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Comfort the Waste Places, Defend the Violated Earth

An Ecofeminist Reading of Isaiah 51:1–52:6 and Tracy Chapman's Song "The Rape of the World"

Abstract

This article compares the personification of Zion in Isaiah 51:1–52:6 as a mother and daughter with Tracy Chapman's 1995 song "The Rape of the World", where the earth is personified as a mother. These works share the power of metaphor in prophecy, poetry, and song to provoke political and social activism in multiple areas of injustice, using rape imagery in different ways. Both pieces portray the negative effects of human activity on the earth, whether by commercial activity or war. The environmental impact of the desolation of the earth during the Babylonian exile depicted in Deutero-Isaiah is viewed through the lens of ecological criticism. The earth itself has a voice in both Chapman's and Isaiah's words.

Keywords

Ecological Criticism, Ecofeminism, Zion, Deutero-Isaiah, Tracy Chapman, Rape, Political Activism, Pop Music, Personification

Biography

Angela Sawyer is a faculty member at Stirling Theological College, University of Divinity, in Melbourne, Australia. She teaches Hebrew Bible and Biblical Studies and is Dean of Students. Sawyer's doctoral work explored Deutero-Isaiah, exile, and post-church Australia. Her research focus includes trauma hermeneutics, feminist criticism, and Isaiah.

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Ecological Criticism

This article engages in a creative intertextual encounter between a pop-cultural song and a biblical passage.[1] An ecofeminist reading that compares Tracy Chapman's song "The Rape of the World" with Isaiah 51:1–52:6 seeks to find commonalities and intersections between the modern concerns Chapman invokes and Deutero-Isaiah's ancient proclamation of salvation. Placing the earth at the centre of the conversation about gendered aspects of both the song and the biblical text allows us to be sensitive to what Elaine Wainwright refers to as the "ecological texture" of both texts and "ecological thinking".[2] In Deutero-Isaiah, land as well as people are victims of war. Their relationship and future are intricately bound up with one another. The primary concern of Chapman's song is raising awareness of environmental catastrophe via a metaphor of a mother being raped. I would argue that Isaiah 51:1–52:6 does not share Chapman's primary concern for the environment. However, the environment is a significant part of a broader concern for an exiled people being implored to return to their home and about the very real consequences of war for the physical environment to which they are returning. My analysis of Isaiah 51:1–52:6 seeks both a transformative reading of Chapman's song, by bringing it into dialogue with the biblical text, and a broader awareness of the biblical text's context in today's current climate emergency.

Over the past few decades, a variety of scholarly theological responses to ecological concerns have emerged. Ecotheology takes seriously the complicity of Christianity in the ecological crisis, as articulated initially in Lynn White Jr's frequently cited article.[3] This notion stems from a sense of anthropocentric superiority in the Christian tradition and a view of creation as subject to domination, perspectives which have had disastrous consequences for the earth. The most influential ecological response in biblical studies is the Earth Bible Project, which has produced a set of key principles and multiple publications and has been closely associated with the Society of Biblical Literature ecological hermeneutics sessions.[4] Empathy and identification are core aspects of the Earth Bible Project.[5] It is characterised by suspicion about the biblical text and alignment with liberation and feminist hermeneutics. The Earth Bible Project has been critiqued for risking "ethnocentrism" and "anachronism", with Hilary Marlow suggesting its underlying ideology is problematic and its method somewhat restrictive.[6] She contends the Earth Bible Project approach may have the unintended consequence "of inviting rejection of the biblical text by those who consider it to be irrelevant in today's world", and notes, "it may also encourage the rejection of concern for the environment by those for whom the Bible carries authority as sacred scripture".[7] The Exeter Project (Sheffield University) has offered a different approach than the Earth Bible Project by affirming the authority of the biblical text, arguing for "an attempt to construct an ecological theology which, while innovative, is nonetheless coherent (and in dialogue) with a scripturally shaped Christian orthodoxy".[8] More recently Tina Nilsen and Anna Solevåg have made a case for using the Earth Charter (originating from the United Nations) as the base of their *ecolonial* approach, an interdisciplinary combination of ecological and postcolonial hermeneutics.[9] Although each of these developments is informative, the Earth Bible Project principles and the connection with feminist criticism have proven most fruitful for this article.

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[1] This article was presented as a paper at the 2019 International Society of Biblical Literature conference in Rome and has been revised for the purposes of this journal.

[2] Wainwright 2012, 280–304.

[3] White Jr 1967, 1203–1207.

[4] Habel 2008, 1–8; Habel, 2009; Habel, 2013, 39–58. For a list of publications associated with the Earth Bible, see Norman Habel, n. d. [accessed 16 September 2020].

An ecofeminist reading, as Wainwright explains, "makes explicit the interconnection between the violence against, and the exploitation and degradation of both women and the Earth".[10] The coincidental emergence of ecological and feminist studies, along with related ecofeminist and ecojustice concerns, has been long explored, with tropes of sexual violence used to express ecological degradation. The conflation of mother Earth and mother Nature in environmental discourse "is widespread and generally accepted without question", writes Tzeporah Berman.[11] These associations come with assumptions about women and the role of mothers in society. These notions, in turn, are precisely what makes a metaphor of earth-as-mother coherent, enabling multivalent but also ambiguous possibilities.[12] Combining overlapping metaphors (earth as mother, ecological destruction as rape) is variously useful and unhelpful in awakening consciousness and action in both ecology and feminism. Early connections between these interests stemmed from contexts of war, as Heather Eaton describes for the 1970s:

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[5] Habel 2008, 1–5.

[6] Marlow 2009, 91.

[7] Marlow 2009, 94.

[8] Horrell 2010, 8–9.

[9] Nilsen/Solevåg 2016, 665.

[10] Wainwright 2000, 162.

[11] Berman 1994, 173–178.

[12] Dille 2004, chap. 1.

> during the invasion of Vietnam, the United States used Agent Orange to defoliate the Vietnamese landscape. This atrocious activity became merged with the image of raped/despoiled women and napalm burnt/scarred children. This sparked anti-war protests that linked women campaigning against militarist technologies, sexual assault and devastating ruin of the natural world.[13]

Rosemary Radford Ruether suggests a connection between ecology and feminism is based on the domains of women's work, child bearing, and child rearing, explaining that "deep ecology … examines the symbolic, psychological, and ethical patterns of destructive relations of humans with nature and how to replace this with a life-affirming culture".[14] Critique of this relationship relates to dualisms perpetuated by linking nature, earth, and mother. Marlow suggests there is a lack of data and evidence to show feminine links to nature.[15]

A reliance on images of ecological degradation and feminist concerns via a rape metaphor is objected to because of its essentialist appropriation.[16] A rape metaphor entails power and violence.[17] Eaton explains, "Ecofeminists see domination as a core phenomenon at the ideological and material roots of the women/nature nexus."[18] They seek to exchange this power dynamic for what Ruether describes as "mutual interdependency".[19] The levels of domination of the earth are perhaps on a global scale not previously seen, with the threat of nuclear weapons, highly mechanised forms of mining, and industrialised processing of finite resources. As Sigridur Gudmarsdottir explains,

> When the earth is declared a body, violated by human consumption and greed, powerful transformations of language take place. On the one hand,

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[13] Eaton 2005, 13.

[14] Ruether 1994, 13.

[15] Marlow 2009, 91.

[16] Gudmarsdottir 2010, 208; Berman 1994, 177.

[17] Kyung 1994, 176; Berman 1994.

[18] Eaton 2005, 59.

[19] Ruether 1994, 21.

> symbolic connections between nature and women are affirmed; on the other the experience of sexual violence that women especially suffer are addressed and intensified to a cosmic scale.[20]

Another major critique of the deployment of a rape metaphor to depict ecological disaster relates to its using passive victim language rather than featuring women as “figures of power, resilient survivors”.[21] We might see Zion’s agency emphasised in the call for her to play an active role in her own freedom in Isaiah 52:1–2. Zion is not blamed in Deutero-Isaiah for her situation, distinct from other prophetic uses of a rape metaphor.[22] Mother Earth’s strength is more implicitly evident in Chapman’s song in Earth’s having given birth to all of humanity.

Whilst we can appreciate the risks in using rape metaphors, by avoiding these images we downplay their shock value. By not engaging with the references to rape in the song and the passage, we potentially remove them from conversation, from front of mind. Interrogation of the imagery needs to include challenging derogatory assumptions within it, particularly in the case of the biblical text, where rape metaphors emerged in patriarchal and androcentric cultures.[23]

“The Rape of the World”

The lyrics of Tracy Chapman’s 1995 song “The Rape of the World” personify the earth as a mother being stripped, raped, beaten, and raised falsely as a queen.[24] Chapman’s work connects issues of class, race, gender, religion, sexuality, violence, poverty justice, and politics. The intermingling of reggae, African, and pop and rock sounds with the civil rights movement is evidenced in her music.[25] As womanist scholar Cheryl Kirk-Duggan relates, Chapman’s blues style

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[20] Gudmarsdottir 2010, 206.

[21] Gudmarsdottir 2010, 220.

[22] Stone 1992, 85–99; Darr 1994, 85–123. See Isa. 47 for the blaming of Babylon for her own sexual humiliation.

[23] Gudmarsdottir 2010, 220.

[24] The song is from the album *New Beginning* (Tracy Chapman, US 1995, Elektra). To hear the song and read the lyrics see the following YouTube link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rPrGB-1lYkg [accessed 16/09/2020].

[25] Whiteley 2000.

> helps make personal and social issues public … Chapman sings about love, fidelity, self-actualisation, freedom, revolution, conflict, ecology, racism, spirituality, theology, time, life and death, dehumanization, women's issues, and everyday personal struggles contextualized by social constraints and oppression.[26]

Many of Chapman's songs have an upbeat tempo that contrasts with deeply sad lyrics, demonstrating the social realities of poverty, violent relationships, human greed, responsibilities, and hope. The style of the music in "The Rape of the World" – beginning with piano, then guitar and drums that beat like a quiet but insistent tribal call or even rhythmic motherly heartbeat, then with piano reintroduced – is in stark contrast to the disturbing words, producing a cognitive dissonance.

Physical imagery of cities, of concrete and steel, is interspersed with actions of violation relating to ecological degradation such as mining. Empire and the extraction of resources for the military-industrial complex are visioned as regress. The "sun shining hotter" implies global warming. The human role in ecological crisis is decried by labelling the actions as "criminal", using the theologically loaded term "sinful". The song calls *all* people to respond and testify to the actions that exploit the earth, a call that tells us we are "witnesses" and therefore culpable if we do not intervene. Reliance on earth's resources demonstrates our vulnerability when they are destroyed. Human actions upon the earth are depicted as cataclysmic, causing the "beginning of the end", presumably of the world. The interconnectedness of creation is evidenced, a key facet of ecological criticism. When one part is destroyed or degraded, all are ultimately affected.

Chapman's personification works on commonplace notions of relationship to a mother, on our possible dependence on our mother for our life (via birth), ongoing health and survival. The song builds a portrait of a mother by calling on imagery of birth, use of terms such as "her", and depictions related to dressing, such as the crowning of a queen and clothing. She can be cut, beaten, and poisoned as well as sexually violated. These are images associated with a real person, with a person's body and emotions. Personification is an effective literary and rhetorical tool because of the personal connection evoked in the hearer. By calling on our eyes and ears, it assumes we can see her and hear her. Ecological criticism problematises the reliance on anthropomorphic representations of earth which play to human-centred images in order to see people care for the earth. Chapman's song gives the earth its own cries, but in human form.

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[26] Kirk-Duggan 1997, 150.

There is a powerful prophetic preaching message inherent in Chapman's lyrics.[27] Language reminiscent of Isaiah's emphatic call to hear, to see, and to do something about the knowledge of an injustice (Isa. 40:21; 41:1; 51:1, 4, 7) resounds in political activism. The physicality of the response of standing and testifying at the end of Chapman's song is contrasted with the passivity of the first verse, where "we" are standing but only watching the rape. The chorus returns to the "Mother of us all" characterisation to remind us what this song is about. There is a jolting pause after "stripped mined" and "clear cut", using "word painting" to get across a message, a common device in Chapman's music.[28] The lyrics juxtapose positive imagery with negative realities: "sunshine" is positive, but it is hotter than ever before; "crowned her queen" is positive, but the power imagery is tainted by its association with "cities of concrete and steel". Sheila Whiteley cites Heidi Safia Mirza's exploration of the presentation of the black woman throughout history as fitting with Chapman's work:

> what we see is how she is permitted to appear. We see glimpses of her as she is produced and created for the sustenance of the patriarchal, colonial and now post-colonial discourse … in her representation she is without agency, without self-determination, a passive victim, waiting to be inscribed with meaning from those who wish to gaze upon her and name her. She is an object; not the subject of her story.[29]

The representation of the world in Chapman's song could also include these entailments of lack of agency and passivity, requiring witness intervention for the world to be rescued. The representation is limited and controlled.

Chapman's song invokes warlike aspects of the destruction, linking rape and violence (beating) with ecological devastation. The second major stanza talks of "bombs exploded underground", a reference to mining practices that correlates with nuclear bomb testing, which also has an ecological impact via ongoing radiation damage. The assault on Zion in Deutero-Isaiah occurs in the context of military violence.

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[27] Kirk-Duggan describes how many African American blues and gospel songs provide sermon-like messages of hope and transformative possibilities. Kirk-Duggan 1997, 140–166.

[28] Whiteley 2000, 176.

[29] Cited in Whiteley 2000, 173.

Isaiah 51:1–52:6

The earth and gendered ecological aspects in Deutero-Isaiah are highlighted when the passage is read in conversation with Chapman's song. Although this article compares two pieces of work to explore their environmental potential, their different formats need to be acknowledged. The lyrics of Tracy Chapman's song are primarily encountered along with its accompanying music, as is the intention for a pop song. The musical melody, rhythm, and style can generate emotional and physical engagement. If Isaiah 51 was originally composed as a song of Zion, it remains for us today only in poetic form.[30] Modern composers have found Isaiah rich in musical potential, but for the purposes of this article my engagement with Isaiah 51 is primarily textual, related to its imagery and language.[31]

A hermeneutic of suspicion is conscious of Deutero-Isaiah's anthropocentric bias and its theological approach to the earth, but I consider this text holds great ecofeminist potential when it is read with a hermeneutic of identification and retrieval that makes the earth the subject.[32] Discourse analysis reveals multiple voices in the oracles of Isaiah 51–52, possibly rhetorically representing different responses to the exile.[33] Isaiah 51 also evidences double-voicing, to use a Bhaktinian term, such as in 51:23, where we see the voice of YHWH speaking in the voice of Zion's tormentors.[34] Interestingly, Zion herself does not speak in these chapters (other than in Isa. 49:14); neither does the world in Chapman's song (although she apparently cries). The prophet takes on the voice of YHWH, and these voices (as well as the narrator) coalesce throughout the passage. Sometimes YHWH's voice is announced via the messenger formula (51:22; 52:3, 4). More often YHWH can be assumed to be speaking in the first person (51:1–2, 4–7, 12, 15), and YHWH is also addressed in the third person (51:3, 9–10, 17).

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[30] Isaiah's complex composition history is beyond the scope of this paper. There are strong arguments for Deutero-Isaiah's general dramatic form. See van der Woude 2005, 149–173. Music is imbedded in this passage via the reference to singing in Zion in Isa. 51:3 and a call for the redeemed to sing in Isa. 51:11.

[31] John Sawyer explores Isaiah's rich reception history including its appropriation in art, literature, and music. Sawyer, 1996, chap. 9.

[32] Habel 2008, 4.

[33] Tull Willey 1997, 3, 55, and chap. 2.

[34] On double-voicing see Green 2000, 35–43, 47–53. This idea is central to Bakhtin's literary criticism and has appeal for postcolonial approaches to biblical texts with notions of discourses of power and resistance.

Similes and metaphors of creation and human alternate throughout the passage in depicting one another, creating a fluid movement. First, exiles are reminded they are “cut from the rock” (51:1) and hewn from the “quarry”, geological imagery depicting ancestral connection to their father Abraham. Birth language links them to Sarah as presumed mother, not to the World as in Chapman’s song. In 51:3 the imagery of Zion’s ruins, deserts, and waste places (the destroyed city, as well as other locations in Judah) will be turned to be like Eden and gardens.[35] The islands or coastlands are personified, told to “wait” in 51:5. Then we are taken back to the people’s direct point of view as they are implored to look to the heavens, depicted in a simile as vanishing like smoke, and the earth, which will wear out like a garment, taking a human form of clothing. The clothing motif extends throughout this chapter into both Zion’s and YHWH’s depictions. The people are equated with flies and creatures, assuming fragility. In verse 8 another insect is referenced, the moth, which, despite its small size, is destructive to the garment. The garment previously related to the earth’s being worn out now represents people being eaten, picked up in the idea of the worm eating the wool. By verse 12 people are depicted as grass. The Creator YHWH, who made these feeble humans, has power over creation. Rhetorical persuasion asserts that logically people are *not* to be afraid of other humans because of their fragility, which is in contrast to YHWH’s power and deliverance. The earth as creation is both demeaned and elevated in these passages, spoken about, spoken to, or used. Isaiah 51–52 presents creation as powerful and valuable, violated but also a tool. YHWH as creator-redeemer, combined in unique formations in Deutero-Isaiah, is portrayed as in control of chaos (Isa. 51:9; cf. Gen. 2).[36] The depiction taps into the Exodus story, with the monster Rahab, representing Egypt, cut down and the sea overpowered by the arm of the Lord.

Isaiah 51–52 continues Deutero-Isaiah’s development of the portrayal of Zion’s journey with her presentation as a mother and daughter in various guises, drunken, bereaved, rape victim, and queen. Zion is a multifaceted symbolic poetic representation of an exiled people, an idea as well as a geographic location that has been destroyed by invasion and war.[37] In Isaiah 51:17–52:2 Zion’s personification is more sharply drawn, with her depiction as a bride who has been violated and language and imagery of her ruin and desolation. The use of mother and child imagery in 51:18–20 may have spoken directly to the acute pain of the loss of children in the exilic community. Zion's powerlessness and victim state are challenged in Isaiah 51:23–52:2, where she is urged to free *herself* from her slavery, whereas in Chapman's song the hearer is to act on their mother's behalf. Zion's personification as a woman at once separates her from and identifies her with creation, allowing the people in exile to identify Zion's suffering with their own suffering.[38] Chapman's line "Mother of us all… place of our birth" likewise makes earth both object and subject, identifying us intimately with her. In Deutero-Isaiah, the slippery representation of Zion provides an opportunity to read Zion in diverse ways. We could imaginatively reconstruct the narrative, seeing the story perhaps through Zion's eyes, as Peter Trudinger has demonstrated in his ecological reading of Zion in Lamentations.[39]

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[35] Other Eden references in the Hebrew Bible make similar comparisons between the lush Eden and the desert (cf. Joel 2:3; Ezek. 36:35; Isa. 5:6; Lev. 26:31).

[36] Stuhlmueller 1970.

[37] On the background of Zion in the Hebrew Bible representing geographic location, symbol, and ideology see Levenson 1985; Ollenburger 1987. Regarding Deutero-Isaiah’s varied representations of Zion see Sawyer 1989, 89–107; O’Connor 1999, 281–294.

Zion's journey of redemption is wrapped up with the restoration of creation.[40] John Barton reminds us, "Peace and harmony on earth, for the great classical prophets, are achieved through justice and righteousness, and though these terms (*mishpat* and *sedaqah*) have definite cosmic overtones, they are still to be encountered primarily in the way that humans behave towards each other."[41] In this framework, cessation of violence is necessary for ecological harmony.[42] Rape as a domineering act of power implicitly breaks relationship, demonstrating disharmony and power imbalance, between humans, creation, and God. Creation's uprising as well as the call to stand up/rise up and overcome the violation in Isaiah 51:17 and 52:1–2 represents a rebalancing. The trajectory of Zion's story in Isaiah 51–52 is of comfort, renewal, and overcoming the victimhood of rape. Likewise, ecological destruction evidenced in the passage is not an inevitable in a nihilistic depiction but rather a threatened end, and the passage is presented as an oracle of hope and re-creation. Deutero-Isaiah innovatively re-uses ancient traditions of creation, chaos motifs, and the Exodus for new contexts and purposes. Modern musicians take the tapestry of inherited traditions and symbols for new purposes, as in the example of Chapman's use of a rape metaphor and contemporary socio-political action. Just as Deutero-Isaiah reshapes a previously utilised marriage metaphor and personification of the devastated city as a woman in new ways, so also Chapman takes a long-held trope of earth as feminine to inspire action on a new crisis. Symbolic representations of women and earth reliant on double messaging are imbedded in both Chapman's and Deutero-Isaiah's songs.

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[38] Habel 2008, 5.

[39] Trudinger 2008, 41–52.

[40] Dempsey 1989, 273.

[41] Barton 2010, 54.

[42] Dempsey 1989, 269–284.

Conclusion

By combining an analysis of ancient biblical passages with a contemporary musical response to environmental catastrophe we can interrogate inherited theological assumptions and highlight previously downplayed aspects of received texts. Chapman's music does not refer to Deutero-Isaiah's proclamation song regarding Zion's future. Speaking originally to Judah's exilic crisis, the songs of Zion may not have envisaged our current climate emergency. However, overlapping metaphorical references in the song and the text to mothers, sexual violence, and environmental consequences of human actions make them fascinating interlocutors. At their heart, Chapman's songs and Zion's oracles are calls for justice. The inherent injustice of ecological degradation is that despite its affecting us all, it invariably disproportionately affects the poor and vulnerable, often women and children.[43] Therefore, Deutero-Isaiah's casting of Zion as a grieving woman who has lost her children and Chapman's casting of the world as a mother tap into the plight of the people who suffer most. The interrelationality of how we treat the human other (as sexual objects to be conquered; by intervening to defend/rescue; in empowering women) can transfer our attitudes to the earth and creation.

This creative engagement can lead to heightened awareness about theological imperatives for human involvement and responsibility for ecological stewardship. By combining these readings with an ecofeminist analysis, we can appreciate the limitations of perpetuating ecological connections to tropes of rape and sexual violence. These tropes are not therefore no longer useful, for they hold potential for reframing understandings of the power of women. Problematising both sexual assault and ecological disaster provides an implicit challenge for transformative social action. Engaging Deutero-Isaiah's ancient metaphors can awaken a greater appreciation of the need to advocate verbally or practically against sexual assault, domestic violence, modern day slavery, and warfare. Using provocative language to illustrate violence prompts us to think twice about two domains – ecological disaster and rape. By successfully linking these issues, Chapman challenges us in thinking about both; even if the focus of the song is on action in relation to ecological destruction, the rape language shocks us to think about sexual violence. This response is also possible with how we interpret Zion's predicament in Deutero-Isaiah.

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[43] See Dawson/Pope 2014, chap. 4.2 on the effect of climate change on the poor. Gaard observes, "Many writers note that toxic pesticides, chemical wastes, acid rain, radiation, and other pollutants take their first toll on women, women's reproductive systems, and children" (Gaard 1993, 5).

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