

Deryn Guest

The Book of Judges

Ecopsychological Readings



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Deryn Guest



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For old slow Joe, visiting crow.

For nomadic cats, Ginge, Chloe, Beau, Porlock, Big Balls,
who come and go at leisure.

For Tik and Tok, the swooping, gliding magpie duo and the drey
of grey squirrels with whom they negotiate the bird feeding station.

For the aged cedar of Lebanon and copper birch for their welcome shade
in the summer months.

For the garden's blueberries, blackberries, strawberries, raspberries
and gooseberries that feed Earthforms without favour.

For George and Jasmine whose barked hellos from next door
join the general conversation.

For the robins, blue tits, chaffinches, sparrows, great tits, long-tailed tits,
starlings, blackbirds, dunnocks, goldfinches, coal tits, and bold parakeet.

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INTRODUCTION

Committing time and energy to biblical interpretation at a time of epoch transition is a questionable activity. If we are at or beyond the tipping points, currently hurtling through the end of the Meghalayan Age and its Holocene epoch into terra incognita on the cusp of the Earth's sixth mass extinction event, commentary writing seems irrelevant; an activity akin to fiddling while the planet burns.¹ Why bother adding thousands more words to an already over-interpreted ancient text when one could be marching or engaging in activist politics? This dilemma troubled me. For several months during the writing of this book I stop-started. It is worth doing; it is not worth doing. It is pointless; it is so meaningful. However, I was/am haunted by Drew Dellinger's poem 'Hieroglyphic Stairway', an extract from which reads:

it's 3:23 in the morning
and I'm awake
because my great great grandchildren
won't let me sleep
my great great grandchildren
ask me in dreams
what did you do while the planet was plundered?
what did you do when the earth was unraveling?

surely you did something
when the seasons started failing?

as the mammals, reptiles, birds were all dying?

did you fill the streets with protest
when democracy was stolen?

1. For indicators of epoch shift see McNeill and Engelke (2014). On the sixth mass extinction event see Kolbert (2014).

what did you do
 once
 you
 knew?...²

What ultimately persuaded me to continue writing was the knowledge that, for better or worse, I am an academic writer. My skills, sense of purpose, have all been wrapped up in academic life. It is not only what I do, but feels like who I am. The desire to ‘do something’ thus seemed best served by using all that academic experience to think about writing biblical commentary differently.

This did not entirely resolve the dilemma—the consternation that my time and energy might better be served by offering to evaluate and write reports for activist groups did not dissipate. The earnest desire to do something practical neither went away nor was sublimated in the writing of this book. It was rather a matter of sitting with the discomfort. It meant acknowledging that writing biblical interpretation at a time of such crisis felt incongruous, while simultaneously recognizing that because the Bible is a cultural artefact of great significance, with such a massive readership, anything that can be done to make its texts come alive ecologically, in a way that changes our thinking, is a useful endeavour. But to do so, biblical interpretation has to step out of its usual paradigm.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, what follows is not a commentary that works through the text of Judges verse by verse, chapter by chapter. Nor do its chapters follow conventional ideas about what Judges is ‘about’ (i.e. pro and anti-monarchy sentiment, conflict between northern and southern tribes, the glorification of YHWH). I engage rather with members of the cast of Judges who are often overlooked, a cast that includes so much more than named human characters and has representatives from all four elements: air, water, fire and earth. It is worth bringing them on to the stage now in order to set the tone for what is to come, and to remind ourselves of their presence:

The element of air is referenced in scenes set in day or night, which the scribe sometimes breaks down into more nuanced zones of daybreak, early morning, light, early evening, or the day ‘far spent’. Air is also referenced in his mention of the heavens, sun, stars and clouds, and it is reasonable to imagine smoke that arises from various burning events described in the text. From the heavens descend rain and dew, shifting us to the element of water. Various watery presences come onto the stage

2. Drew Dellinger delivers his poem in full here: <https://bioneers.org/drew-dellinger-presents-hieroglyphic-stairway-bioneers/>

throughout the story: upper and lower waters, river Jordan and its fords, river Arnon, river Jabbok, wadi Kishon, waters of Megiddo, the spring of Harod and the Red Sea. We also have the coast of the sea and the sand of the seashore. Contrasting with the element of water are several mentions of fire: fire is concealed within jars, divine messengers ascend in fire. There are threats of consuming fire, there are fiery names or functions (Lappidoth) and, in one of the most dismal scenes, brands tied to animal tails are set alight. Finally, the element of earth. Varied land formations are referenced: field, plain, valley, heights of the field, valley of Jezreel, valley of Sorek, valley of Beth-Rehob. Some valleys contain vineyards and olive groves. There are various references to wilderness: wilderness of Judah, wilderness near the Red Sea, wilderness near river Jabbok, and wilderness unspecified in 20.42. And there are pathways: byways, the way, outskirts of the camp, borders, a highway from Bethel to Shechem. Moving our eyes upward, we see the heights of earthy landscape: hill country, mountains, the ascent of Akrabbim, mount Tabor, hill of Moreh, mountain tops, mountain shadows, Gilead hills, the hill before Hebron, and the remote part of Ephraimite Highlands. Turning to the presence of rock, we have caves, strongholds, 'the Gilgal' (a stone circle?) and the sculptured stones located there. Also we have the rock of Oreb, rock of Rimmon, the cleft of a Rock, the hollow place of Lehi, stones (for slings), the millstone dropped on Abimelech's head, and tombs. Earth is also rich in trees: a city of palms, the oak of Ophrah, the oak of the pillar at Shechem, the cedars of Lebanon, the Asherah cut down by Gideon and the palm of Deborah that may have been some kind of sculpted palm. Further trees are mentioned in Jotham's parable: an olive tree and its oil, a fig tree and its fruit, the vine and its produce of wine, the bramble and its shade. Associated with trees is the brushwood and the thorns and briers of the wilderness.

Populating this cast further is its diversity of animal and insects: donkeys, sheep, asses, 'livestock', flocks, horses, camels, kids, bull, locusts, dogs, a lion, bees and foxes/jackals. Proceeding from all this flora and fauna we have milk, curds, honey, flax, seeds, wheat, grapes, flour, meat, broth, unleavened bread, a cake of barley bread, loaves of bread, salt, grain, straw fodder, all of which contribute to the text's setting.

Pulling together this cast helps us appreciate the earthy texture of the Judges storyworld. It is more colourful than I originally anticipated, but it only takes us so far. There is nothing of scenic smells, sounds, textures. Only when one is willing to enter imaginatively into the text with all the senses on full stretch, does the scribe's full cast come to life rather than remain in the background as 'setting'. And it is that imaginative

encounter that is central to this book. Drawing on the theories and aims of ecopsychology, my first aim is to demonstrate how and why this field of study is so relevant for biblical interpretation, how it provides much needed fresh tools at a time of ecological crisis. My second aim is to use the insights of ecopsychology to forge a new method for reading biblical texts—amplification—a method that exposes important absences in the scribe’s storytelling, demonstrates how the scribe inures us from empathy, and reads against the grain in order to return soul to the ‘setting’ of biblical texts. The third aim draws on psychological theory to assess how our capacity for connection to nature has been thwarted and how the damage that has been done can be rectified.

In Chapter 1 I provide a definition of ecopsychology and discuss its key objectives. I note also the aims of its practical wing, ecotherapy, since insights from its practitioners inform subsequent chapters. The rationale for the entire book is found in this chapter. In Chapter 2 I outline the key tasks for an ecopsychological reading of biblical texts and devise a methodology that is fit for purpose. I then demonstrate how it works in Chapters 3 to 8, selecting short passages from the book of Judges for discussion. Accordingly, Chapter 3 takes us to the story of Jephthah’s daughter and the mountains in which she takes refuge. I re-imagine their presence as a holding environment for someone *in extremis*. In Chapter 4 I turn to three stories of human-animal interactions: the horses and their riders (5.22), Samson and the foxes (14.5-6), and Samson and the lion (15.4-5). I analyse how a reader’s capacity to feel empathy for, or connection with, these animals is blunted by both the scribe and commentators, and discuss what can be done to reignite our compassion. In Chapter 5 we re-visit, with Ehud, the stones at Gilgal. Resisting the satire of Judges 3, I amplify the numinosity of stones that are available for divine consultation. Chapter 6 provides a first outing to trees as we re-enter the Gideon story and consider his strange visitor who sits beneath a tree before analysing what has been lost in Gideon’s hacking and burning of the Asherah. A second outing to trees occurs in Chapter 7, this time to visit the Oak of the Diviners mentioned in 9.37 and the so-called Palm of Deborah from 4.4-5. I examine how the ancient practice of divination can be illuminated by Jung’s ideas about synchronicity. The last illustration, in Chapter 8, focusses on habitat of Shiloh, where Benjamite men hide amid the vines in order to abduct the daughters who come out to dance. I bring the vines out of the background into a more fully interactive relationship with the human actants of the story and focus on one moment of connection with earth as an antidote to the horror of this chapter. Running through all these chapters, like a deep river of insight from which new life can be breathed

into old texts, is the work of C.G. Jung. His theories of the personal and collective unconscious, the *anima mundi*, complexes and defence mechanisms, shadow and its projection, synchronicity, the de-psychization of nature and the loss of bush soul, have informed the whole.

Chapter 1

ECOPSYCHOLOGY: DEFINITION AND OBJECTIVES

Ecopsychology is a relatively new, but rapidly expanding academic field. Pioneering thinkers who informed its development include Harold Searles, whose 1960 study recognised the damage wrought when humans are split off from the natural world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1968) phenomenology is oft-cited in discussions of how hands-on experience of nature, of animals, becomes an experiential knowledge. Early strands of ecofeminism associated with Joanna Macy (1989), and Caroline Merchant (1980) have also informed the field, but Paul Shepard (1978, 1998) is hailed by Roszak as 'the first ecopsychologist, the first thinker in the environmental movement, to apply psychological categories to our treatment of the planet' (2009: 33). It was, however, Carl Gustav Jung who, in my view, prepared the ground like no other. His theories provide conceptual tools for understanding the profundity of what happened when humans dethroned the Gods, stopped engaging with river spirits, tree dryads, depsychized nature and imagined themselves to have 'progressed'.¹ The extent to which Jung's work is credited varies from ecopsychologist to ecopsychologist but his work is like a deep river flowing through the field and some, such as David Tacey, see their work as 'an ecological elaboration of Jung's depth psychology' (2009a: 18).

The aim of this chapter is to introduce readers to key interests of ecopsychology. It includes an explanation of my working definition of ecopsychology and an analysis of the field's objectives including, where relevant, the aims and strategies of its associated, practical wing: ecotherapy.² I limit the discussion, however, to those interests of ecopsychology

1. I capitalize Gods because they are important psychic containers, but also because I do not wish to adhere to a divine hierarchy where YHWH alone is referred to as God and all others as god or gods.

2. The term ecotherapy hails from Howard Clinebell's book of that name. It is an umbrella term for a range of 'nature-reconnection practices, animal-assisted

and ecotherapy that have most relevance to the subsequent interpretation of passages from the book of Judges.

Definition

The term, ecopsychology, appears to have been coined by Theodore Roszak in *The Voice of the Earth: An Exploration of Ecopsychology*, first published in 1992. At the time, he did not imagine himself to be launching a field that would bear such a name, but was hoping to forge collaborative work between psychologists and environmentalists. His goal was ‘to bridge our culture’s long-standing, historical gulf between the psychological and the ecological, to see the needs of the planet and the person as a continuum’ (1993: 16).³ In the three decades following Roszak’s publication, new benchmark studies have expanded the field’s range of interests and practices to the extent that it is not easy to formulate one succinct definitional sentence without some explanatory elaboration.⁴ So, although this creates a little unavoidable overlap with the proceeding discussion of ecopsychology’s objectives, I briefly outline three key matters that underlie the subsequent definitional statement.

The Conscious and Unconscious Experience of Loss

Ecopsychology is an investigation of a profound loss that has already occurred, mostly under the radar of conscious awareness. Ecopsychologists thus have a problem. They are tasked with finding ways of articulating something that manifests primarily in symptoms caused by this loss. Andy Fisher, for example, writes of how we feel ‘haunted by things not yet

psychotherapy, horticultural therapy, time-stress management, wilderness work’ (Buzzell and Chalquist 2009: 18). However, that reference to animal assistance requires qualification. Gay Bradshaw, who provides many examples of trans-species work that is helpful for humans suffering from trauma, criticizes any animal assistant therapy which ‘has the potential to be exploitive and damaging to animals’ (2009: 164). For example, she notes how human interaction with dolphins may help the former, but ‘even the “best” captive DAT facilities that capture dolphins from the wild endanger free-ranging populations by traumatizing individuals and depleting their numbers’ (2009: 164).

3. For his own retrospective account of how and why he coined the word ecopsychology, see Roszak (2009).

4. Benchmark studies include monographs by David Kidner (2001), Shierry Weber-Nicholson (2001), Nick Totton (2003), David Tacey (2009a, 2009b), Andy Fisher (2013), together with the compilations of essays in Roszak, Gomes and Kanner (1995), Khan, Ruckert and Hasbach (2012).

conscious, an aching for meanings not had, prefigured contacts not made' (2013: 136). Language fails. Fisher tries to speak, grasp, analyse something below the surface, some longing that has no name. Ecopsychology is thus concerned with an unspeakable absence and with the effects of that absence, how or if the loss can be recovered, together with the coining of new words that can express feelings and griefs that up until now had no terminology.

Interrelationship

Fisher arranges his important (2013) monograph around the psychological, philosophical, practical and critical tasks of ecopsychology. His definition is accordingly spread across a lengthy and intensive discussion that rewards a close reading. Notwithstanding, in an earlier essay he provides one pithy statement. Ecopsychology, he writes, has been defined 'as the psychology of the human-nature relationship' (2012: 82)—a statement consistent with his subsequent claim that its task 'is to develop a psychology that embeds humans within a more-than-human society' (2013: 125).⁵ The problem is that our eyes can run all too easily over those words, intellectually grasping their import readily and easily, but not actually taking them in fully, or in an embodied way. We need to pause. Read them again. Think, no, *feel* what it is to be embedded in the realm of flora and fauna in which we go about our daily lives. Embed is such a good word, helping us to turn our eyes away from this page for a moment to think about what it feels like to be *planted*, to sense ourselves as socially, biologically, psychologically *interconnected* with our surroundings, to be not individuals but *always among and alongside*, rooted, grounded in the spaces we are in. To be embedded within the more-than-human is to recognize our mutuality, commonality and otherness, to experience ourselves as part of a much larger web, then stay with that, not just for a moment, but as an experienced part of our daily existence.

Fisher is under no illusions about the monumental scale of the work needed to re-realise our embeddedness, for it means we have to comprehend, simultaneously, the alarming depth of the abyss that has opened between the human and the more-than-human. This is where the work of ecotherapists is vital. They enable clients to perceive how the loss of

5. It is worth noting that Fisher recommends using the word 'nature' not as a noun, but as a term for something always in process, generative and dying, unfolding and engaging in cycles, and for something that is mysterious. 'To speak of mystery', he writes, 'is to say that the world contains...unseen forces' (2013: 100).

attunement with water, trees, animals, weather, the loss of connection with the physical and psychological turning seasons, has contributed to experiences of depression, numbness, ennui, eating problems, sleeping problems, loss of self-esteem. Prescribing outdoor activities, dream work, interaction with animals, ecotherapists aim to return clients to forgotten ways of living.⁶

Engagement with Psyche and the *anima mundi*

Jung often refers to psyche as the *objective* psyche to underscore its reality. He is not making a reference to a rather nebulous ‘soul’, nor to some fictional or metaphorical tool of the psychologist’s imagination. It is something that has tangible, autonomous existence. Jolande Jacobi, analyst and contemporary of Jung, describes it well: ‘the psyche is no less real than the body. Though it cannot be touched, it can be directly and fully experienced and observed. It is a world of its own, governed by laws, structured, and endowed with its own means of expression’ (1958: 1). It is vital that psyche has this independence, since it provides us with corrective information, guidance, for our subjective, conscious selves. As Jung put it:

the objective psyche is independent to the highest degree. Were it not so, it could not carry out its most characteristic function: the compensation of the conscious mind. The conscious mind allows itself to be trained like a parrot, but the unconscious does not... The unconscious is an autonomous psychic entity: any efforts to drill it are only apparently successful, and moreover are harmful to consciousness. It is and remains beyond the reach of subjective arbitrary control (1968, CW 12, para 51).

The objective psyche is not ‘ours’, as if humans are the only ones to experience psychic interiority. Rather, we are connected to an energy field that expands throughout the world and, in fact, the world has the lion’s share. So, when Jung references the *anima mundi* (the ancient idea of the world soul, a conviction resurfacing regularly through the

6. I note Patricia Hasbach’s resistance to any suggestion that all experiences of feeling healed through immersing oneself in nature is tantamount to ecotherapy: ‘A person who goes for a walk in the park to feel repose or reduce stress is not involved in ecotherapy. Everyone who gardens, walks along the seashore, climbs a nearby knoll, climbs a major mountain, or looks up into the night sky is not involved in a form of therapy’ (2012: 118). For her, ecotherapy involves a three-fold relationship between client, therapist, and nature. For a helpful illustrative overview of ecotherapy strategies see Jordan (2014).

centuries), he acknowledges connection with something that permeates and animates the cosmos.⁷ If we live cognizant of its presence, it can make a marked difference to how we relate to our surroundings. As David Tacey so helpfully points out, it means that when we traverse our habitat ‘we walk not through an outside world, but also through the interiority of the world. We can speak poetically of the “innerness of things,” and the natural world has an internal dimension that can impact on and affect us’ (2009a: 16). Offering practical steps to bring such awareness back to us is especially the remit of ecotherapy, which is perhaps why Larry Robinson describes the ecotherapist as a psychopomp, an ‘intermediary between the human and the nonhuman worlds, introducing them to each other’ (2009: 29).

Working Definition

Taking the above three points into account, the working definition that informs this book is as follows: Ecopsychology is the embodied study of how the damaged organic connection between humans and the psyche of the world in which they are embedded can be healed, and the rebirth of an ecological Self enabled.⁸

7. *Anima Mundi* crops up in the notion of panpsychism found in the hermetic tradition attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, in Plato’s notion of the world soul, in the Stoic understanding of logos and the cosmic soul, in the demiurge stories of Gnosticism, in Augustine’s thought that earth could be understood as the body of God, onwards through Jewish Kabbalah, Islamic mysticism, the alchemical tradition and renaissance thinking. Joseph Lee provides a helpful brief and accessible summary in the *This Jungian Life* podcast: ‘Healing the rift: Anima Mundi in a disenchanted world’ July 6th 2023: <https://thisjungianlife.com/anima-mundi> For a more detailed account see Bonifazi (1978).

8. Self is capitalised to distinguish it from the severely limited sense of self that comes from the central ego. Stein describes the Self as ‘utterly indeterminate, infinitely extended, never fully realized, and linked to (even fused with) the transcendent source and ground of being... [The Self] encompasses all the psyche’s inherent inner oppositions and obscurities, the shadows, and the numerous contradictions and riddles one has to live with in respect to an ever-shifting focus of ego identity and identification’ (2014: 15). It is the Self that pulls us toward finding meaning and significance in life, or in Stein’s words ‘towards the mystery of existence...toward the numinous and the holy’ (2014: 15). This can be a movement that develops within institutional religion, but also as the pull towards a balanced, integrated, rather mystical Self for those who live outside institutional religious structures.