



BRILL

The Ecology of Death in the Book of Job

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Abstract

Ruminations on death recur throughout Job. Equally, language of the non-human world is prevalent. This article examines the coalescence of these tropes in the implicit “neco-ecology” of the book. As though observing the decomposition of a corpse, it focusses on four Joban images, each expressing human death in non-human terms: maggots colonise the cadaver; scavengers consume it. The body disintegrates into dust; plants grow and wither there. At each stage, the article shows how death and life are entangled together, the one requiring and enabling the other. Equally, beings are entangled with each other, challenging the human pretence to self-contained individuality. The article thus fits into a broader trend in the (post)humanities to cultivate scholarship conducive to multi-species flourishing, showing how Job provides fertile compost for symbiotic inter-species alliances of living and dying together.

Keywords

job – death – ecology – entanglement – posthumanist – species – Haraway

Introduction

“If my decomposing carcass helps nourish the roots of a juniper tree or the wings of a vulture – that is immortality enough for me” (EDWARD ABBEY, CITED IN BARNETT 2017: 12).

Death is a major preoccupation in the book of Job, frequently intruding in the speeches of the protagonist (e.g. 3:11–23; 7:6–10; 9:22–23; 10:18–22;

14:1–14; 17:13–16; 21:23–34) and his friends (4:7–11, 17–21; 15:17–35; 18:5–21; 20:4–11). Equally, the non-human world is prevalent, providing fertile imagery to feed their rhetoric. It is little surprise, then, that death should be depicted through ecological language: thus, the corpse is covered by maggots, consumed by scavengers, and shrouded by dust; humans fade like withering plants. This article closely observes the “necro-ecological” (Bezan 2015) imagery of Job, and traces two entanglements that are found there: the entanglement of death with life, and of beings with each other.

The article’s contribution is threefold. First, it adds to the growing body of ecologically-sensitive literature on Job. It focusses on passages and themes which are sometimes overlooked,¹ and argues that much of Job’s death language entails deep-rooted entanglements with ecological implications. Second, it incorporates insights from posthumanism and biological sciences, which illuminate the text in fresh ways.² Third, it has implications for contemporary ecological activism, particularly concerning eco-conscious deathways (though space does not permit for these to be explored fully).

The article is situated within a wider cross-disciplinary movement of scholarship attendant to the non-human world. The human has been decentred, as across the (post-) humanities, scholars are taking seriously the ecological imperative of the Anthropocene. But perhaps this decentring should go further. Donna Haraway (2016) calls for new ways of thinking: instead of humanities, “humusities”; instead of posthuman, “compost” (11, 32, 55, 97, 101–102); instead of Anthropocene, “Chthulucene” (from Greek *χθών* – “earth”; 2, 51–57). This article begins to answer this call, for Haraway’s figures of “humus,” “compost,” and “Chthon” are productive to think with as we begin to consider the necro-ecology of Job. In particular, they suggest two entanglements³ that will

1 Many interpreters focus on the “whirlwind speeches” in Job 38–41 (e.g. Bauckham 2010: 38–63; Brown 2010; McKibben 1994; O’Connor 2003; Pidcock-Lester 2000; Schifferdecker 2005, 2011; Shugart 2014; Stokes Musser 2012), while others hone in on the counter-cosmic curse of Job 3 (e.g. Cho 2003; Masenya 2010; Tönsing 1996) or the meditation on wisdom and creation in Job 28 (e.g. Dell 2001; Habel 2003). This article joins a smaller number of works (notably Doak 2014) in tracing ecological language in other sections of the book. While the theme of death has occurred in these works (especially in discussions of the whirlwind speeches and in Doak), the topic has rarely been central, and there is much more to be said about the ecological ramifications of Job’s death language.

2 Other scholars analysing Job in light of modern science include Brown 2010; McKibben 1994; Shugart 2014.

3 The language of “entanglements” has recently been widespread in literature in this area (e.g. Barad 2007; Rossini 2020; Tsing 2017: vii–xii). Though it is not Haraway’s preferred term, she does use it (4, 13, 34, 36 etc.), and it expresses something of the “tentacular thinking” she advocates.

be central to our investigation, the entanglements entailed in “living-with and dying-with each other” (Haraway 2016: 2).

The first entanglement is between life and death. Haraway’s reworlding project is “as full of dying as living” (10).⁴ Chthon brings to mind the underworld – both the soil alive with subterranean species, and world of the dead⁵ – the “hot compost piles” (4) of fertile humus, where decay and death become productive for new life. The second entanglement is between beings; it is always living- and dying-*with*. The Chthulucene embraces not just anthopos, but earth and all its critters. The human has no autonomy from humus, wholly dependent on the soil. In compost, the individual decomposes and disperses, its matter mixing with diverse others. Accordingly, and based on contemporary biological research, Haraway rejects the notion of the bounded individual, stressing instead that all beings are caught in a process of “sympoiesis.”⁶ No-one becomes who they are individually; rather, they “become with” countless animal, bacterial, and mineral symbionts. These two entanglements are both found within Job, and will structure the subsequent discussion.

The first entanglement, then: between death and life. Job perceives himself to be drawing near to death, and is acutely aware of human transience and fragility (e.g. 9:25–26; 10:20–22; 13:28; 14:1–2). He frequently ruminates on death, and the theme becomes a site of competing ideologies (Mathewson 2006). For Job’s friends, death is best understood within the framework of retribution: wrongdoers are punished with untimely, dishonourable destruction. Job rejects this perspective, but struggles to make sense of death otherwise. Sometimes he hopes for post-mortem rest in Sheol (e.g. 3:13–15, 17–19; 14:13; 17:13–16); sometimes he anticipates complete annihilation (e.g. 7:7–8, 21). And sometimes, he and his friends refract death through language of the nonhuman world. Though they do not expound the implications of this, they nonetheless offer a seedbed for eco-critical reflection. When death is expressed this way, a curious thing happens: life comes with it. As will become clear, their imagery, for all its deathly connotations, entails life too. This resonates with modern ecology: as is increasingly evident from biological research, the forces of death and life tangle together in the ecological web.

4 The couplet “living and dying” occurs frequently in Haraway; one term rarely occurs without the other.

5 Haraway does not use Chthon to mean the underworld in a mythological sense, but the Greek term can have this connotation (LSJ).

6 Or “becoming-with.” The term comes from noted biologist Lynn Margulis (1998), and Haraway uses it alongside “sympoiesis” – “making-with” (59–67).

In the contemporary world, which shapes Job's reception and scholarship, there is no less contestation over the meaning of death.⁷ Some read Job in the framework of Christian resurrection theology (e.g. Ash 2014: 216–217). Others unearth its resources for bereavement counselling (e.g. Lyon 2000). This paper might speak to the growing concern to overcome the detachment and ecological damage of contemporary death practices, and the attendant calls for environmentally sensitive deathways (Barnett 2017). If there is “life-after-death” or “immortality” here, this is “ecological immortality” (Davies 2008: 86–87) in which human death sustains diverse life.

The second entanglement is the entanglement between beings – human and non-human. This article observes the individual disintegrate, to be enmeshed multifariously into community. Job displays anxiety about his disintegrating body, which is stricken by disease (2:7; 6:10–12; 9:17; 16:8; 17:7; 30:17, 30), and violates ancient Israelite ideals of bodily wholeness (Basson 2008). Significantly, the locus of affliction is the skin (2:7), the protective barrier between the individual and the outside world (Zwan 2017). Any infraction on the skin suggests personal permeability, threatening to dissolve the self.

This is all the more troubling because Job perceives of death in individual terms. Bereaved of his children (1:18–19) and rejected by his community (19:13–19), he cannot hope to live on through descendants or memorialization (e.g. Cook 2007); his death is a personal affair. Such individualism resonates and is amplified in the contemporary world. The liberal subject of Western modernity is profoundly troubled by challenges to individual subjectivity (e.g. Pippin 2005). As we will see, though, the necro-ecological language of Job pushes beyond the individual and reaches into an entangled web of interacting beings.

This article engages with entanglements in method as well as in content, joining with scholars who cross disciplinary boundaries. Haraway (2016) plays with the initials SF, which are simultaneously “science fact” and “speculative fabulation” – two poles which “need each other” (3).⁸ Her writing is at once detailed and analytic, and playful and poetic. This article begins to extend tendrils in both directions. It will draw on contemporary science in its analyses of the earth, its creatures, and their biological processes. But it will do so with the framing device of a fictional narrative. It will proceed as though observing the “decomposing carcass” imagined by Edward Abbey in the epigraph, tracing

7 The present article is of course part of this reception, and is shaped by the contemporary Western context of its author. Other perspectives, shaped by other social locations, are also possible and valuable.

8 SF is also science fiction, string figures, speculative feminism, so far (2).

four stages of decomposition:⁹ Maggots colonise the cadaver, followed by scavengers who feast to satiation (Abbey's "vultures"). The remains disintegrate into the dusty ground, and plant-life (like Abbey's "juniper tree") grows up there. Each of these images is found in Job. And each bears witness to entanglements of life and death, and of beings with each other. Though never developing a full necro-ecological ideology, Job thus provides productive compost for such ideas to grow.

Maggots

Entangled Death and Life

Imagine sitting with a cadaver, human or non-human. Within minutes of death, it is no longer alone. Flies – attracted by the smell of decay – attend the gravesite, laying their eggs in this fresh nest of flesh. Before long, larvae squirm forth and teem across the body. You might be sitting with Job, for he too knows such maggots (רמה; 7:5; 17:14; 21:26; 24:20; 25:6).¹⁰

Maggots are closely linked to death, notorious for feeding off corpses (e.g. Isa. 14:11; 66:24; Sir. 7:17; 10:11). Thus Gilgamesh laments his rotting friend Enkidu: "I would not give him up for burial... until a worm fell out of his nose" (Pritchard 1969: 90). Job first attends to them as he ruminates on his own transience: his life is as fleeting as a weaver's shuttle (7:6), breath (7:7), or fading cloud (7:9); his flesh is maggot-ridden (לִבְשׁ בְּשָׂרֵי רִמָּה; 7:5). Indeed, maggots are a clear instantiation and symbol of transient, fragile life. Their full life cycle lasts just a few months, and their larval state only a week or so (Fleischmann, Grassberger, and Sherman 2011: 6, discussing the blowfly). Such insect life is easily squashed and extinguished. So too the human, who is crushed like a moth (4:19), indeed, who is a maggot (25:6).

The insects which infest Job's wounds reveal the reality of death-in-life. A chthonic alliance of maggots and dust – which elsewhere claims corpses (21:26; cf. 17:13–16) – now shrouds Job with the cling of the grave (7:5). The creatures feast on the "sweetness" of his tissue (מתק; 24:20), painfully exposing that parts of him are – and have always been – dying or dead.¹¹ Indeed, all organic life experiences perpetual small deaths. At a microbial level, parts of us

9 For a biological analysis of the stages in cadaver decomposition, see Carter, Yellowlees and Tibbett 2007.

10 Scholarly engagements with maggots are limited but see Riede 2002, 51–54, 127–128.

11 The larvae of blowflies and flesh flies in particular can colonise and consume mammalian tissue. This may occur in the wounds of a living host (myiasis) or in a cadaver. On myiasis see Soler Cruz 2008; on the role of larvae in cadaver decomposition see Dahlem and Rivers 2014.

are always dying, always being consumed by uncountable others (Frank *et al.*, 2013: 28–32).

If there is death-in-life, though, there is also life-in-death.¹² Maggots can clean wounds, killing harmful micro-organism and stimulating healing (Fleischmann, Grassberger, and Sherman 2011: 26–27). Job may imagine himself as a decaying corpse, but a decaying corpse is in fact a vital ecosystem (Carter, Yellowlees and Tibbett 2007; Costandi 2015). Bacteria are rampant. When the immune system deactivates, aerobic bacteria from the microbiome spread and multiply, digesting the body's tissue (Javan *et al.* 2016). They are soon joined by anaerobic bacteria, which further break down tissue into gases, liquids, and salts. This putrid concoction attracts insects (primarily blowflies and flesh flies), who lay their eggs by the hundred. The resulting larvae hatch and moult into increasingly large forms. The maggots flourish, feasting on flesh, bodily fluids, and ingested foods. As diverse insect life joins the corpse-community (e.g. Lindgren *et al.* 2015), inter- and intra-species alliances are made in criss-crossing, crowded, creative ecological interactions.

Maggots, then, might signify fragility and transience, offering little hope for a human's post-mortem existence. But in the necro-ecology of the worm-infested corpse, diverse life is enabled and sustained through human death.

Entangled Beings

Furthermore, maggots dissolve Job's individual self, entangling him with other beings. They challenge the perceived permanence of the human body, revealing it instead as permeable.¹³ Job is concerned for his protective outer layer – his skin (Zwan 2017) – and sews sackcloth upon it (16:15), perhaps to bandage its shrivelled and ruptured state (16:8, 13). In an uncomfortable restitching of this image, he elsewhere describes maggots clothing his flesh (לְבַשׁ בְּשָׂרִי רִמָּה; 7:5a). We do not have here wounded skin protected by a garment, nor even the skin like an insect-eaten garment (cf. 13:28); rather a garment of insects which eats the skin.¹⁴ Using mouth-hooks, maggots burrow into and feed off open wounds,

12 Most interpreters only attend to death in the maggot imagery; a rare exception is Alice Sinnott (2008: 104–106), who describes maggots and dust here as “Earth elements associated with healing” (104).

13 Several interpreters have commented on the problematic permeability of the human body in the book of Job. For the implications of this for social relations and purity, see especially Basson 2008; Erickson 2013. For an analysis in light of metaphors such as THE BODY IS A CONTAINER and WELL-BEING IS SOLIDITY, see de Joode 2014, 2018: 68–88; Van Hecke 2010.

14 For an analysis of clothing imagery for psychological and somatic states in Job, see Quick 2020.

deepening and enlarging them (Soler Cruz 2008). As Steven Connor puts it, “The dream of worms does not destroy or deny the skin so much as reconstitute it, as a thing of holes, passages” (Connor 2004: 242). The maggots threaten the integrity of the skin, and thus the integrity of the self.

As maggots bore into the skin, it begins to leak. Job complains that it “congeals and flows” (רָגַע וַיִּמָּאֵס; 7:5b),¹⁵ his suppurating sores scabbing over, only to reopen again. The maggots allow for this leakage, feed off it, and even become part of it. Maggots ooze, unskeltoned, from the sores. They are precarious formations of otherwise formless slime, asserting a troublesome existence, resistant to proper categorisation as solid or liquid. Ruminating on “the being of the slimy,” Jean-Paul Sartre (2003: 631) noted the “vague, soft effort made by each to individualize itself” (here, each maggot squirms to the surface), “followed by a falling back and flattening out that is emptied of the individual” (the squirming maggot mass). This maggot-slime seems to suck in Job too, whose skin is caught in a solid-fluid flux of hardening (רָגַע) and melting (מָאֵס).¹⁶ No wonder that he anticipates the complete dissolution of the self: “your eyes are on me and I am gone” (עֵינַיִךְ בִּי וְאִינִי; 7:8; cf. 7:21).

If maggots break down the individual, though, they also offer kinship. Job imagines “call[ing] the maggot ‘my mother’ and ‘my sister’” (קָרָאתִי... אִמִּי וְאָחָתִי) (לְרֵמָה; 17:14; cf. 30:29). David Clines (1989: 399) notes the “legal ring” to this language, suggestive of formal adoption into a family (citing parallels in Jer. 2:27; Hos. 2:4[2]; Ps. 2:7; Prov. 7:4). As mother, the maggot may nurture and care for Job. As sister – a possible idiom for “lover” (cf. Song 4:9–10, 12) – she may offer affection and intimacy. Job might join with the speaker of the Middle English *Disputation Betwyxt the Body and Wormes*, who declares to the maggots “Let us be friends... let us kiss and dwell together forever” (Steel 2019: 108). Bildad even moves beyond this. Though intending it as a disparaging dehumanisation,¹⁷ he offers a radical identification: the human (אָנוּשׁ) is a maggot (רֵמָה); the child of humanity (בֶּן־אָדָם) is a worm (תּוֹלֵעָה; 25:6).

This may all provoke reflection on the deep connectivity of beings. Microscopic and macroscopic lives are interdependent. As Lynn Margulis has taught us, all are knotted together with their animal and bacterial

15 With most interpreters, I take רָגַע as “to harden, congeal,” cognate with Ethiopic *ragata* (so BDB). Some (e.g. Dhorme 1926: 90) note that רָגַע occurs in Job 26:12 parallel to מָחַץ “to shatter,” and hence translate it as “to crack” (“s’est fendillée”). מָאֵס is probably a by-form of מָסַס “to melt” (as has also been suggested for מָאֵס in Job 7:16; 42:6; e.g. Clines 2011: 1207, 1219). The two verbs together suggest a movement from solid to liquid and back again.

16 Cf Mathewson 2006: 74–80, who analyses this passage in terms of stasis and disintegration.

17 The identification is usually taken to indicate God’s disgust at the pitiful human condition. E.g. Doak 2014: 59–61; Newsom 2003: 142.

symbionts (e.g. Margulis 1998). Accordingly, Job enters a man-maggot assemblage. Distinctions break down between inside and outside, subject and object, agent and patient. We cannot speak of a singular subject (Job) confronting external objects (maggots), for the maggots are inside him and, as they ingest his flesh, he is inside them. The debilitated, disintegrating Job, burdened by this teeming mass, can no longer imagine himself a powerful independent actor. In the assemblage, agency “has no single locus, no mastermind, but is distributed across a swarm of various and variegated vibrant materialities” (Bennett 2010: 96). The assemblage constitutes an ecological entanglement of “manifold and makeshift relatings” (Bertoni 2016: 11), not reducible to individual man or maggot parts.

Maggots, then, burrow through the divisions of life and death, enlivening themselves through the dead flesh of their host. As you watch their heaving mass, you see them dissolve the boundaries of the individual self, and offer new, entangled ways of relating.

Scavengers

Entangled Death and Life

Still watching the maggots, you almost miss the arrival of the next dinner guests: scavengers. But they announce themselves emphatically, with vultures and ravens inflicting comprehensive dismemberment. Some stay to feast; others tear away flesh and remove it for private dining. Though scavengers are rare in Job, they appear at the climax of the book, circling around God’s “animal speech.” The speech begins with lion, raven,¹⁸ and carrion (38:39–41), and ends with vultures¹⁹ drinking blood (39:26–30). Most scavengers are also predators,²⁰ and predators stalk throughout Job (e.g. 4:10–11; 10:16; 13:14; 16:9; 29:17; see Hawley 2018: 117–146).

Like maggots, scavengers are known for their presence alongside corpses. From ancient Near Eastern iconography (Dooren 2011: 76–78) to contemporary photojournalism (Kleinman and Kleinman 1996), vultures (for example) are pervasive symbols of death. And like maggots, scavengers reveal the human as fragile and edible (Horne 2005: 131–132). A human might retain some pride if

18 On the identification of the **רַבֵּעַ**, raven, see Whitekettle 2006.

19 The Hebrew here is **נֶשֶׁר**, which can refer to both the vulture and the eagle. Given the context of scavenging, the former is more likely here. See Goddard 2007: 59.

20 The only obligate scavenger (a species which relies solely on scavenging, without predation) is the vulture (DeVault, Rhodes and Shivik 2003: 231).

consumed by a ferocious lion (Job 38:39–40), but there is something much less dignified about being pecked by baby birds (38:41; 39:30) – and much more telling about human vulnerability. Edibility is explicit: the category of “food” (אכל) now contains human bodies (39:29; cf. 38:41b) alongside e.g. Egyptian grain (throughout Gen. 41–44); “provisions”²¹ (ציד) refers to cadavers (Job 38:41a) as well as dry, crumbly bread (Josh. 9:5, 12–14).

In their appetite for corpses, scavengers make uneasy companions. They ingest what humans abject, taking in what we push away (cf. Hovanec 2019: 89). Feeding is transitive and intransitive, at once destructive and creative. The corpse feeds the scavengers and diminishes. The scavengers feed on the corpse and rejuvenate. Human status is powerfully challenged; not least their self-perceived position atop the food pyramid. The ecofeminist Val Plumwood recounts her experience in the jaws of a crocodile, and the realisation that came through it: “the most basic feature of animal existence on planet earth—that we are food” (2008: 324). She notes how this experience challenged the common human mythology of dominion, inverting its dualistic structure (Plumwood 1999: 90–91). Humans no longer have mastery over other creatures, but instead are mastered by them.²²

For all that scavenging symbolises death and fragility, though, it also enables life.²³ Amongst non-human animals, scavenging is commonplace, practiced by almost all species of vertebrate predator, and becoming the fate of most terrestrial carcasses (DeVault, Rhodes and Shivik 2003). When an animal dies, others consume its body, using its nutrients and energy to sustain their own lives. Scavengers also contribute to wider ecosystems (Beasley *et al.* 2019). They recycle nutrients, resulting in more stable food webs. They can increase the biodiversity at cadaver sites by leaving e.g., their faeces, hairs, feathers, or bacteria. Some (like vultures) are highly resistant to disease, potentially removing pathogens deadly to other species.²⁴

21 According to BDB, there are two separate nouns (1) ציד ‘hunting, game’, derived from צוד “to hunt”; (2) “provision, food.” If the former interpretation is preferred, human edibility is still evident.

22 The lack of human mastery in the divine speeches is commented upon by, e.g. Stokes Musser 2012. Similarly, Othmar Keel (1978) has demonstrated that the divine speeches reverse common ancient Near Eastern tropes in which a human (or divine) figure has power over non-human animals, either as a hunter, a “lord of the animals,” or a provider.

23 Cf. Doak’s (2014: 217) expression of the paradox, characterising these creatures as “thriving off of pure death.”

24 There is debate about the net effect of scavengers in disease control. Some argue that they may also transport pathogens and spread diseases (Beasley *et al.* 2019: 139–140).

In the divine speeches, the scavengers are specified as infants: the ravens' young (יִלְדִים; 38:41), the vultures' chicks (אֶפְרָח; 39:30). The images collapse the beginning and ending of life, birth and death. Nearby, the sea (a conventional symbol of chaos and destruction) is swaddled like a newborn baby (38:9), and destructive meteorological forces are born from the womb (38:28–29). Indeed, the scavenger pericopes, and the divine speeches more broadly, attest a pervasive intermingling of death and life, the dynamics of the one necessary for the other (Mathewson 2006: 148–155; cf. Habel 1985: 534–535; Horne 2005: 133; Newsom 2003: 241–242; Schifferdecker 2005: 155–165).

Entangled Beings

Above, we saw maggots dissolving the boundaries of the human body. Scavengers and predators are more dramatic. They dismember the body, ripping it apart. Blood is spilt (39:30) and flesh is torn (16:9; 18:4) in a movement antithetical to ideals of integrity. Body parts are relocated and displaced. They may feed fledglings in the nest (as perhaps in 38:41; 39:30), or be chimerically reconfigured, flesh joining with teeth (29:17; 13:14).²⁵ The body is disfigured and becomes unrecognisable. Its identifiability – and thus its identity – are thrown into question (Stavrakopoulou 2010: 73).

Individual personhood depends on the physical body, but it is also communally constructed through social relations (Basson 2008). These too are ripped apart by scavengers. Exposure of the body to “the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth” (e.g. Deut. 28:26; Jer. 16:4) signifies social abandonment (Stavrakopoulou 2010: 75). The body is physically separate from human community, and no symbolic or practical care occurs at the gravesite. As flesh is stripped from the cadaver by vultures, so too is any semblance of honour stripped from the person.²⁶ Furthermore, around the scavengers in Job 38:41 and 39:30, impurity accumulates. These birds (hawk, raven, and vulture) are themselves unclean according to purity legislation (Lev. 11:13–19; see Huff 2019). Their contact with the corpse unleashes further contamination (e.g. Num. 19:11–20; Ezek. 44:25–26; cf. Lev. 21:11; Deut. 21:22–23), and they “suck up blood”

25 For further discussion of the implications of the animal bodies for Job's unwhole body in the divine speeches, see Jones 2013; Raphael 2008: 81–105.

26 Olyan (2005) describes a taxonomy of honourable deathways, in which exposure of the corpse is the least honourable. There is an interesting contrast here with e.g. Zoroastrian and Tibetan Buddhist cultures, in which such “sky burial” is a form of veneration (Dooren 2011: 59–70).

(לעלעוֹדִים)²⁷ – a practice vehemently condemned (e.g. Gen. 9:4–5; Lev. 17:10–14; Deut. 12:16, 23, 27; 1 Sam. 14:33). The body thus becomes a site for impurity, and accordingly must be thrust from society.

But if scavenging effects rejection from the human community, it also enables connections within the non-human community. It is instrumental in the relationships between the birds and their offspring (Job 38:41; 39:30), as flesh is passed between them. The parents are protectors and providers (Doak 2014: 217), displaying co-operation and sociality. Indeed, despite their bad reputation, vultures were held in high esteem in ancient Greece and Egypt for their care of their young (including feeding with blood; Dooren 2011: 96, 104–105). Ravens are known to share their bounty with kin and non-kin alike (Parker *et al.* 1994).

Here, scavenging also facilitates connections between different species. Miller (1991) reads a narrative across the chapter in which each species connects with those around it. He suggests that the raven (38:41) is connected to first the lion (38:39–40), and second the goat, donkey, and ox (39:1–12). The first kills the second, and the raven enjoys the spoils. The vulture is connected to the horse and human. Horse brings human into battle (39:19–25), where the latter is slain. Again, the bird benefits, as vulture swoops on carrion (39:29–30). As the individual body is dismembered, then, it becomes a sharing platter for inter-species pleasure. Furthermore, as it passes through avian crops, stomachs, gizzards, and guts, it binds with other beings – bacterial, vegetable, and animal – in intimate entangled relations.

Scavengers are powerful reminders of human edibility. They showcase the creative-and-destructive potential of meat, with death and life tangling together in their guts. You watch them dismember the individual body. Yet with it, you see them undertake a membering, weaving a foodweb which entwines the membership of the necro-ecological collective.

Dust

Entangled Death and Life

A long time passes, and many scavengers come and go. All the while, the body disintegrates further, rupturing and putrefying, relinquishing its final fluids to

27 I take the verb as defectively written from לעלעו – the pilpel of לעע “to lick up avidly” (HALOT 2:533b). This would then be a byform of לקק – the verb used of dogs lapping up the blood of the slain in 1 Kgs 21:19; 22:38.

the soil beneath. Eventually, all that remains is a jumbled skeleton, clung to by skin blackened and mummified in the heat. Bones lie, dry in the dust.

Dust occurs frequently in Job – more frequently than anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible.²⁸ Like maggots and scavengers, dust is associated with death (e.g. Gen. 3:19; Eccl. 3:20, 12:7; Pss. 22:16[15], 30[29]; 30:10[9]; 104:29; Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2). It is part of the accoutrement of the corpse, as bodies are placed in the ground to decay.²⁹ Mourners perform their identification with the dead by placing it on their heads (e.g. Josh. 7:6; Ezek. 27:30; Lam. 2:10) or rolling in it (Mic. 1:10; cf. Jer. 6:26; Ezek. 27:30) (see Olyan, 2004: 42). Thus Job's friends "sprinkle dust on their heads towards heaven" (עפר על-ראשיהם השמימה) (2:12)³⁰ and Job himself sits in ashes (2:8). In the book, death entails "returning to" (10:9, 34:15), "descending to" (17:16), or "lying down in" (7:21, 20:11, 21:26) this dust.

Furthermore, dust connotes transience and fragility (Jones 2013: 848–849).³¹ Even more fleeting than the chaff which represents the ephemeral lives of the wicked (Job 21:18, cf. Isa. 17:13, 29:5, 41:15; Pss. 1:4; 35:5), dust can be swept away in any updraft. An assemblage of dust is precarious and fragile, lacking in structure and integrity (e.g. Job 4:19; 10:9). The human is, according to mythology from across the world (Leeming 2010: 312–313) – including the ancient Near East (Batto 2013: 20–21, 27–29) and Israel – precisely such an assemblage. In biblical texts "man" אדם comes from "earth" אדמה (Gen. 2:7; cf. Job 10:9; 33:6; Sir. 17:32; 40:11; 41:10; Ps. 103:14) – human from humus – and is thus as breakable as potters' clay (cf. Jer. 18).³²

28 The lexeme עפר "dust" occurs in 26 verses of Job, almost double the amount of any other book (14 verses in Isaiah; 13 in Psalms). For a brief overview of the use of עפר in Job, see Schifferdecker 2005: 71–72. For a discussion of the dust and soil conditions in the ancient Near East, see Hillel 2006.

29 In an ideal Judahite burial, the corpse was placed away from the dust, on a shelf in a bench tomb, but this option was probably limited to the elite (Hays 2015: 148).

30 This action is usually taken as a symbol of mourning, but the details – sprinkling towards heaven – are odd. Some suspect textual corruption and remove השמימה from the verse (e.g., Dhorme 1926: 20–21). Houtman (1978) attends to the double nature of dust: on the one hand, its weightless ability to fly upwards suggests to Houtman an appeal to God; on the other, its heavy connotations of death suggest a request to bury whoever brought on Job's distress. As Job is here afflicted with a skin disease, there may alternatively be a connection to Moses' action of "sprinkling" (זרק) ashes "towards heaven" (שמימה) to initiate the plague of boils (Exod. 9:8). Habel (1985: 97) and Seow (2013: 308) accordingly suggests that the friends are calling forth Job's skin disease upon themselves in an act of ritual identification.

31 Paradoxically, though, dust itself can be unimaginably old and stable. Recent research suggests, for example, that some dust in the Sahara may date back more than 4.6 million years (Muhs *et al.* 2019).

32 The myth of human origins in the earth has been widely commented upon. For ecological perspectives, see e.g. the chapters by Newsom, Brett, and Wurst in Habel and Wurst 2000. For a posthumanist perspective, see Midson 2019.

But if humans come from the dust, then dust becomes the stuff of creation as well as of destruction (cf. Staps 2020). This may be the background of Job's opening words, which compress together life and death: "Naked I came out of my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there" (עָרַם יצִיתִי מִבֶּטֶן אִמִּי) (ועָרַם אֲשׁוּב שָׁמָּה 1:21). There are immediate difficulties here, for the deictic particle שָׁמָּה "there" refers back to the mother's womb (which is evidently not re-entered at death; cf. John 3:4). Though the verse is disputed, the most plausible explanation is that the deictic particle prompts a reinterpretation of the "womb": no longer that of the human mother but that of "mother earth."³³ The exposed nakedness of the corpse in the dust is transposed into the new-formed nakedness of the infant, secure and protected in the maternal womb (Newsom 2003: 57–59; Schifferdecker 2005: 85). This imagery knits together the human- and humus- host as new life is knit together within her (cf. Ps. 139:13–15; Eccl. 5:14[15]; Sir. 40:1; Wis. 7:1–6). When, at death, the body returns to the ground, it composts into fecundity for the fertile earthen womb.

This resonates with another Joban image of death. Job 21:32–33 describes the funeral and burial of a wealthy man. As he decomposes in the earth, "the clods of the wadi are sweet to him" (מִתְקוּי־לוֹ רִגְבוֹ נַחֵל). The corpse apparently consumes the grave soil with pleasure. It might be more accurate, though, to speak of mutual consumption: as the corpse consumes soil through its orifices and ruptures, so too the soil and its inhabitants consume the corpse. They break down its structure, creating more orifices and ruptures, only to be consumed by them in turn. The language here suggests fertility. The earth is "sweet" (מִתְקָה), like fruit (Judg. 9:11; Song 2:3) or honey (Judg. 14:14, 18; Ps. 19:11[10]; Prov. 16:24; 24:13; Ezek. 3:3). The burial is in the "wadi" (נַחֵל), where water flows, swelling the dust into pregnant "clods" (רִגְבִים; cf. Job 38:38).³⁴ The body, as it decomposes, becomes fertiliser for this potential life.

Indeed, challenging the cultural ideal of entombment (Olyan 2005), the untombed cadaver can participate in life-generating interactions. Bodily decay provides localised fertilisation, enlivening the surrounding ecosystem

33 For this interpretation, see Clines 1989: 36–37; Vall 1995. The most prevalent alternative is that שָׁמָּה is a euphemism for the underworld (e.g. Gordis 1978: 78), but this does not take account of the deictic force of the particle. Hays (2012) has suggested it refers to a return to the womb of the mother goddess, as is known in Egyptian religion. "Mother earth" has been an important figure in some recent interpretations of Job, such as Sinnott's (2008) ecological reading of Job 7, and Masenya's (2010) *eco-bosadi* interpretation of Job 3. For a discussion of mother earth in biblical Hebrew literature more generally, see Stordalen 2010.

34 The noun רִגֵב occurs only here and Job 38:38. Most commentators agree on the interpretation "clod", though a few (e.g. Alfrink, 1932) have argued that it means "stones."

(a “cadaver decomposition island”).³⁵ Carbon and nutrients are released into the ground, microbial biomass and activity increase, varied plant-life grows, and diverse creatures drew near. Dense with fertility, the resulting soil nutrients and organic matter may comprise the smallest particles, ready to be transported by the wind (Field *et al.* 2010). In such relocations, the transience of dust no longer provokes musings on death, but rather promotes the spreading of life.

Entangled Beings

Like maggots which gnaw the body and scavengers which tear it, dust powerfully challenges notions of the stable, bounded, autonomous human. Maggots and clods of dust (גוֹשׁ עֶפֶר)³⁶ both clothe Job (7:5), threatening to disintegrate him – the former as a slimy solid-becoming-liquid, and the latter as a precarious solid-becoming-granular. Dust, though, is not so much an actor on the body as something the body becomes.

Both Job (10:9) and Eliphaz (4:19) use parallel images of clay (חֹמֶר) and dust (עֶפֶר) to express human disintegration. חֹמֶר was used as a construction material for both buildings (Gen 11:3; Exod 1:14; Nah 3:14) and vessels (Isa 39:16, 41:25, 45:9, 64:7[8]; Jer 18:4) – both of which might serve as metaphors for the human body (Seow 2013: 389–390, 406). Job describes an uncreation in which God takes him – a singular, self-contained clay entity – and reverts him to a dusty multiplicity.³⁷ Eliphaz depicts an even more radical granularity: like Isaiah’s clay vessel, smashed (כַּתַּת) into pieces unusably small (Isa. 30:14), human persons can be smashed (כַּתַּת) and crushed like a moth (Job 4:20), their foundations proving to be no more than dust (עֶפֶר; 4:19).

As though merging into his ash-heap seat (2:8; Gibson 1905, 166), Job later describes himself as resembling “dust and ashes” (וְאַתְמֶשֶׁל עֶפֶר וְאַפֵּר) (Job 30:19b). Outside Job, this expression occurs only in Gen. 18:27, where it is an image of the human in its weakness and precarity. A nuance may be added

35 Carter, Yellowlees, and Tibbett 2007. These authors note that, while the overall effect is positive, cadaver decomposition may also have some negative consequences for surrounding soil biology (17).

36 Qere has גוֹשׁ and Ketiv has גוֹשׁ. גוֹשׁ seems to be a hapax meaning “clod” (cf. JBA גוֹשׁא). Driver (1969: 73–74), followed by Clines (1989: 163) takes this to have a “figurative medical connotation,” meaning “pustules,” “scabs.” Driver then takes עֶפֶר (vocalised as עֶפֶר) as a verb cognate to Arabic *ǧafara* “to cover,” and takes the subsequent word עוֹרִי “my skin” as part of the same phrase – thus “scabs cover my skin.” Clines understands עֶפֶר as a gloss and deletes. None of these moves seem necessary.

37 Van Hecke (2010: 103–104) similarly notes the loss of individuality and identifiability engendered by this image, though he interprets עֶפֶר not as “dust,” but as wet clay.

here by the hithpael verb **אתמשל**. Clines (2011: 955) suggests that this carries a “connotation of display” (see GKC 54e) – “to show oneself to resemble.” Job has always been akin to dust and dirt, but only through his near-death state do pretences to the contrary fade away. A similar idea may lie behind Job’s much-disputed final words, **: על-כן אמאס ונחמתו על-עפר ואפר**: “Therefore I melt away, and am comforted over dust and ashes” (42:6).³⁸ The dissolution of Job’s individual self is enacted as he “melts away.” The preposition **על** may be polysemous: Job is physically positioned “over/on” the ash heap (cf. 2:8), and he is comforted “over/concerning” dust and ashes (cf. 42:11 for this syntax). That is, concerning his human fragility, expressed through the dust which comprises his substance, and threatens his disintegration.

Becoming dust challenges the human’s self-perceived singularity. Dust is multiple, heaping up uncountably (Job 27:16). Yet dust is miniscule, existing unnoticed. Dust is mobile, moved by waters (14:19) and air (2:12), challenging fixed notions of place and home,³⁹ and any “predetermined, stultifying pattern of order” (Higgins 2007: 255).⁴⁰ If humans “return” to dust at death, this is because dust has always been the starting point and substance of their bodies. Human bodies are always multiple (a conglomerate of parts), miniature (comprising infinitesimally small particles), and movable (shedding deposits everywhere).

Dust is also mingled, eluding organised separation of particles. If it decomposes the individual, it also suggests a new community, with Joban texts emphasising togetherness. Lying together (**יחד**) in the dust, we find Job with his hope (17:16; cf. 20:11), the rich with the poor (21:26), the wicked with each other (40:13). These humans might also encounter plants (8:19; 14:8) and non-human animals there (21:26, 39:14, 41:25[33]). Using a phrase indiscriminate of species,⁴¹ Elihu envisages “all flesh” perishing together

38 This verse is heavily disputed (see e.g. Morrow 1986; Krüger 2007). **מאסתו** may come from **מאס** “to reject, despise,” with an implicit object, e.g. “myself” (Gordis 1978: 491; KJV, ESV, NIV) or “my words” (Pope 1973: 348; JPS, NLT). Alternatively, as translated here, it is a byform of **מסס** “to melt” (cf. possibly Job 7:5, 16; Clines 2011: 1207; NEB). **נחם** (niph'al) can mean “to repent” (Habel 1985: 576; most English translations) or “to be comforted” (Clines 2011: 1208), but the former is almost exclusively predicated of God, so the latter seems more likely here. **עפר ואפר** “dust and ashes” may be a physical location (Driver and Gray 1921: 348; most English translations) or a symbol, either of mourning and complaint (Habel 1985: 582–583) or of human frailty and humiliation (Whybray 2008: 190–191; CSB, JPS). For other interpretations, see e.g. Curtis 1979; van der Lugt 2014; Martin 2018.

39 See Pelham (2012: 138–185) on the configurations of space, including the significance of “home,” in Job.

40 Cf. Sullivan’s (2012) “dirt theory” which takes into account these aspects of dust.

41 As in, e.g., 7:21. Contra e.g. Hartley (1988: 454), who sees only a reference to humanity here.

(יגוע כל-בשר יחד); 34:15a). Without special status amongst them, even humans will return to the dust (וְאָדָם עַל-עֶפְרָיִם יָשׁוּב; 34:15b).

The substance of the ground mixes heterogeneous parts. עֶפְרָיִם might stem from animals (Num. 19:17) or altars (2 Kgs 23:12, 15) or architecture (Lev. 14:41–42). It might bring forth gold (Job 22:24; 28:6) and iron (28:2).⁴² The soil hosts about two thirds of the earth's biological diversity, along with multifarious inorganic matter (Suzuki, McConnell and Mason 2009: 120). It is a relational infrastructure, in which “invisible workers” – invertebrates, fungi, microorganisms, and their companions – enter “affective entanglements” (Puigde la Bellacasa 2014: 35). As the body breaks down, its particles disperse through this mix, entering diverse biotic assemblages (Barnett 2017). This reveals a truth about life as much as about death: all bodies are mingled matter. Bearing in mind the manifold microbial particles which constantly comprise us and consume us, the mingled mass of dust is no foreign community to join at death.

Though grave-dust signals the end of life, then, it can transform into an earthen womb, enabling life's beginning. At the grave-site, you see the body granulate, dispersing into the dusty earth. But this loss of individuality allows for a dynamic and jumbled multiplicity of diverse relating.

Plants

Entangled Death and Life

You return to the grave-site after many days. It is still recognisably a place of death. And yet, around the bones, you find green shoots: new plant-life, grown from the dust. You marvel at this creation through destruction, this floral fertility fed by flesh.

Like maggots, scavengers, and dust, plants occur throughout Job as images of death. They are symbols of transience and fragility (Pss. 37:2; 90:5–6; 102:11; 103:15–16; 129:6; Isa. 1:30; 28:1, 4; 40:6–8; Basson 2006: 579–581). Seasonal patterns mean that they may bloom for a period then apparently die, and the inhospitable climate of the Near East makes them perpetually precarious. Job employs this conventional image in a description of the ephemeral human: כְּצִיֵּץ יֵצֵא וַיִּמָּל “like a flower he comes out and withers” (14:2; cf. 15:32–33; 18:16; 19:10; 24:24). Musselman (2012: 59) suggests that in mind here might be the common field poppy, *papaver rhoeas*, whose petals open and may start to shed within hours. Flowers and humans alike emerge from the dust, only to sink back into it. Accordingly, in pericopes narrating the entanglement of plant lives and deaths, both Bildad (8:11–19) and Job (14:7–10) comment on plant destruction.

42 Because of this, Amzallag (2017) argues that עֶפְרָיִם means “ore” in these and other verses.

For Bildad, plants may be “plucked down” (קטף, 8:12), “wither” (יבש, 8:12) or be “destroyed” (בלע, piel, 8:18). For Job, a tree is “cut down” (כרת, 14:7) and “dies” (מות, 14:8).

We might note, though, that the plant image is double-sided (Doak 2014: 132–135). Though blossoms and blooms may last only months, weeks, or days, the plant itself remains alive, flourishing again the following year.⁴³ Indeed, for all their potential connotations of death, plants are equally associated with long life and rejuvenation across ancient Near Eastern mythology. Think of the “tree of life,” known in the Bible (Gen. 2–3, Prov. 3:18, 11:30; 13:12; 15:4) and in extra-biblical iconography, or the branch of youth retrieved and lost by Gilgamesh (Lanfer 2012: 33–36). Plant metaphors can depict flourishing and renewal (e.g. Isa. 27:6; Hos. 14:6–7; Ps. 92:13–15[12–14]; Basson 2006: 578–579). Job himself describes his idyllic former life in terms of plant vitality (Job 29:19). Strikingly, in Job 8 and 14, it is plant death which facilitates such plant life.

Though the interpretation is difficult,⁴⁴ we can find in Bildad’s pericope (esp. Job 8:16–19), the tale of a plant’s flip-flopping fortunes. Luxuriant and prolific, it spreads itself (8:16–17). Displaying tenacity and resilience (Doak 2014: 144; Seow 2013: 523), it thrives within a place of lifelessness: a “stone heap” (גל, 8:17), elsewhere a burial mound (Josh. 7:26; 8:29; 2 Sam. 18:17) or pile of ruins (Isa. 25:2; pl. in Hos. 12:12; 2 Kgs 19:25=Isa. 37:26; Job 15:28. Jer. 9:10; 51:37). The death-connoting location of its life foreshadows its fate, for abruptly, it is “destroyed from its place” (ובלענו ממקומו; 8:18). Its physical presence is denied (כחש), with the destroyer claiming “I do not see you” (לא ראיתך).⁴⁵ Echoing through this may be Job’s recent fixation on (not) being seen, where invisibility

43 Some plants live to extraordinary age. Alive today are trees of nearly 5,000 years old (see the officially dated “Old List” here: <http://www.rmtr.org/oldlist.htm> [accessed 7 Sept 2020]). Some flowering shrubs, such as the yareta in the Andes, can live to 3,000 (Ralph 1978). Some clonal plants can live far longer than even this (Chesterton 2017).

44 There are three relevant sections of Bildad’s speech which describe the alternative fates of vegetation: vv.11–13 (vegetation destroyed), vv.16–18 (vegetation flourishing then destroyed), and v.19 (vegetation flourishing). Vv. 11–13 explicitly designate the godless who are destroyed. The referents for the other sections are, however, disputed. There are four hypothetical possibilities: (1) Vv.16–18 contrast with vv.11–13, and describe a righteous person who succeeds then endures hardships. V.19 might then comment that this person will be renewed again (e.g. Gordis 1978: 521), or (2) that other people will take over his mantle (e.g. Seow 2013: 522–525). (3) Alternatively, vv.16–18 continue to describe the wicked, who might thrive, but only temporarily. V. 19 then depicts others (presumably righteous people) taking his place (Clines 1989: 209), or hypothetically (4) v.19 depicts that same wicked person being restored (this possibility should probably be discounted as it is unlikely to occur on the mouth of pious Bildad). For a recent interpretation, including a thorough survey of scholarship, see Pinker 2016.

45 This verse is obscure, leaving ambiguous the identity of destroyer and the reason for his statement.

seemed equivalent to non-existence (7:8, 19–21). But fortunes shift again. Joy (משׁושׁ)⁴⁶ will stem from the plant’s destruction, because the plant “will sprout from other dust” (מעפר אחר יצמחו; 8:19b).⁴⁷ The plant has died and returned to “dust” (עפר), but dust transforms to fertile soil, allowing it to flourish again. The plant plays some gleeful game of resurrection, as death occasions new life (Habel 1985: 177–178).

Job too describes a plant’s post-mortem rejuvenation. He depicts a tree which is cut down (ברת; 14:7) and whose stump dies in the dust (בעפר ימות; גזעו; 14:8). Some scholars temper the verb here (ימות), uncomfortable with the contradiction between this death and the forthcoming life. Thus Clines (1989: 284) suggests it has an “inchoative nuance”: “begins to die.” But this dulls the emphatic Hebrew: the stump is dead. From this death, though, comes new life, for the plant will renew itself (יחליף; 14:7) and bud (יפריח; 14:9). In a productive tension of newness and continuity, its new shoots will not cease (וינקתו לא; ותחדל; 14:7). These expand rapidly to full branches (קציר; 14:9), as the pericope condenses time. As gardeners have known from Job’s culture to our own,⁴⁸ such apparent resurrection has botanical grounding. Many plants benefit from seemingly destructive pruning, for this may remove diseased or dead limbs, and expose starved areas to vital light and air (Reich 2010: 7–8).

Plant-life, then, creeps across the distinction between life and death. As a symbol, it roots itself in both terrains. And it muddies and muddles them together, the dust of its death becoming the soil of its new life.

Entangled Beings

After a cadaver decomposes into the soil, its dispersed matter reassembles into new formations. The plant bodies that emerge seem radically distinct from

46 To avoid the sudden shift in tone here, Clines (1989: 200) emends משׁושׁ to מסוס “dissolution.” The full phrase reads הוא משׁושׁ דרכו “that is the joy of its/his way.” The referent of the 3ms suffix is ambiguous: is this the way of the plant or of the destroyer? I assume the former here.

47 The Hebrew here is difficult. The verb is mp. It presumably refers to the plant(s), but so far the plant has been singular, and there is no plural referent in the text. Additionally, there are three interpretations of the syntax: (1) “from other dust it/they will sprout” (taking אחר as an adjective meaning “other,” cf. Lev 14:42) – the plant(s) will sprout up elsewhere (e.g. Gordis 1978: 93). (2) “from the dust it/they will sprout afterwards” (taking אחר as equivalent to אַחֲרָי, viz. a temporal adverb “after(wards),” cf. Gen 17:21, 2 Kgs 6:29) – after a period of demise, the plant(s) will come back (e.g. Janzen 1985: 86). (3) “from the dust others will sprout” (taking אחר as the subject of the verb, though with a grammatical discrepancy in number) – different plants will sprout up where the previous one had been (e.g. Seow 2013: 536).

48 Clines (1989: 328) refers to an ancient practice of cutting back trees such as the fig, walnut, and pomegranate to rejuvenate them.

human bodies. They challenge notions of self-contained individuality, and suggest entangled modes of relation. Plant bodies are disparate and hybrid, enjoying the polydirectional growth of roots (שָׂרֵשׁ; 8:17, 14:8), stump (גִּזְעַ; 14:8), shoots (יִקְנֹת; 8:16, 14:7), and branches (קִצִּיר; 14:9). They are sprawling, spreading themselves over – even out of – the garden (וְעַל גַּנְתּוֹ ... תִּצְאָ; 8:16).⁴⁹ They are mingled with other bodies, fully immersed in the ecological infrastructure. Roots are “in(side) the earth” (בְּאַרְצָ; 8:16); stumps are “in(side) the dust” (בְּעֶפְרָ; 14:8). Floral bodies “entwine the stone heap” (עַל־גִּל ... יִסְבְּכוּ), peering “between stones” (בֵּית אֲבָנִים; 8:17),⁵⁰ enmeshed hybrids of organic and inorganic. Plant bodies are both individual and multiple. The subterranean sprawl of Bildad’s plant may become visible in multiple sproutings across garden and rockery (8:16–17). In the travails of growth, destruction, and rejuvenation (8:18–19), this once-singular sprawl may have divided into separate root structures. Scholars are often perplexed by the plural verb in 8:19: “from the dust *they* will sprout” (מֵעֶפְרָ ... יִצְמָחוּ). Perhaps this is a productive obscurity, provoking the realisation that for plant-life, individuality is an illusion.

These reflections on plant bodies have ramifications for human bodies too (cf. Doak 2014: 38–46). On the one hand, they reveal stark differences. By offering legitimate yet divergent expressions of bodiliness, they challenge whether the (male, white, abled) human body should be the norm and standard for all bodies. On the other hand, they expose similarities, and push us to consider how human bodies too are disparate, hybrid, mingled, and multiple. This is all the more so given the basic metaphor – pervasive in human language (Lakoff and Turner 2009) and the Hebrew Bible (Basson 2006) – PEOPLE ARE PLANTS. Thus we find humans with “roots,” “branches,” and “blossoms” (Job 5:3; 18:16; 29:19; 15:32–33). The metaphor elicits a conceptual entanglement between beings.⁵¹

Bildad’s rhetoric depends on this metaphor. He assumes that the plant world can be mapped onto the human world, attempting to offer a coherent narrative to make concordant Job’s discordant experience (Newsom 2003: 104–105,

49 Thus Seow (2013: 534) translates as “grows out beyond its garden,” suggesting that על “implies superabundance” here.

50 This interpretation takes בית not in its usual sense (“house”), but as a preposition equivalent to בין meaning “between” (cf. Ezek 41:9, Prov 8:2; BDB, 110). Indeed, some KR mss have בין here, LXX has ἐν μέσῳ (“in the middle of”), and Vulg has inter (“among”). Seow (2013: 524, 535) goes further, taking the preposition to mean “within”: the plant “sees what it needs even *within* the rocks” (524, emphasis original).

51 Doak (2014: 39) notes that such metaphors “draw plant and human into interpretive conversation. Metaphors are *arguments* in which identity and difference are what is at stake in the debate.”

134–135). As Brian Doak (2014: 141) notes, for Job’s friends “nature tells a story about justice,” and assume it to be “a single story with a single meaning.” So Bildad begins by confidently describing plants which explicitly symbolise godless humans (8:11–13). However, the clarity soon breaks down as the referents of the plants in 8:16–19 are obscure: righteous or wicked?⁵² Without resolving the difficulty, I focus here on the ambiguity itself, which arises partly because the metaphor is problematic. Plants resist easy division into righteous and wicked, and the narrative ambiguity “refutes the notion of a completely simple, unidirectional nature narrative” (Doak 2014: 145). The metaphor forces plant and human into a fraught conversation of mutual interpretation. The human world imposes categories of binary morality, but the plant world rejects them. This problematisation might then refract back onto the human world, with such categories exposed as artificial there too. The tangled narration problematises these categories, as humans and plants are tangled together in metaphor and in the ecological web.

Rather than emphasising likeness, Job’s logic depends on an absolute distinction: the tree might revitalise, but the human cannot.⁵³ There remain, however, points of coalescence. Tree and human are brought into uneasy relationship, blurring the stark division. Through a cluster of anthropomorphising terms, the tree intrudes on the human domain. It feels “hope” (תקוה; 14:7; cf. 8:16), usually conceived as a distinctly human emotion (e.g. 14:19). It progresses as though through the human life-cycle, culminating when it “grows old” (זיקין) and “dies” (ימות; 14:8). Elsewhere, neither of these terms designates plants, and “growing old” (זקן) is reserved for humans.⁵⁴ In light of this, the term יונקת “shoots” (14:7) might attain additional significance, for it derives from the semantic field of human birth, from the verb ינק “to suckle an infant.”⁵⁵

Job describes the tree, human-like, responding to a “scent” (ריח; 14:9; elsewhere only possible for humans and God). But here the coalescence breaks down, for the tree detects the “scent of water” (ריח מים) – an impossibility for

52 See above footnote 47. Understanding the referent as the righteous are, e.g. Gordis 1978: 521, followed by Balentine 2006: 155–156; Habel 1985: 170–173, 175–178; Newsom 2003: 105–106; Seow 2013: 522–525; understanding the referent as the wicked are, e.g., Clines 1989: 209; Longman 2012: 158; Pinker 2016: 426–432.

53 Despite this, however, many early church interpreters saw hope for human resurrection in this pericope (Seow 2013: 681–682). There is debate whether this interpretation is already present in the OG of this chapter (Cook 2011: 331–337; Mangin 2008).

54 מות occasionally refers to animal death (e.g. Gen. 33:13; Exod. 7:18, 8:9[13]). זקן refers to only humans in both its verbal and adjectival forms. Doak (2014: 154) takes it as “an unsubtle cue linking together the experience of the tree to that of Job.”

55 It is not, however, uncommon for it to designate a plant: Isa. 53:2; Ezek. 17:22; Hos. 14:7[6]; Ps. 80:12[11]; Job 15:30.

human olfaction. Though easily dismissed as metaphor and hyperbole, there is a whiff here of plant superiority. Indeed, even without noses, plants respond to olfactory stimuli (Chamovitz 2012) and they have incredible skills to locate water (cf. Job 29:19).⁵⁶

Humans and plants, then, are conceptually entangled – both alike and not alike – just as they are ecologically entangled in inter-species dependence. A fundamental issue is at stake here: how to negotiate the diverging realities of the kinship between all organic matter, and the radical differences between its manifestations. The tensive ethical principles of kinship and otherness cut through all humankind's inner- and inter-species relatings (Calarco 2015), including those with maggots, scavengers, dust, and plants. At the gravesite where you stand, the plants offer themselves as thinking-partners for these principles as you observe them root their transient, long-lived, hybrid, multiple bodies in the soil, amongst the other living and dying actors in the necro-ecological web.

Conclusion

As you consider the place the corpse once was, you reflect, voicing as genuine a question Job once asked as rhetorical: “the human dies, and where is he?” (וַיִּגַע אָדָם וְאִיִּי; 14:10). You have seen the individual's flesh colonised by maggots, consumed by scavengers, claimed by dust, and composted for plants. Where then is the individual? Or, rather, where is his bodily multiplicity? His matter is dispersed into diverse biotic assemblages – perhaps into Abbey's juniper roots or vulture wings.

This article has shown that an ecological perspective on death spreads its roots throughout Job (though it never develops in full form), entailing pervasive entanglements of life with death and beings with beings. Death is a site of ideological conflict in the book, a fray of multiple competing perspectives. This necro-ecological perspective is a lively contender. The article also speaks to a wider cross-disciplinary movement to cultivate scholarship conducive to interspecies flourishing. The two entanglements traced here are integral to this movement – as epitomised in the words of Donna Haraway. Recognising the entanglement of beings, Haraway (2016: 32, 55, 97) calls for humanities to transform to “humusities,” as humans acknowledge their kinship with earth. Recognising the entanglement of life and death, she asks posthumanists to

56 For example, Gagliano *et al.* (2017) show that plants can “hear” water under the soil and direct their roots to grow towards it.

become “compostists,” rooted in the festering and fecund stuff of living and dying together. This article answers this call.

In the decomposition of the corpse, death entangles with life. Maggots, scavengers, dust, and plants are all symbols of human death, signifying fragility and transience – but they also indicate life. Such a perspective can counter contemporary Western attitudes, which too often see human death as an absolute evil or point of finality (an attitude which increases the suffering of the bereaved). It also challenges common Western death practices, such as cremation, which are toxic to land and air, in favour of the marginal but growing “green burial” movement, advocating ecologically sensitive deathways (Barnett 2017). Indeed, throughout the ecological matrix, the putrid yet productive matter of dead bodies revitalises the land and its dependents. As we have seen in Job, death and life are always tangled together, the one requiring and enabling the other.

Furthermore, beings are entangled with each other. Decomposition mocks aspirations to self-contained individuality. Maggots and scavengers disintegrate, relocate, and consume the human body – and with it the individuated self. The bodies that emerge, like those of dust and plants, are hybrid, multiple, and mingled. The corpse participates in temporary and precarious assemblages with diverse beings, as species are entangled together in “symbiogenesis” (Margulis 1998) or “becoming-with” (Haraway 2016). As a subtitle in *The Quarterly Review of Biology* proclaims, “We have never been individuals” (Gilbert, Sapp and Tauber 2012).

The ethics of the entangled biosphere are complex. As organic matter, ecological partners are alike, sharing relationships of kinship, but they are also radically dissimilar, provoking respect for the Other. Reflection on the necro-ecology of Job speaks into this matrix. It reminds us of our duty – in our discourse and practice, our lifeways and deathways – to participate productively in this entanglement.

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