TELLING THE WILDERNESS:

A STUDY IN THE NARRATIVE FORMATION OF SELF AND WORLD

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ABSTRACT

This thesis relates three subjects of inquiry – the nature and function of narrative, the formation and maintenance of individual and communal identity, and the construction of the human cosmos and the places within it – to develop a theory of the function of narrative in the construction of the human self and world. This theoretical framework is applied to the world projected by the Hebrew Bible, and, in particular, to the role of wilderness places within this cosmos. Wilderness is examined by means of the concept of "liminality," as that concept has been developed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. The thesis concludes with an examination of the rabbinic rite of Passover, and argues that this rite utilizes a narrative of wilderness journey to enable contemporary participants to integrate the chaos and disorderliness of everyday life in a healthy and productive way, according to the pattern of a shared myth. The integration of life experience according to the shared myth brings about the self-identification of the individual with the larger community, and provides the community with an understanding of itself sufficient to sustain itself through the coming year.

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INTRODUCTION

I begin with a personal anecdote. I write this thesis in the city of Vancouver, a place to which I moved only a few years ago. Vancouver is, for me, a New World – a world in which I have pursued new opportunities, developed new relationships and assumed a new identity. In Vancouver I have been able to leave my personal "baggage" behind and begin again. As a result, it is a city I relish and cherish. I have enjoyed discussing this thesis with a fellow graduate student who has a very different relationship with Vancouver. My friend was born and grew up here. Her father taught at the university in which we now study. The campus where we spend our days is full of memories for her – old, old memories that sometimes get her down. Vancouver is, for my friend, a place she needs to leave behind in order to construct a world and a life of her own. My friend and I share the same material space, but we live in very different worlds. Despite the fact that the physical markers of our stories are the same – we walk the same streets, climb the same stairs, study in the same libraries, classrooms and reading room - the stories that we wind around these markers are entirely unique to ourselves.

The worlds that we inhabit emotionally, the worlds that are full of meaning for us, are constructed of memory and imagination – the same stuff from which we construct our narratives and personal identities. This thesis is about the world and time, and how we create meaning in and with both of them. It began with a personal fascination with the nature of meaning, the meaning of human being, the meaning of life. It began with the need to understand what we mean by the word "meaning" when we use it to refer, not to the sense of words, texts, or discourses, but life itself. It has become my conviction that

the meaning of "meaning" has to do with the construction of both self and world. "Meaning" has to do with who we are and what kind of world we live in. The answers to the questions "who?" and "what?" come in the form of stories: stories of self and stories of world. Stories like those that my friend and I have shared about our lives in Vancouver. Story, I believe, is the key to it all – the key to the meaning of "meaning" and the construction of self, community, place and world. This thesis attempts to relate how our stories construct self and world, and give meaning to both.

The sacred stories shared by both Jews and Christians begin with the story of creation. The Hebrew Bible opens with the words, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." The story begins with *action*, the act of creating that establishes world. Everything that happens henceforth in the Hebrew Bible happens in this world and concerns the beings within it. All stories *take place* – they assume a setting, a world, in which the events of the story occur. But this world itself has a story; it is the product of a story of the initial creative act which set the entire world into motion.

The relationship between the world that is the backdrop, the setting that is *assumed* by story, and the world that is the *product* of story is a hermeneutical one. This hermeneutical movement between world assumed and world created is fluid, dynamic and open-ended. The human world of human stories is always in motion, flux and change, to the same degree that the human self is always in motion, flux and change. To borrow and adapt an insight and a wonderful phrase from the philosopher Edward Casey,

self and world are constitutive of each other: there is no world without self, and no self without world.[1]

Narrative is what creates both human self and human world. This insight arises from my study of the later work of Paul Ricoeur, which I have developed into a theory of the function of sacred story. I begin with an analysis of those aspects of Ricoeur's work that are pertinent to my inquiry, to the point at which we begin to see emerge from Ricoeur's work an understanding of the relationship between narrative and personal identity. I then relate this analysis to the philosophical work of humanist geographers, who have applied the insights of phenomenology to create an understanding of *place* and its integral relationship to the human self and its identity. I have expanded upon this notion of place (which is contrasted with space) to develop a new understanding of *kosmos* as a *human* world – the well-ordered world of memory and imagination that the narrated and narrating self inhabits and imbues with meaning. I come to understand this humanized *kosmos* as the world which is established by myth - sacred story - and integral to the construction of a coherent self. I then outline the relationship between world and self and the construction of meaning, applying the resulting theoretical framework to an analysis of the nature and function of wilderness places and story in the Hebrew biblical tradition. By way of conclusion I examine the way in which wilderness, both as place and story, is taken up in the rabbinic Passover rite in the formation and maintenance of Jewish identity.

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[1] Edward Casey, "Body, Self and Landscape," *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* (ed. Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen E. Till; Minneapolis: University of

This thesis is written within a cultural context which is essential to its scope, purpose and limits. Its author is an "I" situated within time and place and limited by history and personal circumstance. Although I presume to speak of "story" in general, I do so from within a context within which certain stories are privileged, well-known and cherished, and many important stories are simply not known at all. The universe presumed by the universal statements made here is that of the human *kosmos* of my own small orbit. This *kosmos* is very Western, very white, and very privileged. It is primarily Christian, although those boundaries have recently become expanded to include some, limited acquaintance of the Jewish world. This *kosmos* is (to use a word coined by Hans-Georg Gadamer) my own pre-understanding that I necessarily bring into my inquiry into other *kosmoi*. It is my hope that this work may be of some benefit to those who are familiar with a different range of stories than my own, but I anticipate that my own words will, of necessity, be interpreted and applied in a manner fitting to those other stories, with which I am not familiar. This thesis makes a very great many sweeping generalizations about human beings, human meanings and human stories. Any statements of such general scope are, regrettably and unavoidably, simply arrogant. The author knows she cannot speak for all human beings in all places and all times. Nonetheless, theory requires that such general statements be made, and theory is, I believe, helpful in finding our way about in life. The theory embodied in this thesis is tentative and experimental, and all its universal statements should be understood in that light.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE: Ricoeur's Narrative Theory

> *Time present and time past*
> *Are both perhaps present in time future,*
> *And time future contained in time past.*
> "Burnt Norton"

Paul Ricoeur is a contemporary French philosopher whose intellectual roots lie in the Continental schools of existentialism and phenomenology. His lifelong fascination with the nature of creative language and his religious convictions, which give all his work a certain theological cast, led him early on to venture beyond the confines of philosophy and to explore the fields of myth and symbol, psychoanalytic theory, semiotics and semantics, literary theory, history and theology. His thought has been described by one of his critics as "irenic" and "mediating," more concerned to find agreement than disagreement with other thinkers and fields.[2] The resulting dialogue between diverse interests and positions is enormously stimulating and productive of rich insight, but it also presents hurdles of its own. The route to any conclusion is lengthy and complex, proceeding by circuitous paths across different disciplines. What follows is a fairly short introduction to his thought, which aims at obtaining from the mountain of his work just those insights that illumine how it is that the narrative systems of traditional religious communities are productive of what we call "meaning." I wish to avoid to the extent possible those meandering discussions which, though brilliant and profound, do not help us to get to the point at which I am aiming. I cannot, however, entirely avoid taking the

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[2] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1990) 4.

reader on what might seem a rather long journey. There are no direct and straightforward paths across the Ricoeurian mountain, and unfortunately, like all mountain paths, the ones that we must take are steep and demanding. But this mountain offers views which are unparalleled elsewhere, and they will, I believe, transform the reader's understanding of the valley below.

Up the Ricoeurian Mountain

Ricoeur makes his way toward narrative theory from an already secure theoretical base in the theory of metaphor. In fact, Ricoeur subsumes the phenomenon of narrative under that of metaphor, and therefore this introduction will begin with an exposition of his thought on that subject.

Ricoeur was convinced that creative discourse, *poiesis*, constitutes a form of knowing the world in its own right, alongside but different than critical reason. This is the primary thesis toward which all of his work on discourse is directed. A secondary thesis that is implicit in all his work, but not, I believe, anywhere explicitly stated therein, is that the *methodology* of creative insight is always and everywhere metaphorical in nature. That creative thought proceeds metaphorically is what makes it different than critical reason. In the Introduction to *The Rule of Metaphor*[3] Ricoeur himself describes his work as "a plea for the plurality of modes of discourse and for the independence of philosophical discourse in relation to the propositions of sense and reference of poetic discourse." The aim is to uncover and to *recover* for critical thought the mode of being,

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[3] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (trans. Robert Czerny; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) 7.

the ontology, of poetic discourse, and thus to understand better how it is that human beings engage their world.

In the same place Ricoeur describes metaphor as "the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality." Metaphor posits a different description for something already manifest to us and therefore already implicitly recognized by a consciousness that is not yet *self*-conscious. This creative positing is inherently fictional in that there is a tension in the ascription of the predicative existential, "it *is* ..." "The metaphorical 'is' at once signifies both 'is not' and 'is like.'"[4] At the same time, however, the fictional description is creative for us in that it manifests to the human consciousness aspects of that already-known which had previously remained unmanifest. This creative manifestation within the field of consciousness produces for us possibilities for knowledge, relation and action we did not have before. This is the fruitfulness of creative thought and discourse, the fruitfulness of *poiesis* which cannot be duplicated or replaced by the methods of critical reason.

Ricoeur says that metaphor creates in discourse both an impertinence and an innovation at the semantic level. At a literal level the metaphor is merely impertinent, declaring that a certain thing *is* what it obviously cannot be. A metaphorical statement is literal non-sense, the destruction of primary, literal meaning. Anglo-American philosophers, following Gilbert Ryle, describe the kind of nonsense created by metaphors as "category mistakes." The metaphorical description places the thing described into a category of things to which it simply does not belong. For example, one cannot say that

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[4] *Ibid.*

the proper number four is blue, and hope to be understood. Proper numbers are not within the category of things that possess the quality of colour. But this is the kind of trespass that metaphorical thinking engages in, the kind of trespass that renders *poiesis* a different and indeed *forbidden* undertaking for critical reason. The poet can proclaim,

> Ye blessed Creatures, I have heard the call
> Ye to each other make; I see
> The heavens laugh with you in your jubilee;
> My heart is at your festival,
> My head hath its coronal,
> The fulness of your bliss, I feel – I feel it all...[5]

and make a great deal of sense. The kind of sense called up, though, involves an intentional trespass of categories impossible to commit if we wish to be understood in a literal way. This trespass, resulting in the destruction of literal sense, creates the discursive situation that Ricoeur calls "semantic impertinence."[6]

> Metaphorical interpretation presupposes a literal interpretation which is destroyed. Metaphorical interpretation consists in transforming a self-defeating, sudden contradiction into a meaningful contradiction. ... We are forced to give a new meaning to the word, an extension of meaning which allows it to *make* sense where a literal interpretation does not make sense.

The impertinence functions to invite the reader to recognize an innovation in meaning by switching from a literal to a metaphorical interpretation, thereby permitting things to be placed in close conjunction that ordinarily are kept far apart. This closeness can be said both to create and to disclose a meaning which heretofore did not exist by *instituting* or *constructing* a resemblance between unlike things.[7] Metaphor invites us to suspend literal thought and engage in an "as if" mode of consciousness. It is a serious kind of play that demands freedom from ordinary restrictions but intends thereby to communicate

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[5] William Wordsworth, "Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood" in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (3rd edition; ed. M.H. Abrams et. al.; New York: W.W. Norton, 1974) 177.

[6] Paul Ricoeur, "Biblical Hermeneutics," *Semeia* 4 (1975) 78.

[7] *Ibid.*, 79.

new meaning and thus contribute to our engagement with our world. This "seeing as" Ricoeur calls "redescription,"[8] and this redescription requires us to maintain a certain tension in our ascription of the predicative existential, "to be." To use an example to which Ricoeur refers us, the poetic phrase "time is a beggar" is meaningful and accurate only insofar as we *also* know and recognize that time is *not* a beggar. As soon as the tension between the "is" and the "is not" is collapsed, the metaphor is destroyed and nothing remains but sheer nonsense, a nonsense that critical reason is entirely correct in wishing to dismiss and clear away.

When properly interpreted, metaphor plays an essential role in revealing our world to us. Philosopher Stephen C. Pepper, upon whom Ricoeur indirectly relies, says that before any area of our experience has been given structure through conceptualization it remains inchoate, and therefore unknown to us at the level of self-conscious awareness.

> Any area for investigation, so long as it lacks prior concepts to give it structure and an express terminology with which it can be managed, appears to the inquiring mind inchoate – either a blank, or an elusive and tantalizing confusion.[9]

In this statement Pepper articulates the insight first given expression by Immanuel Kant, to the effect that any meaningful knowledge claim requires both form and content, or, as Kant puts it,

> Without sensibility no object would be given to us, without understanding no object would be thought. Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind.[10]

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[8] Ricoeur borrows the term "redescription" from philosopher Mary B. Hesse. See his reference to her work in *The Rule of Metaphor*, 242.

[9] Quoted in Max Black, *Models and Metaphors* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962) 240. Ricoeur relies on Black's work, which in turn relies on that of Stephen Pepper. Note here that Pepper speaks of such an area as being inchoate to the *inquiring* mind. This does not mean that it is not present to consciousness that is not self-aware and engaged in articulating its experience at the self-conscious level. Rather, the distinction here being drawn is between the experience which is present to consciousness but not *comprehended* by the intellect.

We might say, following Kant's metaphor, that metaphor seeks to heal the blindness of pure reason by supplying it with alternative visions of reality - visions of that which *might* be if we make our world accordingly, or visions of what reality already is, if we but allow ourselves to see it so. Ricoeur argues that the metaphorical process provides us with lenses without which we cannot fully see what is already in front of us. In that sense, the metaphorical process may be viewed, not as a merely fictional process, positing unrealities, but as the crucially important vehicle of the manifestation of a distinctly *human* reality. It allows us to see beyond the confines of ordinary, literal, empirical sense and understand the many non-empirical realities with which humans are forced to wrestle. This is the essential role that *poiesis* plays in the human project. This thought brings us back to Ricoeur's primary thesis – that *poiesis* provides an irreplaceable function in human life, a function which, when misunderstood, leads us not only into confusion but *dangerous* confusion.

Ricoeur understands narrative as a kind of metaphor, a kind of "seeing as" which enables human beings to engage more creatively with their world. In the case of narrative the metaphorical function is found in the plot. Ricoeur arrives at this insight by applying his theory of metaphor to that found in Aristotle's *Poetics*. To see how this comes about we will need to take a short detour through Aristotle's work as it is understood by Ricoeur.

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[10] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Norman Kemp Smith; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965) 93.

Amongst other things, Aristotle's *Poetics* is concerned with the nature of tragic dramatic poetry – poetry that tells a story and that is serious. He describes poetry using the Greek word *mimesis* which is usually translated into English by the word "imitation." In chapter 6 of the *Poetics* he defines his subject as the "imitation of an action":

> A tragedy, then, is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself...Tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery. All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions – what we do – that we are happy or the reverse. In a play accordingly they do not act in order to portray the Characters; they include the Characters for the sake of the action. So that it is the action in it, i.e. its Fable or Plot, that is the end and purpose of the tragedy; and the end is everywhere the chief thing.[11]

The English word, imitation, suggests mimicry, a duplication or copy, but that is not the sense of *mimesis* as Aristotle uses it. In Aristotle's thought the concept of *mimesis* can only be properly used in connection with poetry, and there it has more to do with active, creative making (*poiesis*) than mere mimicry.[12] *Mimesis* can be said to "imitate" only in the sense that it refers to, or is grounded in, universal human nature and the actions that human beings engage in. The essence of *mimesis* is its story, its plot, or, to use the Greek word Aristotle employs, its *muthos*. *Muthos* is the ordering principle that structures all tragic poetry, integrating all its heterogeneous parts and aspects into one harmonious whole. *Muthos* confers on the action a beginning, middle and an end and thus lends the action a coherent order. "Poetry, [Aristotle] said, is an imitation of human actions; but this *mimesis* passes through the creation of a plot, a tale, which shows signs of composition and order lacked by the dramas of everyday life."[13] The creative dimension

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[11] Aristotle, *Poetics* 1449b 24 -1450a 24 as translated by Ingram Bywater (New York: Random House, 1954) p. 230-231. I have provided Bywater's translation as it reflects the use of the English word 'imitation' to render *mimesis*, whereas other translations use the word 'representation.'

[12] *Rule of Metaphor*, 38.

[13] *Rule of Metaphor*, 244.

of *mimesis* is this *muthos*. But at the same time *mimesis* does truly refer to actual human life – that is what the story is *about*. The creative work of *muthos* preserves, selects and represents human life in its essentials, and most particularly in what is noble and great.[14]

Between creative making (*muthos*) and *mimesis,* understood as a kind of imitation, there is tension and paradox. Ricoeur says, "There is thus a double tension proper to *mimesis*: on the one hand, the imitation is at once a portrayal of human reality *and* an original creation; on the other, it is faithful to things as they are *and* it depicts them as higher and greater than they are."[15] We see immediately that this tension is similar, perhaps even identical, to the tension which Ricoeur has shown to be characteristic of metaphor. Great tragic poetry both is and is not truly representative of human life. The story of Oedipus the king is not *literally* true of any particular human person in history, and yet it speaks of human life in its wholeness in the way that no one individual's life can. It has a kind of truth that is not literal truth, and may be understood as metaphorical. The metaphorical quality of narrative thus lies in its plot, the structure of its overall action. Plot then functions to *redescribe* human life in its essential, universal features, and allows certain of those features to become manifest to us in the same way that all good metaphors shed light on life. And what we see by the light of this metaphor cannot be reduced to ordinary, logical, propositional statements of the kind that critical reason produces and approves. Ricoeur is willing to go so far as to suggest to us "that 'seeing-as,' which sums up the power of metaphor, could be the revealer of a

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[14] *Poetics* 1451 b 5-6.
[15] *Rule of Metaphor,* 40.

'being-as' on the deepest ontological level."[16] Narrative as a 'seeing-as' reveals to us our lives as *human* beings. In his three-volume work *Time and Narrative* he argues that, in fact, narrative provides the essential structure of the human experience of time.

We have been introduced, above, to the idea that experience can be intelligible to us only insofar as it is structured by thought. Much of the argument of *Time and Narrative* centers on demonstrating the enigmatic and aporetic quality of time in human experience. The problem of time is a famous one amongst philosophers. We commonly speak of time using spatial metaphors, as something that flows past us, or through which we advance. But whereas we can move back and forth in space to measure its extent, time, when it is past, simply slips away from us altogether and cannot be recovered except through recollection. Yet recollection is not the thing itself. Time, once it is past, *no longer exists*, and the future, on the other hand, *is not yet*. The present is that continually vanishing point suspended between memory and hope, in our recollection of what was but no longer is, and our hope for what will be but is not yet. Time is the very condition of our being and, therefore, in a manner of speaking, is larger than our own thought. We are not the masters of time, rather, time masters us. The question that lies behind Ricoeur's meditations in *Time and Narrative* is the following:[17] Given that time seems to exceed our grasp, that it has this mysterious and enigmatic nature, how is it, nonetheless, that in ordinary lived experience time is not such an obstacle, that we understand its flow and our lives as temporal beings? For Ricoeur the answer to this question is narrative.

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[16] *Time and Narrative* Vol. 1, xi.
[17] Ricoeur does not himself articulate this question within *Time and Narrative*; however, I believe that the text can be read as a response to it.

In *Time and Narrative* Ricoeur extends Aristotle's understanding of the function of plot to the problem of time and concludes that plot resolves the paradox of time in a poetic mode by integrating heterogeneous elements into a temporal whole. Through this integration, merely sequential occurrences, apparently random, take on the quality of meaningful events, so that the artistic deployment of events can communicate a satisfyingly complete action. Ricoeur argues that the integrating function played by plot is essential to more than fiction and that it also structures the human experience of time. In the same way that fictional narratives become meaningful only to the extent that they portray the texture of lived reality, time becomes *human* time, only to the extent that it is organized in a narrative fashion. In this three-volume masterpiece Ricoeur is primarily concerned to examine prevailing tendencies within contemporary literary production and criticism and within contemporary historiography. In both these areas of endeavor the past century has witnessed explorations of the limits of narrative form and many attempts to escape from it. Historians, particularly, have become aware that all narratives are human constructions and therefore have tended to reject narrative form for historiography as insufficiently objective. Ricoeur, however, argues that, insofar as history is concerned with human action over time, it cannot become entirely independent of narrative and still be history rather than sociology or anthropology. The details of this argument do not directly touch upon the subject of this paper and therefore I will not attempt to reproduce them here. What is of immediate interest are his thoughts regarding the relationship between narrative form and the construction of human identity, which emerge toward the end of the study. I will present just as much of his reasoning as is necessary to grasp this connection.

Ricoeur finds a focus for his discussion of the enigma of time in Augustine's

Confessions. In Book 11 of that work Augustine's desire to understand the *Genesis* story

of God's creation inclines him to ponder the difference between God's eternity and our

human experience of temporal flow, and to attempt to master the mystery of that flow.

His questions reflect the problem of time as I described it above.

> What, then, is time? There can be no quick and easy answer, for it is no
> simple matter even to understand what it is, let alone find words to explain it.
> Yet, in our conversation, no word is more familiarly used or more easily
> recognized than 'time.'...
> What, then, is time? I know well enough what it is, provided that
> nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is and try to explain, I am baffled. All
> the same I can confidently say that I know that if nothing passed, there would be
> no past time; if nothing were going to happen, there would be no future time; and
> if nothing *were*, there would be no present time.
> Of these three divisions of time, then, how can two, the past and the
> future *be*, when the past no longer is and the future is not yet?[18]

Augustine's attempts to resolve this enigma take up many pages, and yet at the end of

them he finds himself no closer to an answer. His attempts yield only one aporia after

another, and finally he decides that he can do no better than acknowledge failure.

> By all means, then, let us speak of three times, past, present and future. Incorrect
> though it is, let us comply with usage. I shall not object or argue, nor shall I
> rebuke anyone who speaks in these terms, provided that he understands what he
> is saying and does not imagine that the future or the past exist now. Our use of
> words is generally inaccurate and seldom completely correct, but our meaning is
> recognized nonetheless.[19]

Augustine finds that pure reflection cannot comprehend the temporal flow. There are no

words that describe it at the literal level in an appropriate way, and the exercise of

searching for such expression confronts us with merely inchoate and mute experience.

We can do no better than speak indirectly and acknowledge that we do so. How is it,

then, that we do speak so familiarly and comfortably about time and experience no

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[18] Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin; New York: Dorset Press, 1961) 11.14, p. 263-264.
[19] *Ibid.,* 11.20

confusion in ordinary experience? Evidently we have a means of structuring our ordinary

experience of time which does not find expression in any direct and literal language, and

yet provides a basis for our understanding of ourselves as temporal beings. Ricoeur's

solution takes us back to Aristotle's understanding of *mimesis*.

Ricoeur contrasts the discordance of Augustine's aporetic experience of time with

the concordance created by *muthos*, or plot, in Aristotle's theory of *mimesis*. As we have

seen, *muthos* provides order and structure, and yet within the structure of tragedy there is

also an essential element of disorder. This is the necessary element of surprise, of tragic

reversal which is diachronically introduced. Therefore the tragic plot is not entirely

concordant. "The tragic model is not purely a model of concordance, but rather of

discordant concordance."[20] The concordance of plot must take account of and govern the

concordance of chance, of the unexpected and surprising. The art of tragic composition,

in fact, consists in rendering discordant experiences concordant, by revealing their

necessity.[21] But this necessity does not appear in nature, rather it is the creation of the art

of *mimesis*, the art of the storyteller. *Mimesis* does not merely imitate actual happenings

but lifts them out of the chaos of the natural flow and confers on them an order by which

one occurrence *must* follow upon another. Ricoeur says, "To make a plot is already to

make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the

necessary or probable from the episodic."[22] It is plot and its embodiment in narrative that

structures our experience of time so that it is no longer mute and inchoate: "I see in the

plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed

[20] *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1, 42.
[21] *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1, 42.
[22] *Ibid.,* 43.

and … mute temporal experience."[23] But is there not still a mystery remaining? Ordinarily we understand plot as a literary device employed in creating fictions. In what way can we speak of plot as configuring and re-configuring the real, the ordinary, everyday flow of events in which we live? Ricoeur makes the connection by applying the insights of literary theory to the dilemmas of philosophy.

Ricoeur claims that story-telling and the experience of time are connected at a fundamental, necessary and universal level. "Between the activity of narrating a story and the temporal character of human experience there exists a correlation that is not merely accidental but that presents a transcultural form of necessity."[24] Ricoeur expands and to some extent transforms Aristotle's concept of *mimesis* so that it takes on a philosophical function similar to that of a Kantian category. As a fundamental structuring principle of human time, *mimesis* reveals itself in three moments that Ricoeur presents quite simply as mimesis 1, 2 and 3. Ricoeur situates the conscious and creative moment of story-telling in mimesis 2, as the mediating moment between the pre-understanding of mimesis 1 and our appropriation of its work in mimesis 3. His description of the moments of mimesis 1 and 3 are analogous to Gadamer's description of pre-understanding and appropriation through an application that is completed in a "fusion of horizons."[25]

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[23] *Ibid.* xi.
[24] *Ibid.* 52.
[25] Ricoeur acknowledges his indebtedness to Gadamer in many different places throughout his work. See, for example, the reference at *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1, 70.

Mimesis 1

Our narrative capacity presumes a certain "prenarrative structure of experience" which Ricoeur relates to Heidegger's concept of Care *(Sorge)*.[26] Care indicates a manner of being that is within or subject to time. It is revealed by such expressions as "to take time to" do something, to "have time to" do something, to "waste" or "kill" time. Ricoeur describes this "within-time-ness" as "our being thrown among things, which tends to make our description of temporality dependent on the description of the things about which we care."[27] There is an inherently temporal quality to our caring about things, delimited by the horizon of the death toward which we are always pointed. "Narrative configurations and the most elaborated forms of temporality corresponding to them share the same foundation of within-time-ness."[28]

The capacity to narrate also assumes an existing practical understanding of human action and the ability to distinguish that action from mere physical occurrences. An understanding of action implies the possession of a conceptual network that includes the ideas of goals, motives, agents, co-operation, competition, struggle, success and failure.[29] It also presumes a capacity for syntagmatic composition – the capacity to relate heterogeneous incidents occurring over time within one meaningful whole. This "syntagmatic order"[30] is, of course, one and the same as narrative order. Further, human action can be transposed into narrative because it is, by its very nature, symbolically

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[26] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson; London: SCM Press, 1962), 235-244.

[27] *Time and Narrative*, 62.

[28] *Ibid.* 64.

[29] *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 55.

[30] *Ibid.* 56.

mediated. Our everyday activities are performed within a symbolic and culturally defined sphere which includes social norms, rules and codes by which actions can be evaluated according to a culturally accepted scale of moral values. This moment of pre-understanding is also characterized by existing narrative traditions which provide a variety of types of plot. These types themselves reflect the accumulation of previous innovations and, by the rules they generate over time, they constitute the grammar of a culture's narrative which governs the composition of new works. The production of folktale, myth and other traditional narrative reflects in a very direct way this sedimented typology.[31]

Mimesis 2

Ricoeur describes mimesis 2 as "the kingdom of the *as if*"[32] whose chief characteristic is the mediation of plot. Plot relates diverse and dissimilar elements such as characters, circumstances, scene, motives and goals, interactions, unforeseen occurrences and unexpected results. It integrates the temporal, dynamic characteristic of all stories in two dimensions. One of these, of course, is chronological, organizing the unfolding of the story in temporal sequence. The second resembles Kant's concept of judgment – the moment of synthesis or integration of the whole of experience in accordance with concepts. Ricoeur takes pains to emphasize the relation of his idea of plot to Kant's understanding of judgment.

> It will be recalled that for Kant the transcendental meaning of judging consists not so much in joining a subject and a predicate as in placing an intuitive manifold under the rule of a concept. The kinship is greater still with the reflective judgment which Kant opposes to the determining one, in the sense that

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[31] *Ibid.* 68-69.
[32] *Ibid.* 64.

it reflects upon the work of thinking at work in the aesthetic judgment of taste and in the teleological judgment applied to organic wholes. The act of emplotment has a similar function inasmuch as it extracts a configuration from a succession.[33]

It is this act of extracting a unified, singular *figure* from the multiplicity of succession that constitutes the "followability" of a story, and, at the level of living experience, *provides the solution to the enigma of time.* It is this configuration of a specifically *temporal* whole that is comprehended in *one* moment, one act of understanding, the multiplicity of past, present and future and *thereby* confers meaning upon all three dimensions of time. Thus, according to Ricoeur, does Augustine's paradox find resolution: "...the act of narrating, reflected in the act of following a story, makes productive the paradoxes that disquieted Augustine to the point of reducing him to silence."[34] Plot is the means by which we can hold together in our understanding our recollection of what was, our present experience and our hopes in a coherent and logical fashion. It is thus the device by which we not only create fictions for our amusement or edification, but also navigate our everyday reality and chart the course of our lives. Simply put, we live by telling stories and living them into existence.

Mimesis 3

The third moment of mimesis is constituted by the intersection of the world of the text with the world of the reader, and the activities of reception, interpretation and application. Referring to the theories of Wolfgang Iser and Robert Jauss, Ricoeur says that a text can only be said to have full meaning insofar as the text's effect on the reader

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[33] *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1, 66.
[34] *Ibid.* 66.

is taken into consideration.[35] Without the work of the reader the text is incomplete, it

exists merely in the realm of *potential* communication. Only in being read is it

actualized. The being of the work is *more*, then, than the static, material entity

manifested in the form of a set of pages. Its being is rather located in the interplay of the

work at the level of a material entity that can be empirically identified and the receptive

consciousness that engages it in the act of reading. According to Ricoeur, the text is

"completed" in its communicating an experience, and with it an entire world that the

reader brings to bear on her experience and her world. There is a great deal of similarity

in Ricoeur's description of this moment of "mimesis" and what Gadamer describes as the

"fusion of horizons," and Ricoeur's intention, I believe, can be better understood by our

having recourse to Gadamer's work. Gadamer describes the interaction between the

work of art and the aesthetic consciousness that receives it in terms of the concept of

play. He argues that play is not merely a frivolous activity, but that it has a "special

relation to what is serious."[36] We play "for the sake of *recreation.*"[37] Recreation as *re-*

creation involves, not simply pleasure but *significant renewal*, a making *new*, which is

not just a *retrieval* of 'liveliness', the breath of life, but the creation of new-ness, some

new thing. In this productive work "play itself contains its own, even sacred,

seriousness."[38] In this creative moment,

> ...the work of art is not an object that stands over against a subject for itself.
> Instead the work of art has its true being in the fact that it becomes an experience

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[35] *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 1, 77.

[36] Hans G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (2nd rev. ed.; trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshal; New York: Crossroad, 1989) 102.

[37] *Ibid.* Gadamer here claims that he is quoting Aristotle's *Politics* 8.3. 1337 b 39, but I find this translation of that portion of the *Politics* debatable. However, whether or not Gadamer may here cite Aristotle as an authority for his argument is not germane to my point. It is Gadamer's point, and I believe it is a good one.

[38] *Truth and Method* 102.

that changes the person who experiences it. The "subject" of the experience of art…is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself.[39]

From the standpoint of considering the relationship between the act of reading and the text we can, perhaps, better appreciate Ricoeur's comment, quoted above, regarding the kinship between Kant's notion of the transcendental meaning of judging and the act of emplotment. The actualization of this emplotment occurs only in the act of reading, and in this moment judgment is called upon to engage in the task of interpretation. "If emplotment can be described as an act of judgment and of the productive imagination, it is insofar as this act is the joint work of the text and the reader."[40]

The work of art has reference to reality and the quality of truth (or falsity) in this moment of becoming experience and being brought to bear upon experience. In this moment it projects a world, "a world that I might inhabit and into which I might project my ownmost powers."[41] It re-describes reality in the same way that non-narrative metaphors do. This re-description enriches and transforms our experience of the world which we had brought to the text. In Ricoeur's words it "augments"[42] our world by providing us with a new lens through which to view and reflect upon it. Indeed, such an optic metaphor is apt in this context, as Ricoeur himself refers to theories of the plastic arts to elucidate this "augmenting" function of narrative.

> In *Écriture et Iconographie*, Francois Dagongnet, replying to Plato's arguments directed against writing and against every *eikon*, characterizes as *iconic augmentation* the painter's strategy of reconstructing reality on the basis of an optic alphabet that is limited and dense at the same time. The concept should be extended to every mode of iconicity, that is, to what we are here calling fiction. In a related sense, Eugen Fink compares *Bild*, which he distinguishes from

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[39] *Ibid.*
[40] *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1, 76.
[41] *Ibid.* 76.
[42] *Ibid.* 80.

> simple, entirely perceived presentations of reality, to a "window" whose narrow opening looks out onto the immensity of a countryside. And from his side, Gadamer recognizes in *Bild* the power of bringing about an increase in being in our vision of the world which is impoverished by everyday affairs.[43]

As discussed above, narrative *fictions* do, indeed, have reference to reality. They must be grounded in common, lived experience in order to communicate to the reader at all. However, fiction claims a certain freedom from purely descriptive and literal reference to reality in order to bring into the light of consciousness those experiences which our language does not allow us to speak of directly. The fact that fictions describe reality metaphorically and not literally should not, therefore, lead us to the conclusion that fictions are not *about* reality. Fiction, Ricoeur claims, is *about* reality to the same degree as non-fictional or historical narratives; however, the way in which fictional and historical narratives speak of reality is indeed quite different. There is an important difference between the referential intention of each, but such difference does not imply the lack of reference entirely on the part of fiction. The relationship between history and fiction is a central theme in *Time and Narrative*, and Ricoeur's conclusions regarding it are essential to understanding how it is, in his view, that all human identity is necessarily narrative in nature. We are now in a position to explore this theme.

While history and fiction have different intentions with respect to the real, they each draw upon the other's strategies and resources in their respective representations of the real. History intends to represent the past *as it really happened.* Fiction, on the other hand, suppresses this direct reference in order to provide a metaphor of reality which reveals those dimensions of the real which cannot be spoken about directly. However,

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[43] *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 1, 80-81.

this suppression of direct relation is only partial. Fiction also relies upon reference to the real in order to persuade. Characters, locations and events are described *as if* they were entirely real, and this "as if" relation requires that much be described as it really is. If, in fact, a novel were created that had no reference to the real whatsoever, it would be entirely incomprehensible to us. Fiction, then, has a relation to reality that is essential, but which is more indirect than historiography. The indirection is, in fact, metaphorical in nature - fictional descriptions are offered *as if* they were real, and the "as if" relation is the essence of metaphor.

Ricoeur describes the simulations of fiction as "quasi-pasts": [44]

> ...the events recounted in a fictional narrative are past facts for the narrative voice, which we can consider here to be identical with the implied author; that is, with a fictive disguise of a real author. A voice speaks, recounting what for it has taken place. To enter into reading is to include in the pact between the reader and the author the belief that the events reported by the narrative voice belong to the past of that voice. [45]

He further argues that, if fiction is quasi-historical, history is, to the same degree, quasi-fictional. Unfortunately we do not have the space in this paper to outline the arguments which Ricoeur offers to defend this latter claim. The best that can be done within the parameters of this discussion is to summarize as briefly as possible his main points and otherwise recommend to the reader Part 2 of the first volume of *Time and Narrative* which is entitled "History and Narrative." Ricoeur's argument in that section to the effect that historiography must remain indirectly dependent upon narrative is fascinating and, I believe, very compelling, however, it must be avoided here.

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[44] *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 190.
[45] *Ibid.*

Ricoeur's argument for a necessary relationship between historiography and fiction rests upon the crucial distinction between the *actual* past, which has been abolished, and the historical pasts that are the reconstructions of historians. Although history always *intends* to present the actual past, as it would have been observed by contemporary witnesses, it cannot, of course, reconstruct just that thing. Remember, the actual past is extinct, abolished. Historical reconstructions are necessarily, therefore, imaginative reconstructions, and in fact Ricoeur argues that the role of the imagination *increases* as the approximation to the real past becomes increasingly precise.[46] Ricoeur coins the term, "standing-for," to describe the paradoxical relation between the actual but abolished past, now existing only in its archeological, oral or documentary traces, and the constructions of the historian.[47] Ricoeur calls upon R.G. Collingwood's work[48] to demonstrate the relationship between historical imagination and re-enactment, which latter Ricoeur claims is "the *telos* of the historical imagination, what it intends, and its crowning achievement."[49]

Historiography also shares with its fictional cousin, "literature," the arts of poetry and rhetoric. In Ricoeur's view the employment of these literary modes does not in any way undercut the relation of "standing-for" between the past and the constructs of history; rather, it, in fact, gives that intention its fulfillment. These strategies enable the historical past to share in the vividness of the real via the "pact of reading" that is established between the narrative voice and the implied reader.[50]

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[46] *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 181.
[47] *Ibid.*, 100.
[48] R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946).
[49] *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 184.
[50] *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 186.

> By virtue of this pact, the reader's guard is lowered. Mistrust is willingly suspended. Confidence reigns. The reader is prepared to accord the historian the exorbitant right to know other minds. In the name of this right, ancient historians did not hesitate to place in the mouths of their heroes invented discourses, which the documents did not guarantee but only made plausible. Modern historians no longer permit themselves these fanciful incursions ... They do, however, still appeal in more subtle ways to the novelistic genius when they strive to reenact, that is, to rethink, a certain weighing of means and ends. Historians, then, are not prohibited from "depicting" a situation, from "rendering" a train of thought, or from giving the "vividness" of an internal discourse.[51]

Now understanding history's intention of standing-for the past and its use of fictional strategies in bringing that past "to life" (as we are wont to say) we may also understand the reconstructions of history as sharing in that epistemological status of "seeing as" which is characteristic of metaphor. Indeed, history's primary relation to the past in its intention of "standing for" such past itself depends upon the strategy of metaphor. History and fiction therefore overlap and interweave with each other, and the two, working together provide that refiguration of time that Ricoeur calls "human time."[52]

Human identity, Ricoeur argues, is a product of the interweaving of history and fiction. Drawing upon the reflections of Hannah Arendt, he points out that to describe the identity of an individual or community is always and necessarily to tell a story. In *The Human Condition* Arendt tells us,

> The moment we want to say *who* somebody is, our very vocabulary leads us astray into saying *what* he is; we get entangled in a description of qualities he necessarily shares with others like him; we begin to describe a type or a "character" in the old meaning of the word ...[53]

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[51] *Ibid.*

[52] *Ibid.*, 192.

[53] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958) 181.

Characters, we know, live in the realm of story. And, indeed, to answer fully the question, "who?" is to tell the story of a life from the beginning to the end.[54] Human identity is necessarily, therefore, a narrative identity.

Narrative identity is not constant or stable. On the contrary, our identities continually shift and re-form as we tell and re-tell our stories over time. The field of human identity is subject to the same hermeneutical circle that we traced in our discussion of the three moments of mimesis. Our very selves are refigured in the moment of re-telling our stories in response to new experiences, new challenges, new understanding.

> The self characterized by self-sameness may then be said to be refigured by the reflective application of such narrative configurations. Unlike the abstract identity of the Same, this narrative identity, constitutive of self-constancy, can include change, mutability, within the cohesion of one lifetime. The subject then appears both as a reader and the writer of its own life, as Proust would have it. As the literary analysis of autobiography confirms, the story of a life continues to be refigured by all the truthful or fictive stories a subject tells about himself or herself. This refiguration makes this life itself a cloth woven of stories told.[55]

The human self, both individual and communal, is a construction that bears a close resemblance to the constructions of literature, and indeed it is a construction that draws upon the literary resources of the society, if it is to be well-made. In Ricoeur's view culture has an important function in the formation of the self.

> This connection between self-constancy and narrative identity confirms one of my oldest convictions, namely, that the self of self-knowledge is not the egotistical and narcissistic ego whose hypocrisy and naïveté the hermeneutics of suspicion have denounced, along with its aspects of an ideological super-structure and infantile and neurotic archaism. The self of self-knowledge is the fruit of an examined life, to recall Socrates' phrase in the *Apology*. And an examined life is, in large part, one purged, one clarified by the cathartic effects of the narratives, be they historical or fictional, conveyed by our culture. So self-

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[54] *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 246.
[55] *Ibid.*

constancy refers to a self instructed by the works of a culture that it has applied to itself.[56]

Narrative is the field in which we construct our very lives. The stories our culture tells us provide us with many and varied resources for imagining our own lives – their possible futures, the ends to which they may be directed, and the range of meanings they might hold for ourselves and others. The stories of which we avail ourselves will, therefore, have very much to do with the kind of characters that we turn out to be.

If the reader has followed me thus far she should now be able to share with me the view that I promised to show her at the conclusion of our climb up the Ricoeurian mountain. Ricoeur's own comments on the subject of the formation of personal identity through narrative constitute only a couple of paragraphs in his three-volume magnum opus. The remarks that follow constitute my own development and application of the theme which Ricoeur instituted in those brief paragraphs.

Following Ricoeur, I have argued above that human beings tell stories because stories are essential to the human project of making sense of temporal experience. Through stories we construct identities that endure over time. We understand our being, our very selves, through the strategem of narrative. If this thesis is correct, we may conclude that the conscious, contrived activity of constructing a story for the explicit purpose of recounting it in dramatic or written form is an activity which naturally arises from the narrating that we spontaneously and necessarily engage in every waking moment. Told stories occur, therefore, as a secondary and derivative phenomenon out of

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[56] *Time and Narrative,* Vol. 3, 247.

what we may call "lived story," the on-going narrative we construct in order to navigate life in a temporal context. There is between these two phenomena a direct and logical relationship in which lived story occupies a primary position. Ricoeur has taught us, however, that the *actual*, concrete relation between the two is much more complex. Told stories inform our reflection and understanding and cumulatively shape our attitudes and therefore our responses to life. Lived and told story interact and interweave in a typical hermeneutical movement, one that is not entirely circular but which might be visualized as a spiral, expanding to the degree of the re-telling that is engaged by the individual or the community. This movement generates successive layers of similar but not identical narratives, narratives that recall and refer to earlier narratives but in doing so refine and reshape them, add to them or take them in new directions. The hermeneutical movement generating story out of story across time spans the gap which convention, in the guise of "common sense" - observes between "literature," on the one hand, and actual human life on the other.

This analytic framework, I believe, may allow us to understand better the meaning of the word *myth*. The English word *myth* has its roots in the Greek word *muthos*. By means of *muthos*, or "myth," cosmic time becomes *human* time. The great, sacred myths of humankind provide the central plots according to which the game of life may be played out. In our living religious traditions our sacred myths are concretized, *made* real, solid, actual, through the lives of those who appropriate the myth. We live the stories, and through our living of them they *become true*. At the same time, through our living of them they become new, also. Each time a myth is lived out in a human life it is

transformed, and to the same extent that that life itself is transformed by the story. Myth is sustained through the dialectic of appropriation and transformation. The spiral motion of mimesis keeps story alive by re-reading, re-living and re-telling. And the truth of the myth, I submit, is discovered in the *living out of it.*[57]

The truths that we discover by living are not of the same category or domain as those provided by mathematics, logic and the natural sciences. These latter truths provide (at least ideally) finality and certainty, and describe the workings of necessity. The truths of pure reason are axiomatic in nature and the truths of the empirical sciences describe the universal "laws" of nature, which are understood to be necessary and inexorable. Poetic or mythic truth, on the other hand, belongs to the very human realm of *making*, of creating, of *art*ifact. Creation does not acknowledge necessity, except of the purely poetic or aesthetic sort which is known only by intuition or artistic "feeling." Creation can only dwell in freedom, in the realm of the *possible.* It concerns what we call "meaning" rather than logical or empirical "truth." To live a truly human life is to take up our freedom and out of it make of our very selves works of art. Logical or natural truths arise from correspondence between a representation and the thing or state of affairs which it represents. Poetic truths do not display this correspondence; strictly speaking they are not *literal* descriptions of anything, as Ricoeur has shown us. Rather they are insightful *contra-dictions*, ways of describing *differently*, newly, creatively.

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[57] A case for this argument is made persuasively by Karen Armstrong, in her autobiography *The Spiral Staircase* (Toronto: Vintage Canada) 2004.

Truth in this domain has to do with judgment, tact, decision, authenticity, fidelity, sincerity. There is nothing mechanistic about such truth – it cannot be obtained by any merely repetitive application of techniques or principles. Its results cannot be guaranteed or predicted. Neither, however, is it *chaotic*. Chaos is the absence and opposite of necessary order - it is sheer randomness, the absence of natural or logical form. In the poetic domain, the counterpart of chaos is *myth-lessness*, the absence of poetic form, the absence of creation where creation is needed. We experience this absence as *meaninglessness*, a word which has to do with language, speaking. Meaninglessness is a profoundly human kind of chaos that besets us when we fail to exercise our freedom responsibly, when we realize that we have been living mindlessly, stupidly, without "making something" of our *selves*. Meaninglessness is the refusal to acknowledge our possibilities, the refusal to *act,* with purpose and intention, the refusal to speak.

In an essay published under the title *Real Presences* George Steiner described what I call here the "poetic" as "the enactment of answerable understanding."[58] The performer, artist, musician, writer, acts out a summons to others, a summons which negates the sovereign isolation of the self. The poetic or artistic summons is "indiscrete" he says.[59] "The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and metaphysical experience, the most "ingressive," transformative summons available to human experience."[60]

> As the act of the poet is met …as it enters the precincts, spatial and temporary, mental and physical, of our being, it brings with it a radical calling towards change…The waking, the enrichment, the complication, the darkening, the

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[58] George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 7.
[59] *Ibid.,* 142.
[60] *Ibid.,* 143.

> unsettling of sensibility and understanding ...are incipient with action. ... In a wholly fundamental, pragmatic sense, the poem, the statue, the sonata are not so much read, viewed or heard as they are *lived.*

The poetic act calls us out of the slumber of repetition, out of routine, out of our numb, unthinking conformity with the seemingly iron law of social convention. It asks us "What do you feel, what do you think of the possibilities of life, of the alternative shapes of being which are implicit in your experience of me, in our encounter?"[61] And our response to the summons, the answer we give to the call to change, is likewise of the order of the poetic. We respond by making something new of ourselves. A change, a shift, in our understanding, is a change in our very *being* – it makes something other than what we have been up to now.

The work of *poiesis* and *muthos* transforms *chronos,* ordinary time, the time of nature or of the cosmos, into *kairos* time – or, as Ricoeur puts it, into *human* time. *Kairos* time is possible only for the free. It is the time of possibility, of opportunity, decision and judgment. *Kairos* time is oriented always toward the moment of *parousia*, the moment of advent and arrival, the moment of encounter with the human or divine Other. We make or unmake ourselves according to how well we navigate those significant encounters with the mysterious stranger who appears at the ford. In the moment of encounter the disorder of ordinary diachrony is overcome by the creative, mythic response – creating *new* order out of the heterogeneous bits of ordinary experience. Ordinary time is thus overcome in a mythic moment which *re-presents* – makes present – both past and future, memory and hope. This moment is the heart of sacred time, the time which calls us out of the chaos of chronological experience back

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[61] *Ibid.,* 142.

into the mythic moment where we make ourselves anew by re-fashioning those experiences in the forge of encounter with the sacred Other.

The focus of Ricoeur's concern that gave rise to the insight that human identity is "narrative-ly" shaped is exclusively the nature of *time* in human experience. But such an exclusive focus is surely one-sided. Another essential dimension of experience begs to be explored – the spatial, *world*ly dimension. Both stories and actual events *take place*. Can we develop an analysis of the worldly dimension of human experience and its relationship to narrative which complements and completes Ricoeur's analysis of its temporal dimension? I believe that we can, and that analysis is the concern of the following chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: The Narrative Construction of the Human Place-World

Postmodern geographers (also known as "humanist" geographers) have, in recent decades, discovered a convergence between philosophy and geography which offers a starting-point for the analysis of the function of narrative in the construction of world. Beginning in the 1970's, humanist geographers rejected the positivism dominant in their own profession, and most particularly its "false claim to objectivity and pure theory in the study of man."[62] They began to employ a variety of approaches, including phenomenology, ethnography and hermeneutics as they explored such questions as, "What is the nature of human experience? How do place, landscape and space define and provide the context for this experience? How do humans make the world into a home?"[63] It should be immediately evident that these questions are also central to the inquiry of this thesis. The coincidence of the two concerns justifies our excursion into the realm of geography, which otherwise might appear to be a surprising departure.

If traditional, positivist geography is primarily concerned with mapping physical space in a scientific and mathematical fashion, postmodernist or humanist geography is concerned with the way in which social rules and human meaning transform unconstructed physical space into place. The relationship and priority between physical space and human place is at the heart of the postmodern critique of modern geography:

> ...the entire debate between modernism and postmodernism can be expressed in
> terms of this still unresolved relationship – the modernist insisting on the priority

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[62] Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher, and Karen Till, "Place in Context," *Textures of Place: Exploring Humanist Geographies* (ed. Paul C. Adams, Steven Hoelscher and Karen Till; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001) xv.
[63] *Ibid.*

of space (whether in the form of well-ordered physical space or highly structured institutional space) and the postmodernist conversely maintaining the primacy of place and, in particular, lived place.[64]

Which comes first, space or place? Are space and nature primary, and place what humans create out of them, or is space an abstraction from the fullness of human experience, and from the phenomenon of place in that experience?

Edward Casey, whom I have just quoted, would quarrel with my statement of the postmodernist concern. He would insist that *place* is in no way *derived from* or *constructed out of* physical space, as if space were some kind of primary material from which all else is made. For Casey, there is no direct relationship between space and place, for they are, in fact, "two different *orders* of reality between which no simple or direct comparisons are possible."[65] He describes space and place in the following paragraph:

> I maintain that "space" is the name for that most encompassing reality that allows for things to be located within it; and it serves in this locatory capacity whether it is conceived as absolute or relative to its own nature. "Place," on the other hand, is the immediate ambiance of my lived body and its history, including the whole sedimented history of cultural and social influences and personal interests that compose my life-history. Place is situated in physical space, but then so is everything else, events as well as material things; it has no privileged relationship to that space, either by way of exemplification or representation. Nor can it be derived from it by some supposed genealogy. To believe in such genealogy is to buy into the modernist myth that the universe is made of pure extended space and that anything less than such infinite space, including place, follows from it by condensation or delimitation.[66]

We may understand Casey's point in more concrete terms by relating it to the anecdote with which I began this thesis: the meaning of "Vancouver" for my classmate and myself. On the one hand, "Vancouver" is a material place in space that my friend and I

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[64] *Ibid.*, 404.
[65] *Ibid.*
[66] *Ibid.*

both share – a city of concrete and steel built out of the wilds of northwestern North America. On the other hand, "Vancouver" is an entirely different place in each of our experiences. For my friend, it is her hometown, the place in which she was born and grew up, a place dominated by the memory of her parents, grandparents and extended family. For me, on the other hand, "Vancouver" is a New World free of all such associations, a place in which I may re-create myself in my own image. When Edward Casey speaks of "place" and its priority over "space," he means to refer to the latter kind of place – the place of personal experience and story, the place of "the immediate ambiance of my lived body and its history." Traditionally, the discipline of geography has been concerned with place, not in the sense of personal experience, but in the positive sense of that shared material reality which may also be referred to, entirely properly, with the same word. That quite different meanings are carried by the same word is, understandably, confusing. Place, in its positive, material sense, is, indeed, a construction out of space. Cities are built out of wild places and their natural resources. However, human *experience* of place is not. In the order of our knowing, what is primary? The object of our knowing, the positive, material thing we aim to understand, or the immediate experience which gives rise to our questions? For Casey, the answer is quite clear – what is primary is the experience, and there is nothing beyond that other than our own abstractions to which we impute a false objectivity. *Subjectivity* is everything, on this analysis. From this point of view we may better understand how phenomenology, hermeneutics and ethnology relate to the discipline of geography, now differently understood. In this view, indeed, the study of geography is much less a study

of the material world in its spatial aspect than it is a study of "man" (sic) or *human* being

and its relation to landscape, place and space.

Place, *qua* human experience of it, is the immediate environment in which we

live. We "do not live in an abstract framework of spatial relationships: 'we live in a

world of meanings. We exist in and are surrounded by places.'"[67] The apparent solidity

of place dissolves when we begin to grasp the intrinsic relation of meaning to place: "a

ghost town, even a living town, is woven with strands of an imagined past and a fictional

community, products of the time and society in which we live."[68] Places have history

and meaning, says Yi-Fu Tuan, one of the founders of humanist geography:

> Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a
> fact to be explained in a broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be
> clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it
> meaning. [69]

To know what a place is, is also, therefore, to know what it means to those who live

there. Place is a human construction, not only of material things – wood, concrete, steel

and so on – but also of specific activities, memories, habits and social rules. The

Vancouver Law Courts at 800 Smithe Street in Vancouver is a physical complex of

concrete buildings which can only be understood in terms of *the court* – that complex of

social relationships and deployment of human power over which the legal profession

holds sway. *The court* is as much a place as the Vancouver Law Courts, but in an

entirely different sense of the word, "place." *The court*, as Michael Curry points out in

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[67] *Ibid.*, xxi.

[68] *Ibid.*, xiii.

[69] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective," *Progress in Geography* 6 (1974), quoted by Kenneth R. Olwig, "Landscape as a Contested Topos of Place, Community and Self," *Textures of Place*, 93.

Textures of Place, is a professional place in which professional status is maintained.[70]

The physical place of the Vancouver Law Courts can only be made sense of via some

understanding of non-physical place of *the court.* Places, says Robert D. Sack, require

human agents.[71] Places are spaces that human beings have bounded and controlled:

> We create and use places as tools because they provide a means for us to
> undertake projects, and in so doing, places add to the nature of projects. That is,
> projects not only require place in the sense that they need a place to occur, but
> the place becomes an active agent in the project and thereby affects it. [72]

We create places by delimiting them, naming them, making and enforcing rules about

what may occur there. We erect fences and walls both on the physical surface of the

earth and on paper to mark boundaries and territories. We exploit via cultivation,

grazing, harvesting, building, dwelling. All these activities both *take place* and *create*

place. Place is the region in which the human self expresses and constructs itself by

engaging with other selves according to intricate social rules and relationships. As

Edward Casey says, self and place are constitutive of each other. There can be no self

without place and no place without self.[73] This self is entirely a social self whose

projects require a community setting to make sense. Place is *both* a material reality, *and*

a non-physical reality consisting of social practices and rules, personal experience,

memory and imagination. Place is the sum total of, or the intersection and interaction

between, all these different levels of reality - physical, social, personal, real and

imaginative. Place is *dense* with meaning, both as word and referent.

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[70] Yi-Fu Tuan, "Space and Place: Humanistic Perspective," *Progress in Geography* 6 (1974)
quoted *ibid.,* 209.
   [71] *Ibid.,* 233.
   [72] *Ibid.,* 233.
   [73] *Ibid.,* 406.

Place does not exist isolated in a vacuum. Places are connected to each other in our experience, woven together in a well-ordered whole which might be described as a *place-world*. This wonderfully evocative expression appears to have been coined by Edward Casey in his highly philosophical meditation on the many meanings of place, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-world*.[74] Unfortunately, however, he fails to elucidate the term, which is rarely employed in the text itself. A couple of sentences in the Preface suggest that the word "world" in this term is intended to operate in a Heideggerian sense, as the "world" of Being-in-the-world:

> To be in the world, to be situated at all, is to be in place. Place is the phenomenal particularization of "being-in-the-world," a phrase that in Heidegger's hands retains a certain formality and abstractness which only the concreteness of *being-in-place*, i.e., being in the *place-world* itself, can mitigate.[75]

The suggestion of a link between a meditation on place with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger is stimulating and exciting, but unfortunately in this book that possibility is also not followed through, except in the most general of ways. This description of Casey's *failure* to exploit the possibilities of his own term is offered by way of justification for my adopting this term and making of it what I will.

Place-world, in this work, will mean that web of places which forms the back-drop of our own personal and communal stories, both lived and told. Place-world is the *kosmos* of *muthos*, the ordered, unified set of places required by the movement of a

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[74] Edward Casey, *Getting Back Into Place: Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World.* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1993.)
[75] *Ibid.*, xv.

narrative. The Greek word, *kosmos,* meant, originally, order.[76] Its connection to the idea

of world or universe derives from that world's perfect *order.*[77] Thus, the *Concise Oxford*

English Dictionary defines "cosmos" as "the universe seen as a well-ordered whole."[78]

The sense of "place" in the term "place-world" is experiential; for example, the place of

my Vancouver, as opposed to my friend's Vancouver. The order, the *kosmos* of that

world, is the order – *kosmos* - imagined and understood by the experiencing subject. By

kosmos I will mean, in particular, the *order* of the entire network of places that

constitutes a place-world as an undivided whole.

Postmodern geographers, in their exploration of place, have not given explicit

consideration to the role of human order in the constitution of place, and yet the existence

of human order in place is obvious if we consider the importance of history and meaning

to place. We have said that place is a construction, not only of material things, but also

of specific activities, memories, habits and social rules. Places come to be precisely

when we *order* space, by bounding and controlling particular spaces, delimiting them,

naming them, making and enforcing rules about what might occur in them. Human social

order, extended through space, gives rise to places, known, understood, ruled. The entire

network of related places which are known, understood and ruled by a human society, is,

in its good order, a *kosmos* – the entire world imagined by the members of that society.

Human order, then, can be understood as *creating* world, and place within world.

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[76] Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon) 446.
[77] *Ibid.*
[78] Judy Pearsall, ed., *Concise Oxford English* Dictionary, 10th edition, revised (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) 322.

Creating as an activity of *ordering* is what we find in Hebrew cosmogony. In the first chapter of Genesis God creates the earth by separating the waters of chaos. The idea of creation as separation or division, the imposition of order upon a pre-existing chaos, is extremely ancient.[79] In the ancient imagination, "the world is not conceived as something which is, something at hand, but a something divided, ordered, named and comprehensible."[80] "Creation is distinction," says geographer Patrick McGreevy and the drawing of distinctions is a cognitive activity. There is a close relationship between human critical thought and cosmogony, according to biblical scholar D. Stenberger:

> Critical thought is as old as creation. Creation reaches its fulfillment in critical thought and is not to be separated from it ...Genesis is witness of this. Separation and distinction were as such the work of God in creation.[81]

The ordered, comprehensible world of everyday human experience might then be understood as the dream of reason, as Jorge Luis Borges suggests, "We ... have dreamt the world, we have dreamt it as firm, mysterious, visible, ubiquitous in space and durable in time..."[82] The biblical authors firmly believed that this cosmic order is nothing to be taken for granted, assumed and abused. The message of the Hebrew cosmogony is that "the world only became the world by separation and only remains the world as long as the separation lasts. The whole order and structure of the world depends on it."[83] Chaos may return at any time God wills and, indeed, in the story of the Flood, with the return of the waters of the abyss upon the earth, this is precisely what occurs. The good order of *kosmos* is a fragile thing, easily disrupted.

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[79] Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsberg Publishing House, 1984), 117.

[80] *Ibid.,* 121.

[81] Quoted in Westermann, 122.

[82] Jorge Luis Borges, "Avatars of the Tortoise," *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* (ed. Donald A. Yates & James E. Irby; New York: New Directions, 1964) 208.

[83] Westermann, *op. cit.*.

Chaos, that state of the earth prior to God's act of creation is a "formless void" according to the *New Revised Standard Version*'s translation of Genesis 1:2. In his article, "Attending to the Void: Geography and Madness," Patrick McGreevy describes with startling clarity the experience of chaos, void, and explains its essential relation to cosmic order.

> It seems to me that there is a tradition in geography of attending to this void. We try to understand the worlds humans create by placing them in the most comprehensive framework, the broadest context. We tend to be acutely aware of how circumscribed all human worlds are. The geographer's keen interest in scale reveals that all places occupy a tiny portion of space and time. We are fond of startling undergraduates with statements such as this: if the age of the earth were a twenty-four hour day, all of human history would occupy only three-tenths of a second. We present them with images of our fragile planet from space and with world maps showing humans to be confined not only to this planet but to the dry quarter of its surface and –for the most part – to the arable 3 percent. If it is true that we geographers are particularly aware of the void that encircles all of our worlds, at every scale, how does this knowledge inform our understanding of those worlds? [84]

Boundaries separate us from the void, boundaries that create both order and limit, finitude. Our identities depend upon these limits, on the exclusion of all that we are not to define what we are:

> There is a distinction to be made between the sort of boundary that defines a particular political/cultural domain vis-à-vis other cultures and the boundary that distinguishes the human from the non-human, but there is also a sense in which all that is beyond a cultural boundary, whether human or non-human, functions as a counterpart to group identity. [85]

McGreevey realizes that both the creation of a human *kosmos* and the erection of cultural boundaries involve the intellectual task of drawing distinctions between unalike things. This is the context of McGreevy's statement quoted above, that "creation is distinction." However, as these distinctions often reflect variable human standards, rather than some

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[84] Patrick McGreevey, "Attending to the Void," *Textures of Place*, 247-256, at 247.
[85] *Ibid.*, 248.

feature of an independently existing reality, they may be illusory. The second half of the Borges's sentence quoted above, "We ... have dreamt the world," aims to subvert the firmness and durableness of the *kosmos* we take for granted: "but in its architecture we have allowed tenuous and eternal crevices of unreason which tell us it is false."[86] The bounding and distinguishing movement which creates *kosmos*, order, is linguistic in nature. As McGreevey says, "In Genesis, God creates the world out of the formless void by *speaking* it into being. Words divide what we experience into discrete units, they dismember, yet we can only create cultural worlds with them."[87] But there is a certain arbitrariness and a definite fragility to a world constructed from words. The real beyond mere speech may suddenly intrude upon our ordered expectations with a force that makes perfectly clear that "what is real is (not) limited by our linguistic abilities." Indeed, the real itself may signify the void, the unbounded, uncontrolled other which eludes our conceptual and linguistic grasp: "The *real* might be described as that elusive *other* whose description, by definition, always exceeds our linguistic abilities, but whose existence is undeniable at the level of immediate experience."[88] And thus chaos, the void, the inverse of *kosmos*, belongs to our experience of world even as our construction of world seeks forever to exclude it. Chaos lingers in the breaks, the discontinuities, the fissures of our experience that elude all our attempts to control by comprehension, by the grasping motion of the intellect.

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[86] *Ibid.*

[87] *Ibid.*

[88] Ashley L. Preston, "Nature Conservation in a Deconstructed World," *Humanities and Technology Review* 16 (Fall 1997) 32.

The Hebrew Bible is full of allusions to the threatened return of chaos, the primeval, watery abyss which originally, before God's act of separation and control, covered the entire face of the earth.

> Both the story of the Flood and passages such as Psalm 74:12-17 (and perhaps Isaiah 51:9-11) attest to a view of creation in which God's ordering of reality is irresistible, but not constant or inevitable. The conclusion of the Flood story includes a divine pledge to maintain creation, but the story itself manifests a profound anxiety about the givenness of creation, a keen sense of its precariousness. ... Between creation and chaos, life and death, there stands neither human righteousness (which continues to be deficient) nor God's intrinsic unchangeability (which this and many other biblical stories belie), but only God's covenantal faithfulness, his respect for the solemn pledge that he makes to Noah.[89]

If the covenant between humankind and God fails, chaos and death would once again fill the earth. The waters of the sinister Sea, the abyss, do not cease to exist, nor are they defeated in a final and irrevocable way. Rather, they are tamed and contained by God's will. The book of Job describes God making a plaything of the great sea-monster Leviathan at 40:25ff.:

> Can you draw out Leviathan by a fishhook?
> Can you press down his tongue by a rope?
> Can you put a ring through his nose, or pierce his jaw with a barb?
> Will he plead with you at length?
> Will he speak soft words to you?
> ...
> Will you play with him like a bird,
> And tie him down for your girls?

The continued presence of chaos in creation gives rise to an unresolved tension in the Hebrew understanding of the world. Authentic human experience of evil testifies to the unceasing power of chaos, despite affirmations of God's mastery over the universe. Thus according to Levenson we find in Psalm 74, for example,

> ...a theology that is reluctant to accept the hymnic language of primordial creation as a given, but instead honestly and courageously draws attention to the

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[89] Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 14.

painful and yawning gap between the liturgical affirmation of God's absolute
sovereignty and the empirical reality of evil triumphant. [90]

Creation, like faith, involves real and persistent risk. If McGreevy is correct in his

perception that the void surrounds us, lies both behind and before us, and penetrates even

the fortresses of reason, then we may find, in the Hebrew Bible's tales of the threatening

sea, more honesty and insight into authentic human experience than is ever admitted by

modern, scientific thought.

Cosmos and chaos oppose each other, they are antagonists forever seeking to

exclude each other, and yet at the conclusion of his meditation upon the void, McGreevy

suggests that they also have an intrinsic positive relation to each other. Like all binary

opposites, they depend upon each other for their own existence and identity. "The world

and the void, like reason and madness, come as a pair. It is the act of creation, of division

– though the boundary line may be arbitrary, leaky, and false – that brings into existence

not only the world but also the void."[91] The void has meaning, it *matters*, it intrudes,

erupts and disrupts only when humans are present to erect a *kosmos* against it. We know

the void, it is part of our experience, and we actively seek to contain and structure it –

that which is uncontainable and structure-less by definition. The initial act of creation,

according to Genesis, is not the separation of the waters of the abyss, but the creation of

light, the separation of the light from darkness, and the naming of both the Light and the

Darkness. *Naming*, says Claus Westermann, is an act of dominion, and through the

naming of darkness, the darkness becomes *part* of the order of creation.[92] The containing

and domination of the darkness parallels the containing and domination of the waters of

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[90] *Ibid.*, 19.
[91] *Textures of Place*, 254.
[92] Westermann, 115.

the Sea. Chaos is not irrevocably overcome and excluded from the order of creation, but written into it in ways that limit its destructive power. In such stories we humans find ways and means of integrating experiences of the void, chaos, into our experiences of world. However, there are other means also of integrating the power of disintegration into our experience of human life and world. The recognition of the creative capacity of liminal places is one of these means.

Victor Turner explores the role of chaos – anti-order, anti-structure, in human societies in his study of what Arnold van Gennep called "liminality."[93] The word, "liminal" derives from the Latin, *limen*, "threshold," and van Gennep applied the idea of the liminal, the threshold place, to the critical, transitional stage of rites of passage. As an individual passes from one state or social position in a society to another, she is first separated from her initial position and then reincorporated into another position, with different rights and obligations vis-à-vis others in the society. In between those two defined, structured positions is a third state which enjoys none of the characteristics or attributes of either. This is the liminal phase, a period of ambiguity in which the subject of the rite eludes all of the ordering mechanisms of the society. Turner says, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."[94] The liminal state is anti-structure, anti-order, and yet according to Turner it has an essential role in the constitution of all ordered societies. It enables persons to pass from one ordered state

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[93] Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960) 21.
[94] Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing, 1969), 95.

into another. In the liminal phase the ritual subject enters into a disordered state, a breaking down of the boundaries that defined her identity in her initial position, in order that she may then be free to be redefined in new ways. Disorder, chaos, thus render newness possible. The continuing presence of the liminal, contained chaos, also serves to check the potentially destructive power of human arrogance, as all those who seek positions of power must undergo the liminal phase in order to reach such positions. In the liminal, disordered state the ritual subject is stripped of all standing in the society, and all claims against it. "They may be disguised as monsters, wear only a strip of clothing, or even go naked, to demonstrate that as liminal beings they have no status, property, insignia, secular clothing indicating rank or role, position in a kinship system..."[95] Turner believes that something of the humility of this experience carries over into the subject's subsequent experience of power in her new role, serving to moderate pride. The liminal experience is shared by all members of the society and enables them to recognize the essential human bond, without which there would be no society whatsoever.[96] "Liminality implies that the high could not be high unless the low existed, and he who is high must experience what it is like to be low."[97] Common experience of liminality also makes possible, within complex societies, the creation of alternative sub-groups who can legitimately challenge the overweening claims of the hierarchy. When a number of ritual subjects together undergo the rite of passage, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, they "tend to develop an intense comradeship and egalitarianism."[98] This relationship of homogeneity and comradeship Turner names "communitas," intending to

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[95] *Ibid.,* 95.
[96] *Ibid.,* 97.
[97] *Ibid.*
[98] *Ibid.,* 95.

distinguish this form of common living from the more highly structured and hierarchical wider society.[99] Whereas in tribal societies these communities are usually transitory, in other societies they can become institutionalized, thereby providing an on-going challenge and critique of the dominant society.[100] The monastic and mendicant orders within the great religions of the world manifest the institutionalization and perpetuation of the liminal state.[101] The power that these groups have to resist and criticize the status quo of their societies is too well-known to need repetition here. However, the opposition between communitas and structured society is not merely destructive, but rather a constructive relationship. There is a dialectic between the two. "Society *(societas)* seems to be a process rather than a thing – a dialectical process with successive phases of structure and communitas."[102] On the one hand, communitas provides opportunity to experience the essential human bond and to enable persons to pass from one status to another in life, and also periodically to re-envision the order of society and world. On the other hand, total communitas, homogenization, proves to be impossible to maintain over very long periods of time. All lasting communities require some social control and economic order if they are to survive. And so structure and communitas, order and disorder, *kosmos* and chaos belong together, like the Chinese symbols of yin and yang, and neither is entirely complete without some aspect of the other.

Thus far, liminality has been described in purely social terms, and in social terms, with words that allude to the temporal aspect of human experience. Liminality has been

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[99] *Ibid.,* 96.
[100] *Ibid.,* 107.
[101] *Ibid.*
[102] *Ibid.,* 203.

seen as primarily a stage, a time of transition, in the overall, temporal, social order. This is due to the fact that van Gennep and Victor Turner, to whom we are indebted for our understanding of liminality, were anthropologists, and to overlook the anthropological setting of the development of the concept would be to do it an injustice. However, liminality can be and is experienced in terms of physical environment, the world in which we live.

First, we should note that van Gennep and Turner's analyses of liminality in an anthropological context *begin* with an understanding of the history of the word. Remember that the word, "liminality," is derived from a Latin word for a sort of *place*, a threshold. Its subsequent use and development by anthropologists to describe transitional stages in human societies is *metaphorical* in nature. The initiation stage into adulthood and other positions of social power is pictured *as if* the initiate were standing on a threshold between two *places*. The idea of place is inherent in the concept of liminality itself, and thus the appropriateness of liminality to a discussion of the human place-world is assured.

The concept of liminality has been applied by scholars to a variety of types of locales. In *Getting Back Into Place*, Edward Casey describes gardens as liminal places, as gardens stand in between buildings, completely enclosed and constructed places, and unconstructed natural land in its wild state.

> (Gardens) are liminal just insofar as they are at the threshold between a series of things: between a building (domestic or institutional) and circumambient nature; between dwelling-as-residing and dwelling-as-wandering; between sky and ground, horizon and path; and between standing stock-still and running. Even if we pause from time to time, for the most part we *perambulate* in gardens.

> *Perambulate* as a transitive verb means to inspect the boundaries of a place;
> perambulation rituals exist from ancient Rome to colonial New England. But in
> the case of gardens *the place itself is a boundary* ... Indeed, the boundary *of* a
> garden can be obscured and even removed at the limit, but the garden itself as
> such is already and always a liminal presence. [103]

Later on in the same book he discusses inns as also liminal places. Inns house transients, and thus themselves, in the words of William LaFleur, "articulate transience."[104] Inns stand betwixt and between a stable home that greets the traveler at the end of the journey and the ceaseless motion of the journey itself. Inns offer fleeting stability and momentary rest. "An inn is the transitory halting-place of the ambulatory journeyer whose on-going motion assures that no place, not even the place of destination, will be the scene of a complete arrest."[105] David Ley uses the concept of liminality to understand the role of the movie house in 20th century American society. The movie house suspends everyday reality and lures the patron into the realm of the fantastic, which then opens us to reconsider our own possibilities in the everyday world.[106] Karal Ann Marling envisions the traditional marquee at the entrance of the movie house as a liminal place. More than just an ordinary entrance, the marquee was "a liminal threshold to realm of pleasures and dreams ... where the ordinary rules of commerce had been suspended and anything could happen."[107]

The concept of liminality has also been put to good use in biblical exegesis. Belden C. Lane applies the concept of liminality to the role of mountains and mountain slopes in the Gospel of Matthew. Building on Terence Donaldson's work, which argues

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[103] *Getting Back Into Place*, 155.
[104] William LaFleur, *The Karma of Words: Buddhism and the Literary Arts in Medieval Japan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 76.
[105] *Getting Back Into Place*, 282.
[106] *Textures of Place*, 4.
[107] *Textures of Place*, 16.

that Matthew's six mountain stories provide the literary schema of the entire gospel,[108]

Lane claims that in the central four mountain narratives, the mountain and mountain

slopes function as liminal places:

> In each case, the recipients of hope are drawn geographically to the edge.
> An eschatological community takes shape on the boundaries, at the liminal place
> on the mountain's slope. The established order breaks down, a company of the
> future is formed, new rules are adopted. Jesus repeatedly leads people into
> hostile landscapes, away from society and its conventions, to invite them into
> something altogether new.[109]

Seth D. Kunin identifies a number of liminal places in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible.

The liminal place "allows the contact between different realms and the human and divine

to develop in ways not usually possible. Thus both direct communication between God

and man, and death and rebirth usually occur in liminal spaces."[110] Mountains and high

places connected the human with the divine realm, forming intermediate zones in which

human-divine communication might occur, and the categories of human and divine might

blur.[111] Mount Sinai clearly functions in this manner in Hebrew narrative:

> Mount Sinai ... is a doubly liminal site. It is both a mountain and in the
> wilderness – and between settled areas. It is the location where Moses and the
> people come into direct contact with God, and a permanent relationship is
> established. In several respects it functions in a similar narrative (or structural)
> way to Mount Moriah. Both are sites of divine communication and more
> importantly are both sites of transformation. Israel at Sinai is transformed into a
> covenant people of God.[112]

Lowered places often operate in similar fashion by linking earth to Sheol. Thus, in the

Genesis story of the "murder" of Joseph (Gen. 37), Joseph is thrown into a pit and a goat

is slaughtered in his stead in order to convince his father that he is dead. Kunin suggests

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[108] Terence L. Donaldson, *Jesus on the Mountain: A Study in Matthean Theology* (Sheffield Eng.: JSOT Press, 1985), referred to in Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 45.

[109] *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 45.

[110] Seth D. Kunin, *God's Place in the World: Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism* (London: Cassell) 30.

[111] *Ibid.*, 31.

[112] *Ibid.*, 32.

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this story functions as "a structurally inverted version of Genesis 22;"[113] Genesis 22 tells

the story of the near sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah, wherein a ram is substituted for

Isaac. Like Genesis 22, Genesis 37 is a rebirth text in which the descent into the pit

symbolizes death.

This survey of applications of the concept of liminality to geographical locales

should make clear that liminal places may be very diverse. It is not the locale in and of

itself that holds the quality of liminality, but rather the meanings that locales may carry in

story-telling. It is as the Jordan River comes to mark the boundary of the Promised Land

in the exodus narrative that the Jordan River comes to function as a liminal place in

Hebrew narrative, and hence later becomes an appropriate site for John the Baptist's

proclamation of the coming of the Lord. However, references to the Jordan River need

not always bear such heavy freight – at times the reference to such geographical locale is

entirely incidental to the main story. In the story of David's battles with the Arameans in

2 Samuel 10, the Jordan River is merely a place-marker referred to by-the-by, in a

narrative that focuses primarily on David's many victories over his enemies. A place

such as a city gate, which stands between the highly structured and controlled space of

the city, and the far less structured and uncontrollable space beyond the city walls is full

of potential as a liminal place; however, in Israelite society the city-gate also functioned

at the site of the local court, the place of assembly and the public market – all functions

that need not have anything to do with liminality. Thus, I suggest that *the identification*

of the character of a place requires close attention to its role in narrative, both lived and

told. Only *narrative* can bestow the quality of liminality on any particular place. These

[113] *Ibid.,* 33.

narratives need not, of course, be at all fictional or textual. They may be the narratives that we enact in everyday life. As I argued in chapter one, we live out our lives in the context of narrative. When we enter a movie house and abandon our mundane realities to indulge in fantasy, our doing so forms part of the story of our days and our lives. Likewise, the gardens that we construct around our homes form part of the setting of our life stories. When we move through places we weave scenes, dramatic moments, and we are characters in the theater of life. In this theatre, our dramas confer liminality upon one backdrop or another for a time, until the action shifts and we find ourselves elsewhere, where the setting conveys, perhaps, quite contrasting qualities. The quality of a place is determined by the story we are reading or living, and in a different story the same place may convey very different meanings. This is not a new idea - indeed, we were introduced to it in the Preface to this work. Vancouver is, in the context of my own life story, a New World, in which I am free to create myself as I want to be. However, in my friend's story, Vancouver functions as hometown and birthplace, a place full of long memories and old associations. It is the story that makes the place just what it is, and when the story changes the place changes too, to become somewhere quite different.

Now we begin to see the connection between narrative and place-world emerging much more clearly, and it is time to pull together the many threads that connect our analysis of narrative as the ordering principle of human time, which occupied chapter one, with the analysis of the nature of place and place-world, which has occupied us thus far in Chapter Two.

CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

In Chapter One we reviewed Ricoeur's understanding of the relationship between the human experience of time and narrative. Ricoeur argues that narrative is essential to human life because it allows us to make sense of temporal experience. Ordinarily, we speak of time in terms of spatial metaphors – as something that flows past us or something through which we advance. However, time is not, in fact, anything like space, because, whereas space always *is* and we can move back and forth within it, time, when it is past, or when it has not yet arrived, simply *does not exist*. The question that lies behind much of Ricoeur's meditation in *Time and Narrative* is this: Given that time seems to exceed our grasp, how is it that in ordinary, lived experience it is not such an obstacle, that we so easily understand our lives as temporal beings? The answer to this question, according to Ricoeur, is plot. Plot is a kind of metaphor that allows us to grasp the heterogeneity of human temporal experience as a single, intelligible whole. Plot creates *human* time, the time that we take for granted, the time in which coherent experience is possible. Although, ordinarily, we think of plot as a literary device employed in the creation of fictions, Ricoeur believes it plays an essential role in configuring and re-configuring the real, the ordinary flow of events in which we live.

In a few brief pages Ricoeur suggests that narrative is constitutive of human identity, both at the communal and individual levels. Drawing upon the reflections of Hannah Arendt, he points out that to describe the identity of an individual or community is always and necessarily to *tell a story*. When we seek to understand who we are, we recall the stories of our own lives. We justify our choices, our mistakes and omissions,

and we congratulate ourselves on our successes, always in relation to our own life story. Human identity is, therefore, narrative identity; it is a kind of identity which flows out of narrative and makes no sense outside of it.

This analytic framework, I believe, allows us to understand better the meaning of the word, "myth." If we understand plot, as Ricoeur does, as *muthos*, we can see that perhaps myth is nothing other than the schematism of time through which natural time becomes human time. According to this thesis, the great, sacred myths of humankind provide the central plots according to which the game of life may be played out. In our living religious traditions certain sacred myths are concretized, made real, solid and actual, through the lives of those who appropriate the myths. We live the stories, and through our living of them they *become* true. At the same time, through our living of them they also become new. Each time a myth is lived out in a human life it is transformed, and to the same extent that that life itself is transformed by the story. Myth, I argue then, is sustained through the dialectic of appropriation and transformation. The spiral motion of the hermeneutical process keeps story alive by re-reading, re-living and re-telling. And the truth of myth, I submit, is discovered in the living out of it.

This analysis of the role of narrative in human life is very helpful, but it takes account only of one dimension of human experience – the temporal dimension. However, all stories presuppose and project *worlds*. The *worldly* dimension of human experience and narrative is assumed by Ricoeur but not explained or accounted for. The central focus of Ricoeur's concern in *Time and Narrative* is the mystery of time. Our

focus is somewhat different: It is to understand the role of narrative in the construction of the human self and the human community. The human self is not a pure consciousness abstracted from body and physical environment. We are enfleshed beings who live in a world. Early in the 20th century Martin Heidegger drew attention to this essential element of human experience. Heidegger argued that the experience of world is prior to any objective or conceptual separation of self and world. World is simply a given, and all conceptual thought functions in terms of it.[114] We may understand Ricoeur's unspoken assumption of world in this way. World is not problematic for Ricoeur in the way that time is. As world is always present and unproblematic it does not feature at all in his understanding of narrative.

But is world, and our experience of world, entirely unproblematic? If narrative may be understood as constitutive of human identity, human self, may it not have a similar role in the constitution of world itself? This question prompted the inquiry we undertook in chapter two. In that chapter we turned to humanist, or "postmodern" (as some of them choose to call themselves) geographers to begin to trace the connection of human narrative to the human experience of world. We discovered that humanist geographers are not concerned with understanding the physical environment in which we live in a scientific fashion, but rather, they consider that the phenomenon of place in human experience precedes and takes priority over such objectification. Humanist geography is less a study of the material world in its spatial aspect than a study of *human*

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[114] A very helpful introduction to Heidegger's work is found in Anthony C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with Special Reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1980). On "world" in Heidegger's thought see p. 154 ff.

being in its relation to landscape, place and world. This concern with human being and human experience renders humanist geography a very appropriate resource for our own inquiry into the relation between narrative and world.

We learned from humanist geography that place is the immediate environment in which we live. It is a human construction, not only of material things like wood, concrete and steel, but also of human activities, memories, habits and social rules. We create places by delimiting them, naming them, making and enforcing rules about what may occur there, and exploiting them via cultivation, grazing, harvesting, building, dwelling. Place is the region in which the human self expresses and constructs itself by engaging with other selves according to intricate social rules and relationships. From these interactions emerge history and meaning, and the places in which history and meaning emerge become imbued with them. Place is both a material reality and a non-physical reality consisting of social practices and rules, personal experience, memory and imagination. Places are connected to each other in what I have called the *place-world.* The entire network of related places which are known, understood and governed by a human society is, in terms of its good *order,* a *kosmos.* By *kosmos* I refer not to the material universe, but rather to the universe as it is experienced and believed to be. It is now time to weave together our reflections on narrative as *muthos* with those on world as *kosmos.*

Although we have here discussed the experience of time and the experience of space as world quite separately, we know that, in fact, human experience is a unified,

temporal-spatial whole. Time and space are the warp and woof of human experience, and I would argue that the attempt to isolate the threads of just one dimension of human experience has the quite unintended consequence of unraveling experience altogether, rendering it entirely incomprehensible. For example, we have seen that we ordinarily understand time in terms of spatial metaphors, like that of an ever-flowing river. I want to suggest that the use of spatial metaphors to understand time is anything but accidental and inappropriate. Rather, if we visualize experience in terms of a unified fabric which has threads running in two different directions, we might see that it is precisely the threads of the *other* dimension, the one we are not focusing on, which hold together the threads of the dimension we seek to understand. When we seek to understand only the temporal dimension of experience, we are forced to take for granted and thus leave in place and unexamined, our experience of world. If we tried to pull apart and analyze in one and the same motion, both time and space, the experience we are seeking to understand would fall apart on us altogether. Thus Ricoeur must leave unexamined the worldly dimension of human experience in order to isolate its temporal dimension; and, likewise, humanist geographers assume the temporal dimension of experience in order to understand its spatial, or "place-al" aspect. But in this inquiry we seek to understand *both* dimensions in terms of their relation to the function of narrative.

If I am right in my suggestion that spatial metaphors are necessary to our understanding of time, precisely because we must assume space/world in order to place in the foreground and analyze the experience of time, then this insight supports Ricoeur's assertion that metaphorical thought is cognitive in nature. Metaphor, it seems, is *the*

means by which we hold together in one thought the fullness of human experience in all its multi-dimensionality. By enabling us to relate different *sorts* of things consciously and intellectually, metaphor enables us to know, at the level of *self*-consciousness, our own experience. Without the device of metaphor there would be consciousness but not *self*-consciousness, that consciousness that is aware of self and world and the difference between the two. And narrative, we have seen, is a particular kind of metaphor. Narrative is a metaphor that enables us to grasp the fullness of temporal experience in one motion. However, *there is no temporal experience that is not also spatial experience.* We can only isolate temporal experience by assuming and placing in the background of our thought, spatial or worldly experience. Therefore, it would be much more correct to say that narrative is a kind of metaphor that enables us to grasp the fullness of *spatio-temporal* experience. Narrative constructs self, but as it does so it also constructs the world in which self lives.

Real stories, both lived and told, do not distinguish between their temporal and spatial aspects. Time and world unfold in story in one, uninterrupted movement, similar to their unfolding in everyday experience. We, the ones who live or hear the story are unconscious of this unfolding temporal-spatial whole; we are engrossed in the movement of the plot. Our sole concern, ordinarily, is upon the ending, the point in which the action of the story will come together in a unity that satisfies our desire for completeness. However, if the story has any profundity, when we reach that end-point our own experience of our "world" – a spatio-temporal whole, as we have pointed out – will shift to accommodate the insights the story has provided. That spatio-temporal world will be

fuller, richer, deeper, than it otherwise was. And thus story weaves world and time, over and over again, and transforming ourselves as it does so.

J.D. Crossan has stated the relationship of narrative to world in a very simple sentence, with which I generally agree: "Myth establishes world."[115] At a very high level of generality this is true, as the human activity of narrating organizes its spatio-temporal experience, giving rise to human time within a human place-world. Our experience of place is shot through with our accumulated narratives, and the on-going narrating that structures our day-to-day activities within place. However, any *one* narrative ("myth," in Crossan's terms), or interrelated network of narratives does not establish, in one moment, an entire *kosmos, ex nihilo,* as it were. As we saw in the discussion of the movement of three-fold mimesis, in chapter 1, the creation of *new* story occurs in a cultural context which *assumes* story. The inherited culture consists of layer upon layer of narrative in many forms – legends, folktales, sacred "myths," chronicle, documented "histories," etc. – and this culture, together with the author's personal biography as an integral part of self-understanding, and her hopes and plans for the future forming a projected future self-narrative, constitutes the author's pre-understanding as she weaves a new story into being. The author of a story *already* lives within a world. The story that she writes, if it is of a suitably profound quality, redescribes that world so that the reader's experience of world is transformed – changed, made new. The hermeneutical movement of generating successive layers of similar but not identical narratives, can add to a culture's understanding of the world, or take that understanding in

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[115] J.D. Crossan, *The Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Sonoma, Cal.: Polebridge Press, 1988) 42.

an entirely new direction, transforming the culture itself. While it is unlikely that any one, single, new story will transform a culture, layers of stories moving toward a new understanding of world will gradually change the culture itself, and a new "world," a new *kosmos* will emerge.

In Part Two we will move into an analysis of the Hebrew place-world, as that world is projected by the many texts that comprise what we call the "Hebrew Bible." In particular we will analyze the nature of wilderness places within that larger place-world, and the role that narrative plays in establishing the identity and meaning of those wilderness places. Following that analysis we will consider how those stories and story-places are taken up in the rabbinic rite of Passover so as to play a significant role in the formation and maintenance of Jewish identity. This telling and re-telling of story through biblical and rabbinic tradition unfolds over a period of several thousand years, beginning in Near Eastern mythology and continuing even today, as modern experiences of exile and deliverance are added to the Passover *Haggadah.* Over those thousands of years the Hebrew and Jewish *kosmos* gradually evolves, from one which was practically indistinguishable from that of its Near Eastern neighbours, to one that participates in the larger, modern, industrialized *kosmos* of the Western world in the 20th and 21st centuries. At no time does any one *kosmos* spring into being in completed form, *ex nihilo*, so to speak. Worlds emerge from worlds, gradually, and in a manner that is virtually unnoticeable to those who are actually engaged in the process of world formation. It is only from the vantage point of considerable historical distance that we become aware of the creation and dissolution of human place-worlds. Indeed, the world we live in and

assume today, the world in which a thesis is being written on the subject of the human creation of world, is itself a world in the process of becoming, an open-ended and unfinished world that our own lives are just now bringing into being.

PART TWO

CHAPTER THREE: The Nature and Role of Wilderness in the Hebrew Bible

As we saw in chapter 2, in the very beginning, before the creation of the heavens

and the earth, there is God and there is chaos – a dark and watery abyss over which the

breath or wind of God hovers. It is God's separation of the waters that enables dry land,

the earth, to appear. God sets limits, boundaries, around the great, primeval Sea, infusing

chaos with original order. This activity – the infusion of order into chaos – is itself the

very nature of creation.

The earth in its original state is not wild: there is no notion, in the Hebrew Bible,

of a natural order independent of the human order, into which humans then intrude. The

idea of a natural order which precedes the human order is a very recent and Western one.

Nor is there an idea of the earth as we imagine it – a massive globe suspended, spinning

and whirling, in a universe so vast that it boggles the mind. Rather, the earth, in the tale

of creation is an intimate place and a very human place: it is a garden.

> On the day the Lord God made earth and heavens, no shrub of the field being yet
> on the earth and no plant of the field yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not
> caused rain to fall on the earth and there was no human to till the soil, and
> wetness would well from the earth to water all the surface of the soil, then the
> Lord God fashioned the human, humus from the soil, and blew into his nostrils
> the breath of life, and the human became a living creature. And the Lord God
> planted a garden in Eden, to the east, and He placed there the human He had
> fashioned. And the Lord God caused to sprout from the soil every tree lovely to
> look at and good for food, and the tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and
> the tree of knowledge, good and evil. (Gen. 2.4b-9)[116]

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[116] This translation from Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996) 7-8. All other translations will be from the NRSV unless otherwise specified.

Genesis tells us that in the beginning there were no plants or herbs because God had not yet caused rain to fall *and* there was, as yet, *no one to till the ground.* The existence of trees and green plants is directly tied to the existence of the human race – humans are to be gardeners, farmers, whose role it is to till the earth and raise the good plants up from it. Once Adam has been made and brought to life God then plants a garden, the first place that ever comes into being *as a place*, on earth. The first human to be created belongs somewhere – he belongs in a garden. But the garden, itself, cannot exist without Adam, whose role it is to care for the garden. And thus we see, already in the second chapter of the Hebrew Bible, that the human being and the place belong together, they cannot exist without each other. Now, this garden is not a garden bordering another place, a building of some kind; rather, it is itself a home and it exists entirely unto itself. We, the readers, have not yet been introduced to any place *outside* of the garden. Although this garden, apparently itself all that there is of earth, is separated from the heavens above, there are no divisions or boundaries on earth, itself. The garden *is* Earth.[117] In the garden God enjoys a serene and intimate relation with his human creatures: he walks with them in the cool of the evening breeze. There are no breaks, ruptures, fissures in the order of creation or in the order of the human-divine relationship. There is, however, an original boundary of another sort, not a place-boundary. It comes in the form of a command given to Adam (and presumably, also, to Eve) not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This boundary is akin to the boundary between heaven and earth: it demarcates the human realm from the divine realm – humans are not

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[117] It is true that the text says, "And the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east (2.8)," therefore implying the existence of places outside the garden, for example, in the west. However, the reader has not been introduced to such places as finished creations. Verses 5-7 of Genesis 2 describe an unfinished creation, one in which there are no plants for there was no rain and no one to till the ground. In this story, plants require a gardener, and the first gardener is Adam, and the garden is Eden.

to share with God in the knowledge of good and evil. And it is, of course, the erection of the very first boundary on earth that causes the problem.[118]

Boundaries are essential to creation: they order, they control, they limit; and limits, as we have seen, are intrinsic to identity. Thus, boundaries are good things. However, it is in the nature of the human creature to resist limits - limits can also be viewed as limitations to be overcome - and thus Adam and Eve must eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they must attempt to be as God. This act, of course, changes everything, and it changes the nature of the earth itself. Adam and Eve's transgression, which defies the identity of both God and themselves, tears asunder the human-divine relationship, and Adam and Eve are thrust out of the garden. They lose their place – their proper place in the scheme of things. But the garden does not disappear; rather, a border is brought into being – the very first patrolled border in the history of the earth. God appoints cherubim with flaming swords to guard the way to the tree of life. There is now a place *outside of* the garden, and with the creation of the first *outside*, wildness appears. The trees of the garden had been created with human beings (and also, presumably, God) in mind, they are "pleasant to the sight and good for food." It is of the very nature of nature itself to serve human beings. The *telos* of the Hebrew *kosmos* is humankind, and one can only properly understand its parts by understanding their relationship with

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[118] By suggesting this reading of the story of the expulsion of Adam and Eve I do not mean to suggest that other readings of the source of the "problem" are incorrect. One can also validly suggest that the source of the "problem" lies in the freedom God bestowed on his creatures. One may also argue that the eating and subsequent expulsion need not be viewed as "problems." Such different readings of the text do not cancel each other out, but rather, add to its richness. By suggesting this interpretive strategy I seek only to draw the reader's attention to one aspect of its narrative art, and not to deny other readings that are helpful in other contexts.

humans.[119] Wild things do not, by their nature, serve beings other than themselves. Like

Adam and Eve, they are self-centered. Wild plants first arise when God curses the earth

in response to the original transgression:

> Cursed is the ground because of you;
> In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life;
> Thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you;
> And you shall eat the plants of the field.
> By the sweat of your face
> You shall eat bread
> Until you return to the ground,
> For out of it you were taken;
> You are dust,
> And to dust you shall return (Gen. 317b-19)

There were no thorns and thistles before this curse, nor was sweat required in order to

sustain life. Adam will have to struggle to tame this new wildness, to bring it under

submission – he who, himself, refused to submit. The state of the land to which Adam

and Eve belong directly reflects the human-divine relationship: as there is now a state of

tension and struggle between humans and God, there is now a state of tension and

struggle between humans and the earth itself. What should have, by its nature, served the

other, now seeks to serve itself. Although wilderness as such has not yet been mentioned,

its primary theme, which I will argue is that of struggle, has already been introduced.

This Hebrew creation story did not spring into being *ex nihilo*, so to speak.

Rather, it is a creative re-telling of much older stories. Claus Westermann observes that

two, originally independent narratives underlie Genesis 2.4b-3.24.[120] One of these begins

at 2.4b and concludes at 2.24. Its subject is the creation of humanity and the dominant

character is God. This narrative relates a first, unsuccessful attempt at the creation of

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[119] On this point, see Westermann, *Genesis,* 197.
[120] Westermann, *Genesis,* 192.

humankind, and its unsuccessful nature is reflected in the words of verse 2.18: "It is not good that the man should be alone." The message of this narrative is that the creation of humanity "is only complete when the man is given a companion who corresponds to him in the woman. The creation of woman completes the creation of humankind."[121] The second narrative is the paradise story, which begins at 3.1, although the prohibition related at 2.16-17 prepares the groundwork for the action of the story. Westermann describes this story as a primeval narrative of crime and punishment[122] that explores "the basic question of human existence and its limitations."[123] Here, no one character dominates, but rather the relationship between God and the human couple creates the dynamic that moves the action along. Westermann argues that the Yahwist's purpose in joining the two narratives together was "to present the primeval event of crime and punishment as one which involved humankind in community."[124] This story of a *community* and its relationship to God is very different from the older paradise story which, Westermann believes, dealt with the crime of an individual alone. The Yahwist communicated his message, not by creating a story *ex nihilo*, but by choosing passages that suited his particular message from among many traditional stories and weaving them together into a unique new story, a perfect whole.

As we saw in Chapter One, new stories are woven out of old stories, via the movement of the three-fold mimesis described by Ricoeur. Thus scholars like Westermann can trace in our ancient texts evidence of still older stories. This corpus of

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[121] *Ibid.*
[122] *Ibid.*, 193.
[123] *Ibid.*, 190.
[124] *Ibid.*, 194.

stories inherited by the Yahwist constituted the grammar of his culture's narratives, a grammar which came to govern the composition of, amongst other things, the story of Adam and Eve, with which we are now familiar.[125] The ideas, images, themes and narrative strategies we find in the books that now constitute our "Hebrew Bible" were themselves drawn from much older material; and the biblical material itself was written, re-written and edited over many long centuries. The Hebrew Bible thus reflects Israelite (and later, Judean[126]) thinking at different stages of its development. We are the heirs of thousands of years of telling and re-telling, and one of the products of this mimetic spiral is the corpus of texts that we call "the Hebrew Bible." At a certain level of generality and abstraction we can trace the *kosmos*, the world order, that is projected by this literary collection, and discern the place of wilderness within it. However, this projected *kosmos* cannot be taken to reflect, in a direct and literal fashion, the understanding of any particular individual Israelite or Israelite community (or Judean or Judean community) at any one point in time. As Ricoeur has taught us, the past itself is gone, extinguished, and it is impossible, now, to re-construct that past with any degree of accuracy or completeness. What we can do, though (and I would argue that it is *all* we can do with ancient texts) is to draw from what the past has handed down to us an image of the world as it once was. From the traces of the past we seek to re-create it imaginatively, and this re-creation serves, for us, to *stand for* that actual past that is no longer available to us.[127] In a word, we seek to write history, and, in particular, intellectual history. We attempt to tell the story of the Hebrew *kosmos*, admitting while we do so, that this telling is no more, can be no more, than an imaginative re-telling – equal parts reality and creative

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[125] See above Chapter One, p. 19.

[126] We might include, arguably, also other ancient Near Eastern thought-forms.

[127] See the discussion of historiography in Chapter One, 23-25.

innovation. I am greatly assisted in this attempt at cosmic telling (or re-telling), by the work of Luis I.J. Stadelmann, who devoted many years to uncovering the Hebrew vision of the world from its traces in the Hebrew Bible.[128]

Stadelmann tells us that the idea of a "world" or a "universe" as a whole is foreign to Hebrew thought. That kind of idea is, however, conveyed by various expressions, particularly הכל ("the all") and השמים והארץ ("the heavens and the earth"), or a fuller expression of the latter, such as שמים וארץ הים וכל-אשר-בם ("heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them," Ps. 146.6). Space, as such, "never appears as an inert, lifeless receptacle; it is the sea where the fish swim, the ground on which beasts tread, the land belonging to such and such people, the heavens where the winds are stored, the snow and hail are kept."[129] In other words, "space" is an orderly network of *places*, a place-world, a set of living environments in which important things happen. The Hebrew world is not static: Stadelmann describes it as "less a being than an event,"[130] as time and history are central to the Hebrew conception of the world order. This *kosmos* is a unified spatio-temporal world and, therefore it is impossible to speak of the Hebrew understanding of its spatial environment without also speaking of the very important events which happen in this environment – events which determine its nature. We have seen an example of this already, in the above account of the emergence of wildness in nature as the consequence of the (partial) removal of God's blessing from the earth.

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[128] Luis I.J. Stadelmann, *The Hebrew Conception of the World* (Rome: The Pontifical Institute, 1970).

[129] *Ibid.*, 2.

[130] *Ibid.*, 3.

The Hebrew *kosmos* is organized into three tiers or levels, with the earth existing in the intermediate zone between the heavens above and the underworld below. Above the earth is the Sky, which is in the form of a solid plate or perhaps an inverted bowl, the רקיע, which the NRSV translates as "a dome," and the JPS as "an expanse." The רקיע restrains the waters above the earth, and into its lower side are affixed the sun, the moon and the stars.[131] The רקיע appears to be supported by distant mountains[132], which themselves have, as foundations, pillars that are thrust down into the underworld,[133] which contains a subterranean ocean and the abode of the dead.[134] The earth is conceived as a vast plain which might, according to one verse, be envisaged as floating on this subterranean ocean.[135] The Hebrew word for earth, ארץ, is also used to refer to a particular country or territory, for example the land of Israel, which is called ארץ ישראל. There is, therefore, in the Hebrew understanding of the "earth" as a whole, the idea of geographically related lands belonging to various peoples, and in its fullest extent, the living environment which is home to אדם, humankind.[136] As a set of lands which are the particular homes of particular peoples, the Hebrew ארץ is, indeed, therefore, primarily a world of particular places, a *place-world*, wherein humans are set in the order of things.

While the underworld as the abode of the dead is a frightening and gloomy place, in no way is it parallel to the later Christian conception of hell as a place of punishment

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[131] *Ibid.*, 57.
[132] *Ibid.*, 46.
[133] *Ibid.*, 135.
[134] *Ibid.*, 166.
[135] Job 26.7b, as interpreted by Stadelmann at 127.
[136] See, in this regard, Stadelmann's discussion at 127.

for sinners. All mortals, regardless of merit, are destined for שׁאוֹל ("Sheol"), which

offers no more than a ghostly half-life. It is described as a dark pit (Ps. 88.7), a chaotic

gloomy, land (Job 10.22), a place of silence where there is no praise or remembrance of

God (Ps. 115.17; Ps. 6.6). Before the Hellenistic period (c. 323 BCE – 31 BCE) there is

no expectation of a resurrection of the dead, and certainly the heavens are not considered

to be the otherworldly destination of the righteous. The hope of God in any way

rectifying this dismal fate of all mortals does not appear – indeed, there is a sense in

which the dead are beyond God's care: "For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise

you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness" (Is. 38.18). The

imprisonment of the dead in the underworld is presented as merely a brute fact for which,

it appears, neither God nor any human bears moral responsibility.

The Hebrew Bible exhibits a variety of ways of understanding sacred space or the

abode of God. On the one hand, the heavens are clearly understood to be God's abode.

Sara Japhet says, "The idea that God resides in heaven can be described as a universal

biblical view. It seems to be almost self-understood ..."[137] Thus Psalms 33, 53 and 102

describe God looking down upon humankind from his throne in heaven, and in 1 Kgs.

8.39 Solomon prays that God will hear the pleas of Israel "in heaven your dwelling

place." But we also find some references to Mount Sinai as God's home, as in Ps. 68.16:

"the mount that God desired for his abode, where the Lord will reside forever." More

frequently, Mount Zion is described as God's terrestrial abode, as in Ps. 9.11, Ps. 50.1-2,

Ps. 74.2 and Ps. 48. Psalm 76.2 declares, as do many other passages, "In Judah God is

[137] Sara Japhet, "Some Biblical Concepts of Sacred Place" in *Sacred Space: Shrine, City, Land* (ed. Benjamin Z. Kedar and R.J. Zwi Werblowsky; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1998) 59-60.

known, his name is great in Israel. His abode has been established in Salem, his dwelling place in Zion." Mountains, with foundations that reach down into the underworld and peaks that graze the Sky, connect the three levels of the *kosmos* in a spatial sense, and thus offer the possibility of connecting the human with the divine. Seth Kunin understands mountains as potential liminal places in the Hebrew *kosmos:*

> Mountains and other raised locations bridged the domains of heaven and earth. This merging of domains suggests the possible connection or joining of the human and the divine. It creates an intermediate area in which the divine may communicate with the human and the human with the divine. It also sometimes creates or suggests ambiguity between the categories of human and divine. [138]

Thus the construction of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11 is an attempt on the part of human beings to create such a liminal zone to bridge heaven and earth. Kunin describes the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac on a mountain in the land of Moriah as a story of transformation and rebirth, wherein Isaac "is symbolically sacrificed and symbolically reborn of divine rather than human descent."[139] The location of the action on the top of a mountain is a fitting one for this contact and interaction with the divine.

Mount Zion is, of course, the location of the Temple, and the Temple is God's dwelling place on earth from the monarchial period onward (Deut. 12.5, Ps. 43.3, 1 Kgs. 9.3 and Ps. 26.8.). The establishment of the Temple is anticipated by Moses in his farewell speech to the Israelites: "But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there," (Deut. 12.5); and becomes an accomplished fact with Solomon's construction of the first Temple: "I have consecrated this house that you have built, and put my name there forever; my eyes

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[138] Seth Kunin, *God's Place in the World: Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism* (London: Cassell, 1998) 31.
[139] *Ibid.*

and my heart will be there for all time" (1 Kgs. 9.3). Mount Zion may be seen as the cosmic mountain of the Hebrew Bible, the place where heaven and earth meet, the "tangent of celestial and mundane reality" in Levenson's words,[140] and in this axial role in world order, the "moral as well as the physical capital of the universe."[141] Jerusalem, the holy city, is the central human community and all the other nations surround her: "This is Jerusalem; I have set in the center of the nations; with countries all around her" (Ezek. 5.5).

Although God can and properly should be found and worshipped in the Temple, it would be erroneous to think that the Israelites therefore understood God as somehow absent from other places. God is available to all who seek him: "The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth," says Psalm 145.18. Indeed, God transcends all spatial categories and limitations: "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" (1 Kgs. 8.27). Although the majesty of the Temple befits God's glory, God will nonetheless be present to his people in their wanderings, regardless of the grandeur of the surroundings. So God responds to David's plan of constructing a temple for him by reminding him that, "I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle" (2 Sam. 7.5). And when God later allows Jerusalem and the Temple to be destroyed, and sends the people into exile as punishment, yet God goes with them: "Though I removed them far away among the nations, and

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[140] Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985) 111.
[141] *Ibid.*

though I scattered them among the countries, yet I have been a sanctuary to them for a little while in the countries where they have gone" (Ezek. 11.16).

These references to God's moving about in "a tent and a tabernacle" during the wilderness wanderings, and his later abandonment of the Temple at the time of the exile, should serve to remind us of the importance of narrative in understanding the Hebrew sense of place and sacred place. Indeed, the idea of the presence or the abode of God on earth is intrinsically related to the overall story of Israel in the Hebrew Bible, which revolves around the theme of God's deliverance of Israel as its axis. The promise of the Bible is that God will be present for his people and save them from their distress: "When you pass through the waters, I will be with you...when you walk through fire you shall not be burned..." (Isa. 43.2). This promise is related in narrative form, and the geographical presence of God on earth must always be placed within the context of this narrative, in order to be properly understood. As we said earlier in this chapter, time and history are central to the Hebrew conception of the world order, and the God who is the source of this order is known through history.

> Any attempt to understand and to interpret the world is a quest to unfold its meaning and purpose within Israel's history. The world provides the environment within which God shall achieve his purpose for Israel. It establishes the setting for history whereby the world then becomes one of Yahweh's tools for shaping his people. All that is achieved in the world subserves Yahweh's final purpose which ultimately is the forming of a people to render him praise. World and history are, then, for the ancient Hebrews not merely interrelated, but actually intertwined.[142]

An understanding of this intertwining of world and history is essential to understanding the centrality of Jerusalem, Zion, home of the Temple and holy city, as the centre of the world. The story of God's deliverance of Israelites from slavery and his leading them

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[142] *Hebrew Conception of the World,* 4.

through the wilderness to the Promised Land leads up to David's victories and the

establishment of Jerusalem as the capital and holy city as the triumphal conclusion of the

first chapter of Israelite history. Later, after the destruction of Jerusalem by the

Babylonians, the narrative theme becomes that of return and restoration, and in this

theme Jerusalem and the Temple figure as destination, the centre that calls the scattered

people home. Jerusalem is the central axis of the world, not only in a spatial sense, but

even more importantly, in a temporal sense – the homecoming place of all Israelites and

all Jews, and even of other nations. God's ultimate purpose in history is the final and

irrevocable establishment of Zion as the centre of the earth for all of earth's peoples, and

this dream animates the prophetic understanding of Zion:

> Arise, shine; for your light has come;
> And the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.
> For darkness shall cover the earth,
> And thick darkness the peoples;
> But the Lord will arise upon you,
> And his glory will appear over you.
> Nations shall come to your light,
> And kings to the brightness of your dawn (Isa. 60.1-3).

Isaiah's vision of Zion appearing in the dawn light of the Shekinah is expressed through

movement, narrative movement – God's glory rising over Zion, nations and kings

traveling toward her – but this movement is integral to the Hebrew conception of Zion as

a *place*. It is a place that shall be delivered, restored, victorious over her enemies, and the

peoples of the whole world shall stream up her hillsides to worship God in his holy

dwelling:

> In the days to come
> The mountain of the Lord's house
> Shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
> And shall be raised up above the hills.
> Peoples shall stream to it,
> And many nations shall come and say:
> "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,

to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths" (Mic. 4.1-2).

Jerusalem figures as world centre in terms of the *telos*, the goal, of world history, as much as or even more so than as a geographical centre. Indeed, the idea of Jerusalem as geographic centre of the world depends upon and turns upon the vision of Jerusalem as the *telos* of history. Only in a very mythical sense is Jerusalem the geographical centre of the world, and with the re-introduction of the idea of myth we return to our theme of narrative as the organizing principle of human experience.

While the *telos* of history might be the final victory of Zion, in the meantime history continues, and that history is anything but unproblematic. Warfare, defeat and the on-going struggle with evil provide the historical context in which arises the dream of God's glory dawning upon the holy city. The order of the world is riddled with chaos, and the everyday experience of evil is what occasions the need to trust in God's faithfulness. Creation is an on-going struggle to contain and master opposing forces that would tear the world apart. Israel has enemies and these enemies have, at times, overcome and destroyed her – this is the historical setting for those many references to the threatened return of chaos in the form of the Sea to which we referred in chapter 2. The struggle with the threatening Sea is historicized in the narrated history of God's salvation of Israel. The splitting of the Red Sea so that the Israelites may safely pass over on dry land echoes the separation of the waters at the beginning of creation. God also parts the waters of the Jordan River so that the people might safely enter into the Promised Land, and the two actions are expressly linked: "...the Lord your God dried up the waters of the Jordan for you until you crossed over, as the Lord your God did to the

Red Sea, which he dried up for us until we crossed over, so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is might, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever." (Josh. 4.23-24) These stories reveal what Luis Stadelmann describes as a typological interest in the past. "As in 'the days of old' Yahweh succeeded in subduing the primordial deep and proceeded to create the world, so he will perform once more his wonderful deeds in a specific historical setting on behalf of Israel and in punishment of foreign oppressors."[143] Thus God's victory over the Sea at the creation and his parting of the Red Sea is recalled by Isaiah as a prophecy of God's eventual deliverance of the Babylonian captives:

> Awake, awake, put on strength,
> O arm of the Lord!
> Awake, as in days of old,
> The generations of long ago!
> Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces,
> Who pierced the dragon?
> Was it not you who dried up the sea,
> The waters of the great deep;
> Who made the depths of the sea a way
> For the redeemed to cross over?
> So the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
> And come to Zion with singing;
> Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
> They shall obtain joy and gladness,
> And sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa. 51.9-11).

Zion's restoration and renewal will be achieved by God's mastery of chaos, by his separation of the waters as at the parting of the Red Sea. The early history of the Israelite people thus sets the pattern for all subsequent Hebrew thinking,[144] and the story of the exodus becomes the foundational story of the Israelite people. I now want to shift our attention to the exodus story and, particularly, its related theme of wilderness places.

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[143] *Hebrew Conception of the World,* 26-27.
[144] *Ibid,.* 27.

If Sinai is the *telos* of Israel's history, the story of the exodus is its beginning.[145] Prior to the events of the exodus there is no community of Israel, only a group of descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, who eventually find themselves in Egypt and become enslaved there. These people do not yet know YHWH as their God, yet God hears their cries because of their taskmasters and resolves to deliver them, and to make them his own people with a law and a land of their own. The making of a people, a covenant people under the leadership of YHWH is, itself, a creation story of a sort. We tend to associate "creation" exclusively with cosmogony, and yet, as Jon Levenson points out, "the point of creation is not the production of matter out of nothing, but rather the emergence of a stable community in a benevolent and life-sustaining order."[146] The story of the exodus is the story of creation of just such a stable community, and its order will be the order of its covenant with God.

Places play an essential role in this story. They symbolize its many themes: Egypt, with its "fleshpots" and its Pharaoh, symbolizes both sinful indulgence and oppression; the Reed Sea symbolizes God's mighty power to save; Sinai represents revelation and covenant; and finally, the Jordan River, at the very end of the story, symbolizes the Promised Land itself, the home of the chosen people. These places, functioning as symbols, recur over and over again in the Hebrew Bible, reinforcing the basic message of the foundational story. Wilderness places weave through this story: Sinai itself is in the wilderness, water miraculously appears from a rock, manna falls from

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[145] The stories of the patriarchs in Genesis are also considered stories of the beginnings of the people, Israel. However, from a narrative perspective, I believe, we find the beginnings of a distinct, organized, and named nation in the book of Exodus.

[146] *Creation*, 12.

heaven to nourish the people in their wanderings, the people rebel endlessly there, cloud by day and fire by night guide the people through it. While the exodus story, itself, is not *about* the wilderness, the wilderness provides the setting of most, but not all, of the narrative. The wilderness is the place of revelation, of testing, of rebellion, punishment and forgiveness. In the wilderness a slave people becomes the nation of Israel, and the theme of becoming, of transformation, is another important theme associated with the wilderness place.

While Israel is in this stage of becoming – no longer enslaved by Pharaoh, but not yet an independent nation – it exhibits many of the characteristics of the liminal entity discussed by Victor Turner. As a group of escaped slaves, it has little status vis-à-vis the surrounding nations. In the harsh land of the wilderness, it is entirely dependent upon God for its care, and obedience to and trust in God are its primary challenges. It is relatively homogeneous as a society and displays the characteristics of *communitas.*[147] The hierarchical order of its society in its settled form begins to emerge during the wilderness wanderings (for example, the priesthood is established at this time), but many of the features of *communitas* will remain with it for some time to come – its leaders will be, like Moses, charismatic leaders, and the equality of brothers amongst themselves will an important principle that the classical prophets will recall in later times. The struggle to endure the hardships of the wilderness, and the many trials its represents, is reminiscent of initiation tests undergone during rites of passage. The setting of Israel's initiation into

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[147] It is true that during the period of the wilderness wandering we see the emergence of differences and hierarchies among the people: tribes, clans, priests and other leaders who would rival Moses. However, I would argue that this order is emerging in this period, and, therefore, it is not inappropriate to apply the descriptive, "liminal."

a new status as a free and independent nation under God is likewise a liminal place, somewhere between order and chaos. It will be helpful, now, to examine the relationship of wilderness to chaos in the Hebrew Bible as a whole, as the role of the wilderness in the exodus story recalls and integrates into itself this relationship.

We have seen that the primary image of chaos in the Hebrew Bible is that of the watery abyss, the Sea, and wilderness, which is principally envisioned as desert, appears to Western thinking to be a place that is entirely its opposite. Yet opposites can stand together as reverse images, and thus as twins, and the Sea and the wilderness often relate in this fashion in the Hebrew Bible.

Primeval chaos is described in Genesis 1.1 as תהו ובהו, which is translated by the NRSV as "a formless void," and by the JPS as "unformed and void." Westermann says that תהו occurs about 20 times in the Hebrew Bible, while בהו shows up only three times, and always in association with תהו.[148] Westermann concludes from his analysis of these words that בהו is added only by way of alliteration, and that the primary meaning of the phrase is carried by the word, תהו.[149] This meaning has to do with a waste place, a nothingness which is more "gruesome" than mere non-existence. He quotes F. Delitzsch, who says, "There is something fearful about this pair of words," and he likens it to the old Norse expression, *gimminga gap*, which literally means "a gaping of yawns," i.e., the gaping abyss.[150] It is as a gaping abyss that תהו comes to mean "chaos," a Greek word that derives from the verb, χάσκω, "to gape." תהו is used

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[148] *Genesis,* 102.
[149] *Ibid.,* 103.
[150] *Ibid.*

often to describe desert or wilderness, and it is in this connection that it carries the sense

of a wasteland or waste place. Thus in Deuteronomy 32.10 God is said to have "found"

(New JPS) or "sustained" (NRSV) Israel בארץ מדבר ובתהו ילל ישמן, "in a desert

land, in a howling wilderness waste." (NRSV) In Job 6.18 the desert caravans turn aside

from their proper course and go up into the תהו and perish, and at 12.24 of the same

book God strips understanding from the leaders of the earth and makes them wander

בתהו לא-דרך, "in a pathless waste." On occasion, the images of the Sea and the

wilderness are summoned up together in one double vision of chaos that seems startling

to the modern reader. Thus Joel 2.20 prophesies the fate of northern invaders with

allusions both to the desert and the sea:

> I will drive the northerner far from you,
> I will thrust it into a parched and desolate land –
> Its van to the Eastern Sea,
> And its rear to the Western Sea (New JPS translation).

Ezekiel 29 imagines Pharaoh as התנים הגדול, the great sea-monster of Near Eastern

mythology, to whom God declares:

> I will fling you into the wilderness,
> You and all the fish of your channels;
> You shall fall into the open field,
> And not be gathered and buried (Ezek. 29.5a).

This mixing of metaphors may be jarring to the modern reader, but it suggests that there

was, to the authors and editors of this text, a similarity between the wilderness and the sea

that we do not experience. Such a similarity would arise if these two images both

conveyed the idea of primeval chaos, waste and void, in such similar ways that they

could be experienced as literary twins.

What arises from this analysis is the close connection that the Hebrew mind found between the state of the land and primeval chaos. Wilderness is like chaos, the place where God's work of creation is beginning to unravel. We noted that in our discussion of the story of Adam and Eve at the beginning of this chapter – wildness emerges when God first curses the land. Ideas regarding the state of the land, creation of order from chaos and the relationship between humans and God form a nexus of ideas so closely related that they cannot be understood properly without reference to each other. Creation is *for* אדם, but when אדם acts wrongly, creation is undone. Indeed, to act wrongfully is, in itself, to create chaos. So long as human actions conform to the divine order, the divine *kosmos,* the land maintains its fertility and its capacity to serve humans; however, these characteristics are damaged when humans sin. The prophets imagine the relationship of the land to humans in highly anthropomorphic terms: the land "mourns" in response to sin:

> The treaty is broken,
> Its oaths are despised,
> Its obligation is disregarded.
> The land mourns and languishes;
> Lebanon is confounded and withers away;
> Sharon is like a desert;
> And Bashan and Carmel shake off their leaves (Isa. 33.8-9).

Frequently the destruction of the land is understood to be divine punishment, thus in Ezekiel 30.12 God declares:

> I will dry up the channels,
> And will sell the land into the hand of evildoers;
> I will bring desolation upon the land and everything in it
> By the hand of foreigners;
> I the Lord have spoken.

This destruction causes creation to return to a state of chaos. Jeremiah 4.23-26 recalls the creation narrative of Genesis 1 in its description of the punishment that God will deliver upon Israel. Note, in this connection, the use of the expression תהו ובהו:

> I looked upon the earth, and lo, it was waste and void (תהו ובהו).
> And to the heavens, and they had no light.
> I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
> And all the hills moved to and fro.
> I looked, and lo, there was no one at all,
> And all of the birds of the air had fled.
> I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
> And all of its cities were laid in ruins
> Before the Lord, before his fierce anger.

The depiction of the wilderness as the scene of destruction due to human sin is obviously a very negative one. The wilderness is a wasteland in which humans are lost and perish, and is a direct reflection of God's anger toward his people. However, unlike the Sea, the wilderness does not (at least, always and necessarily) represent pure, unadulterated chaos, alien and threatening. It is, at least, dry land, and some plants, animals and birds live there. It is possible, also, for human beings to survive there, albeit with difficulty. And, at times, it has a beneficial role to play in the human order. The wilderness may also be the site of refuge, of encounter with God, and of new creation.

After defeating Pharaoh, God chooses to lead his people through the wilderness toward Canaan, the Promised Land. While certainly the wilderness in this story is a harsh and terrifying place, it is also a place where the people experience continuously and directly God's protection and solicitude in miraculous ways. He makes bitter water sweet at Marah (Exod. 15.22-25). He provides both meat in the form of quails, and bread in the form of manna from heaven (Exod. 16), and water from a rock (Exod. 17). His presence and direct leadership is clearly visible at all times in the pillar of cloud that leads the

people by day, and the pillar of fire to give them light throughout the night (Exod. 13.17-22). There are miraculous victories over enemies during the journey: Israel is able to prevail over the Amalekites when Moses merely holds up his hands (Exod. 17.8-14), and the walls of Jericho fall to a trumpet blast (Josh. 6.8-20). And, of course, it is upon a mountain in the desert of Sinai that Moses receives the law, and at Sinai the whole community enters into a binding covenant with God. The tabernacle, signifying this covenant and hence God's support of his people, is also created in the desert.

The giving of the law at Sinai in fact *creates* a new community. It is crucial to God's purpose that the rag-tag collection of refugees from Egypt is entirely transformed by their experience of deliverance. God demands that they entirely forget the old life in Egypt so that they will be entirely loyal to this God and their covenant with him. This transformation proves too difficult for the generation that left Egypt – they continually rebel against the harshness of this new life. Even Moses himself dies in the wilderness. In the end, it is a new generation of all those born on the journey who enter Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. The wilderness wandering thus serves to purify the people of their old memories and loyalties. They are given signs of their new identity in circumcision and Sabbath observance, new organization by division into twelve tribes and leadership by a priesthood which is also created during the wilderness journey. Israel is born in the wilderness, so despite the fact that the wilderness is a place of hardship and terror, it also carries the memory of Israel's birth:

> I accounted to your favour
> The devotion of your youth,
> Your love as a bride –
> How you followed me in the wilderness,
> In a land not sown (Jer. 2.2).

In much later times, even after construction of the Temple, the tabernacle remains associated with the wilderness. Thus 1 Chron. 21.29 describes the tabernacle as "the tabernacle of the Lord which Moses made in the wilderness."

There is a reference to the beginning of a new people in another wilderness story – that of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis 21. Again, the wilderness is certainly not described by this story in any positive way, yet the wilderness becomes the scene of divine encounter and the promise of a new creation. When Hagar despairs of the life of her young son and turns away from him, God hears her weeping and promises that "I will make a great nation of him." And like Israel in the wilderness, Hagar experiences the miraculous gift of water in the desert – suddenly there is a well of water where there was none.

In the Hebrew Bible creation is not creation *ex nihilo*; the latter concept began to emerge only toward the close of the biblical period under Hellenistic influence. Rather, God's creative acts function to separate and place appropriate boundaries between dissimilar things.[151] As we have seen, the first account of cosmic creation in Genesis 1 describes the cosmos coming into being by the separation of light from darkness and of the waters of the heavens from the waters under the heaven, and the gathering of the earthly waters into the bounded areas of the seas so that the dry land can appear. It is possible to understand many of the purity codes of the priestly traditions as motivated by a desire to maintain these boundaries essential to creation.[152] Certainly, such a possibility

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[151] See *Genesis 1-11* for an in-depth discussion of the idea of creation by separation in the HB.
[152] *Sinai and Zion*, 4 ff.

is supported by the interest shown by the authors of the first creation account (which is believed to be the work of the priestly authors) in stressing that the first vegetation and animal life on earth was arranged by kinds, species. If creation is separation and the setting of boundaries, then chaos involves the loosening of these boundaries, allowing the dissimilar to meet and potentially merge. It would be expected then, that earthly places that manifest chaos would be places where the boundaries become thin, and such places would meet the definition of liminality discussed in chapter 2. We may, I believe, understand the many theophanies that occur at wilderness sites in the Hebrew Bible as being made possible by just this loosening of boundaries. The most important and familiar of these theophanies are, of course, the two manifestations of the presence of God to Moses at Sinai described by Exodus 19 and 24. If we consider, as does Jon Levenson, that Mount Sinai is one and the same as "Horeb, the mountain of God" on which Moses encounters the burning bush in Exodus 3, then Moses meets God at Sinai on three separate occasions.[153] In an episode that recalls both the experiences of Moses and Hagar, Elijah also encounters God at Horeb/Sinai. 1 Kings 19 narrates Elijah's flight from Jezebel into the wilderness near Beer-Sheba. There he falls into despair and prays only for death; but he is awakened by an angel who leaves him a jar of water and a cake baked on hot stones. This provision of sustenance echoes both the stories of Hagar and the wilderness journey. He is then led on a journey lasting forty days and nights to "Horeb the mount of God," where he experiences the presence of God "passing by." At this point in the narrative the language employed is clearly reminiscent of the theophany described at Exodus 24. The fact that the author of this story evidently wished to remind the reader of the previous revelatory episode(s) at Sinai indicates that the association of

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[153] *Sinai and Zion*, 20.

Sinai, and hence, by implication, the wilderness, with divine encounter has become

securely embedded in biblical tradition. In addition to the stories of Sinai/Horeb we also

know of the three theophanies at Paran referred to above.

Theophany is the manifestation of the immediate presence of God and, for the

Israelites, was an awesome and terrifying experience. The writer of Exodus chose the

imagery of overwhelming natural phenomena to evoke the awesome aspect of the divine

presence descending upon Mount Zion - thunder, lightning, smoke, fire and earthquakes,

all accompanied by trumpet blasts (Exod. 19.16-20). We find similar language used to

evoke the psalmist's experience of God when God responds to his cry for help in Psalm

18:

> Then the earth reeled and rocked;
> The foundations also of the mountains trembled
> And quaked, because he was angry.
> Smoke went up from his nostrils,
> And devouring fire from his mouth...
> He bowed the heavens, and came down;
> Thick darkness was under his feet...
> The Lord also thundered in the heavens,
> And the Most High uttered his voice.
> And he sent out his arrows, and he scattered them;
> He flashed forth lightnings, and routed them.
> Then the channels of the sea were seen,
> And the foundations of the world were laid bare
> At your rebuke, O Lord,
> At the blast of the breath of your nostrils. (Psalm 18.7-8a,9,13-15)

The power that is described in these passages is the power to create and destroy, the

power to make and unmake, the power of life and death. As we saw above, at pages 79-

80, destruction and death is evoked in the Hebrew word תהו, which is often used to

describe desert and wilderness. God manifests his power of judgment and punishment in

destruction of the fertile earth, the land of blessing, rendering it "waste and void,"

תהו ובהו:

> I looked upon the earth, and lo, it was waste and void
> And to the heavens, and they had no light...
> I looked, and lo, the fruitful land was a desert,
> And all of its cities were laid in ruins (Jer. 4.23,26).

It is precisely this destructive possibility that the prophet, Jeremiah, calls down upon a faithless generation, albeit through the power of a foreign nation, an alien empire that will crush Judah under its foot and render her leaders helpless captives in a strange land:

> Therefore thus says the Lord,
> The God of Hosts:
> Because they have spoken this word,
> I am now making my words in your mouth a fire,
> And this people wood, and the fire shall devour them.
> I am going to bring upon you
> A nation from far away,
> O house of Israel,
> Says the Lord...
> Their quiver is like an open tomb;
> All of them are mighty warriors.
> They shall eat up your harvest and your food;
> They shall eat up your sons and your daughters;
> They shall eat up your flocks and your herds;
> They shall eat up your vines and your fig trees;
> They shall destroy with the sword
> Your fortified cities in which you trust (Jer. 5.14-15a;16-17).

And thus was the land of the promise, the land of milk and honey, forsaken and destroyed. The power of chaos, the power of תהו and בהו, was once again unleashed in the flood of Babylonian military troops, and the blessing was removed.

> Take up weeping and wailing
> For the mountains,
> And a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness,
> Because they are laid waste so that no one passes through,
> And the lowing of cattle is not heard;
> Both the birds of the air and the animals
> Have fled and are gone.
> I will make Jerusalem a heap of ruins,
> A lair of jackals;

> And I will make the towns of Judah a desolation,
> Without inhabitant (Jer. 9.10-11).

There is seemingly no limit to the destruction wrought upon the land of Israel and Judah by their enemies – it is utterly cursed, at least for the time being. Indeed, in the theophany of Ezekiel 1-3.15, that prophet witnesses the chariot bearing the divine presence leaving the Temple in Jerusalem, a sure sign of God's rejection of that place. In the land of promise there is no more hope: "A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more" (Jer. 31.15). The leaders of the country are taken as captives to Babylon; it appears the nation has returned to the conditions experienced in the period of the Egyptian captivity. "By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion...How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137.1, 4)

Ironically, however, it is in this very captivity that we find the seeds of new hope. A people in exile is not yet entirely extinguished, and through this remnant something new might yet be born: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land" (Jer. 23.5). In the dreams of the exiles we find the beginnings of eschatological thought, the hope of the ending, once for all, of suffering and evil, and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth, one restored to at least its original glory, one no longer vulnerable to the ravages of time, decay and human faithlessness. In the Hebrew Bible, this hope takes on an earthly and concrete form in the

vision of restoration of the people of Israel and Judah, the land of promise and the city of Jerusalem, Zion:

> Therefore, the days are surely coming, says the Lord, when it shall no longer be said, "As the Lord lives who brought the people of Israel up out the land of Egypt," but "As the Lord lives who brought out and led the offspring of the house of Israel out of the land of the north and out of all the lands where he had driven them." Then they shall live in their own land (Jer. 23.7-8).

Donald E. Gowan says that eschatology in the Hebrew Bible is not about the end of the world or of history, but rather the end of evil. "It promises the end of sin (Jer. 33.8), of war (Mic. 4.3), of human infirmity (Isa. 35.5-6a), of hunger (Ezek. 36.30) of killing or harming any living thing (Isa. 11.9a)."[154] In these eschatological visions the themes of wilderness, and exodus through the wilderness, are played upon repeatedly. Insofar as the wilderness is an image of chaos, it is also, potentially, an image of the site of new creation, as what was destroyed is made anew. Hosea imagines the people of Israel as the adulteress wife of her divine Lord, who is lured back to faithfulness after her punishment through a wilderness wandering akin to that of the original Exodus:

> Therefore, I will now allure her,
> And bring her into the wilderness;
> And speak tenderly to her...
> There she shall respond as in the days of her youth,
> As at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt (Hos. 2.14,15b).

Israel will be led back to a restored land, a land in which nature itself reflects the transformation undergone by the once-faithless but forgiven bride: "I will make for you a covenant on that day with the wild animals, the birds of the air, and the creeping things of the ground; and I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land; and I will make you lie down in safety" (Hos. 2.18). In this vision of redemption, the original blessing of fertility and abundance is expanded upon, to become, in addition, a blessing of utter

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[154] Donald E. Gowan, *Eschatology in the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 2.

peace and tranquility. Violence is removed, not only from human intercourse, but also from nature itself. There is no more wildness, for even the undomesticated creatures of the earth are brought within the covenant of peace. The curse placed upon the land at the moment of humanity's first transgression is undone, and the land restored is the land as it was in the beginning, without rupture, break or tear. We find the same idea in Ezekiel, in a passage that envisions God as the good shepherd who will protect the sheep from the wild animals. Here, the "covenant of peace" is explicitly named as such: "I will make with them a covenant of peace and banish wild animals from the land, so that they may live in the wild and sleep in the woods securely" (Ezek. 34.25). In the famous eschatological verse from Isaiah (65.25), wildness is not simply banished but actually transformed, so that violent animals become peace-loving ones:

> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
> The lion shall eat straw like the ox;
> But the serpent – its food shall be dust!
> They shall not hurt or destroy
> On all my holy mountain,
> Says the Lord.

The vision of Israel, once again led through the wilderness to the Promised Land, is thus not simply a repeat of the original event, but something much, much more. This return to the land will restore, not just the Sinaitic covenant and the land of the first Temple, but the original blessing that was first lost in the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Paradise. To a certain degree the wilderness will indeed become the site of a *new* creation – a new beginning of an old idea, perhaps. The vision is still an earthly vision, but this earth is more and better than the earth of our everyday experience. It is an earth transformed, restored to its original glory; a glory that right now, in our everyday experience, it has lost.

In this vision of a new or renewed creation, the wilderness plays a double role as a pathway to and a site of renewal. The wilderness is the place on the way home: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God" (Isa. 40.3). This is a way that God himself will travel, but even as he does so, by his very presence he will restore this once-ravaged earth.

> Do not remember the former things,
> Or consider the things of old.
> I am about to do a new thing;
> Now it springs forth, do you perceive it?
> I will make a way in the wilderness
> And rivers in the desert.
> The wild animals will honor me,
> The jackals and the ostriches;
> For I give water in the wilderness,
> Rivers in the desert,
> To give drink to my chosen people (Isa. 43.19-20).

The *presence* of the creative God in this wilderness is a healing presence, to the same degree that the presence of the judging and punishing God was a destroying presence. God's power to make and unmake, to heal and to wound, to bind and to loose, is maintained, affirmed; it is the quality of the relationship between God and human that determines whether this same power will be for good or ill. However, in this vision of new creation, God's presence is entirely beneficial, and it works to transform the wilderness into the fertile land of blessing that it once was, in the beginning. The wilderness then is like a vestibule, the entrance-way which provides those who enter into it a foretaste of the good things to come:

> A highway shall be there,
> And it shall be called the Holy Way;
> The unclean shall not travel on it,
> But it shall be for God's people;
> No traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
> No lion shall be there,
> Nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;

> They shall not be found there,
> But the redeemed shall walk there.
> And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,
> And come to Zion with singing;
> Everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;
> They shall obtain joy and gladness,
> And sorrow and sighing shall flee away (Isa. 35.8-10).

The image of a highway through the wilderness clearly evokes the ancient story of the original Exodus from Egypt, and the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. In such passages we can see how the Exodus story has become the grammar of the culture's narratives of exile, deliverance and journey home. Particularly in Second Isaiah the allusions to the Exodus story are made explicit, so that the prophecy of a new deliverance and return to the land becomes a re-telling of the original Exodus story. These texts hold up an image of God as Saviour (see, for example, Isa. 43.2-3, 14; 44.6, 24; 45.15). The Holy One who saved the people from Pharaoh will remember his people and save them once again as he did before:

> Thus says the Lord,
> Who makes a way in the sea,
> A path in the mighty waters,
> Who brings out chariot and horse
> Army and warrior;
> They lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished,
> Quenched like a wick (Isa. 43.16-17).

The one who once freed the Israelites from slavery will now tell the prisoners to come out (Isa. 49.9) and bring them home again to Zion with singing (Isa. 51.9-11). The return of the exiles from Babylon will thus re-enact the drama which founded the people of Israel in the beginning, re-make them as God's own beloved and restore them in a land made new.

The transformation of waste and desolate places into fertile and abundant land is an integral aspect of God's forgiveness of his wayward people. The restoration of relationship leads to the flourishing of justice and righteousness, which is evoked through the imagery of a peaceful and abundant earth:

> Then justice will dwell in the wilderness,
> And righteousness abide in the fruitful field.
> The effect of righteousness will be peace,
> And the result of righeousness,
> Quietness and trust forever.
> My people will abide in a peaceful habitation,
> In secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places.
> The forest will disappear completely,
> And the city will be laid low.
> Happy will you be who sow beside every stream,
> Who let the ox and the donkey range freely (Isa. 32.16-20).

Indeed, the restoration of the relationship between Israel and God lies at the very heart of the eschatological vision of the Hebrew Bible. As we have seen in the foregoing pages, the state of the land is a direct reflection of the quality of that relationship. Wilderness first arises from the curse God makes in response to human sin; likewise, forgiveness of sin and restoration of relationship removes the curse and restores the blessing, so that the land becomes "like the garden of Eden" (Isa. 36.35).

It is in the context of these eschatological texts that the role of Zion as the *telos*, the goal of history, becomes most clear. The Deuteronomic history charts the development of the nation from a disorganized crowd of ex-slaves, to a covenant people under a law, led to a Promised Land by God, and the gradual occupation and domination of that land. The "first act" in the drama of Israel, so to speak, reaches a climax with the establishment of the united kingdom under David, the building of the capital at Jerusalem, and finally the establishment of the Temple by Solomon. However, all this

godly work is undone in later years, ending in the catastrophe of destruction of the

Temple and the Babylonian exile. The eschatological hope is for a re-enactment of sorts

of the first act, in a manner that will ensure that the disasters that befell the people after

the death of Solomon can never occur again. According to Donald Gowan, such a

guarantee requires a three-fold transformation, of the human person, society and

nature,[155] and this transformation finds its centre and ultimate fulfillment in the vision of

a restored Zion.[156] Zion is the final destination of the wayfarers journeying home along

the desert highway, for, however much the wilderness may blossom and become fruitful,

it can never be home. Home is symbolized by Jerusalem, and the heart of Jerusalem is

the Temple Mount, the holy mountain which will be once for all, God's dwelling place.

It is only here that the people will find lasting peace, true security and unwavering

contentment.

There is a very simple format to the typical Hebrew wilderness story and it has a

binary structure of an exile followed by a homecoming. Wilderness may represent either

the experience of exile itself or the struggles the exiled person or community must endure

in order to reach home. We find this form of narrative recognized by the ancient rabbis

as the sequence, humiliation/glory. In *M. Pesahim* 10.4, the Master of the Passover feast

is directed to preface his response to the Four Questions by an introductory statement

which "begins with the humiliation (גנת) and ends with the glory (שבח)."[157] In the

Exodus story the wilderness, of course, represents the trials and hazards that must be

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[155] *Eschatology*, 2.
[156] *Eschatology*, 3.
[157] The translation here is that of Nahum Glatzer, ed., *The Passover Haggadah with English Translation, Introduction and Commentary.* (New York: Schocken Books, 1953) 23.

negotiated before the Israelite people may enter the Promised Land. In the Hagar story, on the other hand, it is the wilderness itself, with its threat of death by starvation and thirst, that constitutes the place of exile, and the homecoming will be realized in the birth of the "great nation" that will spring from him (Gen. 21.18). The story implies that Ishmael's nation will make the wilderness itself their dominion. This ending, in which the wilderness itself becomes the home place, defies the normative pattern of Hebrew wilderness narratives. However, this story is not about Israel, but about a different people – a people, in fact, who are rivals to the house of Israel as Ishmael is rival to Isaac. It is to be expected that rivals would display characteristics that contradict those of the hero of the story. The wilderness can never be a home place for Israel, and that very fact makes it a very fitting home place for Israel's rivals, the Ishmaelites. In the Elijah story (1 Kgs. 19) the wilderness functions in a dual manner, as both place of refuge for the persecuted prophet, but also as the site of Elijah's despair and complaint to God. Elijah retreats to the desert seeking only death, and the wilderness with its many threats is a suitable site in which to find this resolution to his hopeless plight. Of course, the divine response is to reject this over-hasty surrender, and in a manner reminiscent of both the Exodus and the Hagar stories, food is miraculously provided. The wilderness then becomes the scene of theophany, revelation, and renewal of hope as Elijah journeys to Mount Horeb, which is represented as being the same mount as Sinai, where he experiences the divine presence and receives new instructions that will bring about the fulfillment and conclusion of his work as God's prophet to Israel. The wilderness plays a key role also in the David story, as the place of David's retreat from Saul's attempts on his life. Like Israel in Egypt, and Hagar and Elijah in the wilderness, David also

undergoes a form of exile as he is forced to flee Saul's court when Saul's jealousy of him turns murderous. His time as an outlaw leader, resorting to wilderness refuges for protection from danger, can be interpreted as a time of trial, testing his qualities as a leader of men and servant of God before he granted the prerogatives of monarchy. Finally, in the poetry of the classical prophets we see most clearly the typical binary pattern of exile/homecoming, where the transformations in nature itself display this pattern: productive land is cursed by God and becomes wilderness/desert, representing God's punishment of a wayward people, and then this cursed land is restored to its original, Eden-like fertility when God forgives and Israel is restored to the land.

Let us summarize the results of the foregoing analysis and draw some conclusions regarding the function of the wilderness in biblical texts. The Israelite understanding of the wilderness is the precise opposite of that prevailing in the modern West. Whereas for many of us today the wilderness symbolizes creation in its pristine state, a state of innocence and perfection prior to the depredations of human society, to the ancient Israelites it represented chaos-ridden land. In the mind of the biblical authors, the non-human material world has no intrinsic value or even existence; it exists only to serve humanity. God's original beneficent intention for the land is that it be an Eden, a lush garden full of just those plants and trees that are "pleasant to the sight and good for food." As a literary image, the wilderness sometimes functions to represent chaos in a manner analogous to that of the Sea. It can appear in the poetic parallelism so beloved of biblical writers as a synonym to the watery abyss which God defeats in his world-making work. As the site of the undoing of creation, the wilderness is painted in no rosy hues. It

is a place of horrors, "great and terrible …with poisonous snakes and scorpions" (Deut. 8.15). To venture there is to risk death. However, while humanity is the *telos* of the entire created order, it is far from perfect, and when human community becomes (as it inevitably does) oppressive and death-dealing, then the wilderness may symbolize freedom and the hope of a new creation. When the upright flee to the wilderness they can rely on God's care and support, as Elijah discovered when he fled from Jezebel's murderous wrath. It may be a place of refuge for the outcast, offering protection from enemies. It may be God's intention in times of crisis to lead his people into the wilderness to cleanse them of their sin and re-make them as his holy people, consecrated to him alone.

In the wilderness the proper boundaries necessary for the maintenance of life-giving order become fluid, including the boundary between the human sphere and the divine. Therefore the wilderness is a fitting place for theophany and miracle, revealing the power of the presence of God. This power is a power to destroy as well as to create, and desolate places may represent God's judgment upon a faithless and wayward humanity. However, although judgment is very painful, it is also ultimately healing and restorative. Judgment need not, and in the theology of the HB does not, result in total destruction. There will come a time for judgment to end, leading to forgiveness and new relationship. The miracle of that new relationship is mirrored in the transformation of wilderness and waste places into the kind of fertile and blessed land that God intended the whole of nature to be in the very beginning. Thus, in the mysterious workings of divine providence, wilderness can also be a place that signifies the hope of a renewed,

restored earth: "I will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water (Isa. 41.18)."

The wilderness of the Hebrew Bible manifests the central characteristics of the liminal place. It is highly ambiguous, a place of chaos and death, but also the site of new creation. As a place of destruction, it manifests God's anger, but, at the same time, it is where God's people – the wandering Israelites, Elijah, Hagar and Ishmael - know God's protective care. It is a place of banishment, but also a place of refuge; a no man's land, and, paradoxically, as a no man's land, a symbol of freedom. It is a fitting place for the liminal entity, where Israel can unlearn the ways of slavery and become a new people. The nature of its peculiar ambiguity – offering both promise and threat, life and death – is summed up, I believe, in the idea of struggle. It was struggle that Adam and Eve encountered after their expulsion from the garden, and struggle characterizes God's relationship with Israel throughout its long history. Wild places appear in Hebrew story wherever this struggle reaches a critical point. The idea of struggle plays an important role in the identity of the Jewish people, the people who succeeded the Israelites whose story is told in the Hebrew Bible. The name, ישראל - "Israel" – can be, and often is, translated as "he who struggles with God." Struggle is not good in itself; indeed, it is hardship and distress. And yet struggle is not despair. One struggles because one is convinced of the possibility of success, of life and peace, and the promise of success is offered in the form of the wilderness narrative. As we have seen, the typical Hebrew wilderness narrative has a comedic structure: the period of exile and/or of struggle is

followed by homecoming or restoration. The message of this form of story is that, however lengthy the struggle, it is *not* eternal or unending – rather, in the end God *will* triumph and *will* save his people, even if it means saving them from themselves.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Role of Wilderness in the Formation of Jewish Identity

In Chapter One we saw how *muthos* transforms *chronos*, ordinary time, into human time, *kairos* time, which is always orientated toward *parousia*, the moment of advent and arrival, the moment of encounter with the sacred Other. In the moment of encounter the chaos of diachrony is overcome in the creation of new order out of the heterogeneous bits of ordinary experience. Ordinary time is thus overcome in a mythic moment which makes present both past and future, memory and hope. In Chapter Two we saw how *muthos,* as narrative, establishes *kosmos*, the order of the place-world, and confers character and identity upon particular places within it. In Chapter 3 we saw how Hebrew narrative confers meaning upon wilderness places. I wish to conclude this thesis with a brief discussion of the ritual means by which *muthos,* and its accompanying mimetic circle, functions to create and sustain Jewish identity in the rite of Passover. The particular *muthos* or narrative that I will examine is that with which we have been concerned through most of this chapter – the story of the Exodus, the sacred encounter with God at Sinai, and the wilderness wandering toward home.

Within Hebrew texts we find the traces of the mimetic circle at work in told and living story in the account of God's command to keep the Festival of Unleavened Bread in Exodus 13. 3 – 10. In this passage Moses commands the people of Israel, once they come into the Promised Land, to keep the Festival in remembrance of God's deliverance of the people from slavery in Egypt. The perpetuation of the story from generation to generation is commanded thus:

> When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the
> Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which he swore to your ancestors to give
> you...You shall tell your child on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did
> for me when I came out of Egypt.' It shall serve for you as a sign on your hand
> and as a reminder on your forehead, so that the teaching of the LORD may be on
> your lips; for with a strong hand the LORD brought you out of Egypt. You shall
> keep this ordinance at its proper time from year to year (Exod. 3.5-10).

This passage accomplishes an interesting subversion of ordinary, chronological time.

Within the context of the larger story line, those who are addressed by this command are

those who have just fled Egypt under Moses' leadership. But as we know, these are not

the same people who complete the journey into the Promised Land and keep the

memorial there. The generation of the Exodus dies in the desert, and it is a new

generation who will, eventually, celebrate the first Passover in Gilgal on the plains of

Jericho (Josh. 5.11). From the perspective of ordinary time then, the command given is

one that those who receive it cannot possibly carry out. However, those who read this

story know, somehow, that the time in which the command is given, received and acted

upon is not ordinary, chronological time, but the time of myth, in which all time, past and

future, is made present. In the time of myth, the command given to the Israelites at

Succoth becomes equally a command given to the reader of the story here and now. And

for the latter as well as the former the feast is kept, "because of what the LORD did for

me when *I* came out of Egypt." Ordinary, chronological time is thus overcome in the

creation of *human* time by the workings of myth. According to the myth of Israel, *all*

Israelites are also just those Israelites who flee with Moses from the land of slavery, and

all Israelites have wandered with Moses in the wilderness. The past is made present by

myth. Thus in the time of myth, by the workings of myth, all those who live that myth

can affirm with the psalmist,

It is he who remembered us in our low estate, ...
and rescues us from our foes,
for his steadfast love endures forever (Ps. 136.23-24).

Jeremiah then can recall the myth, and employ the mimetic circle in a later time to

promise deliverance to the captives in Babylon:

He who scattered Israel will gather him,
and will keep him as a shepherd a flock.
For the LORD has ransomed Jacob,
and has redeemed him from
hands to strong for him (Jer. 31.10-11).

Israel may rely upon God's re-enactment of the divine *muthos*/myth – the deliverance of

Jacob/Israel from Egypt time and time again, because in myth all times are but one

moment, the moment of God-with-Israel, creation, the founding. Israel may return again

and again to the Red Sea and to Sinai, and re-make the covenant that sustains her.

Passover is an amalgamation of two ancient festivals, the *Pesach* meal of a

sacrificed lamb, prescribed by Exodus 12, and the week-long Festival of Unleavened

Bread, both of which became associated in the biblical period with the story of the

Exodus. Biblical and extra-biblical records indicate that until c. 70 CE the central aspect

of the Passover celebration was the sacrifice of the household lambs in the Temple in

accordance with the provisions of Exodus 12.[158] The destruction of the Second Temple

forced the community to develop adaptations that would make possible the continuation

of the rite despite the loss of the Temple. Such an adaptation was achieved by rabbinic

Jews by at least around the time of the publication of the Mishnah, which is most often

dated to about 200 CE. Mishna Pesahim 10 describes a Passover evening celebration, or

"Seder," which takes place in the family home without a sacrifice. In this form of

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[158] Baruck M. Bokser, *The Origins of the Seder: The Passover Rite and Early Rabbinic Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 14-25.

Passover the focus of the celebration shifts from temple sacrifice to storytelling and discussion by participants. It is *narrative,* and reflection on narrative, that lie at the heart of the rabbinic Passover, and in this narrating Jews renew their understanding of their shared history, identity and destiny as a people.

The word *Seder,* סדר, means order, and in the context of the Passover refers to the home service with its festive meal. The manual that describes the order of the home service is the *Haggadah,* although literally that word refers to the narrative of the Exodus story that is recited at the meal.[159] Preparations for Passover are elaborate and can consume several weeks, as they include thoroughly cleaning the home, plus, depending on the level of observance, changing all dishes and utensils to avoid any contact with forbidden grains and leaven during the Passover period.[160] Special table coverings and candlesticks are also customary. The meal involves the presentation and/or eating of symbolic foods that are arranged on a special Seder plate that is placed before the master of the feast, customarily the father of the household. The most important of these food items are referred to or explained by the *Haggadah,* which is recited by the participants. They are the matzah, the unleavened bread, which is also known as the "bread of affliction." It is eaten, says the *Haggadah,* because "the dough of our fathers had not yet leavened when the King of all kings, the Holy One, blessed be he, revealed himself to them and redeemed them."[161] Ruth Fredman says that the matzah symbolize both

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[159] *The Passover Hagaddah,* 5.
[160] Arlene Rossen Cardozo, *Jewish Family Celebrations* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982) 127-8.
[161] *Passover Haggadah,* 49.

election and affliction "because affliction through election is the divine plan."[162] A

roasted lamb shankbone (often replaced by a chicken or turkey bone in North America) is

present on the Seder plate but not eaten; it reminds the participants of the ancient Temple

sacrifice.[163] Bitter herbs are also eaten, says the *Haggadah*, because "the Egyptians made

the lives of our forefathers bitter in Egypt."[164] However, interpretation of this item is not

limited to the historical rationale, but extends to encompass contemporary experience.

"Although the state of Egypt is itself behind the Jew, the experience of Egypt and the

experience of the desert – both as a state of transition and as a state, as at Sinai, of divine

communication – are to be part of the Jew's experience at the Seder."[165] The sensory

experience of the Seder thus has the power to remove the participant from the routine of

everyday life and immerse him or her in a different world – a world of slavery and

suffering, but also of deliverance from suffering, a world of wilderness wandering, but

also of divine guidance and revelation. Through elaborate preparations, the display of

special and precious household items, and the eating of ritual foods, ordinary time,

chronos time, is suspended, and the participant is invited to enter into *kairos* time, mythic

time, in which contact with the sacred can be made.

In the Seder celebration, the hierarchy of status as between different participants

is leveled, and those who, in other situations, may have less status have more, and vice

versa. As a family occasion, all members of the community have important roles to play,

especially the children, who on this night have control of key aspects of the ritual.

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[162] Ruth Gruber Fredman, *The Passover Seder: Afikoman in Exile* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1981) 133.
[163] *Passover Seder* , 134.
[164] *Passover Haggadah*, 49.
[165] *Ibid.*, 145.

Children lead the adults in both opening and closing the ritual. The children bring the water with which the master of the feast washes his hands, marking the beginning of the feast. The *afikomen*, a broken piece of matzah which is eaten at the very end of the meal and marks its closing, is hidden, either by the children themselves or the adults for the children to find. In order to draw the ritual to an end, the *afikomen* must be ransomed back from the children by the master of the feast, and thus the children control the ending of the feast. The children also initiate the discussion of the meaning of the feast by asking the ritual four questions that prompt the ensuing dialogue. Baruch Bokser remarks that,

> The Mishnah relaxes social structures in very specific ways. The rite is not exclusive: not just for the intellectuals, the wealthy or the priests; not contingent on the presence of expert singers; not limited to the adults in a household. The concern for the participation of children is such that the Tosefta suggests that adults even play games with the unleavened bread to keep the interest of the children aroused (T. 10:9b).[166]

Through this leveling of differences the ritual makes possible the experience of *communitas*, that relationship of homogeneity and comradeship that marks a group of people who, for a time, share a liminal experience or a rite of passage. As we saw in Chapter Two, the sharing of liminal experience enables participants to recognize the essential human connection that underlies the more highly structured relationships of *societas*.

A central aspect of the *communitas* experience is the self-identification of the participants with the community, over and above their own, individual, differences. In *communitas* the ritual subject is stripped of his or her status distinctions which mark

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[166] *Origins of the Seder*, 80.

him/her as an individual in a hierarchically ordered society. The loosening of these status boundaries encourages self-identification with the group, the *we* that prevents the liminal being from dissolving into nothingness, undifferentiated chaos. In the Passover rite, the ritual narration of the shared, mythic history propels the participants into self-identification with the Jewish community. In fact, this self-identification is a prescribed duty of all participants, a duty that is specified by the words of the *Haggadah* and repeated during the feast by the master:

> In every generation let each man look on himself as if *he* came forth from Egypt. As it is said: "And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying: It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt." It was not only our fathers that the Holy One, blessed be he, redeemed, but us as well did he redeem along with them. As it is said: "And He brought us out from thence, that He might bring us in, to give us the land which He swore unto our fathers.[167]

Baruch Bokser quotes, with approval, a remark by Gerhard von Rad that highlights the function of Passover in bringing about the self-identification of individual Jews with their larger community, in a discussion of the impact of the recitation of the mythic history of Israel:

> The speaker divests himself of all his personal concerns and aligns himself fully with the community. Indeed, he identifies himself with the community: at this moment, as he pronounces its confession of faith, he is its mouthpiece.[168]

However, there is more to the engagement with the history of Israel than mere, passive recitation. "Just as the child is to ask a question or an adult is to instruct the child or another adult, so the participants are to expound … the account in Deuteronomy 26 of the history of Israel and thereby become engaged with those events."[169] Bokser points out that such an engagement is precisely the essence of midrash, the rabbinic form of

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[167] *Passover Haggadah*, 23.
[168] *Origins of the Seder*, 77.
[169] *Ibid.*

exegesis of scripture that ties the written word, bound to the past, to the living present and its concerns.[170]

This interweaving of a narrative of past events with present-day concerns is made possible by the use of a present participle construction in the classic *Haggadah*, a verbal form that lifts the action of the narrative out of its concrete, historical reference and bestows on it a timeless quality, suitable to the mythic nature of the Passover rite.[171] The events of the story have not lost their continuing significance, as the pattern of the action, the *mythos* or basic plot, has a universal import, as applicable today as it was thousands of years ago: "It was not only our fathers that the Holy One, blessed be he, redeemed, but us as well did he redeem along with them." The present participle verbal construction achieves just that subversion of ordinary, chronological time that we noted at work above in Exodus 13.3-10. With respect to a related passage, Exodus 12, Brevard Childs notes that the subversion of ordinary, chronological time has significant theological implications:

> ...the redactor's use of the dialectic between redemption as hope and redemption as memory has important theological implications. Those commentators who are disturbed over the detailed instructions for future celebration before the initial event has transpired have failed to see that far more is at stake in the text than chronological consistency. The interplay in vv. 1-20 and 21-28 between the now and the then, between what is to come and what has already happened, is not dissolved after the event, but once again picked up and maintained in a new dialectic between the past and the future. *Israel remains a people who has been redeemed, but who still awaits its redemption.*[172]

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[170] *Ibid.*

[171] *The Origins of the Seder,* 84-85.

[172] Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974) 205.

The past is made present in the overcoming of ordinary, chronological time by *kairos* time, mythic time, which Ricoeur has taught us is uniquely and particularly a very *human* time.

The timeless, mythic nature of the Exodus narrative as it is retold in the Passover recitation may illuminate contemporary events, as well as ancient ones. Modern *Haggadahs* often include sections that recall the events of the Holocaust, and the stories of ancient escape and deliverance can easily be related to the experiences, for example, of families of Russian Jews fleeing Soviet oppression.[173] Ruth Fredman argues that, "The story of the Exodus contains within it a rationale for the existence of the Jews as an eternally distinct people, and also provides a metaphor for the Jews' existence as a socially marginal community."[174] The two thousand year-long experience of diaspora and exile finds its explanation in this story, making bearable a continuing "state of wandering with the Torah as a guide."[175] The narratives of slavery and wandering may also understood as metaphors for moral or spiritual distance from God, a different, but nonetheless equally real form of exile. Places such as Egypt, the desert or Jerusalem, may denote states of being as much as mere geographical locales, as our examination of the complex nature of place has, I hope, already demonstrated. In the symbolism of the Seder,

> ... "Egypt represents all that is alien, "otherness," as well as slavery, chaos, impurity, darkness, death and despair. Between these two polarities is the "desert," the period of wandering between Egypt and Jerusalem, the state between despair and hope. Whether one is in Egypt, the desert, or in Jerusalem is

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[173] *Jewish Family Celebrations*, 147, 150.
[174] *The Passover Seder*, 24.
[175] *Ibid.*, 41.

measured by one's distance from God in terms of fulfilling the obligations of the covenant. [176]

The Exodus story may thus function to render coherent present-day realities, providing the opportunity for the integration of the disordered, chaotic experiences of chronological time in a renewed understanding of the myth that guides us through the life we live today. As the recitation of the Exodus myth *re-presents* – makes present – the past, then the ancient and the modern, the old and the new, may find harmony in a new order orientated toward a more hopeful future. This immersion in *kairos* time readies a renewed self, both individual and communal, to face the coming year. The goal of the Passover ritual, says Fredman, is "to produce a vision of both history and eternity compatible with the experiences of the celebrants, and, above all, to provide the community with a picture of itself that will sustain it throughout the coming year."[177] The re-telling of the ancient story thus provides for the renewal of identity in such a way that the continuing experiences of the community are fully accounted for and rendered consistent with the community's core values and overarching *mythos*.

In this re-telling of ancient story, Zion/Jerusalem restored and triumphant continues to be the *telos* of the mythic history. The final moment of the Passover ritual looks forward to the fulfillment of the divine promise in the closing words of the prayer that ends the feast:

> Pure One, who dwells in his habitation
> Redress the countless congregation.
> Speedily lead the offshoots of the stock
> Redeemed, to Zion in joyous song.
> NEXT YEAR IN JERUSALEM! [178]

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[176] *The Passover Seder*, 35.
[177] *Ibid.*, 8.
[178] *Passover Haggadah*, 85.

However, before "next year" arrives, ordinary existence must be endured. In rabbinic Judaism, ordinary existence is pictured as *galut*, the exile and diaspora Jews have experienced since the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE. As Ruth Fredman points out, the idea of *galut* has both a literal, historical dimension, and a metaphorical and spiritual dimension. One the one hand, *galut* means life outside of Israel, in Europe or other non-Jewish territories.

> The social reality for the scattered communities that have developed the Seder as it is celebrated today includes their distance from the Promised Land. In a strictly historical sense, this means that any settlement outside the holy land is temporary. Like the Israelites in Egypt before the Exodus, Jews are "sojourners" in foreign lands.[179]

In respect of this geographical experience of *galut*, Jerusalem and the Holy Land represent home in the sense of one's rightful territory. However, on the metaphorical plane, Jerusalem may signify the spiritual state of reconciliation with God, the goal of *tsuvah*, repentance. "Even in countries where Jews are content and have no desire to leave, this sense of the non-realization of a goal is kept alive because of the other sense of "Jerusalem" as a moral destination, a place of re-unification with God."[180] In this sense, Jerusalem may be seen as representing a universal human longing for finality and completeness, as against the unfinished, tentative quality of everyday experience, *galut*.

Human life is an on-going journey, an unending narrative, in which the final goal is forever postponed, delayed, just out of reach of the journeyer. The vision of the eschatological Zion/Jerusalem to be reached "next year" holds out the hope and promise of wholeness, completeness and perfection amid the continuing chaos and disorderliness

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[179] *Passover Seder*, 34.
[180] *Ibid.*, 34.

of everyday life. *Real* life, whether it be the life of the Jew or non-Jew, always contains a disorderly component, as day upon day, hour upon hour unfolds, taking us to new and unexpected places, confronting us with both good and ill. We face unknown and uncontrollable futures, and the hope we bring to that is found in our stories of the past, which provide us with ways to imagine what may come. One way to imagine such a precarious, transitory existence is through the image of *galut*, exile, and the long journey home. For the Jew, *galut* may be understood more literally as diaspora, the scattering of Jewry throughout the non-Jewish world. But the Holy Land and Jerusalem only become home in a literal sense through the workings of story that confer identity on undifferentiated space, rendering that space a place with a meaning, or many meanings. *Galut* is thus, in a more primary sense, a story place, woven of narratives told and re-told, capturing in its web our memories, emotions, hopes and fears. In this sense, both wider and more basic, *galut* is a way of being, life-long and yet not permanent, as no mere human life is permanent. "The Seder stresses hope, man's power to change himself and society, and the shining promise of Jerusalem, but so long as there is the absolute distinction between man and God, the Jew will always be stopped short of his goal."[181] And not simply the Jew, surely. In the meantime, while we wander toward whatever home we imagine, we carry with us our stories as our guides, as the Israelites carried the Torah as their guide in the wilderness. The wilderness is this place of wandering through earthly, temporal existence – not alone, as may travel in communities that share our identities and destinies. And not without hope, as there is a home place dreamed of, and stories that carry our core values to guide us on our travels. But travel we must, as Jerusalem is always just out of sight or around the next corner; we will arrive there "next

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[181] Fredman, *Passover Seder,* 150.

year," not in the here and now. We will find it only, if ever, in our death, or when the

Messiah comes.

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