary

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<sup>61</sup> See the definition of recursion by Black and Rogers, cited above.

<sup>62</sup> Etienne Balibar offers a vivid expression of emergent meaning with his line, “The bridge *gathers* as it crosses” (*Masses, Classes, Ideas*, 56; Balibar’s italics). Larger passage quoted by Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*, 7.

<sup>63</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 5.

<sup>64</sup> As a recursion of the divine hand on top of the mountain, the veil is also a sign of relationship between the various ‘members’ of God: the “face” and the “back,” which God’s hand, in theophany, divides (Exod 33:22-23). On texts, signs, and readers as “nodal points” in a network of relationships, see my reference to Lyotard in the introduction to this project, note 1, p. 2. There I describe texts in terms that readily apply to this chapter’s reading of Moses’ veil: a ‘cipher of movement,’ an ‘embodied contingency.’

<sup>65</sup> See above my discussion of text divisions including references to Dozeman and B. Childs, p. 186.



time.<sup>66</sup> It signals change: the arrival of divine revelation and the move back to the relative world from which Moses is hidden. Yet the veil also reveals the complexity of such divisions, and of the changes they announce. This is not the least because in its hybridity, supplementarity, and recursion, the prophetic veiling and unveiling of Moses reveals the self-difference of time.

Reading through the sign of Moses' veil, it is possible to see how time displaces itself before even a moment's passing. (Indeed, time's 'blink of an eye' is very like the movement of the veil.) What we call the 'present moment' can be named only in relation to another moment. Time—in its telling—splits, coming back to a present different from the one we would name. Time divides in order to be counted; interrupts the moment in the process of continuing its seamless flow. Yet at the *same time*, the moment at hand swallows our attempts to measure it. (Where in this moment is there a boundary to be found?) The present, with all its movement, is indivisible. In it, time goes and returns in difference all in the space inhabited by *now*. In other words, this single moment in time is recursive. It emerges in self-reflexive heterogeneity as an always already changing moment of return.

To read time through the veil of Moses—that is, to read the time of prophecy as a recursion of the sign of the veil—is to draw the word of YHWH into the temporal purview of language. That purview locates prophecy in what Bhabha calls “the disruptive

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<sup>66</sup> Britt makes this point, arguing that the veil of Moses is “a temporal rather than a spatial barrier” (*Rewriting Moses*, 86).

temporality of enunciation,” a phrase brought into focus by the attributes of the veil.<sup>67</sup> It brings the moment at hand and the word that arrives with it into “the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation” and into the relationships required to make meaning in that time.<sup>68</sup> This, it seems to me, is what happens in Exod 34:29-35 when Moses, shining and veiled, surrenders his agency and identity to the hybrid signs of an embodied word and ushers in—from behind but never entirely without the veil—a word about words.

Whether hanging or removed, the veil of Moses is, like time, placed on the cusp of the future. But the time the veil tells has more to do with speech than with a foretelling of things to come. This is appropriate to a scene in which the ocular language of divine theophany (Exod 33:12-23) is replaced by a seven-fold repetition of the verb “to speak” (דבר; 34:29, 31, 32, 33, 34 [2x], 35).<sup>69</sup> And it is appropriate to a text where the site of prophecy—the word spoken at the foot of the mountain—is rendered accessible only by first (re)reading the veil. Here, that rite of passage has taken the form of a semiotics of prophecy, hearing as prophetic the multiple relationships inscribed in the signs of Moses’ re-figuration and working to add to those relationships.

As this reading has suggested, Moses’ hanging of the veil generates recursion in a scene that might, left unveiled, rest in the totality of its images. Instead, the episode ends

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<sup>67</sup> *The Location of Culture*, 54.

<sup>68</sup> On the discontinuity of time, see Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 55.

<sup>69</sup> Moses’ seeing is rewritten as Moses’ saying. Notably, the verb “to see” (ראה) occurs six times in 33:12-23. Twice YHWH tells Moses he has “found favor in my sight” (בעיני, lit., “in my eyes,” vv. 12, 17). Moses uses the phrase three times in return (“in your eyes,” vv. 13 [2x], 16).

with movement and with the anticipation of speech (cf. v. 35). Lest the shining of Moses' face be read as a static apotheosis, the veil intervenes, ironically demonstrating that the glory of God cannot be entirely safeguarded if it is to be conveyed. I would argue, however, that the shining is not dimmed by the veil's cover of difference. Rather, it is split and therein doubled in significance: Shining *and* veiled, Moses' identity slips out between the signs as between the pages of the Sinai story. There the prophet recedes from view in the dissolution of his own unity. Absolved of permanence in ambiguity (his face? his death? his burial? his psalm?), Moses is able to reappear not only as Torah, but also as a sign of return.

The veiling and unveiling of Moses brings to a close the larger mountain passage or "great triad" of Exodus 32-34, a corpus that begins with the covenant ("written with the finger of God," 31:18) poised on the precipice above the saga of the golden calf about to unfold.<sup>70</sup> Before that, Moses receives the Sabbath law, to be passed on as a sign so that the Israelites will know who they are (31:12-17). The editors of this text bind it together—and set it apart—by returning to the Sabbath law in 35:1-3 and repeating its regulations, with a difference. This return reinscribes a point visited repeatedly before the covenant makes it down the mountain 'intact': that returning is endemic to identity formation.<sup>71</sup> The doubled giving of the Sabbath law also surrounds these Sinai episodes (the twice breaking and twice receiving of covenant) with reminders of creation, and of

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<sup>70</sup> Brueggemann, "Exodus," 945. On Brueggemann's analysis of Exodus 32-34, see above, p. 185, note 2.

<sup>71</sup> See my discussion in chapter 3 on the recursions of memory, history, and narrative, pp. 76-92.

the pause in its return. Based on this rhythm, a “perpetual covenant” (31:16) is set in motion. It will bring the people back to the beginning, again and again, and lead them on into the wilderness.

*Passage to Wisdom: Returning to the End of Psalm 90*

At the beginning of this chapter, I posed the question: how does reading go on after death?—a non sequitur unless ‘after death’ is protected by scare quotes.<sup>72</sup> My question had two meanings. In a first sense, it asked the question that haunts Psalm 90: how can mortals live in such an ineffable world, consumed by suffering and, even in joy, bound for death? How are we to make sense of this fleeting thing called existence? In a second sense and following closely on my exploration of language and death in chapter 4, the question meant to interrogate reading. Is it possible to read a text when there is no one reading? This apparent contradiction abides by the logic that there is no author (dead) and no text (apart from the reader) and attempts to take it one step further. The step I have in mind, suggested to me by the apex-ed shape of Psalm 90, by fire and death on the summit, and by the return in reading that goes back down the mountain, is a step across traditions. Zen would call it “stepping forward from the top of a hundred-foot pole.”<sup>73</sup> Psalm 90 speaks of how to “count our days truly” (v. 12) and implies that we make the count with empty hands.

The traversal of traditions I am describing acknowledges the dual meaning of that favored verb of deconstruction: to traverse. There is both a connection and a gap, even a

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<sup>72</sup> The colloquial name for this writing device seems particularly apt in this case.

<sup>73</sup> See *Gateless Gate*, Case 46, 216.

denial, between Zen's challenge to step forward (and surely die) and the psalm's imperative to learn how to count each day. It strikes me that what these appeals have in common is they come from a point of not knowing, expressed in the psalm by the plea to "teach!" (v. 12) and the chasm that lies between it and the previous verse ("Who understands . . . ?" v. 11), no matter how the text is divided.<sup>74</sup> Another connection, albeit one that accrues to Psalm 90 only in the reading, is that the step to be counted is a single step.

This chapter has anticipated the step forward from the 'top' of Psalm 90 by reading Moses' final descent from Sinai as a recursion of it. The veil, which returns even in removal, is critical to this descent, representing as it does both the dissemination of meaning and the kind of world in which that is possible. The intertextual move that dons the veil (or removes it) makes sense in my own text about recursion, emergent meaning, and beginningless beginnings. It presents a difference beforehand, making a case that the wisdom expressed in the descending verses of Psalm 90 (vv. 12-17) is "traversed by otherness" from the start; that the "heart" (v. 12) brought forth in reading will not be self-contained.<sup>75</sup> There is, however, another kind of difference at the heart of Psalm 90, and that is the difference of death. The eighth century Zen master, Hōgen, called this difference "the distance between heaven and earth," indicating in the form of a koan that

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<sup>74</sup> Zen sometimes speaks of this as the "zero point." To illumine the point, see Yamada's commentary in *Gateless Gate*; and Habito, *Healing Breath*, esp. pp. 80-99. For an accessible and engaging look at "zero point" energy in quantum mechanics, see Seife, *Zero: The Biography of a Dangerous Idea*, 165-74.

<sup>75</sup> See B. Johnson's definition of intertextuality, *A World of Difference*, 116.

even a “hairsbreadth” of death’s divide is infinite.<sup>76</sup> The courage of Psalm 90—and of its reading—is to come up to the edge of the difference which cannot be traversed and ask how to go on.<sup>77</sup>

The recursions of Psalm 90 that bring reading to this point limn the unknowing edge of death as the upper limit of a rhetorical mountain. In the language of the psalm, Zen’s hundred-foot pole is a passage about unmitigated fury, exposure, and transience—all beyond the reach of human understanding (vv. 7-11). Those recursions also suggest, by way of Moses’ shining face, that to step forward from this precipice is to be changed; changed in a way that refigures the features of human experience. In this respect, ‘how to go on’ in Psalm 90 is hinted at, perhaps prophesied, by Moses’ willingness to disappear. The prophet risks death to see God and, as a result, relinquishes his identity—his personal ‘hold’ on time. In the space left vacant by Moses’ theophanic absence, the divine word comes forth. But how does this relinquishment translate to ordinary time? How are the lamenting people of God, caught in the grip of transience and the wish to hold on, able to open their hands and receive wisdom that will surely include death?<sup>78</sup> By what wisdom

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<sup>76</sup> Hōgen’s saying is a famous barometer of difference in the Zen tradition. For a version of the koan, see Case 17 of the *Shoyoroku* (Cleary, trans., *Book of Serenity*, 72-75). For a brief biography of Hōgen and insight into his teaching, see Kōun Yamada’s commentary on Case 26 in *Gateless Gate*, 129-33.

<sup>77</sup> See my earlier discussion of Dōgen in chapter 4, pp. 169-76.

<sup>78</sup> The nonsense of a phrase like ‘the grip of transience’ reflects the delusive nature of human clinging. Transience cannot be anything other than a concept. The reality it names is by definition insubstantial—gone before we know it. Humans often imagine that they live in the grip of transience, just as we imagine living in the grip of death (an unknown to the living). The lament of Psalm 90, particularly in vv. 3-11, reflects something of this perspective.

do human beings step forward—from death, from transience, from the all-consuming “power” of God (v. 11)—and find unconditional meaning in an unfailingly conditional world? How, truly, do we go on?

Psalm 90 puts the question this way, and in the asking answers: *To count our days truly, teach!* (v. 12a). This, in Psalm 90, is wisdom; not an idea but a simple act of surrender, and in it the reality of what is given. The sought after “heart” is brought forth (v. 12b). To ask is to count. To ask is to step forward. To ask is to realize the immeasurable meaning, perhaps not of “all our days” (vv. 9, 14), but of this day. Counting again (*one, one, one*), the “heart of wisdom” in Psalm 90 calls on YHWH to return: *how long?* (v. 13). It prays to be sated by *hesed*, understanding that a “morning” of God’s steadfast love can fill a life with joy (v. 14). The “heart of wisdom” asks for gladness to balance suffering (v. 15) and says “let be!” to the prospect of seeing God’s “activity” and “splendor” in this generation and the next (v. 16). In a single step of returning, the wisdom of Psalm 90 invites the “graciousness of *Adonai* our God upon us” (v. 17a); and, in coming to the end, asks *Adonai* to make “the work of our hands” count—with a counting that is “beyond us”—when we are gone (v. 17).

The change in Psalm 90 from what I have read as the ascending face of the psalm (vv. 1-6) to its descent in vv. 12-17 is marked. (Verses 1-2 might be thought of as ‘base camp’ in this reading.) The focus on what is lost to withering and the swiftness of time in vv. 3-6 turns to a focus on the potential for joy in things as they are. The turn reorients relationship to the features of this world and to the creator who begets and outlasts them (cf. “your servants,” vv. 13, 16). It also reorients reading. Where the psalm comes to the

end with hands open enough to be emptied of their work, reading is brought back to the beginning in the realization that there is nothing but relationship. Something, however, has changed. What is *realized* in this ‘nothing but’ is not (yet again) the infinite regress of an endless deferral of meaning. It is reading acknowledging the transience in which the going and returning of meaning-making is a single gesture. Taking a cue from Moses, the realization of nothing but relationship is reading being drawn out of itself toward the other; reading momentarily divested of the self-justifying curvature in upon the reader; reading dropping its repetitious solipsism—ironically, the hazard of deconstruction—and emerging, unpredictably, as something new.

What does the new world look like? One could say that the difference between the descending imperatives in Psalm 90 (vv. 12-17) and the psalm’s earlier mourning of dust-to-dust (vv. 3-6) is ‘like the distance between heaven and earth’; but the comment would be at best metaphorical. The reality that emerges from the edge of the psalm’s middle passage (vv. 7-11)—here encoded by death—is not heaven. It is this world, ridden with the throws of human experience and subject to the laws of language. In other words, it is a world as hybrid, complex, and generative of meaning as the sign of Moses’ veil.

In Exod 34:27, YHWH speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai for the last time, sealing the covenant with a command to the prophet: “‘Write yourself these words, for on the face of these words I am making a covenant with you and with Israel’” (my translation). Moses stays with YHWH forty days, fasts, and writes the two tablets of the law (v. 28). As it happens, the covenant is also ‘written’ on the face of Moses, and rewritten many times over in the sign of the veil.



It is unlikely that the words Moses wrote, even on the other side of Sinai, included Psalm 90. But the memory that attached the prophet's name to the psalm called on a logic as old as language. The same logic animates the veil and places it—by way of this rereading of Psalm 90—on the figure of “Moses, the man of God” (v. 1a). Cloaked again in a doubled gesture of returning, Moses descends a reinscribed Sinai and disseminates a changing word. In the complexity of that word the recursions of reading rest, calling on the difference of another generation.

## CHAPTER 6

### דברים

#### THE WORK OF WORDS: RHETORICAL CRITICISM AND THE MEETING OF DISCIPLINES

*The work of our hands, establish beyond us!*  
Ps 90:17

Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new subject that belongs to no-one.  
Roland Barthes

The law of chaos is the law of ideas,  
Of improvisations and seasons of belief.  
Wallace Stevens

The concern of this chapter is method. By what strategy or set of strategies has this reading of Psalm 90 in concert with a cluster of related texts mapped its way? How will I describe, provisionally justify, and even commend the process that constructed the multiple strata of this project? Considering the path in retrospect, what steps took my reading—and I hope my reader—to the top of a mountain and back and called that mountain Psalm 90?

It is customary in the discipline of biblical studies to put a chapter such as this at the beginning of a project. A carefully constructed method is often considered a criterion for proceeding. The stated method organizes thought (textual relationship) and answers from the start questions of influence and direction. It locates a study of text within the sphere of scholarly debate and locates the reader with respect to the persuasion and goals

of a given interpretation. The disclosure of method acts as both a compass and a rule. It supplies a *modus operandi* as well as a grid on which to hang readerly associations. If convincingly conceived, a hermeneutical method can grant validation in advance to a project's findings. A credible methodology can authorize agreement; a questionable one can substantiate dissent. In either case, method is not typically an end goal of reading, but is an order intended to keep a reading on track until the end.

The decision to address questions of method only after these excursions in reading is not intended as a judgment against the scholarly convention of setting up and abiding by a methodology. In this study, the reversal of order was a choice to allow a set of relationships to take shape without the conceptual constraints of a predetermined map. I acknowledge that such a beginningless beginning is not entirely possible, as I began with a relational framework in mind, the seed of this study, and with a thesis as to how to go on: make the map as you go. I also began with an inheritance of scholarship, particularly in areas of rhetorical criticism and deconstruction, and with reading partners, a number of whom I will revisit in this chapter. Perhaps more to the point, the choice to end by taking account of the map that has been made and asking what it indicates about method is an expression of the model of reading I have followed. Recursive reading, a sibling of intertextuality, is the brainchild of complexity. The constructs of recursion—here, Psalm 90 and its recursions in reading—share the distinguishing features of complex systems. The process of meaning-making is self-organizing and emergent. These features will also be examined in more detail in this chapter.

Along the way this project has interrogated reading. Questions such as “What is a text?” “Who reads?” and “How does reading go on?” have emerged as part of the fabric of my text (a textile mountain) and as part of the process of reading Psalm 90. To my mind, the psalm has had something to say to these questions. The turning at the ‘heart’ of Psalm 90, which I have read as a return from an encounter with death, outlines an iteration of the process of recursion and evokes, in a way that poetry can, a metaphor for reading. By addressing method last, I have waited on this image and waited on the imagination to make it. That said, it is evident that the imagination is a faculty of interpretation granted the status of critical thought in this reading (as if criticism and the imagination could be separated!) and integral to the sought after standard of rigor. Again, these are issues this chapter will explore as it considers the path taken.

There is yet another reason for the cadenced placement of this discussion of the past. The narrative I offer of what came before—of the approaches to interpretation that have fed, cajoled, disturbed, and undermined my own construct of reading—represents ‘the work of my hands’ (cf. Ps 90:17). It is as much an act of interpretation as any other aspect of this reading and it is part of the structure of my text. According to the mountain I have written (read that any way you like), the ‘words’ of this chapter relate recursively to my ‘mountain’ reading of Psalm 90 in chapter 2.<sup>1</sup> In what follows, I mean to repeat the exploration of rhetoric and meaning-making that began with an initial reading of the

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<sup>1</sup> For more on דְּבָרִים (“words”) and הָר (‘‘mountain’’) and the other single-word tropes that head chapters 2-6, see below.

psalm, with the difference of perspective that comes from having made the climb. Looking at a larger swath of landscape, recursion at another level of scale, this reflection on reading is vested in Regina Schwartz's proviso that "[n]onidentical repetition is a way out of the violence of congealing the past."<sup>2</sup> Rhetorical criticism, with its fixed structures and intimations of mastery, is one way of inflicting violence on a text. Poststructural criticism, with its suspicion of poetic forms and dismissal of rhetorical analysis as mechanistic, is another. (These days the charge of mimesis tends to conjure mimicry as well as the symptoms of a medical condition: hysteria over "appearances . . . not actually present."<sup>3</sup>) This chapter seeks an alternative.

To this unfinalizable end, the chapter will look at the development of rhetorical criticism as Phyllis Tribble reformulated the discipline, offering some context for Tribble's work and visiting the criticisms that have been levied against her readings. I wish to acknowledge an early debt to Tribble for alerting my musician's ear to rhetorical patterns, and a continuing debt of gratitude to Toni Craven for holding open the possibility that delight in the ways of words and confounding the assumptions that easily partner such delight can go hand in hand. Among the assumptions I mean to subvert are the binarism of description and interpretation, along with the primacy of either activity over the other; the given-ness of structure and the notion that the bones of a text can be excavated and

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<sup>2</sup> *The Curse of Cain*, 162.

<sup>3</sup> See *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "mimesis." See also Sherwood's comment on the "postmodern / poststructuralist" dance with mimesis, the residual instinct to respond to a text in kind (*A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 4-5). Regarding the lure for criticism to produce an analogue of the text it would read, Sherwood cites Moore, *Mark and Luke in Poststructuralist Perspectives*, xviii.

reassembled as though a mystery were solved; and the authority that tacitly, sometimes overtly, attaches to our visions of order when the complexity of seeing is not taken into account. I would also challenge the counter-criticism that reading poetic patterns and rhetorical relationships is at best a modernist pursuit (dated, stolid, cut off from culture and irrelevant to it) and at worst a kind of meta-linguistic counterfeit locked in self-same repetition. For this effort I will turn to other projects of the imagination: complexity and chaos theory; I will reread description as what Barbara Johnson calls “a fiction-making activity”; and I will consider how intertextuality and interdisciplinarity change reading practices by supplementing and unsettling rather than dialectically opposing the methods of classical biblical scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

In the epigraph to his collection of essays, *The Friday Book*, John Barth lampoons epigraphs as “a kind of rhetorical attitudinizing,” or worse, “tails that wag their dogs, but from in front, like an awkward figure of speech.”<sup>5</sup> Barth’s “misdemeanor” offense is particularly common in literary studies of the Bible, though I suspect this has more to do with intertextual negotiation, a gathering of friends, and recursion (Schwartz’s re-creation of memory) than with “a posture of awe before some palimpsestic Other Text.”<sup>6</sup> With literary-critical readings of the Bible, the palimpsest in question is the written and re-

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<sup>4</sup> For the Johnson quote, see *A World of Difference*, 18. On the strategy of supplementing rather than opposing, see my discussion of hybridity in chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> *The Friday Book*, xvii. Barth’s anti-epigraphic excursus, “Epigraphs,” offers some serious jest. It is an appropriate epigraph to his volume, the full title of which is *The Friday Book, Or, Book-Titles Should Be Straightforward and Subtitles Avoided: Essays and Other Nonfiction*.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

written biblical text.<sup>7</sup> Each chapter in this study has kept company with two epigraphs; one from Psalm 90 and one from another text. This chapter begins with three: the last line of Psalm 90; a multiply-reread line from Rolands Barthes (see below); and a colon from Wallace Stevens' instructively named poem, "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas."<sup>8</sup> As a collective heading for the chapter, this group of excerpts, snippets of re-placed text, acts as a cantilever for the weight of readerly methods past and present. The quotes are also meant to underscore from the beginning the ephemerality of reading, the complexity of change, at once relational and empty-handed, and the seasonality of method. In this regard, the passage from Barthes bears repeating:

Interdisciplinary work, so much discussed these days, is not about confronting already constituted disciplines (none of which, in fact, is willing to let itself go). To do something interdisciplinary it's not enough to choose a 'subject' (a theme) and gather around it two or three sciences. Interdisciplinarity consists in creating a new subject that belongs to no-one.<sup>9</sup>

Barthes' insight about how new areas of inquiry emerge out of relationship is also a commentary on method. It speaks to the (inter)textuality of reading and indicates that the only finality about a given approach to reading—no matter how it confronts the past

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<sup>7</sup> A defining feature of a palimpsest is that it "has been written on more than once, with the earlier writing incompletely erased and often legible" (*American Heritage Dictionary*, Third Edition). The figure as Barth uses it is ripe to be erased (incompletely) and 'written on' again by readings that follow.

<sup>8</sup> For the text of Stevens' poem, see *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 178-185.

<sup>9</sup> The passage from Barthes, "Jeunes Chercheurs" is translated and quoted by James Clifford in *Writing Culture*, 1. Sherwood quotes Clifford's translation in *A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 1. The passage can be found in translation by Richard Howard in Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, 72.

or creates anew—is its finiteness. This, at least, is how the prospect of a ‘new subject’ reads in its ‘interdisciplinarity’ with Psalm 90. What is established ‘belongs to no-one.’

*Setting the (Mis en) Scene: H/ail Poetry!*

Sometime near the end of the 1970’s biblical scholars with an ear to the wall separating the Bible from literature might well have heard, among other rumblings, the muffled rallying cry: *Poetry is dead! Long live poetry!* Literary theory was in transition. Opening the door to see what all the commotion was about, biblical studies would come upon a gathering at once sober and rowdy. Near the front of a crowded (and no doubt smoky) room stood poststructuralism, deconstruction, and reader response criticism, holding forth in a movement away from the ideal toward the relative, away from reference toward reception, away from poetry as a unified aesthetic and toward the poetry of fractured, ambiguous, and unsettled meanings. Gestures flew. Frayed pages of yellowed text fell to the ground. Consciousness, on the rise, stirred to a fevered pitch. A crush of sibling *isms*, the progeny of postmodernism and radical skepticism, jockeyed for perspective and joined in hailing theory’s transfer of power.

Meanwhile, biblical studies looked on and braced for change. The vision of literary theory’s critical melee had an impact that loosed the seal in a disciplinary vacuum. Air, thick with self-reflexive ideology, seeped into the distended space of the Bible’s scholarly isolation, pressing against an already thinned membrane of historical-critical method. The new poetry was on the move; its renegade exhilaration not to be



contained. At the threshold between literature and the Bible, atmospheres mingled and biblical studies could no longer shut the door.

*The Poetry of Poetics: Muilenburg, Tribble, and the 'Old New' Rhetorical Criticism*<sup>10</sup>

Poetry's figurative demise was of practical poetics, of rhetoric as a 'scientific' study, of the text as a puzzle that might, under the best of conditions, be solved. Its proclamation laid these corpses at the feet of New Criticism, a literary discipline with which biblical criticism had only recently come to terms. A short decade earlier, James Muilenburg delivered his landmark address to the Society of Biblical Literature (1968), negotiating a relationship between historical criticism and literary criticism that gave birth to a new rhetorical criticism of the Bible.<sup>11</sup> Where form criticism had looked at generalities and universals reaching across biblical texts, Muilenburg turned to what was unique, internal, and independently viable. Where form-critical methodology sought out norms potentially applicable to all texts within a given genre, rhetorical criticism considered the turns of phrase and structures that made a single text a poem. With a nod to T. S. Eliot, a founding proponent of New Criticism, Muilenburg's method embraced the inextricable unity of form and content. It sought "responsible and proper articulation" of this "creative synthesis" as a means of access to meaning in a text and to the "texture

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<sup>10</sup> For this designation, which intends to distinguish between the modern(ist) revival of classical rhetorical theory in biblical scholarship as 'the old (new) way' in order to call for a reformulation of the discipline in light of postmodern problematics, see Aichele et al., "Rhetorical Criticism," 149-86.

<sup>11</sup> "Form Criticism and Beyond," 1-18. This paper represented the crowning achievement of Muilenburg's long career. Notably, Muilenburg's first Ph.D. was in English Literature. For a comprehensive bibliography on the discipline Muilenburg named, see Watson and Hauser, *Rhetorical Criticism and the Bible*.

and fabric of the writer's thought" as that meaning is made.<sup>12</sup> It saw poetry, indeed life, where critics of New Criticism were already forecasting death.

As Muilenburg appropriated and moved beyond Gunkel's form-critical method, so Phyllis Tribble re-framed the Muilenburg canon for a next generation.<sup>13</sup> Twenty-five years after the publication of "Form Criticism and Beyond," Tribble published a historically contextualized practicum on the rhetorical method she had polished and pursued (*Rhetorical Criticism: Context, Method, and the Book of Jonah*).<sup>14</sup> Adapting Muilenburg's rhetoric, Tribble based her rubric for interpretation on the "organic unity" of text: "Proper articulation of form-content yields proper articulation of meaning."<sup>15</sup> Acknowledging the critical diversity of her own time, Tribble attempted to address the variety of problems posed by her succinct statement of purpose.<sup>16</sup> Primary to this critical effort were a trading of the problematic goal of authorial intent for the less presumptive

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<sup>12</sup> "Form Criticism and Beyond," 7, 5. In time, Muilenburg honed his "canon" for rhetorical criticism to read: "a proper articulation of form yields a proper articulation of meaning." For a written record of this "oral tradition," see Tribble, *Rhetorical Criticism*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> Reformulation by and for the descendents of a next generation continues to be a theme in Tribble's work. See the recent collection of essays co-edited by Tribble and Russell, *Hagar, Sarah, and Their Children: Jewish Christian and Muslim Perspectives*.

<sup>14</sup> In *Rhetorical Criticism*, Tribble sketches and analyzes the background of her discipline, beginning with classical rhetoric (Part I). She then develops and applies her literary-critical methodology (Part II).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 91. For an earlier version, still closer to Muilenburg's canon, see Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 8.

<sup>16</sup> *Rhetorical Criticism* provides brief summary overviews of various critical perspectives, including "the postmodern perspective" (60-61), "reader-response" (66-70), and "deconstruction" (70-72).

concern with textual strategy, and the attendant though more disruptive admission that a text's multiple meanings are largely reliant upon readerly perspective.

In *Rhetorical Criticism*, Tribble initiates both of these adjustments by situating her discipline in relation to New Criticism's claims; first with respect to authorial intention (relevant to meaning, but not comprehensively so), then in terms of "intrinsic" readings (text-centered, but open to the influences of environment).<sup>17</sup> The effect is a reorientation that places the reader on either side of New Criticism's boundary between text and world.<sup>18</sup> As Tribble explains, "[t]he adjectives 'extrinsic' and 'intrinsic' define two contrasting though not incompatible responses."<sup>19</sup> Rhetorical criticism cannot exclude the influence of the "extrinsic" world, but the "larger environment" of the text remains a secondary focus.<sup>20</sup>

The nuances that distinguish rhetorical from New Critical perspective are, like "meaning," subject to slippage.<sup>21</sup> When Tribble identifies communication—and, by extension, interpretation—as a three-part act uniting author, text, and reader, the association with classical rhetoric clarifies rhetorical criticism's dissociation from

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<sup>17</sup> *Rhetorical Criticism*, 94-97

<sup>18</sup> New Criticism describes the text as a world unto itself, reliant only on internal coherence for meaning. On the unity and autonomy of New Critical perspective, see Donald Childs, "New Criticism," 120-124. For a more detailed analysis of the history and theory of New Criticism, see Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 37-46.

<sup>19</sup> *Rhetorical Criticism*, 94.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>21</sup> In an exegesis of her rubric, Tribble writes of the phrase "articulation of meaning": "the word 'meaning' slips and slides, lending itself to innumerable meanings" (*Rhetorical Criticism*, 95).

readings that avow text-immanent, autonomous meanings.<sup>22</sup> The dissimilarity recedes, however, when Tribble orients her “text-centered” method in contrast to “all disciplines that view the text as a window through which meanings come.”<sup>23</sup> As Tribble sees it, texts do not function as windows; they are not transparent to an external reality, nor do they open out onto a surrounding landscape of referential meaning (author, history, theology). Instead, the rhetorical critic stands before the text as though before a picture. The eye takes in every detail while words articulate the meaning of what is seen.

The image of text as picture trains attention on the principal activity that guides rhetorical reading: description. If texts convey meaning through the detail of their surfaces—through linguistic patterns, tropes, omissions—the perception of that meaning will be, first of all, a descriptive act. If coherence—between form and content, structure and subject matter—is the organizing principle of textual meaning, then describing as clearly and thoroughly as possible the relationship between *what* a text says and *how* it says it becomes key to interpretation. The implication in this rubric for reading is that description is separate from interpretation. Tribble’s own grammar of reading practice—the *form* of her description—marks this division with a conjunction (“describing and

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<sup>22</sup> See *Texts of Terror*, 1. In her analysis of classical rhetoric, Tribble notes that the elements, types, and goals of communication all come in groups of three (*Rhetorical Criticism*, 7-9; also 95-99).

<sup>23</sup> *Rhetorical Criticism*, 97. In this respect, rhetorical criticism stands close to New Criticism, though Tribble sounds a note of difference. The text, she argues, may have the capacity to act as a window, but rhetorical criticism does not work that hinge.

interpreting”), as does her instruction that “[t]he double task of description and interpretation” can be “intertwine[d] or treat[ed] sequentially.”<sup>24</sup>

The analogy between text and picture points to rhetorical criticism’s interest in compositional conventions. Applied to the Hebrew Bible, this method is particularly alert to the conventions of parallelism, chiasm, and inclusio. It pays special attention to how repetition, a common idiom of Hebrew poetry, may shape the cadence and character of a text. It is on the lookout for recognizable order and for linguistic features that accrue significance by virtue of reuse within a tradition. In this sense, rhetorical criticism’s claim to take its models for reading from the texts themselves (a claim shared with form criticism) refers to a wider corpus and tacitly acknowledges that any reading of biblical text is intertextual, grammatically if not thematically.<sup>25</sup> In another, more problematic sense, rhetorical criticism focuses solely on the framed object of its gaze. As Tribble puts it, the guide for this kind of reading is “the *ipsissima verba* of the text.”<sup>26</sup> Word by word, line by line, the patterns of language direct the reading in which they take shape.

Within the parameters of Tribble’s method, reading proceeds with the confidence that form *is* content, that pattern informs perception, that ‘organic unity’ begets a form of union. The intimacy of this exchange between text and reader is brought about through

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 97, 105.

<sup>25</sup> This level of intertextuality may be compared to the *Langue* and *Parole* of Saussurian semiotics, with form-content (description) corresponding to ‘language’ and meaning (interpretation) corresponding to ‘speech.’ For Saussure, the twin aspects of language are dialectically intertwined; neither is able to mean without the other. (See Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*.)

<sup>26</sup> *Rhetorical Criticism*, 105. See Tribble’s “Practical Instruction,” 101-106.

‘close reading.’<sup>27</sup> The language of close reading is the language of penetration, of a “love affair” with the text initiated by perception rather than reception.<sup>28</sup> According to Tribble’s ontology of text, attention to detail allows the reader to enter into the text and “perceive its being”;<sup>29</sup> not thought as the author thinks it (Muilenburg), but language as it works its ways. The result is a method that seeks to expose language in the act of meaning-making and so to disclose the meaning that is made.<sup>30</sup> Done with care, rhetorical analysis so

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<sup>27</sup> Close reading is a trademark of New Criticism. An exacting focus on the rhetoric of a text can no longer be considered the sole domain of any single method.

<sup>28</sup> In classroom teaching, Tribble has defined exegesis as “having a love affair with a text” (personal communication). The exegetical love affair Tribble commends calls to mind the French literary term *jouissance*, coined by Barthes to describe ‘the pleasure of reading’ as “the tendency of rhetoric to resist closure and extend play” (Fish, “Rhetoric,” 220; see also McLaughlin, “Introduction,” in *CTLS*, 1). The work of Wolfgang Iser and Stanley Fish epitomizes reception theories of reading and demonstrates the diversity of such theories. For an overview of “reception aesthetics” and the fundamental contrasts between Iser and Fish, see Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 47-78.

<sup>29</sup> Tribble, “The Gift of a Poem,” 280. The essay is from 1977.

<sup>30</sup> In an early reading of Jer 31:15-22, Tribble suggests that the poem “describes itself” into existence (“The Gift of a Poem,” 280). This animation of the text should be read alongside Tribble’s qualification, following Ricoeur, that texts—though they “[speak] to attentive hearers in particular contexts”—are by themselves mute (see *God and the Rhetoric*, 4-5; also *idem*, *Texts of Terror*, 1). Philosophically, rhetorical criticism is undergirded by both Schleiermacher and Ricoeur. On the one hand, form-content and meaning may be seen as corresponding to Schleiermacher’s “grammatical” and “technical-psychological” aspects of interpretation. (See Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*.) On the other hand, Tribble abandons the notion of authorial intent in favor of meaning located ‘in the text,’ a move that takes her beyond Schleiermacher’s wish “to understand the text as well as and then even better than its author,” a goal echoed in Muilenburg’s rubric, but not so far as Ricoeur’s horizon of meaning ‘in front of the text.’ (See Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics: The Handwritten Manuscripts*, 112. For Ricoeur’s reading of Schleiermacher, see *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, esp. 43-48. On Ricoeur’s location of meaning in reading, see the four essays published as his *Interpretation Theory*.)

conceived “enables [the reader] to own the text” and, in that tenure, to “clarify it” for future readers.<sup>31</sup>

*Theory and Method: What Ails Rhetorical Criticism?*

The above excurses on the Muilenburg-Trible method of rhetorical analysis serves two purposes. It attempts to describe, as neutrally as possible, a way of reading text that figures in my own reading of Psalm 90. And it sets up a problematic of readerly assumptions within a methodology that in the strictness of its formulation no longer makes sense to me. In this respect, rhetorical criticism is doubly useful to this project. It initiates engagement with rhetorical structure as a way of meaning-making (cf. my diagram of a content chiasm in Psalm 90); and it provides a springboard for traversing the oppositional constraints (intrinsic/extrinsic, description/interpretation, theory/practice) that limit ‘rhetorical criticism’ to a single, reified method.<sup>32</sup> The latter provision allows Tribble’s method to function as a context for addressing some of these constraints. It also invites a turn to alternative models of structure, text, and reading as a way of opening rhetorical criticism to the unpredictable interplay of complex relationships.

The contribution of Tribble’s work, particularly in the field of feminist biblical criticism, is not to be underestimated. Tribble’s attention to detail in the language of Genesis 2-3 (“Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation” [1973], *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* [1978]) broke open traditional ways of reading that text. The detail of her

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<sup>31</sup> *Rhetorical Criticism*, 105.

<sup>32</sup> On the reification of method and the postmodern challenge to rhetorical criticism to subvert “the familiar Western distinctions between content and form, between theory and practice,” see Aichele et al., “Rhetorical Criticism,” 183-85.

reading continues to surface in the variety of feminist interpretations that have followed.<sup>33</sup> Tribble demonstrates her rhetorical method with clarity, invention, and, in many cases, with persuasion. Yet it is the very perception of mastery in Tribble's method that raises questions—questions that lead one to wonder if rhetorical criticism's poetic persuasions might not belong to a bygone era. Such doubt is fueled, in part, by the creative anarchism of postmodern reading theory that grants dominion over a text to no method. It is also the result of an alliance between theory and method that seeks to unseat unitary assumptions while maintaining a norm of ideological plurality;<sup>34</sup> that challenges the politics of aesthetics while advocating art as freedom;<sup>35</sup> and that cultivates incoherence for the sake of a different kind of coherence. Within this mix, the 'old new' rhetorical criticism fails to hold sway because the vision of beauty and truth on which it is based no longer holds.

One way of framing the challenge to rhetorical criticism's vision of text is to put it in terms of *rhetorical* questions. If poetry—or poetic prose—yields meaning through the balances of structure, what happens when our sense of the poetic changes; when

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<sup>33</sup> See my references to Genesis 2-3 in chapter 2, pp. 41-44 and 53-54.

<sup>34</sup> As an ideal of postmodern theory, ideological plurality comes dangerously close to functioning as a univocal ideology. The threat is apparent in the current tendency to absolutize the value of polyphony in text. For a critical alternative to the binary opposition of monologic and dialogic or pluriform views of text (following Bakhtin), see Bal, *On Story-Telling*, 1-4.

<sup>35</sup> Of the bifurcation in critical aesthetics, Eagleton writes: "The aesthetic is at once . . . the very secret prototype of human subjectivity in earliest capitalist society, and a vision of human energies as radical ends in themselves which is the implacable enemy of all dominative or instrumentalist thought" (*The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 9).



balance, closure, and centeredness are no longer the measure of expressive beauty?<sup>36</sup> If meaning is understood to be a function of unity and coherence, what happens when coherence is countered by a view of text as fractured, unstable, and self-subverting? If truth is mobile, relational, and resistant to totalizing, can there be any truth to the claim that meaning is a re-presentation of fixed forms, and that textual meaning can be properly articulated when its forms are properly revealed? Can texts, even figuratively, be ‘owned’?

From her perspective as a feminist biblical scholar, Tribble maintains that “a fixed, unchangeable text is neither possible nor desirable.”<sup>37</sup> But this self-described “theological reflection” does not seem to jive, in theory or in practice, with Tribble’s rhetorical method. The notion that description is an objective task, subject to being more or less rightly done, suggests not only a stable text but one that is verifiable. With form inscribed in the letter of the text, only a change in the text received (or a correction in reading) will justify change in the forms perceived. Tribble mitigates this fixity with the implied logic that form is a function of form-content, but she does not escape the larger logic that the coherence of form and content, insofar as it is accessed by a description distinct from interpretation, is an objective matter. The impression left is that within her rhetorical system, Tribble’s findings function with the authority of fact. What is possessed is not only

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<sup>36</sup> Adapting the “aesthetic hypothesis” of Ronald Dworkin, Patrick and Scult advise that the goal of interpretation is to read a text as “the best text it can be,” a standard that “introduces a certain indeterminacy” by deferring judgment to the reader’s sense of aesthetics (*Rhetoric and Biblical Interpretation*, 85). For Tribble’s critique of this rubric, see *Rhetorical Criticism*, 46-47.

<sup>37</sup> “Postscript: Jottings on the Journey,” 148.

a great familiarity with the text, but also a command over how a text makes its meaning, over the poetry and the poetic.

The irony of this aspect of rhetorical criticism—its claim to access—is that in the process of reading a poem, something of the poetic is lost. The relational structures said to interact in the process of meaning-making (form-content, description-interpretation, text-reader) are constrained by a rubric that fixes structure and binds reading to it. Beauty and truth, traditional subject domains of rhetoric, are likewise constrained. One is limited to the balances of mimetic coherence; the other is absent what Mieke Bal calls “the metonymic contamination of its motivated pursuit.”<sup>38</sup> These are the charges that have dogged Tribble’s rhetorical readings: that her method turns the text into an objective mechanism, a puzzle to be solved, and yields a readerly perspective at once authoritarian and ahistorical.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> “Body Politic,” 154. Bal is addressing “the impossibility of pure meaning” or the fallacy that a non-ideological interpretation (or description) is possible. The motivated pursuit for structure pervades rhetorical analysis. One of the problems with rhetorical criticism in its Muilenburg-Tribble formulation is the implicit claim that certain linguistic patterns, where present, dominate meaning. Where patterns are inconsistent, the tendency is to render coherence by imposing the terms of a structure on the text. Sherwood notes evidence of this methodological compensation in rhetorical readings of Jonah by Tribble and Magonet (*Form and Meaning*), both of which, Sherwood claims, “stress symmetry, patterning, order, and deal in tables, diagrams, charts—consigning those bits that do not seem to cohere to a perfect logical scheme to a brief spate of ‘symmetrophobia’” (*A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 225).

<sup>39</sup> On the charge of ahistoricism, see in particular Exum, “Feminist Study of the Old Testament,” 96; and Bal, who associates Tribble’s “[failure] to use the otherness of the other culture as a heuristic tool” with ahistoricism (*On Story-Telling*, 71). Schüssler Fiorenza levels a similar attack against rhetorical criticism when she accuses Tribble of glossing the social, cultural, and theological problems of the Hebrew text with a logically inevitable combination of “neo-orthodox hermeneutics” and intrinsic analysis (*In*

At issue in these critiques is the reduction of meaning, a problem that stems from the linearity of this approach to text. The claim that structure is a yield of the “*ipsissima verba*” invokes a text in which the ‘very words’ lie flat on the page.<sup>40</sup> A description that can re-present these words in a structure without introducing difference (*différance*) relies likewise on linear or two-dimensional relationships. These relationships work for simple systems in which one thing leads directly to another but they cannot account for the relational complexity at play in the reading and making of texts.<sup>41</sup>

If poetry, as Barbara Johnson suggests, is “the repository of knowledge about the resistance of language to intentional dissolution,” with “‘absolute randomness’ . . . the outer limit of that resistance,” then rhetorical criticism argues *for* poetry.<sup>42</sup> But rhetorical criticism also demonstrates against poetry’s resistance to ‘intentional dissolution’ by reading its models of structure not as interpretations of the text but as distilled stand-ins for it. This substitution—structure (form-content) for text—is made possible by the separation of description from interpretation; a separation that disentangles the text from its reader and grants description the status of objectivity.

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*Memory of Her*, 19-21). In an apparent parody of Trible’s defense of form-content unity in text (“[a] literary artifact is not a container from which ideas or substance can be removed” [*Rhetorical Criticism*, 92]), Sherwood dismisses methods that treat the “text as a word-search puzzle that can be ringed and solved, or as a box stacked with precious things” (*A Biblical Text and Its Afterlives*, 229).

<sup>40</sup> *Rhetorical Criticism*, 105. Alice Bach criticizes Trible for being “satisfied with an analysis of the surface text” (“Reading Allowed,” 198).

<sup>41</sup> See my reading of the veil as a figure of linguisticity and complexity in chapter 5, pp. 187-216; and see below.

<sup>42</sup> *A World of Difference*, 7.

The claim that description is an independently verifiable activity privileges the work of ‘showing,’ rhetoric’s category of *mimesis*, over ‘telling,’ rhetoric’s *diegesis*.<sup>43</sup> The suggestion that the text ‘speaks for itself’ elevates telling to the level of showing (the reader’s task is to tell what the text shows) and grants interpretation the status of being correct. While rhetorical criticism is not alone in its privileging of objectivity, the method seems particularly ripe for the deconstruction of privilege that comes with seeing description, like interpretation, as “a fiction-making activity.”<sup>44</sup> Sounding a critique and a note of resonance, Johnson could be addressing rhetorical criticism when she writes:

Instead of according moments of textual self-interpretation an authoritative meta-linguistic status, deconstruction considers anything the text says about itself to be another fiction, an allegory of the reading process. Hence, the privilege traditionally granted to showing over telling is reversed: ‘telling’ becomes a more sophisticated form of ‘showing,’ in which what is ‘shown’ is the breakdown of the show/tell distinction.<sup>45</sup>

Rhetorical criticism under a different rubric—that is, with a different set of assumptions—is available to this kind of deconstructive practice. (The attention to detail in the language of Derrida and Dōgen, explored in chapter 4, offers an example.<sup>46</sup>) When description is understood as an act of interpretation, not only is the traditional hierarchy of showing and telling reversed, the artificial separation of “‘literal’ and ‘figurative,’ . . . visual and verbal” is undone.<sup>47</sup> Under these conditions, reading can pay attention to the

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<sup>43</sup> See B. Johnson’s analysis of *mimesis* and *diegesis* in *A World of Difference*, 18-19.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> See my section on “Language and Death: Reading as Deferral,” pp. 161-77.

<sup>47</sup> Bal, “Body Politic,” 154.

detail of text, to small and large-scale rhetorical relationships, without presuming that the reader is in any way excluded from those relationships. This inclusion is an advantage for a method that delights in breaking down the distinction between doing and saying and that seeks to show its reading strategies as part of the process of telling about a text.

An interpretive or *hybrid* description unsettles the provisional difference between form and content (or ‘form-content’ and ‘meaning’), between text and reader, between the fiction-making of structure and any other aspect of interpretation. Rhetorical criticism can make this shift by acknowledging the self-difference of showing and telling, neither of which stands as an independent category. As constructs of reading, rhetorical structures are preceded by the stories they tell.<sup>48</sup> Their descriptions are creative and constitutive, inscribing an approach to meaning-making in structures that express the already moving relationships of reading. Rhetorical analysis plays on this point when its readings are crafted in forms that reinscribe (show again) what they would tell. (An example is reading a mountain structure in Psalm 90 by writing a mountain structure about it.) From this perspective, rhetorical criticism’s figures are not unlike figures of speech, dividing and multiplying according to the logic of figuration.<sup>49</sup> Like “[f]igures of speech, especially spectacular ones,” rhetorical structures show what language often tries to hide: “potential weaknesses in the system, places where its workings are visible, places

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<sup>48</sup> In the tradition of text as “already a translation,” this reading assumes “the impossibility of a position that is not already a relation (Kamuf, “Introduction,” xv). For comment on Octavio Paz’s oft-cited adage, see Barnstone, *The Poetics of Translation*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> On the logic of figuration, see chapter 5, pp. 192-217.

that remind us that our truths are not self-evident.”<sup>50</sup> Rhetorical criticism, in a ‘new new’ form, looks to make a strength out of this weakness.

*Beyond Rhetorical Criticism: Mountain Climbing and Text Making*

Early on in *A World of Difference*, just after a helpful analysis of deconstruction’s deconstruction of ‘truth’ in reading, Johnson advises that “the one imperative a reading must obey is that it follow, with rigor, what puts in question the kind of reading it thought it was going to be.”<sup>51</sup> Johnson has unpacked “the illusion that objectivity is situated somewhere outside the self” and raised the risk of therefore “setting oneself up as an arbitrary arbiter.”<sup>52</sup> Her reading turns to the element of surprise, suggesting that the ability to meet up with and propagate surprise—an encounter with “otherness”—is what constitutes a strong reading. “No methodology can be relied on to generate surprise,” writes Johnson. “On the contrary, it is usually surprise that engenders methodology.”<sup>53</sup>

It is as difficult to claim surprise for a reading as it is to judge whether a rhetorical structure mapped and elaborated by a particular interpretation is convincing to anyone but its author. (Critics of rhetorical criticism argue that this is seldom the case.<sup>54</sup>) Johnson’s rubric of emergence suggests that the question for readers is not one of truth but surprise. Does a mapping of rhetorical relationships add anything new to reading? Does it unsettle what is expected? Does it engage reading in an encounter that generates connections,

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<sup>50</sup> McLaughlin, “Figurative Language,” 89.

<sup>51</sup> *A World of Difference*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 13 and 15, respectively.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 15

<sup>54</sup> See, e.g., Michael Fox, *A Time to Tear Down and a Time to Build Up*, 148; see also Jennifer Koosed’s comments with reference to Fox in “Decomposing Qohelet,” 251.

questions, unforeseen gaps? Is a methodology engendered by something that is bound to change worth following?

The notion of mapping a reading process—especially one motivated by surprise, is incongruous, like showing the impermanence of something. It conjures scenes of leaving a trail of crumbs in the woods and expecting to find the way back, or writing messages in the sand before the tide comes in. To map a process that is emergent and unpredictable is to render an example of Lyotard’s classic depiction of the postmodern as “that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms.”<sup>55</sup> Have I then allowed myself the ‘solace’ of a ‘good form’ by reading Psalm 90 as a recursive structure described by chiasm? Have I compounded the leniency, errant for my time, by taking up the psalm as a map of reading? Lyotard’s paradox of the post modern— “of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*)”— suggests there is no way to deny this.<sup>56</sup> What I would like to suggest is that the forms presented in the course of this project are signs of the kinds of relationships that emerge when rhetorical structures are read as complex models.

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<sup>55</sup> *The Postmodern Condition*, 81.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* Lyotard writes: “A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he [sic] writes, the work he [sic] produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. Those rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer, then, are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what *will have been done*. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en oeuvre*) always being too soon” (Lyotard’s italics). I am reminded of Zen’s *alas!*

Complexity is itself a helpful model for envisioning a conversion from a modern rhetorical method governed by ‘proper articulation’ and a verifiable correspondence between ‘form-content’ and ‘meaning’ to a postmodern practice of rhetorical reading. In perhaps its simplest terms, the move from modern to postmodern is a move from simple to complex order. Simple systems are mechanistic and determined. Self-contained, their processes are linear, hierarchically organized, and predictable.<sup>57</sup> They are subject to dissection and reassembly. Complex systems function organically. Their parts interact in a web of relationships which no single part controls. They are open-ended, recursively-organized, and unpredictable. A complex order can be analyzed but doing so affects the system. This kind of order can only be known within the limits of a relationship to it.

The ‘new science’ of the last century—relativity and quantum theory—initiated a paradigmatic change from simple to complex order by recognizing that the universe does not operate like a well-tooled machine. Reality, it turns out, behaves more like a living organism. Ushered in by the physical sciences, this new paradigm for understanding altered thinking across disciplines. Despite the variety of pursuits in philosophy, psychology, history, education, archaeology, literary theory, theology, and biblical

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<sup>57</sup> For a similar description of simple orders, see Reynolds and Craven, *Higher Education Reconceived* (forthcoming). Doll also discusses simple order with reference to closed systems. Citing the work of Ilya Prigogine, he notes that “closed systems . . . ‘exchange energy but no matter.’” As Doll puts it, simple, mechanical systems allow for “no spontaneous development of energy nor any transformation of matter into energy” (*A Post-Modern Perspective*, 57). It does not seem much of a stretch to apply these observations to text and interpretation. One thinks of the ideal goal of historical criticism: to get at what the text really meant, the *matter* of the word unchanged.



interpretation, complexity serves as “a common episteme.”<sup>58</sup> For rhetorical criticism, the epistemic change to complexity means rethinking a construct of relationships largely oriented by a mechanistic view of text and reader, and figuring out what it means to treat as organic the connections a rhetorical reading makes.

*Excursus: Complexity and Chaos*

Complexity as an interpretive model entered literary theory by way of the science of chaos. During recent decades, the complex orders of poststructuralism and quantum theory have intersected in this developing discipline. (Reality’s interdependence is expressed in reading’s interdisciplinarity.)<sup>59</sup> Where quantum mechanics recognized the necessity of relationship to knowledge and the essential role of change in constituting reality—a discovery fraught with hermeneutical implications, its insight focused on small-scale fluctuations that do not necessarily translate to the level of experience. Within a linear system, these ‘quantum fluctuations’ do not seem to make much difference in macroscopic events. The rules of change fail to connect with everyday experience. But a nonlinear system tells a different story. As Katherine Hayles explains, this is where chaos theory with its models of dynamic nonlinear systems provides a “missing link.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> See Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, 176.

<sup>59</sup> This is not to say that postmodern notions of textuality and indeterminacy grew out of science. Hayles argues that the affinities between poststructuralism and chaos are “so extensive that the most likely source for them is no single site but the cultural matrix as a whole” (“Complex Dynamics,” 11). For a more extensive analysis of the synchronicities between deconstruction and chaos theory, see Hayles, “Chaos as Orderly Disorder,” 305-22.

<sup>60</sup> “Complex Dynamics,” 12.

Chaos is complexity writ large. When mapped, approximated, it presents a model of change that unpredictably connects small-scale events and large-scale effects. The pattern of these effects was first made visible in Edward Lorenz's computer-generated 'phase space' diagram of weather. Lorenz's model emerged as a template of his own experience. In trying to predict the weather, he chanced upon the pattern of change in an unpredictable system. Lorenz isolated the variables that make up the basic structure of weather and fed them into a computer. In numerous repetitions, expected patterns were generated, but always with a disturbance, an unexplained difference. The process showed that within order there was disorder; what physicist James Gleick called an "orderly disorder."<sup>61</sup>

Then one day Lorenz behaved in a manner consistent with what his model of weather suggested about reality. Thinking it wouldn't matter, he introduced a miniscule change to the sequence of variables, rounding one number up by one one-thousandth.<sup>62</sup> The result was a difference so dramatic it hardly resembled his earlier findings. Lorenz had bumped into what science calls "sensitive dependence on initial conditions" or, more

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<sup>61</sup> Gleick, *Chaos*, 15. The phrase has become a standard epithet for the complex order of chaos. In his overview of the history of chaos theory, Gleick identifies Lorenz's discovery as the "seed for a new science" (16). Lorenz's investigation is variously narrated in Gleick, 9-31; Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, 146-52; Reynolds, *Learning is a Verb*, 22-24; and Taylor, *The Luminous Web*, 93-97. The storied nature of these accounts indicates how the Butterfly Effect has stirred imaginations.

<sup>62</sup> Lorenz's computer stored six decimal points in its memory, but printed out only three to save space. When Lorenz wanted to restart the program without going all the way back to the beginning, he entered the numbers exactly as his computer gave them. The difference was between .506127 and .506 (Gleick, *Chaos*, 16).

poetically, “the Butterfly Effect.”<sup>63</sup> He saw that the tiniest change—such as a single flapping of a butterfly’s wings—in one part of a complex system can create a major change in the system at large. And he caught a glimpse of the surprising incongruity of cause and effect in a non-linear system.<sup>64</sup> Rather than dismissing the data as a mistake due to inadvertent interference in the recording process, Lorenz recognized the necessity of unpredictability to the structure he was studying; not only weather, but the workings of chaos.

The pattern of change Lorenz happened upon is not noticeable to the ‘naked eye’ (an eye without the lens of a model), nor does it show up on a typical two-coordinate graph, a graph of only two variables. But when variations in movement are collapsed into one point on a graph and this point is followed over time, a visible pattern emerges.<sup>65</sup> The disorderly order of chaos generates a shape. What is seen is a matrix of relationships; a dynamic system relating—always with a difference—back to itself. What is shown is not an order—even the order of complexity—in isolation, but a correspondence across scales; a pattern of unpredictable change made (relatively) coherent by its relationships.

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 23; see also Kauffman, *At Home in the Universe*.

<sup>64</sup> See Hayles, *Chaos Bound*, 11. Hayles’ explanation for the dominance of linear dynamics in modern science is instructive: “non-linear differential equations do not generally have explicit solutions” (ibid.). Contrary to modern mechanical assumptions, linear systems do not predominate in the natural world. There, non-linearity is the rule.

<sup>65</sup> As Doll explains, a phase space graph depicts an entire system “relating to itself moment by moment” (*A Post-Modern Perspective*, 91). The pattern does not inhere in the movements themselves, but in the relationships between movements played out in time.

Lorenz's graph of the Butterfly Effect, a figure of chaos, looks like the wings of a butterfly or the eyes of an owl: "a beautiful double spiral in three dimensions."<sup>66</sup> It is an example of a *strange attractor*, not a linear order anchored by a single mid-point but a chaotic order that arranges itself around a central area.<sup>67</sup> Doll describes the image and the orderly disorder it represents in terms of three distinguishing features:

One, the 'chaos' described is not a wild, random abandon. Far from it; the pattern is quite orderly but complex . . . . Two, the trajectories have both 'bounds' and a center 'attractor' area. Neither of these are precisely defined, but as the trajectories fly out from the center area they are attracted back, only to fly out again. The system, in its dynamic tension between moving out and back, has an overall coherence. Three, on occasion, any given point on the trajectory will 'flip over' from one 'owl's eye' or 'butterfly wing' to the other. These 'flip over' events are certain to happen over time but unpredictable for any given moment. One cannot say when such flipping will occur, only that it will. The pattern is random, but it is a pattern.<sup>68</sup>



Lorenz attractor<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Taylor, *The Luminous Web*, 96.

<sup>67</sup> Hayles provides an accessible explanation of strange attractors in *Chaos Bound*, 143-174. See also Gleick, *Chaos*, 117-53.

<sup>68</sup> *A Post-Modern Perspective*, i; as quoted in Craven, "The Book of Judith," 229.

<sup>69</sup> Wikipedia, s.v. 'Attractor,' <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Attractor> (accessed January 20, 2007).

There is an orbit of purpose to the interjection of this excursus, a foray into chaos which may seem to have run off the page. The Lorenz attractor is a visual metaphor for reading much as *הר* (mountain), *תורה* (law), *אש* (fire), *בוסיה* (veil), and *דברים* (words) are interpretive metaphors for each chapter in this study.<sup>70</sup> In all cases, the strange attractor is complexity, an order of meaning-making that is emergent, recursive, self-reflexive, and self-organizing.

This is the order I have intended to inscribe by reading Psalm 90 as a content chiasm; by imagining what that might have to do with a psalm—the only psalm in the Psalter—attributed to Moses; and by reading connections to other Mosaic texts as part of a web of recursions that refigure “the mountain of God” (Exod 3:1). My reading has been constructed through a series of feedback loops, connections that lay down the lines of structure while adding new information that alters the orbit of those lines. These loops make for meaning that is emergent, as my experience with this project attests; and, in various ways, self-organizing. Rather than beginning with an end goal or a fixed structure to be reinforced, the process self-selects. One recursion feeds into another—an act of response and manipulation, and each choice affects the whole in unpredictable ways.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The term ‘visual metaphor’ is borrowed from Doll, who refers to the colloquial descriptors of “owl’s eyes” and “butterfly wings” as “visual metaphors” for the Lorenz attractor (*A Post-Modern Perspective*, i).

<sup>71</sup> Cilliers ventures a definition of self-organization as “a property of complex systems which enables them to develop or change internal structure spontaneously and adaptively in order to cope with, or manipulate, their environment” (*Complexity and Postmodernism*, 90; italics removed). He then details the attributes of self-organizing systems, one of which is spontaneous *symmetry-breaking* (91-95; Cillier’s italics).

The approach I have taken to reading these related texts is also self-reflexive. It is limited to reading, understanding text as a complex order of relationships that can challenge and even surprise reading but that cannot mean in isolation.<sup>72</sup> This approach has yielded a constellation of returning, in each of the texts I have studied and in the study as a whole. But it has not yielded a closed system. Instead, it has made something like a strange attractor out of the mountain structure ascribed to Psalm 90. By rereading this structure in various recursions—in Exodus 32, in the shape of the Psalter, in Exodus 34, and as a ‘passage’ through death to wisdom—a more complex image of the mountain has emerged and a different order for rhetorical analysis.

The *difference*—a spacing much discussed throughout this project—for rhetorical reading does not relegate textual structure to the nether-side of a binary opposition. When differently framed, the ‘solutions’ of rhetorical criticism become genuine questions: How *are* texts like musical compositions? What stability for a text is gained by the order of its words? Do structures like the Psalm 23, with its 26 words before and 26 words after the line “for you are with me” (v. 4b), remove that text from the canon of deconstruction?<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Theological language is self-reflexive in this sense when it is understood as language about human ‘being’ and not about God (see Scharlemann, “Being Open and Thinking Theologically”). Humans cannot speak from the point of view of God, nor, as Bultmann and Derrida have expounded, is it possible to speak *about* God. For Bultmann, the only theological address available to humans is the one Psalm 90 makes: “You are God.” For Derrida, language about absolutes is immediately displaced by its relativity. (See Bultmann, “What Does It Mean to Speak of God?”; and Derrida, “How to Avoid Speaking.” Both essays are cited in earlier chapters.)

<sup>73</sup> Awareness of this structure has become part of the popular domain of psalms studies. For an example, see Craven and Harrelson’s commentary on Psalm 23, “The Psalms,” 771.

What is the ‘outer limit’ for structures worth noting? (cf. Johnson’s comment on ‘absolute randomness,’ cited above). Is there anything to be said for the *bodiliness* of text; and is the acknowledgement of physical dimension, as Terry Eagleton suggests, in some way vital to engaged reading?<sup>74</sup>

Eagleton’s unsettling appeal to materiality speaks to the disorderly order of text and to my understanding of rhetorical structure. He writes: “But a body of course is just a way of acting upon the world, a mode of access to it, a point from which a world is coherently organized. ‘A body is where there is something to be done.’”<sup>75</sup> The body of Psalm 90, as it arrives on the page in a particular configuration of words, is a place for the imagination to act, and to be restrained. This reading of recursions has expanded that space and invited the body into a ‘season of belief.’

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<sup>74</sup> Addressing how “we encounter the world,” Eagleton writes, “if any very ambitious forms of it are denied us, then it is not long before we catch ourselves wondering whether there is really anything out there, or at least anything quite so fascinating as ourselves” (*The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 12). Seyla Benhabib ventures a similar argument in her feminist-critical study of postmodernism when she emphasizes the danger in “debunking as ‘essentialist’ any attempt to formulate a feminist ethic, a feminist politics, a feminist concept of autonomy and even a feminist aesthetic” (*Situating the Self*, 230). Rather than disseminating the opposition of constructivism and essentialism, these perspectives attempt to unsettle it.

<sup>75</sup> *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, 12. The quote is from Merleau-Ponty (uncited).

## CHAPTER 7

### RESTING IN RECURSION: PSALM 90 AND OPEN-ENDEDNESS

*You have been our resting place  
from generation to generation*  
Ps 90: 1

If nobody has ever found out where Moses was buried, is this not because there cannot be one single place for the Book?

Edmond Jabès

The first time I read the Hebrew text of Psalm 90, I was sitting in front of my computer with a screensaver that read: “Flowers fall amidst our longings and weeds spring up amidst our antipathies.”<sup>1</sup> I had planted the quote from Dōgen as a reminder of the exquisite impermanence of desire and the endless concepts that attach to our dislikes. (Now I also hear ‘amidst our *antinomies*.’) Commentators will say Dōgen meant nothing of the kind; he simply expresses things as they are. Psalm 90 also expresses what is—in the voluble language of human lament. As far as the ‘prayer of Moses’ may seem from the cultures of Zen, when I looked at the Hebrew verse that day and saw a pattern of return, it felt like coming home.

Coming home is one way of describing recursion, except that home is never the same place twice. To return is to change. Recursion as a reading practice acknowledges

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<sup>1</sup> This translation was suggested to me by John Gaynor (personal communication). Variants of the line from Dōgen’s Genjō-kōan can be found in Tanahashi, ed., *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 69; and in Yasutani, *Flowers Fall*, 19.



this loop and the gap it implies, while also challenging the temporal illusion that change is the other side of a boundary called ‘now.’ Recursive reading, or intertextuality at multiple levels of scale, begins as already other than itself, already a relationship, already in the flux of meaning-making. It ends, when it comes time to end, also changing; and leaves behind nothing outside of a changing relational paradigm.

Psalm 90 is not *about* reading, though this ancient prayer wouldn’t be about anything without it. But the psalm is about change. It addresses the human condition of temporality, the guarantor of change, by calling to return an endless God. And it expresses a change in perspective on the turning issue of the value of “our days” (vv. 9, 12, 14), “our years” (v. 9), “our lives” (v. 10). As I have read it, Psalm 90 makes this turn by looking, perhaps as directly as humans are able, at divine wrath and human suffering, and by asking for wisdom. The psalm evokes in reading a set of relationships that speak to these issues and engender surprise. In this way, Psalm 90 is not just a passage about wisdom, but a passage to it.

The web of recursions that generated the mountain template for this reading also generates change. The association with Moses, the shape of a content chiasm, the image in the psalm of mountains begotten (v. 2), intertextual connections with Exodus 32 and 34 and, in turn, with the burning bush of Exodus 3, the turn in the Psalter at the beginning of Book 4, a sense of movement in the psalm from inevitable loss, through death, to an imperative of fulfillment, and a return in the end to the psalm’s opening name for God (*Adonai*, vv. 1, 17)—all feed into this. In chapter 6, I offered the Lorenz attractor as an image of the kind of change generated by this reading of Psalm 90. The disorderly order

of those butterfly wings, a visual metaphor for reading, is another way of seeing the mountain image of a multiply reread Sinai. Five interpretive metaphors have been offered as well in this project; holographic headings over each of the chapters that rereads, from another point of view on the mountain, the psalm (chapters 2-6). Taken together, these guiding tropes generate another recursion of the strange attractor that is Psalm 90.

In this chapter, by way of conclusion, I will look at these tropes and reflect on why I chose them. Why, for example, the *law* (תורה) as a correlate for ascending through dust “to dust” (v. 3)? Why the mountaintop symbol of *fire* (אש) instead of cloud or smoke or “a sigh” (v. 9)? Why the sign of a *veil* (מסורה) at the incoming of “wisdom” (v. 12)? While these questions have not gone unaddressed in the course of my reading, they spawn connections that provide a way of looking back at the path taken.

Another question will close this study and, in some sense, bring it back to the beginning. What does it mean to read Psalm 90 *as if* it were a psalm of Moses? The potential elaborations of this association are endless and, as emergent meaning provides, unpredictable. Here, I will reflect on two that emerge from this reading; by considering a relationship between the “resting place” in Psalm 90 (בַּעֲוֹן, v. 1) and the lack of a final resting place for Moses; and by rereading the psalm’s “heart of wisdom” (v. 12) as a covenant with change. As feedback loops in an open-ended text, these closing comments continue to venture a link between the wisdom of Psalm 90 and wise reading, and to draw the psalm’s recursions into Jabès’ Mosaic paradigm where ‘no single place’ for reading can be found.

*The Imagined Mountain: Making Tropes Make Sense*

In music, a trope is a form of embellishment that delays a cadence and adds to its expressive quality. Musical tropes are interpolations, often improvised. They can be as simple as a single turn or as elaborate as a string of notes, a melisma that heightens the penultimate moment of a particular melody. Figures of speech are a different sort of trope, but not entirely different in the way they operate. Linguistic figures—metaphors, for example—also exercise a kind of delay by introducing a difference that must somehow be bridged. The imagination enters in with its melisma of associations.

The five tropes used as chapter headings in this study are more than ornamental. Neither can they be identified solely with writing’s favorite muse, metaphor; though they do function as metaphors. They are what I call *attractor metaphors*—figures of the imagination born out of connections between texts, both strategic and unexpected. As metaphors, these signs introduce the kind of surprise and wonder that comes from saying: *הַר* is a mountain, the word *תּוֹרָה* is a law, or *מָסוּחַ* is a veil—all expressions that elaborate, in some sense, the reading process this study has explored. To my mind, these metaphors tell the story of Psalm 90 in different terms. They also initiate the terms of this reading. (See Camp’s comment that “metaphors create us and not the other way around.”<sup>2</sup>)

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<sup>2</sup> “Metaphor in Feminist Biblical Interpretation,” 34. While I agree that reality is constructed, and largely by language, I also note Eagleton’s critique of unqualified constructivism when it comes to the imperative to change social conditions. (See my references to Eagleton’s argument in chapter 6, p. 247.)

To call these tropes attractors is to relate them to the image of the Lorenz attractor and to the disorderly order it expresses. As attractors, *הר* (mountain), *תורה* (law), *אש* (fire), *מסווה* (veil), and *דברים* (words) are focalizing signs that keep the loops of reading from running off the page. At the same time, they are signs of mobility and unpredictability, generating matrices of association beyond the control of a fixed structure. Like strange attractors, these tropes are not signifiers of a single act of meaning-making—a ‘system’ at a given moment in time, but are figures of a process. Whatever meaning they convey is a measure of reading relating to itself across the multiple recursions of Psalm 90’s mountain passage.<sup>3</sup>

Like musical tropes, these attractor metaphors heighten the expression of my text and create a space for added improvisation. They point to the role of the imagination in reading, as well as to the order of change I read in Psalm 90. In chapter 5, I described that order in terms of hybridity and recursion, language that unsettles the self-perpetuating opposition of making and breaking, sameness and difference, self and other. In chapter 6, I extended the language of complexity to address the false distinction between showing and telling, a distinction that has plagued rhetorical criticism in its encounter with the postmodern. The chapter tropes in this study offer another recursion of this unsettling. As hybrid signs of attraction and dissemination, they overturn division and hierarchy, not by contesting difference but by rendering it more complex.

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<sup>3</sup> See Doll’s explanation of a strange attractor as an image generated by a “system relating to itself . . . over time” (*A Post-Modern Perspective*, i).

Where signs are set up, idols easily follow. This warning, implicit in language, has special resonance for a reading that plays on the Mosaic provenance of Psalm 90. (Here enters the question, what comes from reading *as if* a psalm of Moses?) The attractor metaphors of chapters 2-6 counter—or unsettle—the fix of ‘idolatrous’ reading. They do this not only by implicating the imagination in the construction of signs, but by addressing the structure of the imagination, which divides and falls when its strange attractor order is denied. Tellingly, such a breakdown shows itself in a default to binary opposition, a lapse Stephen Crites describes in terms of the “opposing pathologies” of an imagination gone awry:

In one case imagination turns hectic, destroying its figures in a kind of mad infanticidal rage before they have even taken definite form, perhaps in a rage against any existing world, perhaps in haste to get on with yet another abortive experiment. The opposite and more common pathology of imagination is a necrophilic fixation on an inherited order. Here, too, imagination is active, shoring up an already dead structure of things and imposing it even on the melancholy children that life continues to bring forth, as if they were born already old.<sup>4</sup>

Crites’ first-case scenario of a divided imagination calls to mind deconstruction’s impulse to infinite regress. Unrestrained by structural meaning, deconstruction ‘runs off the page’ in a *disorderly* disorder that denies even chaos the ‘solace of a good form.’<sup>5</sup> In contrast, Crites’ second “and more common pathology” evokes the divine prohibition against idolatry, a commandment to maintain a healthy imagination when it comes to

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<sup>4</sup> Crites, “Unfinished Figure,” 173.

<sup>5</sup> See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, 81; and my discussion in chapter 6. On the boundedness of the orderly disorder of chaos and of strange attractors, see also chapter 6.

conceiving the uncontainable otherness of a living God. (Here, Moses enters the scene of reading.) The “fixation on an inherited order”—by a community of faith or a community of readers—limits the mutable relationships of meaning-making to an *orderly* order, substituting continuity and predictability for complexity. As Crites puts it, this fixing of the imagination’s issue is tantamount to bringing forth children “already old.”

In analogy with signs, idols represent a reification of the imagination. They are place-holders for one side of a linear equation. Figures of speech are idols when they lose the capacity to mean more than one thing. Rendered inert by the failure to change, such figures busy the imagination at “shoring up an already dead structure.”<sup>6</sup> Their aim is to hold the text still. This is not the aim of the five words set up as attractor metaphors in this study—hybrid signs of mobility that reinscribe a structure and provide another means of interpreting the relationships that make it.

The sign for chapter 2 is  $\text{רֹהַר}$  (mountain), an image that stands over the whole of this project. This is the least complicated of the tropes I have used, and perhaps the most complex. The word occurs in Psalm 90 in the plural ( $\text{רֹהַרִּים}$ , v. 2) and in a position that happens to correlate with my initial reading of the text (chapter 2). But the image I have

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<sup>6</sup> Crites, “Unfinished figure,” 173. On the notion of “dead metaphors,” see Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 52, 64; see also idem, “The Metaphorical Process,” and *The Rule of Metaphor*. Leo Purdue addresses the life and death of metaphor in *Wisdom in Revolt*, 24-27. Derrida deconstructs the privilege of metaphor and the assumptions that grant it in “White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy,” and “The *Retrait* of Metaphor.”

in mind is not so much a derivative of the psalm's vocabulary as it is a cipher for the relational order I read in Psalm 90 and for the process that generates it.

הר is a sign of recursion, 'brought forth' by recursion. The mountain contour ascribed to Psalm 90 rose up in the course of multiple readings. By the time the crossover patterns of a content chiasm spread out and narrowed on the page, associations with Moses, Sinai, theophany, the law, the land, the shape of the Psalter, Zion, the Temple, and the kind of loss expressed in diaspora had all come into play. The lens of a strange attractor amplified these relationships. Within this density, it cannot be said that the rhetorical structure of Psalm 90 *begins* with the words of the text, anymore than it can be said that a body begins with the bones. But in the scheme of reading, rhetorical structure does provide for bones. The mountain is given materiality even as it moves, irrevocably, off the page.<sup>7</sup>

It is easy to envision הר as an attractor, a figure generated by recursion that flings reading to the edge of meaning and draws it back toward a focal area. It is harder—one could even say even *strange*—to approach the sign, in its strictest sense, as a metaphor: הר *is* a mountain. This does not mean הר *represents* a mountain; a literalism, though language is inured to imagining it so. Neither does it mean הר *is like* a mountain; a simile, though comparisons can be made. (Reading is *like* mountain climbing, but to note this is to remove reading from the rocky ground.) It may be that the most conducive way to

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<sup>7</sup> See again my discussion of Eagleton's aesthetic of materiality as a necessary part of how we encounter—and change—the world (above, note 2; and chapter 6, p. 247).

understand *הר* as a metaphor is to encounter the sign—face it, climb it, traverse it, reread it, construct it, (erase it)—and see what new meaning is made.

*הר* is the suspended space of reading. It is a grid in motion, “a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.”<sup>8</sup> *הר* is the world rising, and falling, too. It is a sign, a text: the difference that makes meaning possible and the endless change that dissolves it. *הר* is the relations that fan out like the fractal patterns of limbs on a tree, the veins in leaves, or the iterating rings around the eyes of an owl.<sup>9</sup> In other words, *הר* is the order of complexity; *הר* is emergence; *הר* is change. But *הר* is also the fact that confronts reading and confronts, in particular, the reader of Psalm 90: “the fatal intersection of time and space.”<sup>10</sup> In this, *הר* is the unrepeatable sign, the particularity of a text (gone in an instant), the structure—however relative—that reading requires. It is the view from now that changes what it means to be here.

As an attractor metaphor, *הר* (mountain) is the hybrid ground of this reading. It is the ascending, descending, confronting, emerging place where Psalm 90 meets Moses, always with a difference; and where lament moves, like metaphor, from what has been known—“generation to generation” (v. 1)—to the unknown. Each of the intertextual excursions that make up this study reiterates, in some way, this mountain form. Each new

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<sup>8</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 22.

<sup>9</sup> These iterating patterns in nature are common examples of recursion, similar to the patterns seen in the Mandelbrot and Julia sets, fractal images referenced in earlier chapters.

<sup>10</sup> Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” 22. Foucault uses the phrase to refer to the impingement of history on our understanding of space. I use it to name the transience of our read structures, which nevertheless do organize space.



reading of the psalm also changes the mountain. (The place of returning is not the same place twice.<sup>11</sup>) On another level of scale, the mountain is a focal image that draws the chapter tropes of תורה (law), אש (fire), גוססה (veil), and דברים (words) onto the page of a larger order. The collective constellation of relationships makes a path that in this reading is called ‘mountain.’

תורה (law) is the attractor metaphor for chapter 3. The sign emerges out of the intersection of Psalm 90—as if a psalm of Moses—and Exodus 32, a connection that has been widely noted in terms of shared vocabulary and used to theorize the psalm’s attribution to Moses (see chapter 3 for references). The significance of תורה as an attractor is elaborated by the mountain shape of my reading, the shape of the Psalter, and the breaking and giving of the law that happens, more than once, on Sinai. From the beginning, תורה is a recursion, a point demonstrated by Moses’ smashing of the law before it is received (Exodus 32), by the ‘second law’ of Deuteronomy, by Joshua’s copying of “the law of Moses” (Josh 8:32), and by “the book of the law” found (possibly rewritten) by the high priest Hilkiyah (2 Kgs 22:8; 2 Chr 34:14). Torah proliferates, always with a difference. (See chapter 3.) As a chapter trope, תורה draws together these associations and generates a doubled meaning: the *law* of YHWH and the law(s) of reading. Both laws issue from the heightened landscape of Psalm 90 through the mutable patterns of recursion, a ‘law’ of return.

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<sup>11</sup> This echoes my earlier likening of recursive reading to stepping into the Heraclitean river. The hybridity of signs signals that recursion begins in self-difference, a point I make throughout this study.

תורה, on the face of this mountain, is a sign of difference. The law that holds humans accountable in a world where they return to dust also points to the God in whose otherness time is of a different measure (“for a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday that is past, like a watch in the night,” Ps 90:4). This תורה is a matter of urgency, addressing humans to return to right relationship with God even when the tangible signs of that relationship—the signs that are *known*—are destroyed. Reading the shape of the Psalter as a narrative outline of the failure of the Davidic covenant—with the destruction of the temple and loss of the land—and a return to ‘Exodus faith’ in the figure of Moses offers another version of this law.<sup>12</sup> The Psalter as a reread Sinai, a recursion of Psalm 90, is a fitting place for its giving.

For reading, the sign תורה *is* a law: a law of memory, history, and narrative. What we choose to forget in order to re-member this sign, how we re-conceive ourselves in constructing it, and how we tell the endless search for totalization that founders in creative self-difference and leads to return will indicate the meaning of the sign. In this, תורה is itself a mountain. It is a recursive structure, imagined, constructed, traversed, read. It is a terrain that teaches us the temporality of our lives and the seasonality of our meaning-making. It is, according to the going and returning of Psalm 90, holy ground; set apart by difference and set up as a place of encounter with the all-consuming other.

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<sup>12</sup> See references to Mays, Wilson, McCann, and deClassé-Walford in chapter 3, pp. 97-116.

The attractor metaphor for chapter 4 is **אש** (fire). This sign is the most enigmatic in my text and the most dangerous. It settled on my reading early on, emerging out of associations between the psalm’s rhetoric of wrath in vv. 7-11, the theophany of the burning bush in Exodus 3, and the revelation of YHWH in seeing the “back” and hearing the “name” in Exodus 33-34; a revelation emblazoned once and for all on the face of Moses. (Of the four theophanies on Sinai, these two—the first and the last—are revealed only to Moses.<sup>13</sup>) In Psalm 90, the vocabulary that invites these associations includes three words for divine wrath, all of which bear the nuance of burning (**אף**, “anger” or “burning,” vv. 7, 11; **חמה**, “wrath” or “heat,” v. 7; and **עברה**, “fury” or “flaring up,” vv. 9, 11).<sup>14</sup> The image of being “consumed” (**כלה**, v. 7) by this burning—the verb, **אכל**, is famously associated with the burning bush—and of human “secrets” (**עלמו**) exposed in the “light of [the divine] face” (v. 8) adds fuel to the fire signified by this trope.<sup>15</sup>

To read Psalm 90 as a mountain alight with fire—a fire that consumes, overwhelms, and brings to light what we would hide; that ends our lives and leaves us “in darkness” (v. 10); that burns with a power which, even in faith, cannot be understood—is

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<sup>13</sup> The four Sinai theophanies occur in Exod 3:1-4:23; 19:16-19; 24:15-18; and 33:12-34:9. For an extended comment on the fourth theophany and its relationship to the first, see Dozemann, “Exodus,” 136.

<sup>14</sup> See chapter 4 for word studies and references.

<sup>15</sup> The expression of the divine presence as a consuming fire also occurs in Exodus 24, where Moses ascends “the mountain of God” to receive the law written by YHWH (v. 13). The mountain is covered in cloud, but YHWH’s “glory” is also visible: “like a devouring fire (**אש אכלת**) on top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel” (vv. 15-17).

to read the psalm as an encounter with God and with death.<sup>16</sup> In chapter 4, I read the encounter with death in two ways. The first, a response to the intersection of fire and death, looked at death in terms of the most devastating burning I know, the Holocaust. The second, a perspective my reading of the psalm had anticipated, considered the encounter with death in the altogether different sense of a realization that allows the day at hand to be counted as complete. Both of these readings speak to the transience of human life and, in different ways, to its unbearable suffering. Both reflect a moment of surprise, of what Milan Kundera calls “tearing through the curtain of pre-interpretation.”<sup>17</sup> For both readings, the text is a site of revelation. In this dual reading of death on the mountain under the sign of fire, life as we know it is brought to an end and the psalm’s encounter with God is given a form.

The question, why the attractor  $\aleph$  for the middle verses of Psalm 90 gives rise to another question: why associate the putative “prayer of Moses” with the Holocaust? What triggered the surprise of coming to the top of the text’s chiastic and intertextual structure and finding there the image of an organizing trope burning with the “strange fire” of *holocaustos*?<sup>18</sup> In retrospect, the daunting emergence of human burning could have come from reading a text that exposes the darkness of human affliction at the same time that it laments the fragile brevity of human life. Or from imagining that Psalm 90 walks its

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<sup>16</sup> See my alternate translation of vv. 7-11 in chapter 4, p. 133, where  $\text{וַנִּעְפֹּד}$  is rendered “and we are in darkness.”

<sup>17</sup> *The Curtain*, 92.

<sup>18</sup> See references to Lev 10:1 and wrong sacrifice in Beal and Linafelt, “Sifting for Cinders: Strange Fires in Leviticus 10:1-5,” cited in chapter 4, p. 136, note 13.

lament of transience by ascending toward an unpredictable and uncontrollable encounter with the reality of human death. A vision of Auschwitz, the adjudicator of ‘after,’ could have emerged from an association between Moses, the shape of the Psalter, and diaspora. Or from the intertextual thread between Sinai and Moriah to which poets of ‘the final Exodus’ attest.<sup>19</sup> The emergence of  $\Psi\aleph$  in this altered form—not the fires of theophany but ovens of unholy death—could have come from the evocation of a burning God by Jabès, who, after the Holocaust, writes no longer of a Bible but of “*the burning Book*.”<sup>20</sup> There is also the possibility that, like my mountain text which turned into a breast in the reading, the trope from the top of Psalm 90 recalls the horrible burning as a witness *against* the “evil” we have seen (v. 15) and a warning that death should not be anything other than a natural part of life.

In the harrowing narrative of Wiesel’s *Night*, a woman among eighty people in a boxcar cries out through the course of two nights, “Fire! I can see fire!” and “Look at the fire! Flames, flames, everywhere. . . .”<sup>21</sup> Until finally the train arrives. Wiesel writes: “In front of us flames. In the air that smell of burning flesh.”<sup>22</sup> Later, in his “Plea for the Dead,” Wiesel addresses the fires of Auschwitz as “the defeat of the intellect.”<sup>23</sup> As Jabès puts it, “the thread has been cut.”<sup>24</sup>  $\Psi\aleph$  in my text signifies all of this. It also signifies

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<sup>19</sup> See chapter 4.

<sup>20</sup> *Book of Resemblances* 2, 16. Jabès’ italics.

<sup>21</sup> *Night*, 22-25.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 26

<sup>23</sup> “A Plea for the Dead,” 71.

<sup>24</sup> *Book of Resemblances* 2, 61.

another kind of cut. This is the death chapter 4 hinted at, with the help of Dōgen, as the “dropping off of body and mind,” as an end to “the curvature of the self in upon itself,” and as an end to language that is realized in every word we speak.<sup>25</sup> It is in this sense that I understand the ‘word’ of Psalm 90 as a surprise encounter with the God of creation and a commentary on how we make meaning when we read.

In chapter 4, I drew some parallels between Derrida’s deconstructive word play and Dōgen’s playful reordering of words and letters (Chinese and Japanese characters). Derrida’s slashes and hyphens, parentheticals and respellings are intent upon showing language as “the *rupture* with totality itself.”<sup>26</sup> While Dōgen would not disagree with the rudiments of language, like the necessity of difference to the linguistic construction of meaning, his words are given to convey the emptiness of all our constructions. For Dōgen, the ‘rupture’ and ‘totality’ are, like all things of this world, devoid of any lasting substance. Each and every gesture, each moment of our lives, is the full expression of this elusive transience.

Under the sign of fire, chapter 4 described the *realization* of meaning as a leap into the present moment. Such language is easily misunderstood, particularly in a culture rife with self-help manuals and all manner of practices designed to train the mind. The attractor metaphor 罨 turns these formulae to ash. It suggests instead that Psalm 90 be

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<sup>25</sup> For Dōgen’s realization of “dropping off,” see Tanahashi, *Moon in a Dewdrop*, 70; cited in chapter 4, p. 172, note 116. For Luther’s diagnosis of the “curvature of the self in upon itself,” see Luther, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 2, 161, l. 35; cited in chapter 4, p. 180, note 151.

<sup>26</sup> *Writing and Difference*, 71.

read as a koan, a text whose realization conveys the reality it inscribes. In chapters 5 and 6, I describe that ‘reality’ in terms of an order of change—an orderly disorder that renders the world and our reading of it in a matrix of recursive relationships, strangely attracted toward a ‘center area’ and flinging out in loops that (re)figure the edge of what we know. In this reading of Psalm 90,  $\Psi\aleph$  marks a turning moment. The psalm’s middle passage is exacting, in ways not unlike Moses’ repeated trips up Sinai. Fire is hard to avoid. Yet the connections that generate  $\Psi\aleph$  as an attractor for the middle of Psalm 90 do not consume the Sinai story’s more opaque indicators of divine presence: smoke and cloud.<sup>27</sup> Despite the apparent brilliance of fire, the ambiguity of divine disclosure is not lost in this complex trope. Fire consumes and illumines; kills and gives life. Yet to say that the God of Moses is ‘both/and’ with respect to fire is a simplification, a reduction that Psalm 90, in its bringing forth of wisdom, does not make. The complexity of  $\Psi\aleph$  and its reading in relation to Psalm 90 suggest a hybrid mingling of the functions of fire; of burning and burning up, of revelation and unknowing. Chapter 5 looks into this hybridity as a way of refiguring the world and reading on in the psalm’s order of return.

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<sup>27</sup> See, for example, Exod 19:18, where Mount Sinai is described as “wrapped in smoke, because YHWH had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln.” Elsewhere the smoke is replaced by cloud, the daytime version of the pillar that leads the Israelites through the wilderness, a “pillar of fire by night” (Exod 13:22). For further references, see chapter 4.

The attractor metaphor for chapter 5 is *מסוה* (veil). The veil is a mixed sign of doubling and difference; a divide that both conceals and reveals.<sup>28</sup> It is also a recursive sign, always already moving, always more than itself. The veil arises in my reading as a recursion of the law (*תורה*, chapter 3). Its placement at the beginning of chapter 5 is, once again, an indicator of intertextual and structural associations. Where Exodus 32 and the shape of the Psalter helped to generate the loops of ascent in my mountain reading of the psalm, the veiling of Moses' face in Exod 34:29-35 speaks to the spiral of the other side. Through these associations, Moses' final descent from Sinai provides a lens, not unlike a veil, for reading the descending or returning verses in Psalm 90 (vv. 12-17). On another level of scale, Exodus 32-34 lend their form to a recursion of Psalm 90, a prayer that begins and ends in the God of creation (cf. the doubled giving of the Sabbath law in Exod 31:12-17 and 35:1-3); a lament that rehearses the return "to dust" (*אֶדָם*, v. 3; cf. *דָּךְ* in Exod 32:20), encounters the one who alone understands and outlasts mortal frailty, and comes round to an imperative for wisdom and compassion that recalls the language of YHWH's first prophet (*שׁוּבָה . . . וְהִנַּחֵם*, v. 13; cf. Exod 32:12).

In this study, *מסוה* is a sign of language and an indicator as to how reading *goes on* 'after death'? The question, posed by reading the psalm's middle passage (vv. 7-11) as a dual encounter with death, lingers at the end of this study, just as it lingers, in another

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<sup>28</sup> Veils in general do this, though chapter 5 does not undertake a reading of veils in general. It is careful not to ascribe its constructions to the veiling of women, though interesting parallels between cultic control and the covering of women's faces could be drawn. Neither does the chapter relate the veil's function as a sign of dissemination to the various functions of veils in contemporary society, a topic for another day.



form, in the psalm's rendering of the future to God ("the work of our hands, establish beyond us!" v. 17). One way of responding to this question is to take Psalm 90's plea for "wisdom" (v. 12) as the next step. Then the answer to *how do we go on?* is given in the asking: "To count our days truly, teach!" (v. 12). The simplicity of this response conveys something of the "heart" (v. 12) Psalm 90 brings forth. Another way of responding, also conveyed by the psalm's imperative of grace, is to note that the world in which wisdom unfolds is this very world, veiled in language, crying out for meaning, and gladdened when days of joy bring a measure of balance (cf. v.15).<sup>29</sup> In other words, the days that count as simply as 'one, two, three' (or *one, one, one*) are replete, not only with grace if it comes (cf. *hesed*, v. 14), but with the hybridity and complexity of being human.

As a sign of language, מִסוּהָ is a veil. The sign Moses assumes is the difference required for the dissemination of meaning. By choosing to read the figure of Moses in relation to Psalm 90, I have wielded this difference. Like the editors of the Psalter who installed the name of Moses as a heading for Psalm 90, I have marked the text as reread and appropriated "the man of God" (v. 1) as an attractor metaphor for it. The process is a matter of invention, as I would argue all reading is. The resulting recursions relate to the text in ways that I believe enrich its reading and also tether it to a structure, an order of relationships that keeps a complex and often unpredictable reading from 'running off the page.' That said, the מִסוּהָ put on by this study's *as if* reading of the psalm—*as if* a prayer

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<sup>29</sup> On the psalm's 'imperative world of grace,' see chapter 2's reading of the seven imperatives and two jussives in vv. 12-17.

of Moses, *as if* the mountain of God—is not so much a veil as it is a way of elaborating a theme that lies at the heart of Psalm 90: the theme of return.

The placement of chapter 6 at the end of this study rather than at the beginning reiterates the psalm's theme of returning. The attractor metaphor for the chapter, דברים (words), does the same. Words are the stuff of recursion, the 'repository of knowledge' about the relationality of the world and the intuition that such knowledge is incomplete. In chapter 6, I looked back at my own words: the path this reading of texts has taken and the methods and models out of which it emerged. I analyzed my approach to Psalm 90 in terms of complexity; as emergent, recursive, self-reflexive, and self-organizing. The chapter contextualized my work as interdisciplinary; beginning with Barthes' insight that interdisciplinarity creates "a new subject that belongs to no-one."<sup>30</sup> To the conversation between biblical studies, literary theory, complex systems analysis, curricular theory, music, and Zen, I added a metaphor for reading drawn from chaos theory. Pressed by the discipline of naming my method, I characterized it, following Johnson's rubric for reading, as a methodology of surprise. Under the sign of דברים, it is also a methodology of recursion.

Chapter 6 returns to הָרַר with a doubled measure of meaning. The chapter reflects on the process that made this project's imagined landscape and links it back to my initial reading of the psalm in chapter 2 (הָרַר; see below). דברים thus brings into view the overall

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<sup>30</sup> For the reference to Barthes' quote from "Jeunes Chercheurs" and James Clifford's translation of it, see chapter 6, p. 224, note 9.

structure of my reading: a strange attractor or ‘visual metaphor’ for Psalm 90, which I have interpreted as a reread Sinai.<sup>31</sup> The image that represents this returning lies flat on the page unless the imagination generates the recursions that make relationships mean in multiple, complex ways. Then, like *words*, these related attractors fling their connections to the edge of meaning—much as Psalm 90 ventures toward the edge of life—and, like words, they draw reading back into the flux of disorderly order where this interpretation happens.

#### The Strange Attractor of Psalm 90: A Reread Sinai

אש (fire)

תורה (law)

מסוה (veil)

הר (mountain)

דברים (words)

In the schema of this mountain reading, דברים is not a conclusion but an end that has come into sight; a descent that returns to a place of rest. Chapter 6 inscribes that descent by reading the method(s) that shaped the mountain passage of this study in relation to the end of Psalm 90. In that chapter, my analysis of method is an expression of “the work of our hands” (v. 17), offered in the spirit of another iteration of the psalm, with a difference. My words about ‘the path taken’ are a willing declaration of structure: of relationships both strategic and unexpected, made in the course of a study whose contribution to an understanding of text is as transitory as the “days” it wishes “to count”

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<sup>31</sup> See my description of the Lorenz attractor image at the end of chapter 6 as ‘a visual metaphor for reading.’

(v. 12). In the end, Psalm 90 does not escape such transience, but opens to it by pleading the opportunity for another generation of “children” (v. 16) and of “work” (v. 17) to “[tear] through the curtain of pre-interpretation.”<sup>32</sup> Whatever future may come, it will be without our knowledge of it. This, for the psalm, is a returning.

Is this the *rest* of open-endedness into which Psalm 90 empties with its plea for “the graciousness of *Adonai* our God” (v. 17; cf. v. 1)? Is the recursion of  $\text{ָןָ}$  a sign of it? Is a reread Sinai? If so, the “resting place” ( $\text{ָןָ}$ , v. 1) to which the psalm returns “from generation to generation” (v. 1) is also a place of reading. The superscription to Psalm 90, linking the psalm to “Moses, the man of God” (v. 1a) indicates the reach of these connections. Just as there is no single resting place for Moses, no burial for the bones of the prophet who met God on one mountain and died on another, there is no single place for the text; and no single place for its readers. To return to this endless uncertainty is to rest in the complexity of recursion. With Psalm 90, it is also to be able to say, “You are God” (v. 2).

Psalm 90 begins with this confession and, by virtue of structure, returns to it. But something changes in the process. This project has been a way of reading that change and of *making* it—in rhetorical structure, in a matrix of texts, and in a changing image of order. As I have read it, Psalm 90 reckons the change it inscribes as wisdom, though the psalm never lays claim to the knowledge it seeks. Instead, its lament shapes a bringing

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<sup>32</sup> See the reference to Kundera, *The Curtain*, cited above.

forth that, by my count, does “teach” a new reckoning of the value of “our days” (v.12). And it teaches the fearsome complexity of that value.<sup>33</sup>

The association with Moses, an *as if* stance from the beginning of this reading, suggests to me that the mobile returning Psalm 90 engenders be read as a ‘covenant’ with change. The psalm’s “heart of wisdom” (v. 12) then calls to mind the “new covenant” in Jeremiah (31:31-34), with its law of relationship written on that most mobile of surfaces, the human heart. The law ‘written on’ Psalm 90 by these rereadings of texts is mobile and mutable in a way that Jeremiah—or Moses—might not have imagined. It is hybrid and emergent, disseminated in difference; it is a mountain on fire and a word veiled even in the unveiling; it is an orderly disorder, generated by relationship and generating change; it is a law of return to a here and now that is gone in the time it takes to think it. In this pluriform ‘covenant,’ Psalm 90 comes to rest—and, with Moses, to return to reading.

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<sup>33</sup> Kundera touches on this complexity when he lauds the novel for the capacity of its storytelling to “reveal the immense, mysterious power of the pointless” (*The Curtain*, 21).

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