

Chapter 3

GENESIS 1.1-2.4A:

THE ORIGIN MYTH OF ĒRETS AND SHAMAYIM

1. Design

Understandably, many scholars have discerned the design of Gen. 1.1-2.4a in terms of the seven days associated with this narrative. One or more events are associated with each day; events are viewed as happening in a logical sequence. Significantly, the climax in this sequence is believed to be the creation of humans on the sixth day, a perception that may well reflect the anthropocentric orientation of past interpreters as much as any intrinsic structure in the narrative.

In his well-known work, *The Genesis Accounts of Creation* (1964), Westermann recognized that there may be at least two structures within the Genesis 1 account: first, a monotonous rhythm is characteristic of P (1964: 7); second, colour and diversity of presentation is embedded within the P narrative (1964: 12). He concedes that these two structures have been fused to such an extent through the ongoing tradition that very few cues are left to differentiate the two.

Even more significant, however, is Westermann's recognition that Gen. 1.26-28 is a 'rupture within the framework' of the narrative. He notes that the

P structure slips noticeably into the background. It is not recorded as a command and the fulfillment of this command, but as a resolution on God's part, and the fulfillment of this resolution. This serves to underline the uniqueness of man's [sic] creation. The creation of man [sic] is something far different from the creation of the rest of the world. One could say that this ruptures the framework of the course of creation (1964: 21).

One of the popular ways to view the design of Genesis 1 is to focus on the creative acts of God and order them, as Middleton (2005: 278) has done, into two symmetrical triads.

Preparation (Genesis 1.1-2.3)
(*formless and empty*)

Panel 1	Panel 2
(<i>forming static regions</i>)	(<i>filling with mobile occupants</i>)
Day One (Genesis 1.3-5)	Day Two (Genesis 1.14-19)
(1) light/darkness	(5) luminaries
Day Two (Genesis 1.6-8)	Day Five (Genesis 1.20-23)
(2) water/firmament/water	(6) fish and birds
Day Three (Genesis 1.9-13)	Day Six (Genesis 1.24-31)
(3) water/dry ground	(7) land animals
(4) vegetation	(8) humans

Day Seven (Genesis 2.1-3)
(*the heavens, the earth and all their host*)

When we approach the design of the passage from the perspective of the chief characters/domains and the primary events or actions in the narrative plot, alternative structural designs may emerge. The following design reflects an awareness of these characters and the way in which Gen. 1.26-28 represents a rupture in the basic framework of the narrative.

The Creation Narrative

Narrative Title (Genesis 1.1)
(*God created sky and Earth*)
Narrative Setting (Genesis 1.2)
Introducing the Primal Characters
Earth, waters and wind (of God)

Scene One (Genesis 1.3-5)	Scene Five (Genesis 1.14-19)
Light created by God and separated from darkness	Lights created by God in sky to give light for Earth and seasons
Scene Two (Genesis 1.6-8)	Scene Six (Genesis 1.20-22)
Waters separated by God and sky made	Water creatures emerge and sky creatures created
Scene Three (Genesis 1.9-10)	Scene Seven (Genesis 1.23-25)
Earth revealed from beneath the waters	Earth creatures emerge from Earth

Scene Eight (Genesis 1.26-28)
Humans created by God to rule/subdue Earth

Scene Four (Genesis 1.11-13)	Scene Nine (Genesis 1.29-31)
Vegetation is brought forth by Earth	Vegetation given as food for all living creatures

Narrative Coda (Genesis 2.1-3)
God rests and blesses the seventh day

Narrative Notation (Genesis 2.4a)
The family tree of sky and Earth

This design reflects an ordered narrative structure. In the interpretation that follows, we will follow the sequence of scenes in the narrative, recognizing that Gen. 1.26-28 is a deviation or rupture of the basic narrative pattern. The basic narrative pattern is typical of origin stories or primal myths found in the ancient Near East and numerous Indigenous cultures. These narratives regularly commence by outlining the dimensions of the primordial presence and primordial absence in the world according to the traditions of that culture. The various scenes of the narrative progressively describe how the primal world—especially its absence—is transformed into the present world or some domain of that world.

What distinguishes the Genesis 1 account from most other origin stories is the symmetrical pattern of the scenes. This symmetry may suggest artistic and poetic skill on the part of the narrator who retells this creation myth in a particular cultural context. This symmetry does not, however, justify classifying this narrative as a liturgy, as Brueggemann and others have done (1982: 33). The explicit repetition of lines and themes is as much part of primal narratives and storytelling as it is of liturgy.

If we identify with Earth as the first character introduced in this narrative, the progression of scenes reflects the stages in which Earth is revealed, made replete with all forms of life, and finally blessed by God. In this narrative sequence the 'goodness' of Earth and its living components are celebrated by God. Earth is, moreover, a partner with God in the creation of vegetation and other life forms.

Given this underlying basic narrative sequence, the creation of humans in vv. 26-28 is not only a rupture, as Westermann maintains, but also a violation of the role of the central character of the story. Earth is no longer a partner; Earth is an object of subjugation. Living creatures are no longer the celebrated progeny of Earth, but creatures to be dominated by humans. The full force of this conflict between the basic narrative and the scene where humans are created will be evident in the analysis which follows.

In spite of this obvious 'rupture' in the narrative of Earth, most interpreters argue that the creation and the creation event are to be viewed from the perspective of human beings. The alternative orientation of Earth, the main character in the account, is ignored. In the movement of the creation story outlined by Bernhard Anderson, for example, the climax of the story is human fertility and dominion over Earth. Humanity, claims Anderson, belongs to the 'sphere of God's cosmic administration' (1994: 50-52).

If we take a further step in analysing this design by recognizing that the text is a traditional origin myth, we can discern an even clearer focus on Earth (*Erets*) as the primary character and focus. If we also recognize the validity of the research of Ellen van Wolde that *bara* does not mean create

but 'separate' (2009), we can refine the design of this text as a traditional myth of 'separation' and 'emanation/emergence'. After the domains of the primordial cosmos have been separated, new entities emanate from these domains as in other ancient origin myths. We also recognize that the rupture in the narrative sequence is caused by the intrusion of another myth, the *Tselem* myth, which has a radically different orientation.

The *Erets* Myth

A Myth of Separation and Emanation

Preamble (Genesis 1.1)

When Elohim separated *Erets* from *shamayim*

Setting: Primordial World (Genesis 1.2)

The primordial mythic cosmos;

Erets in waters of the deep & darkness below
wind of Elohim above

Scene One (Genesis 1.3-5): Separation Scene Five (Genesis 1.14-19): Emanation

Light separated from
the primal darkness

Lights set in *shamayim*; light
emanates for *Erets* and seasons

Scene Two (Genesis 1.6-8): Separation Scene Six (Genesis 1.20-22): Emanation

Primal waters separated

Water creatures emanate from waters

Waters above fixed by a *shamayim*

and birds fly in the *shamayim*

Scene Three (Genesis 1.9-10): Separation Scene Seven (Genesis 1.23-25): Emanation

Waters separated before

land creatures emanate

Erets emerges from the waters from *Erets*

Scene Eight (Genesis 1.26-28)

The *Tselem* myth: Separation & Domination

humans made with *tselem* of Elohim

& separated to rule/subdue *Erets*

Scene Four (Genesis 1.11-13): Emanation Scene Nine (Genesis 1.29-31): Emanation

Vegetation emanates

Vegetation emanating from *Erets*

from *Erets* is food for all living creatures

Scene Ten (Genesis 2.1-3): Separation

Elohim rests and separates

the seventh day as holy

Framing Coda (Genesis 2.4a)

The *toledoth* of *shamayim* and *Erets*

Given the centrality of *Erets* in this myth, the task of identifying with *Erets* and any of the related domains or emanations in this myth is perhaps made easier. In any case, as we proceed with a detailed analysis, we keep in mind that we are Earth beings seeking to connect with Earth and related characters; this makes this myth an important part of our heritage, even if we are living in a so-called enlightened world where evolution and ecology govern our cosmology.

2. Analysis

a. Preamble

The opening verse is probably a kind of ancient title or preamble summarizing the major thrust of the plot in this *Erets* myth, namely, God ordering and populating the physical universe consisting of *shamayim* and *Erets*. It is significant that our suspicion of dualistic thinking among traditional interpreters of Genesis 1 is confirmed in the traditional translation of the very first verse of the Bible. That the term *shamayim* does not mean 'heavens' is evident from the divine action of day two where God constructs the *shamayim* as a firmament or ceiling overhead. The Hebrew term '*shamayim*' means sky not heaven. There is no suggestion here of a dualistic universe consisting of a particular domain for God and celestial beings. Nowhere in Genesis 1 is heaven created as God's abode; rather, *Erets* and *shamayim* are the physical universe.

Genesis 1.1 has also been rendered as a subordinate clause: 'when God began creating sky and Earth'. Such a rendering, however, does not alter the substance of the verse, but simply points the reader immediately forward to the primordial state in Gen. 1.2. The opening line highlights what will happen to *Erets* and *shamayim* in the narrative that follows.

If the verb *bara* is rendered 'create'—as has traditionally been the case—all the events that follow will be viewed as God creating various domains of the world in one way or another.

If, however, we recognize with Ellen van Wolde that the Hebrew verb means 'separate', this myth is not about God 'creating' everything, but about stages of separating, ordering and activating domains of the cosmos.

Thus, based on the internal and external linguistic and textual evidence and on a controlled argumentation, it is highly plausible and very likely that the type of action expressed by the verb *bara* in Genesis 1 does not mean 'to create' but that it can be rendered by 'to separate', designating an action of a very concrete, special and physical character (2009: 20).

Following van Wolde's recommendation, therefore, we would render this opening preamble as 'In the beginning in which/when God separated *shamayim* and *Erets*'. This translation makes it clear that the events which follow are a description of how this 'separation' takes place and what ensues from this separation. The focus of the process which follows rests on *Erets* whose separation is not only climactic, but is also associated with a related birth metaphor of special significance.

b. Setting (Genesis 1.2): Primordial World

Typical of primordial or origin myths around the world, the setting outlines the dimensions of the primordial presence and absence. The reader

anticipates how these dimensions will be transformed in the process that follows. In the Genesis 1 narrative, the setting introduces the listener to three forces or domains which describe the primordial cosmos:

Erets—described as *tohu wabohu* in the waters;
waters—described as the deep (*tehom*) in darkness;
wind—described as the *ruach* of Elohim hovering.

As a reader, I could potentially identify with any one of these domains introduced in the setting. The wind (*ruach*) of Elohim, as distinct from the voice of Elohim, plays no further role in the plot. The waters are an important domain that needs to be separated at key points in the plot. The first domain introduced, *Erets*, is a central figure and one with whom we may readily identify when we use an ecological hermeneutic.

What are these domains and how are they related in this opening verse? What is the habitat of *Erets* in the beginning? Later *Erets* is revealed to be the land mass on which fauna and flora can flourish. The primordial absence in the case of *Erets* is described as *tohu wabohu*. While there is considerable discussion about the specific meaning of this idiom, the textual evidence suggests an absence of form and fertility. Clearly, *Erets* exists, but as yet has not assumed its final shape or function and has not yet been filled with life forms. This transformation takes place in the course of the narrative. There are no specific indications within the setting itself that the idiom *tohu wabohu* means chaos in this text (cf. Tsumura 2005: ch. 1).

The term *tehom* (deep)—especially since the interpretation of Hermann Gunkel in the nineteenth century (1997; 2006)—has frequently been connected with *Tiamat*, the chaos waters deity found in the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* myth. The research of recent interpreters such as Tsumura (2005: ch. 2) has demonstrated that, whatever the origin of the term *tehom*, an association with chaos—and *Tiamat* in particular—should no longer be made in this context. The setting is a pre-creation scene in which the primal waters that extend into the depths of the primal cosmos are simply present in anticipation of the transformations that ensue in the separation/creation process.

My findings are consistent with those of van Wolde.

This is the primeval situation: no 'nothing', nor a chaos that needs sorting out, but a situation of 'before' or 'not yet' in view of what is coming. Even God is not yet the Creator, but an indefinable spirit of God moving on the face of the waters. These are the main characters of the story to come (1998: 25).

The wind (*ruach*) of God is an integral part of the primordial world; Hiebert suggests *ruach* is the atmosphere of the primal universe (2008: 10). This presence of God is not a raging storm but a breeze blowing across the 'face' of the waters. The use of the verb *rachaph* in Deut. 32.11, describing an eagle mother hovering over her young before teaching them to fly,

suggests an image of parental nurture rather than primal disturbance. As Schottroff says, the 'brooding mother bird with fluttering wings is God's quickening breath, his invigorating and supportive spirit' (1993: 25).

If I now locate myself within the primordial habitat of *Erets* and identify with her as a character in this primal scene, I discover a number of forces around me. I am enveloped in waters called the deep. There is no indication that these waters are forces of chaos around me. I am also enveloped by darkness and hence not visible. I am also conscious that there is an atmosphere or wind: God is hovering above the waters where I am residing.

The imagery of this habitat or scene suggests an embryonic figure without the form and fertility later associated with that land mass called *Erets*. The scenario suggests a primal womb embracing the unborn *Erets*. It is a scene of anticipation rather than agitation, of calm rather than chaos, of the primal world before separation. God is present as a hovering wind—a presence more like a midwife or a parent than a raging storm; God is the potential atmosphere that will provide life-giving breath when *Erets* is born.

c. Scene One (Genesis 1.3-5): *Light Separated from Darkness*

The opening scene begins with a creative impulse from God expressed as Elohim speaking, using the idiom 'Let there be'. The creative power of the divine word is a tradition known from the Psalms (Ps. 33.6). Interpreters discern a range of theological implications in this divine mode of action. Within the narrative plot, however, God's word functions as the catalyst that initiates a diversity of actions in the various scenes of the narrative. God is not some distant divine being speaking from heaven, but is present at the scene.

When God speaks, the first action is the immediate advent of light. Elohim says 'Let there be light' and light appears. Light, which von Rad called 'the first-born of creation' (1961: 49), is not described in any way. This phenomenon is apparently self-evident to the narrator. Light is not equivalent to cosmic energy or some other scientific phenomenon; this account is a simple myth about the origin of a phenomenon we see every day. With the advent of light, the first divine act of separation is recorded: God separates light from darkness and consequently day from night.

What is the implied nature and function of light in the narrative? First, from the perspective of *Erets* in the primordial setting, the darkness that enveloped the waters where *Erets* was waiting to appear no longer dominates the scene. When she appears, *Erets* can now be seen. Light also enables *Erets*, waiting in the dark waters, to be seen before her birth.

d. Scene Two (Genesis 1.6-8): *Waters Separated and Sky Made*

In scene two the creative impulse of Elohim's word summons a *raqia* into existence. It is clear from the function of the *raqia* in the narrative that

this domain serves to separate the primal waters and hold some of them in a realm above. The *raqia* seems to be some kind of ceiling or dome that holds back the separated cosmic waters now located above. The idiom 'he who stretches out the heavens', found elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, reflects a different tradition which views the skies as a tent stretched out for the appearing of Yhwh (Habel 1972). Unlike the appearance of light in scene one, the dome is explicitly 'made' by God, suggesting some kind of physical structure. The *raqia* is expressly named *shamayim*, and is the upper half of the physical universe announced in the preamble to the myth.

How is this scene related to the anticipated appearance of *Erets*—whose hidden presence is announced in the setting of the narrative in Gen. 1.2? From the perspective of *Erets*, this separation of the waters is not a conquest of the waters of chaos to form the two domains of *shamayim* and *Erets*. Rather, the formation of a solid realm above prepares the way for the appearance of *Erets*, a solid realm below. First, *Erets* emerges from the waters below and second, there is space beneath the *shamayim* into which the emerging *Erets* can move and be seen. Scene two sets the stage for the birth of *Erets* in scene three.

1. *The Birth Metaphor*. The implication of this reading that a womb/birth metaphor lies behind the imagery for the setting and appearance of *Erets* on day three may seem surprising, given the tendency of many interpreters to view *tehom* and the waters as evidence of primal chaos. That *Erets* has been viewed as a mother in some biblical passages is well known (Ps. 139.13-15). Job cries out, 'Naked I came from my mother's womb and naked I shall return there' (Job 1.21).

A primal birth image is explicit in passages such as Job 38.8 where sea comes forth from a primal womb to be clothed and contained by God. Immediately relevant is the imagery of Ps. 90.2 where the psalmist asserts that El, the creator God, was present before the mountains were born (*yld*) and before *Erets* and the inhabited world came to birth and was brought forth in labour (*chul*). This passage quite explicitly speaks of the origins of *Erets* at the hands of the maker/midwife in terms of a birthing process—a tradition that I suggest is also reflected in Genesis 1 (cf. Anderson 1972: 650).

e. *Scene Three (Genesis 1.9-10): Waters Separated and Erets Born/Revealed*
Scene three is the first climax in this *Erets* myth. Waiting in the waters of the primal womb while light and space are formed, *Erets* is ready to make an appearance. It is a birth: first there is the parting of the waters and then the hidden form appears; separation precedes the appearance of *Erets*. This dual action is set in motion by Elohim.

Especially significant is the expression 'let dry land appear'. When the waters are separated and pulled back into their own domains, the revealed

form of the *Erets* is described as *yabbasah*: a 'dry domain'. What once was enveloped in water is now visible dry land ready for life to inhabit. God then names this newborn domain *Erets*, 'Earth'—just as a human parent names a newborn human child.

The verb *raah* is usually rendered 'appear', though it could be translated 'be revealed'. The Niphal form of this verb used here is used elsewhere when God or an angel of God is revealed or 'appears'. In Gen. 18.1, 'Yhwh appeared to Abraham' (cf. Gen. 12.7; 35.1). The language of God's theophanic appearance to humans is here, in Gen. 1.9-10, associated with the appearance of *Erets*, highlighting the climactic significance of the event. The appearance of *Erets* might well be called a 'geophany' (cf. a theophany; see Habel 2000a: 34ff.).

This gives *Erets* a unique character, distinct from all other components of the cosmos. Only *Erets* is revealed from below, born out of the waters; *Erets* is a hidden mystery made manifest, a sacred domain in the cosmos.

When the light was separated from the darkness, Elohîm—the character behind the breath and the voice—responds. Elohîm not only speaks but also 'sees' in a distinctive way, responding personally to what appears and 'is seen'. Elohîm does not pronounce light and Earth 'good', imprinting them with integrity from a position of authority. Rather, they 'are good' and God experiences them as such; Elohîm 'sees' they are naturally good. The integrity of *Erets* is a given, discovered by God in the creation process.

The 'good' that Elohîm sees in 'Erets is not 'good' in some dualistic or moral sense. 'Good' is Elohîm's response to what is seen, experienced in the moment of its appearance. A similar idiom is used to describe the response of Moses' mother when he is born. When she first bonds with the child 'she sees he is good' (Ex. 2.1). Elohîm beholds Earth emerge from the waters below and 'sees Earth is good'. Elohîm is delighted with the child who appears!

Appealing as it may be, there is no evidence in the text to suggest that *Erets* is an oppressed character within chaos waters who needs to be liberated (Deane-Drummond 1996: 17). The act of God separating the waters of the Reed Sea to expose the 'dry land' may have been a stage in the liberation of Israel, but the appearance of the dry land on the third day of the *Erets* myth is not a rescue operation; it is the revelation of a hidden reality, a birth, a separation from the waters below. Elohîm, the god in Genesis 1, is not necessarily a prototype of Yhwh the Liberator in other passages of Scripture. The *Erets* story of Genesis 1 stands as an ancient origin myth in its own right.

If we recognize the validity of the birth metaphor, the progression from Gen. 1.2-10 becomes clear. A form, like an embryo, is located in the waters of the deep. These waters suggest a placid womb rather than a raging sea. Light and space are created so this form can be revealed. At the 'birth' moment, the waters separate/burst and—at the invitation of Elohîm—the

form appears/emerges out of the waters as a newborn child. God names this form 'Erets', looks at her and responds with delight.

f. Scene Four (Genesis 1.11-13): *Erets Produces Vegetation*

Elohîm now speaks to the 'newborn' *Erets* and summons her to come alive, replete with all the vegetation typical of land; *Erets* comes to life by generating a range of plants complete with seeds that will enable regeneration. The immediate source of this plant life is not strictly the command of Elohîm, but *Erets*—*Erets* is a partner with Elohîm in the creation process, a co-creator. When the word of Elohîm activates *Erets*, the potential life forces within *Erets* are activated and fauna and flora of all kinds emanate. The revealed *Erets* is the dormant source of all living creatures, except humans. Elohîm observes what has appeared and declares it good; Earth's vegetation delights Elohîm.

Identifying with *Erets* as a character in scenes three and four, I am a beautiful child in whom Elohîm delights. I emerge when the primal womb parts. Fertility lies within me; I come alive and green, with the capacity to bring forth all kinds of vegetation.

g. Scene Five (Genesis 1.14-19): *Lighting Erets*

In scene five, Elohîm fixes a range of lights in the *raqia* called *shamayim*. Significantly, these lights are not intended to adorn or illuminate the sky. Rather, their functions support life on *Erets*: they divide night and day, regulate times and seasons, and provide 'light upon *Erets*', a function which is specified twice (Gen. 1.15, 17). The larger light regulates light during the day and the lesser light during the night. By regulating day and night, the 'lights in the *shamayim*' also regulate time: 'signs, season, days and years'. The lights that emanate from the *shamayim* are created to meet the needs of *Erets*!

Some scholars argue that the word 'sun' (*shemesh*) is avoided as a polemic against an ancient Near Eastern deity who bears that name. It is just as valid, in terms of this narrative as a primal myth, to recognize that the emphasis lies on the basic function of these bodies as 'light-givers' for *Erets* rather than on deliberately negating any specific ancient Near Eastern rival mythology.

This regulation of the light is described at one point as 'rule over the day and over the night'. The verb rendered 'rule' is *mashal*, a term used for both 'ruling over' (Gen. 45.26) and 'being responsible for' (Gen. 24.2). Just as Abraham's servant was 'in charge of/responsible for' Abraham's household, sun and moon are responsible for/rule over day and night. The function of this 'ruling' is not to 'dominate' as the verb *rada* implies in Gen. 1.26, 28, but to 'regulate' light for *Erets*. These lights are custodians of *shamayim* in the service of *Erets*, 'to give light to *Erets*'.

h. Scene Six (Genesis 1.20-23): Water and Sky Creatures Emerge

The waters are activated in scene six and water creatures emanate, including monsters (*tamim*) who have no prior existence as chaos forces as they do in other ancient Near Eastern traditions. As with *Erets* in scene four, the waters possess the capacity to bring forth all the living creatures that inhabit the oceans; the waters are partners in the creation process—a partnership that anticipates the ecosystems that we now know exist in our planet. The appearance of birds in the sky is not linked with any specific source—either land or water—even though the atmosphere or *ruach* might well be an implied source. The function of the birds is to fly above *Erets*, and across *shamayim*.

At this point in the narrative a divine blessing is introduced, a key factor in sustaining the creation process. To bless (*barak*) is to impart power. In this instance, that power activates a capacity to procreate and 'multiply on *Erets*'; *Erets* is the domain where this blessing/power is exercised and where the creatures involved find a home. The *Erets* myth depicts *Erets* as both the source of life and the habitat of all living creatures. The creation process continues: life is stimulated by the divine word, emanates from *Erets*, and persists through the blessing of procreation.

i. Scene Seven (Genesis 1.24-25): Land Creatures Emanate from Erets

The inner capacity and vitality of *Erets* as a partner with Elohim and a co-creator of life is made abundantly clear in scene six. A word from Elohim, and *Erets* 'brings forth' all kinds of fauna just as she brought forth all kinds of flora in scene four. The range of fauna includes cattle (domestic animals), all wild animals and creeping creatures (reptiles). The description is apparently intended to cover all species of fauna except human beings. The wild animals are specifically identified as living things 'of *Erets*'. In a traditional primal sense, they all belong to *Erets*. They are all 'Earth beings'.

Earth, *Erets*, is the source, home and habitat of 'living creatures'. As a life source, *Erets* supplies both the body and breath that create a *nephesh chayyah*, an animated being or living creature. There is no duality here where the material derives from *Erets* and the spirit or life breath derives from God. All animated beings—except humans in this particular narrative—originate from *Erets*.

In a number of indigenous peoples' creation myths—sometimes called emergence myths—all life, including animal and human life, emerge or emanate from the land or sea and return there when they die. Typically, in Australia's Indigenous peoples' origin stories, animals and humans emerge from the ground as part of a sacred cycle of life. The identity of individuals is not only determined by virtue of their origin from the land as mother, but also in terms of specific places on the land where that person shares a common spirit with animals and ancestors. Earth is a spiritual source of life.

At this point I acknowledge my debt to Indigenous Australians, such as the Rainbow Spirit Elders, for my appreciation of the deep spiritual significance of Earth/land in the Bible, including Genesis 1 (Rainbow Spirit Elders 1997).

j. Scene Eight (Genesis 1.26-28): The Tselem Myth

1. Genesis 1.26: The Council Decision. We might well expect, given the progression of the plot in this primal narrative, that *Erets* would also bring forth that species we call human beings. The alternative primal narrative of Genesis 2 might also suggest such a development as a logical progression in the plot. In Genesis 1, *Erets* has been the key character, the valued partner and the co-creator with Elohim through scenes one to seven; *Erets* is the living source of fauna and flora. We might even expect, if we identify with *Erets*, that in the opening line of scene eight, we would hear Elohim speaking with *Erets* and saying, 'Together let us make humans'.

But scene eight introduces a totally new context and a radically different mythic orientation. Or, as Westermann (1964: 21) recognizes, from the perspective of *Erets* the plot is ruptured by a scene that stands in narrative conflict with what has preceded.

The new context is an unidentified location where Elohim confers with other beings and says, 'Let us make humankind'. The 'us' is reminiscent of the council of heavenly beings (*bene elohim*) in Job 1.6. There is no hint of this 'other' domain anywhere else in the narrative, nor that this is a created domain. Instead of calling on *Erets* to be a creation partner as in previous scenes, God addresses a totally new set of partners. The making of humans is a decision involving unidentified divine forces apparently from another realm. This primordial realm seems to be of a different character to the realm encountered previously in Genesis 1.

2. Making a Tselem. It is perhaps significant that Elohim speaks of 'making an image'. 'Making' suggests the concrete act of constructing a solid model or image. Like an artisan, it seems, Elohim 'makes' (*asah*) a God-image as one would make a stone or wooden model. In several texts, the same verb is used for making concrete images. The Philistine priests, for example, give the order to 'make images of the mice' that are ravaging the land (1 Sam. 6.5; cf. Ezek. 7.20).

Interpretations of the *tselem* of Elohim (*imago deo*) in this Genesis 1 text are legion and cannot be explored in detail here. As we may suspect, a dualistic mindset has informed most interpretations in the past. A long tradition, that goes back to Philo who was influenced by Platonic thought, promotes the idea that the image refers to a non-physical dimension of humans: the mind, reason, consciousness or a spiritual core (Fergusson 1998: 13). The usual meaning of the Hebrew word for image (*tselem*), however, is

something concrete and visible: a statue of a deity (2 Kgs 11.18; Dan. 3.1); a picture on a wall (Ezek. 23.14). Making a *tselem* implies making a figure like a statue. James Barr (1968:16) recognized a parallel between the action of God using an image to make a figure called a human and the process of Moses using a model or pattern (*tabnit*) from God to make the tabernacle (Exod. 25.40).

3. A *Tselem of Elohim*. In the numerous readings of this text, however, biblical scholars and theologians overlook the physical dimension of the divine action and discern a higher dimension in humans that somehow makes humankind creatures of a higher order. Traditional readings of the text foster a strong anthropocentric approach; these readings allow humans to play God by identifying with a dimension of God that they believe they emulate or express. In the October 2005 issue of *Interpretation*, Sibley Towner claims this text makes humans 'clones of God' and 'prime ministers of the King of the universe' but without the right to 'play God' (2005: 355). His reading is boldly anthropocentric. Dean McBride regards humans as the presence of God in the cosmos.

The particular purpose of their creation is 'theophanic': to represent or mediate the sovereign presence of the deities within the central nave of the cosmic temple just as cult images were supposed to do in conventional sanctuaries (2000: 16).

Humans are beings 'made' in the *tselem* of Elohim. But which of the 'images' or portrayals of Elohim is employed in the formation of humans? If we assume a traditional interpretive approach that relates a key image/portrayal to its wider context, then Genesis 1 suggests a range of images/portrayals.

- a. A nurturing life-force. The initial image/portrayal of Elohim in the primordial scene—where the wind of Elohim hovers over *Erets* in the primal waters—indicates a participating presence, a life force that is nurturing *Erets*. The probable birth metaphor may even suggest a midwife or parental image.
- b. A verbal impulse. The second image/portrayal of Elohim is reflected in a creation process whereby the word from Elohim is an impulse that enables light and darkness to separate, the waters to divide, a firmament to be formed above the waters, and lights to be located in the firmament.
- c. An empowering partner. The third image/portrayal that emerges is that of God cooperating with the domains of *Erets* to enable *Erets* to become a partner in the creation process by bringing forth all forms of fauna and flora.

In Gen. 1.26-28, however, a radically different image/portrayal is depicted, one that is not connected with the preceding images/portrayals.

- d. A hierarchical power. The image/portrayal of Elohim implied in Gen. 1.26-28 is diametrically opposed to the preceding images which are essentially empowering. In this text, the image/portrayal relates to the transfer of power from a deity to one species on *Erets* who is given the mandate to exercise power over all the domains of *Erets*.

4. *Interpreting the Tselem*. Most scholars ignore the possible association with contextual images/portrayals and view this passage as clear evidence of the superiority of humans over other creatures. The *tselem* of Elohim, they argue, implies human superiority, and authorizes humans to rule an anthropocentric universe. The following quotations are representative of this point of view.

The human was created by the special plan and providence of God. This indicates that the human being is a creature far superior to the rest of the living beings that live a physical life (Luther 1958: 56).

The human is God's last, highest creation and is treated with particular thoroughness...The report that the human was created after God's image and that the human was given dominion over the animals explicitly expresses the special value of humanity (Gunkel 1997: 112).

For the author of Genesis, the human has an incredible dignity, made in the image and the likeness of God, not as slave, but to have dominion over Earth (Vawter 1956: 43).

The human, however, has from the very beginning been created for a task that sets the human apart from the rest of creation (Westermann 1964:20).

The apex of the creatures is undoubtedly meant to be the human being (Renner 1988: 30).

The dominion granted to humankind crowns the work of creation. The whole universe is centered on humankind, from the great to the small (Pietrantonio 1995: 68).

The contribution of creatures, which God not only allows but indeed encourages, is clearest, and most decisive in the case of humanity, to whom God explicitly grants the status and role of the image of God and the commission to extend God's royal administration of the world as authorized representatives on Earth (Middleton 2005: 289).

From the perspective of *Erets*, it is apparent that interpreters have ignored the three preceding images of Elohim—the God who empowered *Erets*—and have adopted without question the hierarchical image that both overpowers and disempowers *Erets* and the creatures of *Erets*.

5. *The Royal Metaphor*. The function specified for the god-image creatures is 'to rule' (*rada*). Precisely because human beings are made in the *tselem* of Elohim, they are given the mandate to 'rule' all living creatures. Left there be any question about what creatures are involved, the text delineates a

wide range of representative living things, including fish, birds, domestic animals, wild animals and creeping things. Humans are given the authority to rule as representatives of Elohim over all living things in nature.

As Towner points out, the logic of the text is clear: it reads 'Let us make humankind (*adam*) in our image, according to our likeness, so that they may have dominion' (2005: 348). Giving expression to the *tselem* of Elohim is not identified as evident in worship or communication with Elohim, but precisely in the function of having dominion over creatures. The logic is indeed clear: humans are created with the *tselem* of Elohim so that they may rule! That seems to be the essence of the *Tselem* myth.

There has been much recent debate about the meaning of the term *rada* variously rendered 'rule', 'have dominion' and 'take responsibility for'. Normally *rada* is what kings and taskmasters do (1 Kgs 4:24; 5:16)! Those who claim the text implies some sympathy for *Erets* soften the force of the verb by arguing that

- the term 'rule' reflects royal language;
- the first humans are thus depicted as ideal 'kings';
- humans, as rulers representing God, should reflect God's just rule;
- the ideals for God's rule through a chosen king are given in Psalm 72;
- this is interpreted as 'taking care' of the poor;
- 'ruling' *Erets* therefore means 'taking care of' *Erets* (see Dryness 1987: 54).

The problem with this interpretation is that a close reading of Psalm 72 reveals that *rada* is not linked with 'justice' or 'caring for' anything mentioned in the psalm. The relevant verses, apparently echoing the reign of Solomon, read:

May he have dominion (*rada*) from sea to sea
and from the river to the ends of Earth.
May his foes bow down before him,
and his enemies lick the dust (Ps. 72.8-9).

'Having dominion' in Psalm 72 means ruling over a domain in which all conquered foes have been forced to lick the dust. The royal metaphor does not temper the force of the hierarchical image. Ruling in the *tselem* of Elohim implies a form of royal domination that devalues *Erets* and the living community of *Erets*.

6. *Genesis 1.27: Implementing the Decision.* The implementation of the joint decision to 'make' humans in the *tselem* of Elohim is described in poetic language. The new dimension of this divine act is the designation of both male and female as bearers of the *tselem*. Both male and female humans bear the royal image and have the mandate to rule all other living creatures.

There is no indication of male rulers being superior in any way to female rulers; they are separated (*bara*) by sex but both bear the *tselem* that gives them the capacity to dominate.

Given the preceding analysis, it seems that the description of the *tselem* of Elohim in this passage

- is not to be interpreted from a dualistic perspective as a non-physical dimension of human beings;
- can be recognized as having an anthropocentric orientation that raises humans to a level above other living creatures;
- reflects the same terminology used in textual connections to describe making images for other gods or entities;
- portrays humans as visible, physical expressions of God's appearance.

As noted above, deities such as Baal were depicted by the image of a bull. Other deities had various animal and human faces that reflected their identity. In this passage, Elohim announces that a replica of this deity's appearance will be made in the human form. Just as Seth bore the physical *tselem* and likeness of his father Adam, so humans bear the *tselem* and likeness of Elohim (Gen. 5.1-3). And just as physical images of kings were located in various domains to represent the king, so also human beings are the images of Elohim located throughout *Erets*.

A further dimension of this action of God is discernible when we realize that the verb *bara* is used three times in this poetic verse. Following the research of van Wolde, we can render this passage 'God separated the human being made in his image'. That is, 'God placed human beings in a spatially distant position, namely, on *Erets*'. And again, 'God made a separation between male and female'. That is, God separated the human being into two sexes, each connected with its own sphere of life' (2009: 21-22).

By recognizing that *bara* implies physical separation, we can understand how, according to this myth, these creatures who look like God and bear the *tselem* of God are removed from that realm where other celestial beings like God may reside.

7. *Genesis 1.28: Empowering the Humans.* After humans have been made bearing the *tselem* of Elohim, they are empowered to carry out their role in the cosmos. This empowerment is described as Elohim 'blessing' the newly made humans. To 'bless' is traditionally understood as imparting positive power—especially the power associated with fertility (Gen. 24.60). Here, too, blessing imparts to humans the capacity to 'be fruitful and multiply', that is, to procreate and reproduce.

8. *Subduing Erets.* The blessing of humans is not intended to effect reproduction as an integral part of life, as with the other living creatures. Instead, humans are blessed so that they can fill *Erets* and subdue it.

The act of filling *Erets* suggests that *Erets* is the specific domain where humans are to rule. Fish may fill the seas (Gen. 1.22) but humans fill *Erets*, the domain where the *Erets*-born creatures already live. 'Filling' *Erets* implies a takeover. This is confirmed with the final mandate: 'subdue' (*kabash*) *Erets*!

The verb *kabash* has all the connotations of heavy-handed control. Zedekiah takes back those who have been liberated and 'subdues' them as slaves (Jer. 34.11). When Joshua completes the conquest of Canaan he is described as 'subjugating' the land (Josh. 18.1). In later texts, this verb is associated with the overpowering and rape of women (Est. 7.9; Neh. 5.5). The verb *kabash* connotes oppressive and harsh action and is consistent with the royal connotations of *rada* identified earlier.

In a detailed critical analysis of the *tselem* of Elohim in Gen. 1.26-28, Garr maintains

kabash (subdue) is a harsh term that empowers, in this case, human beings to control, occupy, and subjugate a vast area by an exercise of mighty force. The 'image' entitles humankind to achieve decisive victory over the entire natural world. Stated differently, humankind will act like a victorious king over a conquered land (2001: 171).

In the *Tselem* myth, *Erets*, as the object of this harsh action on the part of humans, is the innocent victim of a royal ideology that elevates humans and devalues *Erets*. This portrayal of *Erets* is completely at odds with the character of *Erets* depicted in the first seven scenes of the Genesis 1 narrative. Elohim's partner in creating other life now becomes the victim of human 'subduing'; *Erets* becomes a slave of humans rather than their mother.

As if this humiliation of *Erets* was not enough, all her progeny are again declared to be the objects of human domination in the closing words of Gen. 1.28. From the perspective of *Erets*, humans are given the right to treat *Erets* and *Erets*-beings as inferior parts of creation: *Erets* is no longer a partner with God but a victim of humans.

It is perhaps possible that, as Gardner has suggested, the narrator of this verse reflects a hidden polemic against *Erets* as a power that 'nature religions of the surrounding nation deified' (2000: 24). But as Daniel Hillel, a *bone fide* ecologist, writes in an appendix to his work, *The Natural History of the Bible*, this text can be construed as 'a divine ordination of humans to dominate Earth and use every nonliving and living thing on it for their own purposes, without restraint or reservation' (2006: 242).

k. Scene Nine (Genesis 1.29-31): *Erets Provides Vegetation as Food*

The final scene recalls scene four in which the main character *Erets* brings forth vegetation, thereby demonstrating that *Erets* is not only alive but a partner in the creation process. In this closing scene, however, Elohim

does not specifically acknowledge *Erets* as the source of the vegetation but recognizes that the designated flora exists 'upon the face of *Erets*'. Elohim chooses to give all plants yielding seeds and trees bearing fruit to humans for food. Bird, animals and reptiles are assigned 'every green plant', that is, vegetation that does not have seed or fruit. This classification of flora may reflect a divine decision to give humans the more valuable species of vegetation for their food.

As earlier in scene three, Elohim 'sees' or views everything that has been created and responds positively. This action is not one of Elohim simply declaring creation to be good, but actually acknowledging that it is intrinsically good. The degree of divine celebration is emphasized by the verdict of 'very good'.

1. Narrative Coda (Genesis 2.1-4a): *Elohim Separates and Blesses Day Seven*. The ending of the primal *Erets* myth of Genesis 1 is a coda, bringing to a close the series of three separations and emanations described in the narrative. An *inclusio* links *bara elohim* in Gen. 1.1 and Gen. 2.3b and hence demonstrates the place of this coda in the narrative. As a coda, however, this passage appears to be located outside the sequence of creation events as such. But as Wallace has shown, 'The seventh day is thus part of the creation structure, yet it is distinct within it' (2000: 50).

The coda for the seventh day begins by announcing that the process of 'separating' the material universe—*shamayim*, *Erets* and their host—was complete, then adds that this process of completion actually takes place on the seventh day. So what happens on the seventh day to 'complete' the creation/separation process: God rests, blesses, separates, and sanctifies.

In terms of a typical primal narrative, the coda may summarize the completion of what is identified as incomplete in the primal setting. The cosmos is now complete and Elohim can rest (*shabat*) with creation. But that rest apparently does not mean inaction or taking a vacation: the use of *bara* in Gen. 2.3 indicates continued divine action. And, as van Wolde suggests, this verse means that God made the seventh day by 'separating' it and setting it apart of the other days (2009: 22). Elohim also blesses and sanctifies the day that celebrates completion—Elohim invests that day with a power comparable to the power of procreation given to living creatures of *Erets*.

If the creation process is alive on the seventh day to bring *Erets*, *shamayim* and all life to complete fulfilment, then creation continues (*creatio continua*). By the act of resting Elohim, as the impulse in the cosmos, relates to the completed cosmos through the act of blessing. That blessing, significantly, relates to the seventh day. Prior to that day, blessing has been dispensed to activate life as such. Now time is blessed with the inherent capacity to initiate, sustain, and restore life.

From the perspective of *Erets*, the concluding actions of God express both divine approval of the completed universe and continuing concern for the 'work' we call creation. The focus is not anthropocentric, but cosmic, embracing the completed separation of *shamayim* and *Erets* together with the celebration of divine rest! In a sense, the 'very good' that God experiences at the end of creation in Gen. 1.31 is now celebrated by rest, making it sacred and a blessing. Or as Moltmann writes: 'The God who rests in the face of his creation does not dominate the world on this day; he "feels" the world; he allows the world to be affected, to be touched by each of his creatures' (1985: 229).

As indicated in the Introduction, the use of the term *toledoth* in Gen. 2.4a is not accidental. It is part of the framing process that serves to link the initial *Erets* myth of Genesis 1 with the *toledoth* in subsequent chapters. The completion of the separation/creation sequence is announced in Gen. 2.1. The summation of Gen. 2.4a links this sequence with the specific 'separation of *Erets* and *shamayim*' in Gen. 1.1. It is possible that this sequence is viewed as comparable to the succession of human progeny indicated by the normal use of *toledeth*. In any case, by using the term '*toledoth*', the *Erets* myth is incorporated into primordial human history—and an anthropocentric framework is initiated.

m. Sabbath Connections

In the past, due to various dualistic influences, we have tended to separate God from time. Here, however, God is linked with time: blessing a period of time and thereby investing it with special power. God is in, with, and under time as God is in, with, and under the rest of creation. So, one dimension of time is filled with blessing, with life-giving impulses, with divine presence.

There are three textual connections in the Hebrew Scriptures that interpret the 'Sabbath' (*shabbat*) concept. The first, in the book of Exodus, is a social reading. Israelites should keep the Sabbath holy and rest from any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns' (Exod. 20.8-11). The reason given for this practice is that God did the same when creating *shamayim*, *Erets* and sea. Within the law codes of Israel, however, this practice was taken to the extreme, demanding that any who violated the Sabbath must die (Exod. 25.2).

The second reading, in the book of Deuteronomy, adds a historical dimension, associating this day with the liberation of God's people from slavery in Egypt (Deut. 5.12-15). On this day the people of Israel not only desist from work but celebrate their identity and freedom. Genesis 2.1-3, however, is not an aetiology for the Sabbath day as such; the noun 'sabbath' (*shabbat*)—as distinct from the verb 'to rest' (*shabat*)—does not occur in this

passage. Genesis 2.1-3 is about creation, the domains of nature, and God's blessing of time on the seventh day; it is not about worshipping on that day.

The third reading, in Leviticus 25-26, relates directly to creation and to the land in particular. This passage is concerned specifically with 'a Sabbath of complete rest for the land', also designated as a 'Sabbath for the Lord' (Lev. 25.2-4). This rest is specified as a complete absence of any agriculture every seventh year. In the sixth year, the people of the land are expected to gather enough food to meet their needs during the seventh year. The focus of the Sabbath has moved from rest on the seventh day to complete rest in the seventh year. In the seventh year the land is to be made free to rejuvenate and restore its fertility.

A full appreciation of this process of Sabbath rejuvenation is only apparent when we discover that, in Leviticus, the land (*Erets*) belongs to Yhwh rather than to God's people who are named as tenants. Moreover, this land is explicitly designated Yhwh's sanctuary, that domain where Yhwh dwells, walks as he did in Eden, and expects to be kept free from any polluting idols (Lev. 26.1-2, 11-12).

The fertility of the land is dependent both on the faithfulness of the tenants and the rejuvenating presence of Yhwh. Total rest/sabbath for the land is specifically termed a 'Sabbath for the Lord'. The two are intimately interconnected. As God rested on the seventh day, so God rests and thereby rejuvenates the land every seven years. The rejuvenating presence of God is in the land, and by implication, in all creation. 'Land' in this Leviticus passage is the same word as *Erets* in Genesis 1—the former is a microcosm of the latter.

Accordingly we might well recognize a Sabbath principle embedded in this text: *it is vital for the rejuvenation of the sanctuary of Earth by the presence of God that Sabbath time be dedicated by human tenants on God's planet*. Or in more contemporary ecological terms: *it is vital for the internal rejuvenation/restoration of the domains of nature that there be adequate rest time without the influence of external human forces that may have depleted a given domain*.

3. Retrieval

In the preceding analysis of the narrative we have retrieved dimensions of *Erets* as a character and subject that have not previously been fully recognized because of our past tendency to read the text from an anthropocentric or dualistic perspective. If we go a step further in identifying with *Erets* and reading in solidarity with *Erets*, we may be able to hear the voice of *Erets* behind the events. This articulation is a form of reconstruction which, I would argue, is as valid as scholarly reconstructions that seek to portray Genesis 1 as *Chaoskampf* myth, a liturgy, or a theological polemic.

In the following reconstruction of the narrative, *Erets* becomes her own interpreter. She tells the story from her perspective, a perspective we have retrieved through the preceding plot analysis of the *Erets* myth.

My Birth Story

I am *Erets*. In the beginning Elohim separated me from the rest of the primordial cosmos.

At first I was waiting deep in a primal womb. Everything was dark. Everything was enveloped in water. I had as yet not been fully formed or filled with life. I was just there, waiting. In the darkness, the wind of Elohim was hovering.

The first sign that things were changing for me was a voice in the darkness. Elohim called for light and separated the light from the darkness. Light meant life was coming. Light meant things could be seen when I emerged from the waters. Elohim named the light day and the darkness night.

The second sign that things were changing for me was Elohim talking to the waters. Elohim called for a vast canopy to stretch out high above. Elohim separated the primal waters and located half of the waters above the canopy and left me in the waters below the canopy. A canopy above meant that there would be space for me to be seen when I emerged from the waters. Elohim named the canopy Sky.

The third sign that things were happening to me was when Elohim spoke to the waters that enveloped me and summoned them to separate, to burst apart. Then I heard the voice of Elohim calling me to emerge from the divided waters and 'appear'. Now there was light, there was space, and there was an opening in the waters. Now I could appear, emerge from the darkness below, and be born. I appeared and Elohim named me *Erets*.

Can you imagine the honour of being brought forth personally by Elohim from the primal womb. Elohim was like a midwife. And my birth was amazing: I came from primal darkness into primal light. I felt very precious.

My amazing transformation continued when Elohim brought me to life in a new way. Elohim invited me to be a partner in the creation process. He summoned me to bring forth every imaginable species of vegetation from within my body. I became a source of life. I filled my surface with living flora. No wonder Elohim looked closely at me and all that had emerged and said, 'I'm delighted!'

Now that the basic domains of the cosmos were in place, it was time for Elohim to fill these domains with appropriate forms.

First Elohim filled the sky with various kinds of lights to order the cycles of life and especially, as Elohim said, to provide light on me. Light was essential for the life I was nurturing. Light emanated from the sky to bless me.

Then Elohim summoned the seas to swarm with marine creatures and the air with birds. These creatures surrounded me and I sustained them.

Another special moment happened, when Elohim invited me to bring forth every imaginable species of land creature—mammals, reptiles and more. I was Elohim's partner in the creation of living beings. All fauna and flora emerge from me. They are my kin and I nurture them.

Again, Elohim looked closely at all that had emerged and said, 'I'm delighted!'

My Dark Story

I have another story to tell, a rather dark story about the origin of humans.

When Elohim thought about creating humans he chose to discuss the option with the council of celestial beings instead of with me. I was ignored and these other divine beings became Elohim's confidants.

They decided to create what are called human beings. These beings are apparently not my kin—they did not emerge from within me as other living creatures did. According to this version of the beginning, they are not made from the stuff of creation like other living things. Instead they are modelled on these celestial beings using an image of Elohim in the process. These new creatures apparently looked like Elohim and the celestial beings.

This action may have been reasonable if these images were formed to be my friends and work with me in nurturing life. Instead, they were given the special capacity by Elohim to multiply, completely fill my space, and dominate all the creatures that I had been partners in creating. All my kin were to be ruled by these images of Elohim. Why?

And as if that was not insult enough, these image creatures were given a mandate from Elohim to 'subdue' me as if I were a wild beast, an enemy, or a violent force to be controlled. By so doing Elohim discarded me as a partner and handed me over for humans to abuse. These image creatures not only looked like Elohim; they were given the right to play God in a cruel way.

Later, Elohim allocated the various types of vegetation to humans and all life on Earth so that I could nurture them. When Elohim saw the completed cosmos, Elohim said 'I'm very pleased!'

Elohim may have rested after the creation process, but it left me feeling ambivalent. I worked with Elohim as a partner throughout the process until the very end when a different kind of Elohim seemed to enter the scene and devalue me in favour of these new image creatures.

When Elohim rests, however, I am given time to rejuvenate. Sabbath also means a blessing is imparted to me and I will rise again, even if humans believe they are commissioned to suppress me.

Whether or not you hear the voice of *Erets* (Earth) in just this way, the task of reading the text from an ecological perspective suggests that we identify with *Erets* and explore the way this narrative would be read by *Erets* and the *Erets* community, of whom we humans are one species. As children of *Erets* we are invited by *Erets* to hear the stories from her perspective.