



# Keep the **RULE** to Keep the **EARTH**

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT shows how Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40 challenges us to radical conversion so that we may keep Earth as our home.

**M**y aim each month is to offer an ecological interpretation of an Old Testament reading that we will hear on one Sunday during the month. I discovered that the first Lectionary reading on each

of the Sundays in May this year are taken from the New Testament book Acts of the Apostles, right up to the last Sunday of May when the Church celebrates Trinity Sunday. The first reading for that feast is taken from

the Book of Deuteronomy and it draws us into the world view that the Deuteronomist (the authorial voice) proposes: being faithful to God's commandments leads to life, and infidelity to those commandments leads to death. This paradigm, this pattern, this rule-of-thumb permeates not only the Book of Deuteronomy but also what is known as the Deuteronomistic history – the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

## Election Calls for Fidelity

Foundational to the Deuteronomist's world view is the theology of Israel being the chosen nation of God: "Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for that god's self from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" (Deut 4:34) Accompanying this theology of choice or election must be a fidelity to the commandments that lead to life, the Deuteronomist insists so emphatically.

What is not emphasised – indeed it is quite hidden – is the fate of the nation from which the chosen nation is freed. For example, the passing reference in Exodus 14:30 to the Egyptians lying dead on the seashore – to which we proclaim "Word of God" after listening to this reading during the Holy Vigil – is but one example. It shows that we need to engage with Deuteronomistic theology critically not only for its impact in the human community but in the other-than-human also.

## Deuteronomic Challenge

The Deuteronomist offers us a world view, a way of viewing or conceiving the world and how we should live in it. We are invited to: "Ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other." We are invited by the Deuteronomist as we are being invited by Earth system scientists to consider "former ages" as well as our own; to ask the new questions that Earth is addressing to us.

### Deuteronomy 4:32-34, 39-40

<sup>32</sup> Moses said to the people: "Ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other: has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard of? <sup>33</sup> Has any people ever heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have heard, and lived? <sup>34</sup> Or has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for that god's self from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? . . . <sup>39</sup> So acknowledge today and take to heart that our God is in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. <sup>40</sup> Keep God's statutes and commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that your God is giving you for all time."

### Dialogue with Earth System Scientist Clive Hamilton

In this regard, Clive Hamilton in his 2017 book *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Human in the Anthropocene* introduces us to Earth system science. This science proposes that we name the current geological epoch "the Anthropocene" – an age characterised by a rupturing of the Earth system itself. "It is the Earth taken as a whole in a constant stage of movement driven by interconnected cycles and forces... It is a single, dynamic, integrated system, and not a collection of ecosystems."

In order to explore what this new understanding might yield, I found myself returning to the opening words of the Deuteronomist in our focal text: "Ask now about former ages, long before your own, ever since the day that God created human beings on the earth; ask from one end of heaven to the other."

We are encouraged to ask about "former ages" – which for us would include the 14 billion years from the Big Bang to the present. And in our "asking" we are returned to the Anthropocene and to the Deuteronomic invocation to "ask from one end of heaven to the other".

In doing this we encounter Earth system scientists' discovery of "the new concept of the Earth system" which "encompasses and transcends previous objects of study such as 'the landscape,' 'ecosystems,' and 'the environment.'" Naming this current period as Anthropocene, therefore, does not encapsulate just the disturbances of ecosystems but the disruption of the entire Earth system.

The Deuteronomist asks: "Has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard?" Addressed to the emergence of the Anthropocene, this question confronts us as contemporary readers/hearers of the Deuteronomic text: "Has anything so great as this ever happened or has its like ever been heard?"

If this question echoes through current Earth system science, the answer that we will hear is an emphatic "NO!" As a result of human activity across the past century, there has been an unprecedented change to Earth's system, one unlike any other before it. And as a result, our entire way of being as Earth creatures in relation to Earth's systems must change.

In the final verse of the Deuteronomy text we hear this imperative: "Keep God's statutes and commandments, which I am commanding you today for your own well-being and that of your descendants after you, so that you may long remain in the land that your God is giving you for all time."

The "land" that God is giving/has given to the human community is Earth itself and its inhabitant community has an obligation to care for it. Current science has, however, revealed the depth of damage that has been done to Earth over more than a century or two, and asks if it is indeed irreparable.

We may have hope, but for Clive Hamilton the future of Earth is grim. We need to remember that the Deuteronomist's call to keep the commandments "so that you may long remain in the land" is no blanket guarantee but rather an exchange: we must keep the rule to keep the Earth. What the Deuteronomist calls for is a radical human conversion that allows us to continue to live on this planet – against the odds, against the Earth system science, even – this Earth that is given us "for all time". 🌱

Art by Lakai Monu, aged 12.



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