



# ‘Mountain top experiences’ and the Psalms of Ascents (Ps 120-134)

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## Abstract

Mountains are not only appreciated for their natural beauty but notably also for their inspirational and elevating effect on the mind, ‘mountain top experiences.’ To illuminate the last-mentioned, insights from Attention Restoration Theory (ART; developed by environmental psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan) have been utilised, as well as insights from Dark Green Religion (DGR; Bron Taylor). It is especially the ART human:nature relational properties of ‘fascination’ (awe) and ‘extent’ (order, mystery), complemented by the DGR notions of ‘interconnectedness’ and ‘sacredness’ (intrinsic worth), that explained the cultural constructs of mountains as the centre(s) of the world, sources of life, sites of identity, symbols of power, seats for deities and places of inspiration/transformation/renewal. The Psalms of Ascents collection (*šîrê hamma’ălôt*; Ps 120-134) provided an exemplary (ancient) expression of a ‘mountain top experience’ for a group of post-exilic Israelites in search of their identity. Apart from a few explicit references to mountains in the collection, the overall focus is on an ‘ascent’ to Jerusalem, to Mount Zion and the temple where Yahweh chose to reside. This was the centre of the (then Israelite) world, where earth and heaven meet. The rather insipid Mount Zion became larger than life, where pilgrims experienced security, solace, blessing, unity and a transcendence to ‘a greater reality’ in the presence of their deity.

**Keywords:** Mountain top experiences, Attention Restoration Theory, Dark Green Religion, Psalms of Ascents, interconnectedness, sacredness.

*‘Gone to stand on your mountain in the wild - 21 st June 2008’<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Many years ago (1987) Mark Johnson wrote a book, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination and Reason*, emphasizing the centrality of our bodily experiences in conjuring up thoughts. Bodily sensations become ways to metaphorize, to symbolize, or to ‘have a world’ (1987:102). Different so-called image schemata such as containment, force, balance, paths, cycles, scales, links and centre-periphery, to name but a few (1987:126), assist in translating bodily sensations into abstract metaphors. Thinking of a container that is filled, ‘up’ becomes ‘more’ and translates into being ‘upright’ with a positive meaning, while emptying the container means ‘less’ or going down and has a negative connotation. Being on a mountain extends the body’s capacity to be ‘up’ quite remarkably, that is to be elevated both physically and mentally. The last-mentioned is captured by the expression ‘mountain top experience’ or a moment of inspiration, when reflecting on and expanding the self (Seney, 2016:210-211). Illustrating the last-mentioned, Seney (2016:214) refers to a young girl Elizabeth sitting on a cliff overlooking the Pacific, feeling her mind ‘...transported beyond the

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<sup>1</sup> A memorial plaque for an Honorary Ranger, the late Dorothy Bickley, on a bench at the highest point of the Waterberg Mountains in Marekele National Park.



ocean...she beheld the total interconnectedness of the universe...' It can also be described as a transcendental experience that can be religious or not. And this is the aim of this article, to highlight the elevating effect of mountains on the human mind.

In what follows the theoretical lenses of Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Dark Green Religion (DGR) will be discussed first. Both these approaches emphasize the intrinsic connectedness between humans and nature. Following this, these theories will be concretized with experiences of mountains in general. Here a key source, Edwin Bernbaum's beautiful book, *Sacred Mountains of the World* (1997), will be focused on, but also older writers, 19<sup>th</sup>-century American naturalist writers Henry David Thoreau and John Muir (nicknamed 'John of the Mountains') as well as a few modern mountaineers, eloquently verbalizing their emotional experiences of mountains. Lastly a close scrutiny of the 'Psalms of Ascents' (Ps 120-134) will be done, to determine whether this collection also reflects a so-called 'mountain top experience.'

### **Green hermeneutics: Attention Restoration Theory and Dark Green Religion**

Attention Restoration Theory (ART)<sup>2</sup> provides an apt psychological explanation of what happens (positively) to the human mind when exposed to nature. What does ART, developed by the environmental psychologists Stephen and Rachel Kaplan (1989), comprise? This theory departs from the view (à la William James) that humans in their evolutionary history evolved two mental mechanisms, allowing for a well-adaptive rational and emotional functioning. The first is the voluntary attention mental mechanism, that can simplistically be called 'concentration,' and enables us for instance to work in a focused way. This capacity is, however, limited and therefore needs to be rested to be restored when it becomes exhausted. Indications of mental fatigue are emotional instability, impulsivity and irritation. The other mechanism that assists in the restoration process is the involuntary attention mental mechanism, also called 'fascination.' Here our attention is captured in an involuntary and relaxed way through the fascinating world of nature: beautiful sunsets, cloud formations, breathtaking landscapes, the lush greenness of the plant kingdom, water and animals. Meditation, music and art, the intake of glucose and ordinary sleep can also restore our concentration capacity (Berman et al, 2008:1211; Kaplan & Berman, 2010:52-53; S Kaplan, 2001), but nature is always available surrounding us and comes for free.<sup>3</sup> To be attracted to (and be fascinated by) nature it has to be savanna- or parklike, because such environs provide safety, free movement and appeal to our adaptiveness, something that we inherited from our ancient forebears. To be able to have a restorative effect, nature needs to meet certain human:nature relationship properties. The Kaplans have identified four such properties that overlap and complement one another: 'being away' – this implies the welcome getting away from it all, from the daily, boring and tiresome toil and to be exposed to '... cognitive content different from the usual' (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989:189); 'compatibility' – this implies the tallying or 'resonance' with nature to attain a certain goal or fulfil a certain need (adventure, scientific excursion, fishing, hunting, bird watching, nature photography, etc.). This happens quite naturally and effortlessly, even for the urbanised city dweller, confirming that we are part and parcel of nature (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989:185, 193). This makes good sense because of our innate bond with nature, aptly verbalized by the founder of the Biophilia hypothesis, the biologist EO Wilson (1993:31): '...the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms;' 'fascination' – this implies the involuntary capturing of our attention by some

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<sup>2</sup> See Viviers (2016a) for a more detailed discussion and application of Attention Restoration Theory to the book of Song of Songs in the Hebrew Bible.

<sup>3</sup> The Kaplans (1989:150 – 174) make a distinction between 'nearby nature' and 'faraway nature.' The first-mentioned can be a small, interesting suburban garden/park while the last-mentioned usually refers to exotic nature reserves or wild nature. Both can be restorative in so far as they meet the properties of 'being away,' 'compatibility,' 'fascination' and 'extent.'



inspiring natural phenomenon, as mentioned already.<sup>4</sup> It also implies the transcendence of our thoughts to other, invisible (metaphysical) 'worlds' to which we feel deeply connected whilst experiencing our minuteness in the bigger scheme of things; 'extent' – has to do with order, structure and the coherence of different nature elements that guarantee our safety, enhance our memory so as not to get lost and 'belonging.' 'Extent' also implies that which is interesting and mysterious, to contemplate and be transferred to other unknown 'realities' (R Kaplan, 2001:511). In this dialectical relationship with nature, we imaginatively construct/fashion it according to our cultural and time-bound convictions, nowadays positively as meaning-giving and life-fulfilling.<sup>5</sup>

Moving from a psychological to a religion science perspective, Dark Green Religion (DGR) developed by Bron Taylor (2010),<sup>6</sup> in essence comprises a deep sense of awareness of humans' connectedness to nature, and reminds of the etymology of the word 'religion' – '... from Latin *re* (again) and *ligare* (to connect) ...' (Taylor, 2010:2). It is not a superficial, romantic and momentarily 'green good feeling' towards nature, but implies an ethics of embracement of the natural environment, of live and let live. 'Dark' therefore indicates a profound experience of nature.<sup>7</sup> 'Dark' within Dark Green thought can, however, also have a rather negative connotation, especially within some 'green' activist groups, generally characterized by misanthropy, almost seeing no place for humans on planet Earth (Taylor, 2010:101). The term 'religious' not only encapsulates the experience of believers, but also provides a religious-like expressive jargon for those who adhere to a secular worldview. A telling example is Ursula Goodenough (1998:xx), a cell biologist, who departed from her earlier theistic convictions. She nevertheless expresses her intense experience of the wonders of nature, as exposed by science, in religious jargon: 'For example, the evolution of the cosmos invokes in me a sense of mystery; the increase in biodiversity invokes the response of humility; and an understanding of the evolution of death offers me helpful ways to think about my own death.' The eighteenth-century John Muir 'of the mountains' is an earlier, similar example (see below), who also departed from his childhood (Scottish Calvinistic) fundamentalist religious convictions under the influence of (inter alia) evolutionary thought, but nevertheless used religious language to capture the wonders of nature (Devall, 1982:75). Taylor's (2010:13) definition of Dark Green Religion is as follows:

... a deep sense of belonging to and connectedness in nature, while perceiving the earth and its living systems to be sacred<sup>8</sup> and interconnected. Dark green religion is generally deep ecological, bio-centric, or eco-centric, considering all species to be intrinsically valuable, that is valuable apart from their usefulness to human beings. This value system is generally (1) based on a felt kinship with the rest of life, often derived from a Darwinian understanding that all forms of life have evolved from a common ancestor and are therefore related; (2) accompanied by feelings of humility and a corresponding critique of moral superiority, often inspired or reinforced by a science-based cosmology that reveals how tiny human beings are in the universe; and (3) reinforced by metaphysics of interconnection and the idea of interdependence (mutual influence and reciprocal dependence) found in the sciences, especially in ecology and physics.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Hard' fascination (e.g. watching a highly competitive tennis match) taps into directed attention and can also deplete it, while the effortless, attention-grabbing of our minds through 'soft' fascination (e.g. beautiful sunset) assists the replenishing process (Kaplan & Berman, 2010:49). 'Fascination,' as used in this article refers to the last-mentioned.

<sup>5</sup> In the Middle Ages (wild) 'nature' was seen as something dangerous, even evil, and was avoided.

<sup>6</sup> See Viviers (2016b; 2017) for more detail on this methodological-hermeneutical approach and its application to biblical texts.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor (2010:223-224) prefers not to name his approach *deep ecology*, to prevent confusion with the work of Arne Naess and the 'politics of radical environmentalism...'

<sup>8</sup> In an earlier work Taylor (2008:89) says the following: 'By dark green religion, I mean religion that considers nature to be sacred, imbued with intrinsic value, and worthy of reverent care.'



Taylor (2010:14, 15) furthermore differentiates between four kinds of dark green expressions ‘...embedded in worldviews and narratives that are believed to cohere with science – but they are also often grounded in mystical or intuitive knowledge that is beyond the reach of scientific method.’<sup>9</sup> There is therefore a dividing line between natural (scientific) and supernatural (faith) worldviews, but the line is porous and the one does not necessarily exclude the other. There are two supernatural versions of Dark Green Religion, the first is ‘spiritual animism,’ where it is believed that a supernatural spirit/deity incarnates a natural phenomenon (e.g. a holy stone, tree, mountain, river and animal, as is found in nature religions). The second is named ‘Gaian spirituality’ where Gaia (‘Earth’) refers to the Greek goddess that incarnates mother earth. Earth is regarded as one big harmonious and balanced organism that is upheld by a supernatural deity. The two natural expressions of Dark Green are ‘natural spirituality’ and ‘Gaian naturalism.’ In ‘natural spirituality’ animals for instance are appreciated as intelligent and mindful without necessarily being ‘inspired’ or animated by some kind of supernatural being. In ‘Gaian naturalism’ the earth is still considered as a perfect whole, self-regulative and even ‘trustful’ (according to the scientist James Lovelock), but not having a ‘godly’ status. The well-known primatologist, Jane Goodall, being both scientist and someone with theistic views,<sup>10</sup> is a good example of someone who finds herself in both worlds of the dividing line between natural and supernatural.

It is clear that Taylor’s approach represents a ‘broad church,’ a bricolage of viewpoints, diverse convictions and ethical codes carried by a wide array of prominent figures and institutions who might be mainstream or subculture (2010:77, 217). However, what might seem confusing can also be regarded as an accommodating space for creative ferment, with one ‘confession’ or bond that brings all these expressions together, the depth of their embracement of nature or according to Taylor (2010:102): ‘The heart of dark green religion is to be found in the belief that everything in the biosphere is interdependent, intrinsically valuable, and sacred.’

It is especially the notions of belonging, interconnectedness and sacredness of DGR that are important for complementing ART. ‘Belonging’ indicates (inter alia) that nature is our home. It is aptly reiterated by the ART property of ‘being away.’ To get away from it all, back to nature, is actually ironic, since it implies a (real) homecoming of sorts. This is understandable because this is where we come from, where we exist meaningfully and is also our final destination, therefore also ‘(inter-) connected.’ The last-mentioned simultaneously matches ART’s ‘compatibility,’ the fit into or resonance with nature, accentuated by the Biophilia hypothesis that we are innately attracted to nature (Wilson, 1993:31). And the closely related ART properties of ‘fascination’ and ‘extent,’ encapsulating the elevating effect of exposure to the rich biodiversity of the natural world, describe the psychological process that leads to the conclusion that DGR has emphasized, the ‘sacredness’ or intrinsic worthiness of nature.

It is time to take a closer look at how mountains specifically, concretize the theoretical insights of ART and DGR when exposed to them.

### **An ART and DGR explanation of ‘mountain top experiences’**

Mountains form part of the oldest formations of Earth, some more humble (e.g. Mt Zion) and others soaring to incredible heights, the highest on Earth (Mt Everest), born from the clash of tectonic plates or volcanic eruptions when our planet was in its infant years. Their sheer height

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<sup>9</sup> Taylor (2010:2) expands the narrow boundaries and intellectual definitions of traditional religions (e.g. substantialist and functionalist) and follows a ‘family resemblances’ (‘polyfocal’) approach to religion. Applied to the treatment of nature, a wide array of beliefs and behaviours are accommodated, including those that are ‘religious-resembling.’

<sup>10</sup> Goodall believes animals (e.g. primates) also have a mental world (intelligence/mind/soul) similar to humans, derived from a ‘superordinate intelligence’ (Taylor, 2010:31).



and fascinating shapes are immediately attention grabbing as they can be seen in their entirety. Bernbaum (1997:208, 214) says: 'More than any other place, even the ocean, the view from the summit of an isolated peak offers a concrete sensation of feeling ourselves placed in the very middle of the world, enclosed within the vast circle of the horizon around us,' or 'a god's eye view.' Apart from other natural settings, a mountain forms a complete ecosystem in itself, with forests, meadows, rivers/springs, lakes, glaciers and granite peaks, with climates ranging from tropical to arctic, forming microcosms of the world (1997: preface, 214). They cannot be tamed, yet they sustain life around them for hundreds of kilometres, for instance the highest point in Africa, the snow-capped Kilimanjaro, nourishing its environment (1997:128). The presence of 'green' and 'water' on the mountain, indicators of the life force, naturally attract humans, animals and other life forms, as emphasized by ART (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989:9; see also Bernbaum, 1997:211). But mountains also have spiritual meaning, as we tend to see more than meets the eye. Climbing a mountain is like climbing to the 'gates of heaven,' says Thoreau (1973b:123), and pondering on the comprehensive intelligence that formed them (2001:53). Some indigenous tribes like the Bushmen of Botswana see mountains as petrified forms of their ancestors (Bernbaum, 1997:130) and will therefore revere them. The Chagga bury their dead facing their sacred mountain Kilimanjaro (1997:135). Mountains offer an escape that is a 'tonic' for the soul according to Thoreau (Anderson 1973:12), and Muir speaks eloquently of getting good tidings from the mountains, where nature's peace will flow into you like sunshine into trees (quoted by Bernbaum, 1997:243). Mountains are indeed special places and spaces for our well-being.

What happens to us when we escape to the mountains? 'Being away' or breaking away implies giving the mind a break from the daily toil (directed attention), and expose it to cognitive content of a different kind (indirect attention), so that it can be restored. Bernbaum (1997: preface) encapsulates succinctly: 'People see them (mountains - HV) as places where they can go to leave behind the materialistic, competitive concerns of the urban world and immerse themselves in a primordial reality that renews them spiritually and physically.' The new sounds, fresh smells<sup>11</sup> and captivating sights of a mountain environment are indeed cognitive content of a different kind. Whilst inhaling the microbes of this new environment it frees the body's natural pharmacy of feel-good hormones, and we immediately experience excitement, anticipation and happiness. To be in 'another world,' both physically and mentally, comes easily as mountaineers confess. Edwin Herzog describes his first ascent in 1950 of Annapurna (Himalayan peak) as a 'different universe' with 'an astonishing happiness welling up in me' (1997:xv). Thoreau, when climbing Wachusett (2001:49), describes the mere elevation of 1900 feet above the village of Princeton as '...infinitely removed from the plain...we feel a sense of remoteness, as if we had travelled into distant regions, to Arabia Petrea...' As mentioned already, 'breaking away' simultaneously (and ironically) implies coming home or 'belonging' (DGR), reiterated by Bernbaum (1997:xvii): 'we...let go of our feelings of separateness and merge with the mountains around us or *feel at home* (HV) in their awesome presence.' And likewise Thoreau (Harding, 1959:153) who experiences a 'correspondence' (at home) with nature and Muir who claims that going to the mountains is 'going home' (Devall, 1982:69; Payne, 1996:98; McDowall, 2010:1631).

'Compatibility' or the natural 'resonance' that we have with nature, because of our interconnectedness, makes the 'fit' with nature quite effortlessly, for whatever reason or purpose we venture into it. Long before Wilson came up with his Biophilia Hypothesis to indicate our innate attraction to the natural world, Thoreau (Harding, 1959:153) spoke similarly of an intuitive 'correspondence' with nature, spending as much time as he could (up to four hours a day) in his natural environs towards a fuller and consoled life. He wrote a whole essay on 'Walking' in 1862 (1973c:133, formerly known as 'The Wild'),<sup>12</sup> regarding this kind of escape

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<sup>11</sup> Thoreau (1973c:142) speaks of 'mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires.'

<sup>12</sup> In this essay Thoreau (1973c:144) also refers to his famous dictum, 'In Wilderness is the preservation of the World,' his deliberate choice of the wild above the tamed. Aldo Leopold (1966:129-133) later on read this saying



into nature as a kind of 'crusade' (1973c:133). Incidentally, 'walking' is one of the basic, almost effortless ways of spending time in nature to become restored, according to ART (De Young, 2010). Thoreau was part of the group of 'transcendentalists' of his time but nevertheless also embraced animism and pantheism (Taylor, 2010:54-55) as can be seen in his 'musing,' contemplative thought. Muir, on the other hand, although also sharing these sentiments but far more radical in his views on interconnectedness,<sup>13</sup> left the orthodox faith, as he immersed himself more and more in scientific, conservationist work during his numerous nature and mountain retreats later on (McDowall, 2010:1630). His work on floristic biogeography and especially glaciation, earned him to be recognised among names like Darwin and Wallace who were his contemporaries in Europe (McDowall, 2010:1634). One of the conspicuous purposes for visiting mountains globally, since time immemorial up until today, is that of pilgrimage. What Bernbaum (1997:12) says of pilgrims visiting Mount Meru and Kailas (Himalayan peaks), that this is a journey to the centre of the universe where the cosmic beginning and end meet, and encountering the divine, is true of most pilgrimages to mountains the world over (see pilgrimage to Mt Zion below). And this pertains also to 'modern pilgrims' who do not believe in supernatural deities but nevertheless come under the spell of the natural power and beauty of mountains for inspiration, expanding the self and experiencing fulfilment (1997:xvi, 141).

What William James called the involuntary attention mental mechanism, the effortless grabbing of our attention through beautiful nature scenes for instance (whilst blocking out the bombardment of stimuli depleting our directed attention), is called ('soft') 'fascination' by the Kaplans. We need 'soft fascination' to become restored. Bernbaum (1997:247) captures this need through mountain exposure: 'Much of the special appeal of mountain climbing comes from the fact that it takes us out of the ordinary world of everyday life to a magical place where we can experience spontaneous feelings of wonder and awe.' Mountains offer us visions of that which is pure and eternal, elevated above the daily mundane wheeling and dealing. That is why many Europeans<sup>14</sup> for instance flock to the Alps and Pyrenees seeking spiritual nourishment from sights that emit transcendent power and mystery, to enrich their dull, everyday lives (Bernbaum, 2005: 1459). The first climber of Everest without oxygen, Reinhold Messner, described his ascent not as an accomplishment but as an *Allgefühl* (all-inclusiveness), a deep happiness/bliss inside his head and breast that left him speechless (Von Stuckrad, 2005:1120). And in almost similar vein Johnson (2005:1400): '...climbing...still affords the chance to gain a celestial view from a terrestrial perch... *allows for an oceanic experience that inspires a caring rather than a conquering attitude toward the rock* (HV).' Being on a mountain top, however, not only inspires joy but can also evoke dreadful fear<sup>15</sup> and awe,

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as an indication of ecological balance. If a mountain is stripped of its wolves, it 'fears' devastation through an overabundance of deer. The same is true also of African elephants who destroy plant life (and other animal species) when their numbers become too many.

<sup>13</sup> According to Devall (1982), Muir can be seen as an early predecessor of 'deep ecology,' an essential non-anthropocentric stance and a radical empathy with nature (Muir, however, was not misanthropic; 1982:76). It is marked by 'biocentric egalitarianism,' emphasizing the deeply interconnected flow of everything in nature ('the great clod' -Taoist) – 'to think like a tree,' 'listening with a third ear' and 'taste the freedom of the mountain.' On Muir's love for mountains, Devall (1982:69) says: 'Muir did not go into mountains seeking pleasure in a superficial sense nor did he climb mountains to make a "first ascent," to get his name in the record books of some mountaineering association. He went walking in mountain landscapes, experiencing them to the fullest, letting go of social self...' The last-mentioned is often defined by the 'American dream' to conquer, subdue and over-utilize (plunder) nature through capitalism and modern technology.

<sup>14</sup> Not only Europeans but many urbanites the world over are nowadays aptly diagnosed as suffering from 'Nature Deficit Syndrome' (see also Wilson, 1993:35).

<sup>15</sup> Anderson (1973:19) states: "'Climbing Mount Ktaadn" is a striking American exemplum (Thoreau – HV) of Edmund Burke's famous essay on "The Sublime and the Beautiful," though it illustrates these two concepts in reverse order,' where the 'sublime' (opposite of 'beauty') inspires awe and fear (even terror) through power, vastness/infinity and obscurity (darkness). In this regard Bernbaum (1997:xv) also refers to Rudolf Otto who emphasized the fascination and fear of the 'wholly other' when encountering the sacred in mountains.



an experience that is so overwhelmingly terrifying that it blocks out comprehension and speech and leaving us with feelings of humility. They can become places of 'hell' instead of 'heaven.' Bernbaum (1997:242), experiencing an avalanche, describes this near encounter with death. It evoked an awakening of the spirit and mind where everything around him became sharper and brighter, and a deep appreciation for life (see also Taylor, 2010:118). Thoreau (1973a:118), on top of Mt Ktaadn where it seems as if eerie rocks have rained down from a foreign planetary quarry, and the wind a 'young whirlwind,' poetically captures these immense forces of nature: 'Nature was here something savage and awful, though beautiful. I looked with awe at the ground I trod on, to see what the Powers had made there... This was that Earth of which we have heard, made out of Chaos and Old Night. Here was no man's garden, but the unhandseled globe.' Despite having the 'compatibility' to access even the highest mountains, on some of them we do not 'belong' as they become wholly other 'holy ground.' It makes good sense therefore that humans have since the dawn of history almost always regarded mountains as 'sacred.'

'Extent' implies two things, namely order and mystery. Mountains notably form markers, borders, orientation points, safe refuges and centres of the cosmos for a particular people. Their visibility makes them a great asset in simply finding your way. In Cape Town for instance, the lone standing Table Mountain ensures that getting lost is almost impossible, the mountain is always there for orientation. Their life-sustaining capacities (providing especially water) make them centres around which life is organised, and people sometimes even prefer to live on them instead of close by.<sup>16</sup> They do not only form physical centres but more than often mythological centres, a linking axis around which earth and heaven revolves. Their 'deep valleys and high peaks conceal what lies hidden within and beyond them, luring us to venture ever deeper into a realm of enticing mystery' (Bernbaum, 1997:xviii). Their reaching into the skies, surrounded by clouds evokes the impression that they open up into 'other worlds,' and easily lures the mind to wander. Many of these peaks, so endowed with physical beauty and therefore regarded as earthly 'Gardens of Eden,' easily transmute into symbols of a heavenly 'paradise' in the myths of people across the globe (1997:252). When climbing Saddleback Thoreau says (1973b:127): 'It was such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise.' John Muir regarded mountains as godly temples and altars: 'The hills and groves are God's first temples...' (Payne, 1996:96), providing good tidings and inspiration. They become places and spaces of revelation (e.g. Moses on Sinai, Muhammad in a cave on Mt Hira; Bernbaum, 2005:1459), of meditation to discover one's '...true place in the scheme of things' (Bernbaum, 1997:41, commenting on mountains in Chinese art), or just regular reflection. Thoreau liked to read Wordsworth and Virgil on his excursion to Wachusett (2001:50), Muir to reflect on evolution when he was in the mountains (McDowall, 2010:1631-1635). A rested/restored mind promises to come up far more easily with an "aha!" moment, as many have discovered.<sup>17</sup> Whether used for religious or non-religious purposes,<sup>18</sup> it is clear that mountains have become 'sacred,'<sup>19</sup> that what DGR pleads for, special places accorded intrinsic worth without which the human mind would be impoverished. Bernbaum (1997:248) lastly notes that when mountains (and nature in general) are regarded 'sacred,' this would be a huge step forward for nature conservation. As unlikely as one would desecrate a church, so

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<sup>16</sup> Bernbaum (1997:135) captures an insightful remark from a member of the Chagga tribe, near Kilimanjaro: 'You are not a full human being if you don't come from Kilimanjaro. In fact, the higher up the mountain you live, the more fully human and blessed you are.'

<sup>17</sup> For instance, Isaac Newton, enjoyed walking in a garden into which his laboratory at Trinity College, Cambridge opened. He would often rush back indoors and write down some new insight that he obtained whilst wandering (Thielen & Diller, s.a.).

<sup>18</sup> On climbing Mount Sinai, Bernbaum (1997:99) remarks: 'An immense vista of undulating ridges and distant deserts opens around the awestruck pilgrim. Even those who have no spiritual attachment to the place feel themselves in the presence of something that far exceeds their limited conceptions of the world they think they know.'

<sup>19</sup> See the telling title of Edwin Bernbaum's 1997 book, *Sacred Mountains of the World*.



would one desecrate/plunder the San Francisco Peaks in Arizona, regarded by the Hopi and Navajo Indians as 'holy ground.'

The mountain top experience just explained is aptly summarized by Bernbaum (1997:255):

The sense of the sacred awakened by mountains reveals a reality that has the power to transform our lives. Whatever that reality is, however we may conceive it - as a deity, the ground of being, emptiness, the unconscious, the self, nature, the absolute – our encounter with it frees us from our usual conceptions of ourselves so that we can grow beyond the persons we think we are.

### The 'mountain top experience' of the Psalms of Ascents (Ps 120-134)

Bernbaum (1997:253) makes an insightful remark on Mount Zion/Jerusalem, the at-centre space where the Psalms of Ascents are situated. It is a built-over mountain, densely populated since ancient times, but it nevertheless, as a (elevated) city, offers a place of spiritual renewal and enrichment as the wilds are able to do.<sup>20</sup> The two most important mountains in Israel are Mount Sinai (9000 feet) and Mount Zion (only a rounded hill):<sup>21</sup> 'Sinai is the awesome peak of the covenant and the law...Zion, on the other hand, is the beautiful site of the temple...Sinai is the mountain of the beginning, Zion the mountain of the end' (Bernbaum, 1997:102). Zion is also a *Leitmotiv* in the collection of the Psalms of Ascents (Ps 120 -134), compared to the rest of the Psalter (Prinsloo, 2005:476 n 81). There is an agreement that the collection of the Psalms of Ascents forms a coherent unity in terms of structure and meaning, and in its final form probably served as a post-exilic 'devotieboekje' (Van der Ploeg, 1974:347), meditation book or book of confidence (in Yahweh). It could have been used during pilgrimages, 'ascending' to Zion/Jerusalem, as its later redactional heading, *šîrê hamma'ălôt* (added to each individual psalm), indicates (Viviers, 1994:288; Grogan, 2008:16). The overall theme of confidence could have assisted in rediscovering their identity in the presence of their blessing (and creator) deity and evoked hope for the future also (see Ps 132), amongst the post-exilic Jewish community.<sup>22</sup> Levin (2016:400), after an incisive analysis of the layering that the collection underwent through redactional and (final) editorial activity, comes to the same conclusion: 'Hence whoever makes his own dwelling place in the proximity of Zion will forever enjoy the blessing of the unsurpassable nearness of God (Ps 133). The last line summarizes once more the message of the collection: "Yahweh bless you from Zion, he who made heaven and earth!" (Ps 134:3).' Levin (2016:382, 399-400), however, interestingly emphasizes that the journey ('pilgrimage') of diaspora Jews to Zion, is one way - a single journey - and this special place should never be left again. The 'spatial' study of Prinsloo (2005) on this collection is insightful, as it touches on the centrality of 'space' as symbolized by Zion/Jerusalem, where heaven and earth meet (2005:461). À la Lefebvre and Soja, Prinsloo (2005:460) prefers to use 'space,' because of its emotional undertones that imply more than 'place.' He distinguishes between first space (physical, concrete space), second space (imagined space, bringing into play especially the emotive meaning of space) and third space (lived space, emphasizing the ideological stances of different groups).<sup>23</sup> To be off-centre is to be in negative space, and to be at-centre in positive space. In the Psalms of Ascents, Zion/Jerusalem becomes the at-centre space par excellence, the source of all physical and spiritual life to

<sup>20</sup> This would be an example of 'nearby nature,' in and around us even in very busy cities (see footnote 3).

<sup>21</sup> Allen (1983:167, following Keel) says Zion is a modest hill compared to its surrounding mountains. It is 66 metres below Mount of Olives, 76 metres below Mount Scopus, 33 metres below the hill to its west, and 53 metres below *ras el-mekkaber*.

<sup>22</sup> On Book V of the Psalter of which Ps 120-134 form part, Prinsloo (2005:475-476) indicates that it is concerned with the restoration of Israel after the exile, with an eschatological and Messianic flavour.

<sup>23</sup> Prinsloo (2005:462) says: 'In a very real sense the one is the other.'



which one should ‘ascend,’<sup>24</sup> no different than the many sacred mountains that have served their surrounding communities elsewhere (see above). Prinsloo (2005:472, 473) encapsulates as follows: ‘The poem (Ps 134) stands in stark contrast to the complete negative tone of Psalm 120. Space has been recreated through the physical experience of ascending to Jerusalem and the emotional experience of ascending to YHWH from negative to positive space, from off-centre to at-centre...A real pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the temple became a spiritual pilgrimage from  $\text{lwav}$  to  $\sim\text{ymv}$ , an ascent into the arms of YHWH,’ creating an *inclusio*.<sup>25</sup> And this movement/ascent happens through the five triads (120-122; 123-125; 126-128;<sup>26</sup> 129-131; 132-133) of the collection, forming its storyline (Prinsloo, 2005:472-474).<sup>27</sup> What is lacking in Prinsloo and the other authors mentioned thus far, is a stronger emphasis also on the Zion mountain as an implied ‘subject,’ or at least having some kind of ‘agency,’<sup>28</sup> to co-create or enhance with Yahweh the atmosphere of confidence and trust in the collection. Jerusalem, the temple and Zion are more than often conflated, the one recalling the other, and the conspicuous personification of Jerusalem in Psalm 122<sup>29</sup> implies the (natural) Zion hill also. Does Zion meet the (emotive) properties of ART of ‘being away,’ ‘compatibility,’ ‘fascination’ and ‘extent,’ and the ‘sacredness’ of DGR, as Prinsloo with his emphasis on ‘space’ as something more than ‘place’ has already suggested (see also Ps 48)? Does it ‘create’ restoration and upliftment?

The negative note on which the *ma’ālot*-collection starts in Psalm 120, of being far away in Meschec in the north and Kedar in the south,<sup>30</sup> distanced from the ‘centre’ Zion/Jerusalem, raises the need for ‘being away,’ or as indicated above, coming ‘home.’ The well-known ‘I lift up my eyes to the mountains, where does my help come from?’ of Psalm 121:1 could very likely indicate a far-away glimpse of the supplicant of Zion/Jerusalem and its surrounding mountains, en route to this destination (see Ps 125; Mays, 1994:389; Clifford, 2003:221; Grogan, 2008:200).<sup>31</sup> And ‘homecoming’ is soon, sweet and joyous, Psalm 122: ‘I was glad (*šāmah<sup>etf</sup>*)...’ when they arrived in the fortified city on the hill, the seat of the law and judgement founded by David who much earlier made it his ‘home.’ Its built structure (gates, walls, citadels, etc.) captures the attention of something ‘new’ compared to where the ‘pilgrims’ toiled and suffered earlier. Prinsloo (2005:464-465) encapsulates: ‘The sense of *belonging* (sic!-HV), of

<sup>24</sup> Prinsloo (2005:461) encapsulates: ‘To “ascend” is to be close to Yahweh, to experience life. To “descend” is to sink down into the Deep, the realm of death.’

<sup>25</sup> At a formal level Viviers (1994:281-282) also indicates a so-called ‘semantic-sonant-chiasmus’ between Psalms 121 and 134, binding the collection as a whole through *inclusio*.

<sup>26</sup> When Prinsloo (2005:473) refers to Psalm 126-128 as the ‘heart’ of the collection, it interestingly also matches Viviers’ earlier structural analysis of the collection (1994:287). Views among scholars, however, differ at where the ‘climax’ of the collection lies, and remains an open question. Some regard the long Psalm 132 as the climax, whilst Levin (2016:396) sees Psalm 133 as the highpoint.

<sup>27</sup> Commenting on ‘third space’ or the competing ideological stances of groups, Prinsloo (2005:474-477) argues that at the beginning of the fourth century BCE, a group of displaced Levites were vying for power which they have lost under the post-exilic temple aristocracy. It is their ‘voice’ that is heard in the collection. Levin (2016:381-382, 399-400), however, argues that the collection is all about post-exilic Jews who are urged to return to Zion/Jerusalem from the diaspora.

<sup>28</sup> Habel (2011:51, 62) argues convincingly that Earth (*Adamah*) should be seen as a ‘co-agent’/subject along with God in the creation process in Genesis 2-3. Person (2008) argues similarly that the role of non-human characters in the book of Jonah should be recognized. These ‘voices’ are often hidden in official Israelite theology although the lines sometimes blur, especially among lay people. Indigenous peoples with their emphasis on ‘spiritual animism’ (see DGR) do not have a problem with nature elements being ‘alive,’ and in their own unique way contribute to its ‘sacredness.’

<sup>29</sup> See the *vocative* ‘O Jerusalem’ in vs 2; On Psalm 122 Mays (1994:393) says: ‘They are to ask after the peace of Jerusalem (v. 6a) as if Jerusalem were a person being greeted by each pilgrim...’

<sup>30</sup> Prinsloo (2005:462) indicates that the two place names form a *merism*.

<sup>31</sup> Allen (1983:151) summarizes some views on this sight of the mountains, e.g. source of danger, mountain sanctuaries of other gods, (positive) heavenly heights, cultic reference to the mountains of Jerusalem and the cosmic mountains on which Yahweh dwells (see Ps 48:1-3; 87:1-3; according to Habel).



being at centre, explains the urgent prayer for the “peace<sup>32</sup> of Jerusalem” (6ab).’ The Jerusalem-mountains in Psalm 125:1-2 become nature elements that are ‘good to think by’ or physical space transmuting into imaginative space (see Prinsloo above). The mountains ‘assist’ in evoking new thoughts: Yahweh believers are as steadfast as Mt Zion,<sup>33</sup> and Yahweh encloses his followers like the mountains embrace Jerusalem. This home is safe and secure, the kind of habitat that ART emphasizes for human well-being. In ancient Israel ‘home is where Yahweh is’ and this is stated explicitly in the eschatological royal psalm, Psalm 132:13-14: ‘For the Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for *his dwelling (lēmôšāb lô), this is my resting place (z’ôt mēnūhātī)* for ever and ever, here I will sit enthroned, for I have desired it ...’ (see also vs 7-8). And Zion will also be the centre of the future ‘paradise,’ the Messianic era when Yahweh will ‘make a horn grow for David...’ (vs 17; see also Is 2:1-5) and shower Israel with his abundant blessings. Home spells ‘good (-ness)’ and ‘pleasant’ (*tôb, nā’im*)” in Psalm 133 when the nation lives together in harmony and Yahweh bestows his blessings from Zion (‘from *there [šām]...*’; vs 3), life forever. Commenting on Psalm 131 and the supplicant’s trustful confidence in Yahweh, Levin (2016:396) says about the space from which the person praying is ‘...Mount Zion or in its immediate vicinity (cf. 125:2).’ And the repeated formula ‘from this time forth and for evermore’ (vs 3), indicates that the journey to Zion/Jerusalem is a ‘one-way-ticket.’ The temple on Mt Zion in Psalm 134 (‘house of Yahweh,’ ‘holy place’) is also the supplicants’ spiritual home, from where their creator blesses them. For the Israelites Zion/Jerusalem is the ‘sacred home’ at the centre of the universe, the geographical first space turned into imaginative second space of a fulfilled life, a mountain top experience.

‘Compatibility,’ the ‘fit’ into or the ‘resonance’ with Mt Zion/Jerusalem has just been touched on by emphasizing it as ‘home’ where the early Israelites experienced a deep sense of belonging. Other than a wild, untamed mountain range or peak that may require good planning and sometimes extraordinary efforts to access it (e.g. Everest and the need for oxygen), Mount Zion has been ‘humanized’ (Bernbaum, 1997:99) and is therefore easily approachable by all. Sinai on the other hand is far more difficult and represented ‘holy ground’ for only an initiated few (Moses), recalling many inaccessible peaks across the world amongst indigenous peoples. Bernbaum (1997:99) captures one of the primary purposes of ascending Mount Zion/Jerusalem: ‘In going up to Jerusalem, pilgrims could go up to the Lord as Moses had on Mount Sinai. And indeed, a number of psalms sung on pilgrimages to the holy city bear the title “A Song of Ascents.”’ The spiritual upliftment, meeting the deity in the temple where earth and heaven meet, has been indicated already (see Ps 134). But not only early Israelites, Jews and Christians have visited Jerusalem for this specific reason; Muslims also regard Jerusalem as the third most important pilgrimage site, with Mecca and Medina rated first and second (1997:100). The journey to Jerusalem, however, comprised more than just a pilgrimage, but implied permanent settlement in or around Mt Zion/Jerusalem, vindicating Levin’s view of a one-way journey from the diaspora. Psalms 126-128, the third triad in the collection, consisting of a (trustful/confident) supplicatory prayer that Yahweh would change their fate similarly as that of Zion<sup>34</sup> earlier (126:1), and the twin wisdom Psalms 127 and 128, speaks of settlement. Prinsloo (2005:473) verbalizes as follows: ‘...their daily business of sowing and reaping (Psalm 126), working and raising families (Psalm 127), and experiencing the fruit of their labour (Psalm 128).’ And the similar blessing from Zion as in Psalm 134:4 in 128:5: ‘May the Lord bless you from Zion...,’ the ‘earthly link with Yahweh’ (Allen, 1983:185),<sup>35</sup> the source and centre of life. Being off-centre has been indicated in Psalm 120 already, and is aptly expressed in Psalm 130:1 ‘Out of the depths (*mimma’āmaqîm*) I cry to you O Lord...’ To be in the ‘clutches of  $\perp w a v$ ’ is the experience of being off-centre (Prinsloo 2005:469), distanced from

<sup>32</sup> Clifford (2003:225) and most commentators note the alliteration and conspicuous wordplay in vs 6a: ‘... *ša’ālū šālôm yērušālām.*’

<sup>33</sup> Briggs & Briggs (1907:454) note that ‘the royal city is enthroned as a king, cf. 48<sup>2sq</sup>.’

<sup>34</sup> Prinsloo (2005:467 n 44, following Kraus) notes that ‘Zion’ here refers to Israel as a people.

<sup>35</sup> Commenting on Ps 129:5 ff., Allen (1983:190) speaks eloquently of Zion as the ‘touchstone’ of God’s purposes.



Yahweh and therefore an in –‘compatible’ space where no one wants to be. Yahweh and his abode, the height of Zion, is the desired ‘compatible’ space to be.

‘Fascination’ implies the effortless capturing of the mind through some kind of beautiful scenery, sound, smell, taste or touch, and simultaneously soothing the mind. Heights like mountains, a special part of nature, do this notably and lead to mountain top experiences. Fascination and awe usually go together, that which leaves us speechless, surprised and submissive when overwhelmed by something vast, great and powerful (Keltner & Haidt, 2003:303). The far-off sight of Zion and its mountainous surrounds, ‘I lift my eyes to the mountains...’ (Ps121:1) does exactly this, leaving an unforgettable impression on the traveller (Clifford, 2002:235). And the dangers of such a perilous journey (vs 3-8; possible attackers, sunstroke, ‘moonstroke,’ sun and moon also as harmful deities; Clifford, 2003:222) evoke anxiousness and fear. The entrance into Jerusalem (Ps 122) is marked by ‘...joyful fascination with the scene and the occasion,’ almost ecstasy. This is exactly what impressive architectural structures (in this case elevated) also do to us (Keltner & Haidt, 2003:303). Mount Zion in Psalm 125:1, seemingly small but becoming larger than life through faith as the cosmic mountain (Eaton, 2005:431), intrigues as a symbol of stability anchored in the womb of the earth (see also Ps 36:6; 65:6; 76:4; 90:2; Clifford, 2003:232; Weiser, 1962:757). And the embracing mountains of Jerusalem, evoking the simile of Yahweh embracing his people (vs 2), creates comforting consolation.

Psalm 132, apart from celebrating Zion as Yahweh’s resting place, an astonishing thought within Israelite faith that their almighty creator God (Ps 121:2; 124:8; 134:3) has chosen this particular earthly seat, also harbours his ‘footstool’ (vs 7). The ark notably evokes awe as a holy and dangerous object (2 Sam 6:1-7). Fascination is up front in Psalm 133 with the word-pictures of the aromatic, ‘glistening’ oil dripping from Aaron’s beard onto his garment, and the life-giving dew of the exotic Hermon (Song 4:8) descending on Mount Zion (Clifford, 2003:260-261),<sup>36</sup> and exemplifying Yahweh’s blessing of unity. These images convey beauty, charm, refreshment and abundance (Weiser, 1962:785; Allen, 1983:215). The last-mentioned is also the point of comparison of the Hermon dew falling on Zion, a geographical impossibility but poetic licence at work here (Eaton, 2005:446-447). The Psalms of Ascents ends on a doxological note in Psalm 134 in the temple on the Zion height, where supplicants ‘lift up’ their hands in praise to Yahweh, and he reciprocates with a blessing, a captivating picture of serenity, harmony and restoration.

‘Extent’ focuses on two things, ‘order’ and ‘mystery,’ the last-mentioned that ‘lets the mind wander.’ The emphasis on Zion/Jerusalem as the centre of the universe, the cosmic orientation point of all, the ‘at-centre space’ according to Prinsloo, has been highlighted already and aptly captures the notion of ‘order.’ This centre becomes the ultimate point of belonging and has the capacity to restore the mind with feelings of security and tranquility. ‘Mystery’ evokes the transcendence into ‘other worlds,’ of escaping from the mundane to the sublime. Mays (1994:189-190) eloquently captures these ideas when he comments on the Zion psalm, Psalm 48: ‘The psalm views the city as a medium through which God can be known...the visible is transparent to the invisible and focuses mind and spirit on what cannot be seen... It (city-HV) is tangible evidence that the Lord has taken them as flock...a way of envisioning the earthly in terms of the heavenly, the temporal in terms of the everlasting.’ Most commentators agree that it is not primarily about Zion (city and mount) but about God. Without God there would not have been a ‘Zion,’ but the opposite is equally true, without Zion no God. Mount Zion subtly functions as ‘co-agent’ (May’s ‘medium’) in evoking mystery.<sup>37</sup> The

<sup>36</sup> ‘It is like a mountain towering into heaven, its sides running with the life-giving dew of God’s blessing, which flows down upon arid lands,’ according to Eaton (2005: 447; see also Briggs & Briggs, 1907:476).

<sup>37</sup> See Goldingay (2007:93), indicating the interconnectedness between God and Zion, the heavenly and earthly, although the last-mentioned should be understood in terms of the first, similar as Mays argues. However, here one needs to critically turn the argument the other way round (see main text), would there be any ‘God’ if there were no ‘mountain’? What comes first, doesn’t the tangible (first) evoke the abstract and only then does the abstract



experiencing of the 'peace' of and in Jerusalem (Ps 122) already uplifts the pilgrim to a blissful, imaginative space of serenity, reminding of the 'oceanic feeling' of interconnectedness that like-minded people (e.g. believers) experience. The same applies to Psalm 133 with its emphasis on unity. The mystery of life-giving dew from the mountains opens up thought to Yahweh who "on the hills of Zion" ... confers the height of blessing - life...' (Eaton, 2005:446), the concrete leads to the abstract. The being part of a greater whole<sup>38</sup> is also present in Psalm 134, portraying a group of supplicants who is one of mind and faith, savouring the mystical presence of their blessing deity. Psalm 132's focus on the earthly Zion, opens up to a future, Messianic 'paradise.' The mysterious future is depicted in terms of the tangible and well-known here and now (abundant provisions...food – vs 15; salvation...joy – vs 16). Allen (1983:218) summarizes aptly: 'Zion is Yahweh's powerhouse...Zion is a doorway that opens out into the power behind the world.' 'Extent' also implies contemplation and reflection and its range in the *ma'ălôt*-collection is wide. It focuses on their centre of faith, Zion/Jerusalem (e.g. Ps 121; 122; 132), their creating, saving and blessing deity Yahweh (e.g. Ps 121; 124; 134), the characteristics of their faith itself (e.g. Ps 123; 125; 131), their unified identity (e.g. Ps 133), their trials and tribulations of the past (e.g. Ps 120; 124; 126; 129; 130), on nature, wisdom and making a living (e.g. Ps 126-128), in short, all of the themes covered in the collection.

As with other mountains, Mount Zion/Jerusalem also becomes something 'good to think by,' as the mind moves from the concrete to the abstract. It allows for a mountain top experience, uplifting, expanding and restoring the mind. The words of the ninth-century Theodore of Constantinople captures this succinctly (in Bernbaum, 1997:90): 'It seems to me that a mountain is an image of the soul as it lifts itself up in contemplation. For in the same manner as the mountain towers above the valleys and lowlands at its foot, so does the soul of him who prays mount into the higher regions up to God...' And for those who situate themselves under the porous line between supernatural and naturalistic worldviews (see DGR above), this experience of elevation is the same.

## Conclusion

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and Dark Green Religion (DGR) provide apt explanations of what nature does to the human mind. When exposed to nature, it not only restores the mind but simultaneously has an elevating effect on human thought, to ceaselessly transcend into 'other worlds.' We not only live from nature but also become fulfilled through nature, and therefore it makes good sense that nature has throughout the ages been seen as intrinsically worthy ('sacred'). Mountains, a special part of nature that immediately captivates the attention, not only form eco-systems in themselves to sustain life but also provides a 'god's eye view,' a tangible experience of being at the centre of the universe, leading to moments of inspiration or 'mountain top experiences.'

Writers of the past and present have therefore sung their eulogies of mountains for what they do to sustain both physical and spiritual life. It was no different with the biblical *ma'ălôt*-collection (Ps 120 -134), where Israelite/Jewish supplicants/pilgrims experienced not only a physical 'ascending' to the safe, confidence-inspiring and life-giving Mt Zion/Jerusalem, but a meeting of their deity YHWH who chose to reside there. The rather insipid (and largely 'humanized') Mount Zion compared to other ranges, nevertheless along with YHWH, became co-creative in establishing this inspiring space as the centre of its inhabitants' universe and life, their 'paradise' and 'heaven.' Mountains throughout the ages and globally have been very special, both ecologically and culturally.

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shape ideas also of the concrete? See also how all of life is conceptualized metaphorically in terms of (concrete) bodily experiences according to Johnson (1987).

<sup>38</sup> Here somewhat (Israelite) particularistic, but elsewhere universalistic (see Is 2:1-5).



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