

I

Introduction

TWO TREES: FRYD AND GLEDE

I used to know two trees. I called them *Fryd* and *Glede*, Delight and Joy, but I do not know what they called themselves. They stood on a lawn, next to each other, their branches interwoven, a three-minute walk from my dorm; one a star magnolia, the other a northern magnolia. The star magnolia would blossom first, then the northern, but both bloomed before their leaves came in. They were, for me, messengers of spring. I would visit them. Once, with a friend, I licked moisture off their petals. The raindrops tasted faintly of flowers.

My roommates thought I was strange – beyond the occasional tree-hugger joke, they did not know what to make of my enthusiasm for the trees. Even I, when I think about it now, am unsure how to explain or conceptualize my interaction with the magnolias. The spring symbolism is clear enough, but that hardly exhausts my relationship with these trees. I went to them for comfort, for a kind of companionship. They contributed to my sense of home in ways I cannot put into words. But the difficulty of sorting out my side of things pales in comparison with the difficulty of sorting out their side of things. I do not know what the trees were to themselves, how they, as trees, experienced the world, or experienced my repeated presence. I know I thought they were sisters or friends, and that *Fryd*'s blooms would encourage *Glede* to get going. *Fryd*, to my mind, was extravagant, profligate. She dressed herself in floppy, crisp-white flowers, like a marshmallow wedding dress; lace, beading, silk, layers – why choose one when you can have all? *Glede* was more staid. Each bloom elegant: cream, with pink rising from the bottom. Her buds

were precise and sculptural, like bone china, each poised and in its own space. Her flowers did not fall over themselves in giddiness; they sat on gray branches, profound and ecstatic, like queens and empresses.

But what were these trees in themselves? How did they experience each other? How did they feel the coming of spring, how did they know when to put out flowers? Did my passion for them register in any way? Did I encroach on their space, were they indifferent, or did they enjoy visits? I don't know and I don't know how to begin to know. I recognize that my thoughts about *Fryd* and *Glede* smack of anthropomorphism, of fruity sentimentality. But this shortcoming only begs the question of what real intimacy between humans and trees looks like. Is any such intimacy possible? I do not know, but I know that other people know. I have read about animists, people who interact with all kinds of persons – trees, rocks, foxes – and I have read the Bible: “The trees of the field will clap their hands . . .” (Isaiah 55:12); “I call today the heavens and the earth to witness against you . . .” (Deuteronomy 4:26)¹ – this from the mouths of Isaiah and Moses! The heavens and the earth, looking at us; so says Torah. What is all this about? What view of the world underlies these texts? What relationships did the biblical writers have with trees, soils, and skies?

What follows is an inquiry into these and related questions as they present themselves through the text of the Hebrew Bible. I use the classical tools of biblical studies, including close reading, historical comparison, and linguistic study, to think about intimacy and relationship between humans and nonhumans in the biblical text. The biblical writers return, again and again, to descriptions of the world that allude to a plenitude of persons: bellicose rivers, frisky mountains, fields draped in mourning. This book is an exercise in taking such language seriously; I don't mean literally – there is plenty of metaphor here – but seriously. What do these texts suggest about how ancient Israelites viewed and interacted with the world?

I will argue that texts across the Hebrew Bible demonstrate that its writers viewed nonanimal nature as active and alive, that is, as persons. By nonanimal nature I mean all elements of the cosmos excluding humans and animals, what in the modern West would be considered inanimate nature. I use the term “person” as a goad, a difficult term that is meant to make us uncomfortable. I hope that the tension between Western notions of personhood and of nonanimal nature will be a productive tension, one that might free our imagination to reconsider how we think of the

¹ All translations of biblical texts are my own, unless noted.

world and its relation to us. This is important if we are to understand the biblical text: a personalistic view of nonanimal nature influences how biblical writers narrate interaction among humans, nonhumans, and God. Rather than viewing nature and its elements as raw material or landscape, they describe the heavens and the earth, mountains, trees, and rivers as creatures that engage with other creatures and are able to hear and obey commands, protest human misconduct, lament and offer praise, and affect human history. Though a number of texts could be brought to bear on my thesis, I will mostly confine myself to texts in which nonanimal nature performs actions, displays affect, or is addressed in a manner similar to how one addresses a person; I collectively call them personalistic nature texts. These texts have not received sustained attention in previous scholarship and have never been studied together as a group.

TWO AIMS: EXEGESIS AND ECOLOGY

I have two aims. The first is exegetical: to arrive at a more accurate and detailed understanding of personalistic nature texts and their role in the Hebrew Bible. The second aim is ecological, namely to think about how we, in the contemporary world, interact with the world around us and to consider how engaging with the Bible's active understanding of nonhuman nature might influence our ethics and the scope and nature of contemporary environmental action. As such, my aims echo Jane Bennett's, in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, in which she explores "the capacity of things – edibles, commodities, storms, metals – not only to impede or block the will and design of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, and tendencies of their own."² Bennett writes about these "capacities" with two goals in mind, one philosophical and one political. The philosophical project of her book is "to think slowly an idea that runs fast through modern heads: the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert."³ This aim is much like my exegetical aim; I will "think slowly" through texts in which nonanimal nature behaves like persons. I will treat with suspicion the common-sense "fast" idea that nonanimal nature is inert, and the concomitant assumption that ascribing activity to it is, therefore, always only

² Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University, 2010), viii.

³ *Ibid.*, vii.

symbolic or ornamental. Bennett's political goal is "to encourage more intelligent and sustainable engagements with vibrant matter and living things," and she uses as a guide the question, "How would political responses to public problems change were we to take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies?"⁴ I ask the same question, but use the biblical text as the source material for ecological reflection. Bennett hopes to contribute to "more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption."⁵ "My hunch," she writes, "is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies."⁶ Like Bennett, my hope is that attending to personalistic nature texts will prove useful for contemporary ecological engagement.

In particular, I hope to contribute to discussions in Christian and Jewish communities, for whom the Hebrew Bible is scripture. Richard Bauckham, in his book *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology*, uses language similar to Bennett's, though with a religious bent, to describe what is at stake in taking seriously nature's praise of YHWH.⁷ He writes: "The more we praise God with the other creatures, the more we shall want to resist the relentless trend towards a total humanizing of the world in which the rest of creation will have become no more than the material from which we have fashioned a world of our own creation."⁸ Attention to how nonhumans praise YHWH is, he says, "the strongest antidote to anthropocentrism in the biblical and Christian tradition."⁹ Terence Fretheim, in his book *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation*, also considers texts in the Hebrew Bible in which nonhumans praise YHWH. He asks: "[W]hat kind of thinking about God and what kind of thinking about nature would have occasioned this kind of language?"¹⁰ The language he refers

⁴ Ibid., viii. ⁵ Ibid., ix. ⁶ Ibid.

⁷ YHWH is the English rendition of the four Hebrew letters יהוה, which make up the divine name. Orthodox Jews do not say or write with vowels the divine name. In consideration of Orthodox readers, I have rendered the divine name as YHWH throughout, including in quotations.

⁸ Richard Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures: Green Exegesis and Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2011), 154.

⁹ Ibid., 150.

¹⁰ Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament: A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2005), 250.

to includes Isaiah's call to the mountains, the forest, and its trees to "break forth into shouts of joy" (Isaiah 44:23), and the incorporation, in Psalm 148, of the sun, the moon, the heavens, the waters above the heavens, the deeps, fire and hail, snow and frost, strong wind, the mountains and all hills, fruit trees, and cedars in YHWH's chorus of praise. Bauckham and Fretheim query one particular kind of personalistic nature text, namely those in which nonanimal nature receives summons to praise, but texts that attribute activity to nonanimal nature are much more diverse than this. Jeremiah says to the heavens, "Be desolate . . . at this, be horrified, be very dry" (Jeremiah 2:12), Joshua commands the sun and the moon to stand still in the sky (Joshua 10:12), and Moses recruits the heavens and the earth to witness against Israel (Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 32:1). This project resists anthropocentrism not only by exploring nature's praise, but also by attending to its mourning, its responsibilities in creation, its attentiveness to humans and YHWH, its articulateness, and its joy.

This kind of attention requires putting aside commonsense notions about where life begins and ends, what a person is, and who and what can be in a relationship. Bennett writes that studying the vibrancy of matter "requires that one is caught up in it."¹¹ "One needs," she says, "to suspend suspicion and adopt a more open-ended comportment. If we think we already know what is out there, we will almost surely miss it."¹² Bauckham points to the eighteenth-century poet Christopher Smart as an example of someone who embodies this kind of "open-ended comportment." Nature's praise is a key theme in Smart's poetry, as exemplified by his poem about his cat:

For I will consider my Cat Jeffry.
 For he is the servant of the Living God, duly and daily serving him.
 For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.
 For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.
 For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.¹³

The poem is both a detailed observation of the behaviors and habits of Smart's cat and a celebration of these behaviors as Jeffry's forms of worship.

¹¹ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xv. ¹² Ibid.

¹³ Jubilate Agno, Fragment B. The section of the poem that concerns Jeffry can be read at www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/jubilate-agno-fragment-b-i-will-consider-my-cat-jeffry. The poem in its entirety is over 1,200 lines.

In Bauckham's words, the poem is "playful as well as serious."¹⁴ It is a charming, funny portrait of a cat, and a serious theological reflection on the relationship between God and a nonhuman creature. Reading personalistic nature texts require something of Smart's spirit, or of the spirit he attributes to his cat, "a mixture of gravity and waggery."

Another person who embodies this spirit is Martin Buber. In *I and Thou*, he writes about two ways of looking at a tree:

I consider a tree. I can look at it as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background . . . I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law . . . In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and conditions.¹⁵

This is the tree as *It*, as object, but Buber insists there is another way to look at a tree: "It can . . . also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer *It*."¹⁶ Buber emphasizes that becoming "bound up in relation" to a tree is not an instance of humans projecting meaning onto the world. For the relation to be real, it must be mutual. "The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no value depending on my mood; but it is bodied over against me and has to do with me, as I with it." To deny the mutuality of the relationship would be "to sap the strength from the meaning of the relation." Buber is unsure of what this means for how we think about trees (does the tree have consciousness?), but he is unambiguous about the reality of the meeting, that the *Thou* he meets is the tree: "I encounter no soul or dryad of the tree, but the tree itself."¹⁷

For Buber, the *I-Thou* relationship between humans and trees is one that is beyond words. When we address nonhuman creatures as *Thou*, "our words cling to the threshold of speech," he says.¹⁸ To meet the world and be met by it is something that must be lived; "Believe in the simple magic of life, in service in the universe, and the meaning of that waiting, that alertness, that 'craning of the neck' in creatures will dawn upon you," he offers in encouragement. "Every word would falsify; but look! bound about you beings live their life, and to whatever point you turn you come upon being."¹⁹ This book is an attempt to heed Buber's encouragement to look, while engaging with texts that do not seem to think that "every word

¹⁴ Bauckham, *Living with Other Creatures*, 154.

¹⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1950), 7.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 8. ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6. ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

would falsify.” I share Buber’s sense that my words are inadequate, but not his claim that they are, therefore, necessarily false (the fact that Buber writes at length about meeting a tree suggests that he, too, has more confidence in words than he lets on). Instead, I hope, with Maggie Nelson and Ludwig Wittgenstein, that “the inexpressible is contained – inexpressibly! – in the expressed,”²⁰ that, despite my inability to definitively describe the point of view of *Fryd* and *Glede*, I can yet say something that might help me and us be receptive to the “mutual giving” between humans and the world so tantalizingly promised by Buber.²¹

Observed at a distance, through the lens of Western concepts, personalistic nature texts appear naive and primitive, or at least the interpreter who takes them seriously appears so. From up close, with an openness to their sense of engagement, entanglement, and wonder, they reveal the rich thought of Israel’s poets on the life of other-than-human creatures and their relationship with YHWH. Taken seriously, they can provide stimulus for more careful ecological thought, a prod to make us reconsider how we treat creatures that the modern West does not consider persons: mountains, forests, soils, and bodies of water. Mountaintop removal, clear cutting, aggressive use of fertilizers and pesticides, and careless oil drilling looks very different when these acts are not only extractive resource management, but also dysfunctional relationships with persons created and valued by God.

STRANGENESS AND ETHICS

One of the challenges of using personalistic nature texts for ethical reflection is their enduring strangeness. Knowing *about* animist understandings of nonanimal nature, that is, the idea that “the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others,” does not easily translate into experience or familiarity.²² To most Westerners, myself included, study does not erase the strangeness of interacting with trees or rocks as subjects capable of response. The enduring alienness of personalistic nature texts does not, however, mean that these texts cannot inform ethics. On the contrary,

²⁰ Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, MI: Graywolf, 2015), 3.

²¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 33.

²² Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (London: Hurst & Co., 2005), xi. See Chapter 2, “Interacting with the World,” for a more in-depth definition of animism.

their strangeness is itself informative. It opens up space for new questions, approaches, and methods.

One thing that personalistic nature texts and animist traditions provide is a new language. One may infer from personalistic nature texts that interactions with mountains, trees, and, especially, farmland are social. That means that the language of social interactions is suitable for thinking about ecology. Words like etiquette, respect, generosity, and gratitude, borrowed from animist traditions and implied by biblical discourse, convey new ways of relating with nonanimal nature. For example, the Bible repeatedly insists that the ground “gives” its produce and that trees “give” their fruit (see, for example, Leviticus 25:19; 26:4; Deuteronomy 11:17); this terminology implies that the ground and trees act with generosity towards humans when they provide food for human consumption. Leviticus emphasizes that the land needs sabbath (see Leviticus 25:2; 26:34–35), and requires humans to respect this needs and to adapt their actions to it. Humans must return the generosity of the land by granting it rest. The prophetic theme of the mourning of the land (see Isaiah 24:4; 33:9; Jeremiah 4:28; 12:4, 11; 23:10; Hosea 4:3; Joel 1:10; Amos 1:2) solicits repentance and compassion from the audience. To say that a land is in mourning exceeds accusations of mismanagement. It names the land as an aggrieved person, a person entitled to restitution and consolation. Using social language to describe the relationship between humans and nonanimal nature alters the meaning of sustainability and responsible use; instead of focusing primarily on what is sustainable for human populations, the language requires that attention also be paid to the land’s needs and desires.

The difference between animistic understandings of the world and modernistic ones can seem absolute – the difference unbridgeable – yet there are people who, though they do not necessarily identify as animists, model respectful engagement with nonanimal nature. These people can serve as “tutors” in the endeavor to change how we interact with that which is not human. Contemporary farmers, scholars, and writers model how language might mold interactions with nonanimal nature. Chickasaw poet and writer Linda Hogan speaks about misuse of land in terms of broken treaties: “It is clear that we have strayed from the treaties we once had with the land and with animals. It is also clear, and heartening, that in our time there are many – Indian and non-Indian alike – who want to restore and honor these broken agreements.”²³ Logan, like Leviticus

²³ Linda Hogan, *Dwellings: A Spiritual History of the Living World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 11.

(see, for example, 26:42), frames the relationship between people, land, and animals in covenantal terms. Extractive resource management, water pollution, and global warming are deplorable not only because they adversely affect human life, but also because they fail to honor proper relationships between humans and all that is nonhuman. Such practices are forgetful of the fact that “all things are connected.”²⁴ The title of an edited volume by Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Colman, *Meeting the Expectations of the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture and Stewardship*, points to a similar logic.²⁵ Sound treatment of nature extends beyond making sure humans will have access to food, water, and clean air in the future; it includes respect for the land’s own “expectations.” Attention to the expectations of the land changes the sort of questions we might ask when faced with a decision that will affect humans, soils, forests, and rivers. We must ask both “How will our choices affect us, our children, our neighbors, people in faraway countries?” and “How will they affect pines, beeches, soil, rivers, creeks, and groundwater?” Will our action permit only a minimal living space for these creatures? How might we instead act with generosity? What might it mean to extend hospitality towards a valley, or respect towards a stand of trees?

Such questions are not new questions, though they are new to me. The anthropologist Hugo Reinert relates how the Sami reindeer herder and philosopher Nils Oskal describes proper interaction with *sieidi*, stones to whom Sámi people have traditionally sacrificed. Oskal does not describe such sacrifices as worship, but as politeness: “Common courtesy indicates that you should greet it and wish it well in your thoughts when passing it by. It is unheard of to argue with a *sieidi* or to enter into conflict with it.”²⁶ Oskal compares politeness towards *sieidi* to Christian charity; both, he claims, express “an obligation to ‘extend politeness to all beings that cross your path.’”²⁷ Extending politeness to stones, tundra, trees, and fungi will not feel natural to most people raised in the modern West, but it can nonetheless shape our thinking and action. Politeness, respect, and gratitude as measures of the value of an action set a higher standard than costs and profits, questions about human benefits and losses, even

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ Wes Jackson, Wendell Berry, and Bruce Colman, *Meeting the Expectations of the Land: Essays in Sustainable Agriculture and Stewardship* (San Francisco: North Point, 1984).

²⁶ Hugo Reinert, “About a Stone: Some Notes on Geologic Conviviality,” *Environmental Humanities* 8, no. 1 (2016): 99.

²⁷ Ibid.

questions about environmental impact. Reinert himself thinks of it as a matter of recasting questions about harm: “Can a stone be harmed?” he asks, before suggesting that one way to include stone in politics is to view it as “a vulnerable subject.”²⁸

Reinert describes two immersive, relational “experiments” in which he attempts to act as if the world is alive and sentient. The first involves a *sieidi* stone. Reinert is visiting Kvalsund in northern Norway, when the people there learn of his interest in stones. They tell him about a near-by *sieidi* stone, named Stallogargo. Reinert writes that “on [his] second day [he] went to see the stone and introduce [himself].”²⁹ He brings the stone gifts: a few coins and tobacco. His sacrifice does not make him feel either familiarity or comfort, nor does it cause a sudden change in him. He speculates, however, that it affects a second “experiment,” this time involving a property on the coast of Denmark with which he is entrusted. Everything about the property requires work: “There are floors to take up, foundations to excavate and reinforce, literal mountains of earth and stone to move and remove and fill in.”³⁰ His bodily engagement with the property changes what he sees when he looks at it:

As time and the work press, the land reveals itself to me in new ways . . . I feed the birds and hedgehogs, water the trees, pay attention to root systems and earthworms and to the time it takes for things to grow, to seasonal shifts and patterns of rain, to water flows as they articulate with the topography of dips and trenches and heights.³¹

The new owner of the next-door property models a different way of seeing and treating the land; in the space of an afternoon, he “razes the lot to the ground.”³² Reinert is grief-stricken: “I watched a hundred years of trees, plants, hedgehog habitats, and bird nests destroyed.”³³ His own engagement with his plot of land has changed how he understands interactions between humans and the spaces in which they live. The leveling of the next-door plot no longer appears to him as a reasonable building and landscaping strategy, but as a “horror,” a violation of “the mutual enmeshment of soil and self and beings.”³⁴

Of the two experiments, the second, I suspect, is the easier for most people to understand. But Reinert draws a close connection between his gift to the *sieidi* stone and his engagement with the plot of land on the coast of Denmark. He writes: “Could it be, by some logic of hidden

²⁸ Ibid., 104. ²⁹ Ibid., 107. ³⁰ Ibid., 108. ³¹ Ibid. ³² Ibid. ³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 108–9.