

ELEMENTAL BONDS: SCENE FOR AN EARTHY POSTCOLONIAL THEOLOGY

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The creative and productive future of postcolonial biblical criticism depends on its ability to reinvent itself and enlarge its scope. It should continue to expose the power-knowledge axis but at the same time move beyond abstract theorization and get involved in the day-to-day messy activities which affect people's lives.

R.S. Sugirtharajah (2008: 64).

Elemental bonds: the phrase appeared to me strangely, just a flickering thought as I meditated on images of the divine speaking from a burning bush. Dry ground and perhaps some leaves, the shining sun and a small fire, an insignificant bush and a man about to be drawn into a remarkable story. This scene shines in the imaginations of many generations of Christian, Jewish and Muslim theologians as an enticing depiction of God's awesome presence in the ordinary—divine glory.

The Bible offers numerous images of the divine encountered in the midst of the day-to-day activities of people's lives and in non-human elements. But theology has all too often ignored the earthy qualities of such theophanies, just as it has neglected its own material ground. Moving too quickly past bodies and matter to pursue a dream of salvation undisturbed by the complexities of flesh, it has even fantasized with salvation from materiality itself. As a result, our senses have become numbed and frequently fail to perceive the divine in the elemental. Do we feel the reverberations of the breath-spirit (*ruach*) moving on the surface of the waters as the beginning of creation? Can we see the cloud that guided the people of Israel through the day, or feel the warmth of the pillar of fire that kept them company in the cold nights? Do we ever hear the whirlwind as it debates with Job?

In the burning bush, with its elemental references to fire and ground, I seek an image of divine glory that inspires earthy reverence. But for all its appeal, when approached with ecological concerns in mind, the image of a burning bush also glares with ambiguity. The celebrated fire suggests connections with the less than glorious 'natural' disasters of the recent past. Wildfires, hurricanes, droughts, and tsunamis are fresh in our memories; not only fire, but the elements in general evoke fears of destruction—for good

reasons. Whether such disasters are named ‘acts of God’ or not, they are not simply ‘natural’. Complex questions of the effects of human practices in such elemental conflagrations can hardly be suppressed, especially since combustion and consumption are central aspects of life under contemporary forms of empire, indeed, its driving forces. The seemingly natural scene of Moses at the burning bush is thus disturbed as we consider the quality of our relationships to the elemental, for we are never simply passive spectators of this epiphany or mere recipients of a message from divine-flames.

In light of the mutilation of the most elemental bonds of the world, I read R.S. Sugirtharajah’s call to reinvent and enlarge the scope of postcolonial criticism and to keep grounding it in the complex realities of contemporary life as an invitation to respond to the ecological crisis of our times. In his recent assessment of the field, ‘Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation: The Next Phase’, Sugirtharajah restates his commitment to postcolonial criticism: ‘As long as there are empires, dominations, tyrannies and exploitations—either rising or resurfacing—postcolonial criticism will continue to have a vigilant role to play’ (2008: 52). He further challenges his readers to ‘recover the practical projects and recommit...to addressing the crises that affect the contemporary world’ (2008: 52). Among such crises, Sugirtharajah names terrorist attacks and asylum seeking; this essay proposes that the ecological crisis is a fundamental concern for postcolonial criticism, one that reveals the breadth and depth of destruction caused by human practices promoted by today’s empires.

Postcolonial theologies in the twenty-first century are called to make more explicit the complex effects of imperial ideologies and practices not only on the lives of human beings, but also on the non-human world. Or, more accurately, we need to make explicit the effects of imperialism in the relations that constitute creaturely life. The development of an ecologically conscious postcolonial theology—perhaps we could call it an earthy postcolonial theology—entails the investigation and critique of contemporary imperialisms as well as a creative reimagining of cosmic relationships, carefully engaging scriptural and theological images of God and creation, in the hopes that they can spark elemental wisdom.

Gods of Empire

The current political climate has led to the troubling resurgence of the gods of empires and their imitators, Sugirtharajah observes (2008: 73-77). In the aftermaths of so-called ‘natural’ disasters, as in the wake of terrorist attacks, the gods of judgment are summoned to public contests which purport to choose the mightiest one between them as well as to select between objects of divine judgment; that is, to decide between the possible Jonahs to be forced to carry the burden of guilt for divine judgment

and bear the weight for our deliberately ignored vulnerability. Whether the accusations fall on ‘the non-Christians’, ‘the infidels’, or ‘the godless liberals’, on the media, homosexuals or wall-street elites, images of angry gods issuing judgment, dispensing punishment, and reasserting their power and control over the world dominate the scene. ‘What we have witnessed has been the fragmentation of the modernist, singular monotheistic god and the emergence of many deities in Hindu, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist forms. These gods and goddesses were vying with each other not only to get attention but also to demonstrate which was the angriest of them all’ (Sugirtharajah 2008: 73-74). The emergence of these multiple gods does not spell the end of monotheism, but rather another competition for control over it: a plurality of monotheisms. Monotheism supports the ideologies of conquest and violence reflected in such battles among judging gods, Sugirtharajah argues, and furthermore it occludes the complexities of contemporary everyday life. ‘Monotheism is managed by a rigid thinking that requires stark choices between right and wrong, truth and falsehood. This kind of stark choice is unhelpful to people whose lives are inherently untidy and their experiences marked by messy and mixed-up realities’ (2008: 57).¹ Thus, Sugirtharajah invites postcolonial criticism ‘to revisit the colonizing monotheistic tendencies present in the biblical narratives’—and in theology—and embrace a multiplicity consonant with the ‘diverse nature of our modern living and the diverse nature of our experiences of the divine’ (2008: 56, 57).

Sugirtharajah’s proposed intervention in monotheistic discourses is crucial for the development of ecologically responsible postcolonial theologies, for only theologies attuned to the irreducible multiplicity of creaturely life—shaped each and every moment by human and non-human others, and thus never simply one—can do justice to its messy and mixed-up realities (2008: 57). In contrast, the logic of the One subsists only by repressing the singularity of real bodies, Laurel Schneider argues in *Beyond Monotheism*, an incisive analysis of the logic of the One and the imperialistic fantasies that haunt monotheism. ‘The story of the One denies fleshiness and the stubborn shiftiness of bodies; it cannot abide ambiguities and unfinished business; it cannot speak syllables of the earth’, she writes (Schneider 2008: ix). Indeed, the simple god of monotheism is ‘a masquerade, a projection out of the fluidity and flux of divine creation’, a theological abstraction that needs the One-Many divide to split divinity from the multiplicity of creation (Schneider 2008: 138).

1. Fumitaka Matsuoka similarly observes the limitations of monotheism to nurture Asian American. ‘For Asian Americans, our epistemology begins with the notion that reality is multiple... The Christian use of butsudan, Buddhist family altar, points to this difference. The depth-reality is not one but many’ (2008).

Postcolonial theologies are certainly suspicious of those gods whose simplicity mirror the zeal for oneness of empires; and monotheism has effectively protected and promoted the primacy of the One. Yet the complicated relationship between the one and the many cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between monotheisms and polytheisms. Sugirtharajah refers, for instance, to the complicated histories of supersessionist ideologies that have inflected our understandings of monotheism and polytheism and implicate both terms in the One-Many divide (2008: 56-57). Thus, a theology that seeks to resist totalizing impulses cannot proceed simply by claiming many divinities or many creaturely realities. Schneider proposes a logic of multiplicity, which she insists, 'is not the same as "the many"'. Multiplicity 'does not refer to a pile of many separable units, many "ones"' (Schneider 2008: 142). It is not the opposite of the One; rather multiplicity 'results when things—ones—so *constitute* each another that they come to exist (in part, of course) *because* of one another' (Schneider 2008: 142). A theology of multiplicity thus begins from an affirmation of embodied life characterized by fluidity and change, by porosity and interconnection, by elemental heterogeneity (Schneider 2008: especially 153-81).

Elemental Insights

A focus on the elements may help postcolonial theologies to bring to the fore the fluidity, porosity, and interconnection that constitute all life. Because they are utterly material and ubiquitous and yet vital and also always beyond the full control of human beings, the earthy elements are clearly non-anthropocentric images, resistant to homogenizing idealisms that tend to blind theology to the plight of the non-human world and the sacredness of its elemental bonds.

Even before the times of Socrates, philosophers drew inspiration from the elements to think cosmically. The elements named vary from culture to culture; the Greeks considered earth, air, water, and fire—often called the pre-Socratic elements—the building blocks of the universe and of human existence. They theorized that matter evolves from the interaction *between* the elements. 'The unity of things' was thus conceived as a 'consequence of the plurality and harmony of their elements' (Grosz 2002: 205). The combination of the elements was believed to constitute the very basis of subjectivity as well as 'the relations pertaining to the social and natural world' (Grosz 2002: 205). The elements influenced both the human and non-human world, affecting, for instance, the disposition of particular persons. In these ancient philosophies the irreducible relationship between matter and thinking was joined precisely in the theorization of the powers and effects of the elements.

The elements are therefore an ideal site to which Luce Irigaray returns to 'expose the limits to which the male philosophical tradition submitted when

it lost interest in the sustaining elements of the Pre-Socratic world view' (Chanter 1995: 163). In her close readings of philosophical texts, Irigaray traces the dependence of those works on the material elements that they fail to acknowledge. She goes so far as to describe metaphysics in general as a 'forgetting of the elements'—a shortcoming that her work seeks to correct (Oliver 2007: 127). Irigaray explains: 'I wanted to go back to the natural material which makes up our bodies, in which our lives and environment are grounded: the flesh of our passions' (cited in Grosz 2002: 172).

Although Irigaray's main focus has been on the effect of forgetting the elements in the relationships between men and women, today, as we seek to respond to an unprecedented ecological crisis, some theologians have turned to the elements themselves with new zeal: taking its ground seriously. Ellen Armour draws from Irigaray's work to call for constructive, 'nonanthropomorphic ways of conceiving the divine' (Armour 2006: 52). Armour argues that the pre-Socratic elements are what Irigaray calls 'sensible transcendentals', because they 'embody a material transcendence' (Armour 2006: 52). The elements are transcendent in relation to us because we are utterly dependent on them for our existence, 'and yet they exceed our grasp' (Armour 2006: 53).

The search for the materiality of transcendence articulated by liberation theologies has also occupied postcolonial theorists. Gayatri Spivak has most explicitly expounded its theoretical significance in her vision of a planetarity. In response to the increasing abstraction promoted by globalization and the resulting attempt to reduce the planet to a singular economic value system—another example of the logic of the One—Spivak proposes that human beings reimagine themselves in relation to the planet as a transcendent Other. The planet here is not independent from, but rather includes human beings and the socio-political forces we call the 'globe'. Yet this radically inclusive reality, while inextricable from our very existence, remains unmistakably 'underived from us' (Spivak 2003: 73). It transcends us, and 'yet we inhabit it, on loan' (Spivak 2003: 72).

Although Spivak is not expounding a cosmological model of divine transcendence, her proposal that, 'we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities' (Spivak 2003: 73) resonates with such a theological vision. As planetary creatures, humans are indelibly marked by their relationship to and responsibility toward the earthly Other of humanity, in all its complex multiplicity. In this view of ethical responsibility, the planet is also sacred. Sacredness for Spivak does not entail 'a religious sanction, but simply a sanction that cannot be contained within the principle of reason alone' (Spivak 1995: 199). Such view of human relationship to the planet leads Spivak to speak of a *sacred* planetarity. She assumes, however, that the major world religions can no longer ground such visions of sacred earth,

for they have been ‘too deeply imbricated in the narrative of the ebb and flow of power’ (Spivak 1999: 382-83).

Yet there is still planetary nourishment flowing from Christian traditions—although mainly from traditions at the margins of the religious establishments. For instance, Leonardo Boff’s reading of the Genesis creation narrative suggests just such a structure of planetary transcendence. Boff observes that in the creation story, human beings are created last; the world is already there to witness the becoming of the first human beings. ‘Humanity did not see the beginning’ (Boff 1995: 46). This fact of birth is the ground of our responsibility, which does not derive from human choice. ‘The responsibility is anterior to [human] freedom and is inscribed in its creational liberty’, Boff concludes (Boff 1995: 46).

Spivak’s view of planetarity reclaims a sense of transcendence *in* the world that may lead theology to a renewed sense of reverence for that in which we live and find our sustenance, instead of fixing our eyes on the imagined realms of unchanging being where we have often exiled the divine. Affirming divine transcendence in the world around us is, of course, not to say that the earth or the elements are a kind of god, nor does it entail construing its transcendence or its otherness as absolute difference or separation from humanity. I have elsewhere explored the constructive potential of Spivak’s planetarity for a theology of relational transcendence—where transcendence is experienced in the irreducibility of creaturely difference (Rivera 2007). Schneider’s vision of divine multiplicity further emphasizes the porosity and material interconnections of creaturely life, where things interpenetrate and co-constitute one another. In these relational models, planetarity is sacred and underived from us—but it is not One. Planetarity cannot be split from creaturely multiplicity, for it can only be conceived in relation to the planet’s inherent porosity, fluidity, and elemental heterogeneity. The relational and vital character of the elements resists fusion into oneness and helps disrupt the common tendency to objectify the earth.

Focusing on the elements is not an essentialist return to an idea of nature. Postcolonial theologies cannot abandon the relentless deconstruction of ‘the natural’ as a foundation for racist, patriarchal, and homophobic ideologies that lend legitimacy to imperialisms. The elemental does not take us back to such fixed fundamentals (Keller 2007). An elemental theology does not seek to extricate a referent called nature from cultural representations, but rather attend to the messy relationships between cultures and their elemental grounds. It thus admits that theology is never innocent, unmediated reflection of ‘the planet’ or ‘nature’, but as Spivak’s concept of planetarity, these terms seek to highlight the materiality of transcendence—however imperfectly. In Boff’s holistic view, the very term ‘ecology’ ‘encompasses not only nature (natural ecology) but culture and society (human ecology, social ecology, and so on)’ (Boff 1995: 9). Ecology focuses on the ‘interdependence and

interactions of living organisms' (Boff1995: 9). a relational approach that resonates with the ancient vision of the elemental continuity in human and non-human relations I mentioned above.

Despite the justified concerns of a postcolonial theory about the homogenizing impulse of dominant talk of the common—the common origin, the common market, the common language—the common must still be imagined, if only for the sake of the one planet that sustains us. Why not 'let earth itself be the ground'? Catherine Keller proposes (Keller 2007: 65).² Such a ground does not afford the fixity or rigidity of foundations that anchor imperial hierarchies or illusions of theological certainty, for indeed this earth is never fully graspable or controllable, but a rich 'elemental matrix' (Keller 2007: 66). The elemental is not a foundation. Yet a theology grounds itself on the earth, a development of what Rosemary Radford Ruether called a 'conversion of our intelligence to the earth' (1983: 89), avoids the progressivist tendency to construe getting grounded as punishment. As Sharon Betcher writes, 'Among those who are wise to the earth, 'getting grounded is actually a very ancient and widespread wisdom for "centering" and restoring spirit, for fitting a body back into its elemental and social niche. Getting grounded re-minds us to "think with the weight of the earth" ' (Betcher 2007: 317). Think with the weight of the earth. *Kabod*, the Hebrew word translated as glory, means literally 'weightiness'—an apt term for an elemental divine presence that draw us closer to earth and startles us with a vision of the ordinary.

Moses at the Burning Bush

An image of earthy-divine glory draws us back in time and space, not to the ancient Greece of the pre-Socratic philosophers, but to the desert. Mount Horeb, the mountain of God: where an encounter with the divine ignites an Exodus. We do love the Exodus narrative, especially those of us with a certain weakness for progressive impulses: confronting rulers, transgressing boundaries, leaving behind a place of oppression, venturing through dangerous deserts. An irresistible adventure! Yet Sugirtharajah has warned us of the costs of early liberationist fervor for the exodus narrative, which too often led to the celebration of the conquest of the Other in the name of an interventionist God (Sugirtharajah 2001: 27-28; 2002: 103-123). A postcolonial stance, he argued, is mindful that the Bible contains elements of bondage and disenfranchisement, in addition to liberative strands. 'What

2. Likewise, Karen Baker-Fletcher, who takes us back to the 'Spirit hovering over depth meeting earth/ swirling wind and love', seeks common ground on and with the earth (2006: 54). The soil, Baker-Fletcher observes, is not nothingness, but 'the original elements that make up cycles of life, death, and rebirth' (2006: 74).

postcolonial biblical criticism does is to make this ambivalence and paradox clear and visible' (Sugirtharajah 2002: 101). Acknowledging ambivalence and complicity in the text and in the reading, interpretation carries on. As Spivak argues, 'a literary habit of reading the world can attempt to put a curb on...superpower triumphalism only if it does not perceive acknowledgment of complicity as an inconvenience' (Spivak 1999: xii). Thus a postcolonial theology does not flee the scene of biblical interpretation; it rather attends to all of its intricate connections. In this respect, the scene of Moses at the burning bush may be read as a figure of the elemental ties intrinsic to the story: simultaneously political, theological, and ecological. The incident is not yet an adventure, but a gentle if complex moment. A warm encounter takes place, one that grounds the ensuing movement in the 'relative stabilities of creation' (Keller 2007: 65).

Moses, who has apparently been enjoying his self-imposed exile in Midian, decides to lead his flock 'beyond the wilderness', and comes to Horeb' unaware of what he would find there: God in her element (Exod. 3.1). Moses just notices that a bush is blazing. The sight is strange: a bush is burning, but it is not consumed. So Moses decides to come closer to find out why.

As Moses stares at the fire, so do we. We keep returning to the scene to contemplate that particular burning bush, as if attracted by a timeless fascination with fire. We keep staring at the flames as if recognizing in it our element—Prometheus-like? A strange pleasure: we are mesmerized by the dancing flames, drawn to its warmth, soothed by its hissing and crackling sounds. What is the source of such attraction? Do the flames enkindle our deep longing for a habitat where the fire of the sun feels close to the skin, where its presence touches? Do the flames awaken memories of the flesh, or of the comforting warmth of home? Or is this enchantment rooted in more ancient memories of solar energies shared by all earthy creatures?

Such questions allow me to relate to the scriptural references to fire as a manifestation of God. But such manifestations are often terrifying, and thus fire is not a popular element among contemporary theologians. For instance, in Mark Wallace's inviting reading of spirit in the elemental plurality of the creation, fire is associated with judgment and purification (2007). Compare this depiction with that of the other elements. As earth, Wallace argues, the spirit is divine dove and a fruit bearer; as air, it is 'vivifying breath that animates all living things', as well as the prophetic wind of salvation; as water, the spirit 'refreshes all who drink' (Wallace 2007: 295-96). In a list that includes the comforts offered by the fruits we eat, the air we breath, the water we drink, it may not be accidental to find fire mentioned last—and timidly. Judgment and purification are not precisely warming.

These implicit reservations collude with the images of dangerous wildfires to make fire a not-so-popular element. And yet, despite the common ambivalence toward fire, we can hardly ignore its blazing force in scriptural

theophanies, or the allure of the Pentecostal flames. Images would surely multiply and so will their theological significance once we get closer to the flames. The well-known images of the pillar of fire that accompanied the Israelites in the desert and the burning bush remembered in the continuous fire of the bush-like *menorah*, also evoke a protecting warmth whose term in Hebrew, *esh* ('fire'), mimics its hissing sounds. *Esh*. According to some rabbis, fire was the source for the creation of the heavens, and all that comes directly from God is fire—including the law, which was said to be black fire engraved on white fire (Heschel 2005: 333).

Contemporary science offers a similar vista. In Brian Swimme's description of the big-bang, the universe 'flared into existence around thirteen billion years ago as a super-dense concentration of *energy*, trillions and trillions of degrees hot, and then quickly develop into the first atoms'. Then suddenly, 'these atoms...join together to form the galaxies and the stars', which then 'developed in their core all of the other elements of the universe. These elements then formed new systems, star systems, such as our own sun and Earth and Mars and so forth' (interview recorded in Crossland 2003). Such was our fiery beginning, which is still part of us. 'The sun is in us', David T. Suzuki adds, 'released in our cells by processes of combustion. It's the energy of creation, taken up as sunlight, released as fire' (interview recorded in Crossland 2003).

Fire also appears as an overwhelming force, however, feared as the very judgment of God. The ancient Greeks emphasized this double nature when they distinguished the destructive fire (*aidelon*), associated with Hades, from the creative fire, associated with Hephaistos. And sometimes there seems to be a dramatic difference between them. We now know, however, that the destructive and creative powers of fire are inextricable from each other. Fire ecologists argue, for instance, that wildfires are crucial for the regeneration and survival of forests. These are, of course, not just any fires, but regimes of fire tailored to the specific needs of an ecosystem. Rhythmic cycles of drying and wetting, fire and growth. Therefore, controlling fires can be as damaging as lighting them unwisely.

Fire itself is not a substance, but a relationship. It is an interaction between other elements: between oxygen in the air and organic material, which in turn comes from earth, water, and solar fire. And there is certain 'reciprocity' between fire regimes and the plants which they naturally burn. Stephen Pyne, professor of fire history at Arizona State University, explains that fires have their own habitats. 'Some plants survive, for example, by protecting their vital organs from heat'. Others 'use the heat to their advantage: some re-sprout from roots or branches after fire has incinerated their outer limbs... Other plants opportunistically seize a site temporarily purged by fire to promote their own reproduction' (2002). What appears as destruction is often part of a cycle of renewal.

Human beings have nonetheless appropriated fire and shifted the balance toward consumption. Pyne observes that ‘about 200 years ago, we shut fire up and put it to work. With furnaces and internal combustion engines, we built the modern world. Now, we have lost touch with the sources of power. We think energy comes from a pump, instead of the sun’ (2002). Thus we no longer treat fire with respect—and have forgotten the ancient rituals for its use. Pyne continues, ‘We’re still fire creatures—never more so—but we’re not part of any process of renewal’ (2002). In contrast to the wildfire regimes I described before, there are no cycles in human patterns of burning, no moment at which we allow the earth to rest and re-generate.

We have also taken fire out of their habitats, in disregard for long-established relationships, consuming even the seeds of restoration. Pyne observes that the US ‘is recolonizing its once-rural countryside’:

This recolonization has kindled a new fire frontier that eerily inverts the old. Instead of agricultural encroachments, we have urban ones. Instead of a landscape laden with combustibles as a result of logging and land clearing, the scene bloats with inflammable structures amid an overgrown biota. Instead of fires rushing into forest reserves, fires roar out of reserves and into the exurbs (2007).

Without respect, even reverence, for relationships, a source of creative power becomes a force of destruction. We fear that destructive force, and there are always some who, in the name of Christianity, blame God for firing elemental energies toward ‘sinners’, while conveniently ignoring the power of their own elemental relationships. They seem to forget that the destruction of relations—human and non-human—ignite inexhaustible *strange* fires. (This was painfully illuminated in the failed responses to and blasphemous justifications for the destruction following Hurricane Katrina). Human and non-human relationships cannot be neatly set apart.

An interest in just relationships led early liberation philosophers and theologians back to the Mountain of God to contemplate the burning bush. They focused on the bush itself, as if restating a question from an old Midrash: ‘Why did God choose to appear in a *bush*?’ The Rabbi answered: ‘Had he appeared in the carob tree or a sycamore, you would have asked the same question. However, it would be wrong to let you go without a reply’. So the rabbi responded: ‘to teach you that no place is devoid of divine presence, not even a lowly bush’ (Plaut and Stein 1981: 407).

The lowly bush was the key for Enrique Dussel’s reading of this epiphany (Dussel 2003). He argued that this scene portrays the revelation of God in those excluded from systems of power. The poor, the Other ‘is the ‘locus’ of God’s epiphany’ (Dussel 2003: 139). This is the significance of the image of Moses facing a burning bush in the midst of the desert: it epitomizes for Dussel the face-to-face encounter with the Other. The Other beyond sight interpellates the self, like God in the burning bush. The Other calls the self

to see (and thus move) beyond the boundaries of the systems of domination, which requires openness to a surplus of meaning in common reality. Only thus can there be a possibility for welcoming transcendence in the finite existence of the human Other.

This key philosophico/theological reading of scripture exemplifies a 'search for the materiality of transcendence', which, Marcella Althaus-Reid observes, is at the heart of Latin American Liberation theologies (2004: 394). However, in its early phases, the materiality that mattered usually had a human form. Surely, the human faces in question were concerned with the very material effects of socio-economic ideologies. And yet, the focus was clearly the human face. (This is, of course, no longer the case, as evidenced in the works of Latin American liberation theologians like Boff (1995) and Ivone Gebara (1999).

What I am pursuing here is not to turn away from the encounter with the Other that this epiphany represents. I would like to suggest instead that we retain the specificity of this particular encounter and focus on the fact that it is *in* a thorny bush that Moses sees and hears the divine *as* fire. If, as the Rabbi insisted, the burning bush teaches us that no place, even a bush, is void of the divine, then may we not contemplate this as a vision of the elemental force in all things, which does not consume creation, but gives it life? God dwells in the humble. But the metaphor of dwelling can be misleading if by it we mean that there is an accidental or external relationship between the divine and physical reality. The divine is in a flame that envelops an ordinary bush, and in all creatures, as an enlivening element that does not consume—not unlike the power of intracellular combustion that warms us, moves us, and connect us to other solar creatures as to the sun.

As in other scriptural epiphanies, the medium is in large measure the message. Fire is an element of change, of becoming. Indeed, lacking its own substance, fire is nothing but relational transformation. Technically fire *is* not, fire *happens*. As observed above, fire is a reaction between elements: air, earthy matter, and the always mysterious, impermanent spark. It seems quite appropriate to its non-substantial element that the divine flame identifies itself with a famously identity-defying statement: 'I am who I am'; or 'I will be who I will be'.

When God appears to Moses, God had been touched by the cries of the Israelites groaning under slavery. The cries ascended to God. Unlike the God of classical theology, the God of Moses is no unmoved mover. Although we commonly hear references to Heb. 12.29, 'God is consuming fire', in this epiphany, what may melt is the idea of divine apathy. I would even suggest that the divine here burns with elemental passion. *Compassion*. As the heart of fire, the divine burns with non-consuming desire, just like the lover in the Song 8.6 whose love is raging flame (NRSV). At that particular moment,

the divine flame that was the very life of the bush became visible: it caught Moses' attention—and his heart. Its light and heat drew Moses into divine passion. The spark was then in Moses as it was in the bush—a holy spark. But I'm getting ahead of the story here—we need to touch ground again.

The theophany glows not only in the thorny bush, but also on the ground around it. 'Come *no* closer!' (Exod. 3.5).³ God responded, when Moses said 'Here I am' (Exod. 3.4). Perhaps in a first lesson about non-consuming love, Moses was asked to remove the sandals from his feet to stand on holy ground (Exod. 3.5). Can this ground—dusty and common—shine with divine glory as well? Is there also an earth-epiphany suggested in this passage?

This 'Come no closer!' may be read as a demand for Moses to keep his distance from the elements (so Moses is being grounded—in the punitive sense). But I'm persuaded by a more tactful request. A Hasidic saying instructs: 'Only when one is barefoot can one feel the little stones underfoot. Moses was to lead his people in such a way that he could feel their smallest sorrows' (Plaut and Stein 1981: 407). May we hear God's voice not as a demand to keep our distance, but to feel even the smallest sorrows of the earth? Becoming better attuned to the pulse of the earth, grounded, like the bush, in the dusty matters of life, we can also heed the request to approach the earth gently in order to encounter the divine in the elemental relationships of the day-to-day practices of our lives. Sparked by the same non-consuming passion of the God of the mountain, shall we not take off the things that hurt the planet—most likely not our shoes, but our cars—and also those that isolate our bodies from the pain of the earth?

Conclusion

The bushes are burning, and some of our prophets are inflamed, desiring not to rescue people from a particular land, but to contribute to healing the earth's elemental bonds. Liberation struggles surely await, but we hope none of them will entail an absolute Exodus. Instead of dreaming of dramatic escapes from the materiality, an earthy postcolonial theology becomes grounded in the complex, messy, elemental relationships of planetary life—where the bush, the ground, and the holy sparks are part of us—they are within us as we are in them. It rediscovers the inextricable connections between political, theological, and ecological: deepening its reading strategies and critiques of empire to denounce the mutilation of the elemental bonds of our world and attuning itself to traditions of reverence toward fire, water, air, and earth. Postcolonial theologies may thus accept Sugirtharajah's invitation to 'recover the practical projects and

3. I'm reminded here of Jesus' words to Mary Magdalene outside the empty tomb: 'Do not hold on to me!' (Jn 20.17).

recommit...to addressing the crises that affect the contemporary world' (2008: 52)—with non-consuming passion.

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