

METAPHORS OF GOD, NATURE AND BIRTH IN PSALM 90,2 AND PSALM 110,3

I. METAPHOR

The methodological background of this paper is a combination of a close reading of the Masoretic text and the old versions, reader-oriented intertextuality¹ and interaction theories of metaphor². Texts are parts of intertextual networks. This is important especially for metaphors: Which images are combined? Is it possible to speak of a semantic field, a “Bildfeld”, a “field of images”, a combination of images that is common to more than one text? Initiating an ongoing process of interpretation, metaphors create many different senses. Intertextuality is a term to describe the manifold interactions of texts and of text and reader as well. It is the reader who understands or fails to understand a text, who links texts, who identifies metaphors and creates meaning by filling the gaps, the missing links. He or she combines images with other texts and with his or her own experience. The imagery is taken from everyday life³.

Reader-response criticism always raises the question: Who is the reader? A contemporary reader in the context of the Ancient Near East has other associations than an European Biblical Scholar at the beginning of the 21st century. A rabbinic reader will stress other aspects of a metaphor than a Christian reader shaped by the interpretation of the Old Testament in the New. We can deal here only with examples. Interaction theories of metaphor do not intend to “translate” metaphors. It will never be possible to find the original meaning of a metaphor in its origi-

1. Cf. S. HOLTHUIS, *Intertextualität: Aspekte einer rezeptionsorientierten Konzeption* (Stauffenburg-Colloquium, 28), Tübingen, Stauffenburg, 1993; G. AICHELE (ed.), *Intertextuality and the Bible* (Semeia, 69/70), Atlanta, GA, Scholars, 1995; M. GROHMANN, *Aneignung der Schrift: Wege einer christlichen Rezeption jüdischer Hermeneutik*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 2000, pp. 23-38.43-61.

2. Cf. R. ZIMMERMANN, *Metaphertheorie und biblische Bildersprache: Ein methodologischer Versuch*, in *TZ* 56 (2000) 108-133. M.C.A. KORPEL, *A Rift in the Clouds: Ugaritic and Hebrew Descriptions of the Divine* (UBL, 8), Münster, Ugarit, 1990, pp. 35-54, and G. EIDEVALL, *Grapes in the Desert: Metaphors, Models, and Themes in Hosea 4-14* (CB.OT, 43), Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1996, pp. 49-67, give an overview over the development of interaction theory of metaphor.

3. Cf. K. NIELSEN, “From Oracles to Canon” – and the Role of Metaphor, in *SJOT* 17 (2003) 22-33, pp. 30-32; A. LABAHN, *Metaphor and Intertextuality: “Daughter of Zion” as a Test Case. Response to Kirsten Nielsen “From Oracles to Canon” – and the Role of Metaphor*, in *SJOT* 17 (2003) 49-67, pp. 50-53.

nal context. Metaphors evoke different associations in readers from different backgrounds. The task of interpretation is forming a multifaceted picture of different aspects of meaning.

II. GOD, NATURE AND BIRTH

Metaphors for God always involve the danger of anthropomorphism. As human beings, we can speak of God only in images taken from the world surrounding us. At the same time, with these images we will never understand God completely.

Ps 90,2 and Ps 110,3 provide some implicit metaphors for God. Both texts are open in their imagery. Interpretation includes defining whether they say something about God or not. Ps 90,2 is near to a personal metaphor of God and Ps 110,3 tends to an impersonal metaphoric way of speech⁴.

Both texts have something to do with nature. The term “nature” is, of course, an anachronism when speaking of biblical times. The Ancient Near East does not know the distinction between nature and culture. Nature is part of the surrounding world⁵. Phenomena of nature are often ascribed to numinous powers. Nature as a general term is the semantic field that links Ps 90,2 and Ps 110,3.

Both texts have something to do with birth. In both texts God is depicted as giving birth in some manner. How exactly does this happen? What is God doing in these texts? Is YHWH the subject of a birth process?

III. BIRTH OF MOUNTAINS, EARTH AND MAINLAND IN Ps 90,2

<i>Before mountains were born</i>	2a	בטרם הרים ילדו
<i>and you were in labor with earth and mainland,</i>	2b	ותחולל ארץ ותבל
<i>from everlasting to everlasting you are God.</i>	2c	מעולם עד-עולם אתה אל:

Ps 90 is “a prayer of Israel”⁶, a “communal MEDITATION”⁷ containing not only collective perspectives, but also individual parts. It contains not

4. As for the distinction of personal and impersonal metaphors, see NIELSEN, *Oracles* (n. 3), p. 29.

5. B. JANOWSKI, *Das biblische Weltbild: Eine methodologische Skizze*, in Id. – B. EGO (eds.), *Das biblische Weltbild und seine altorientalischen Kontexte* (FAT, 32), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2001, 3-26, here pp. 4ff., uses the term “natürliche Lebenswelt”.

6. C.A. BRIGGS – E.G. BRIGGS, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2 (ICC), Edinburgh, Clark, 1951, p. 271.

7. E.S. GERSTENBERGER, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL, 15), Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 2001, pp. 158.161.

only aspects of lamentation, but of wisdom as well. Vv. 1b-2 are part of the frame of Ps 90, a hymnic appeal to the God of creation.

Many translations try to avoid the birth imagery in V. 2a (e.g. NRSV: “Before the mountains were brought forth”), making the aspect of birth invisible and leaving it open how exactly this “bringing forth” was taking place. While ילד *qal* means “to give birth” or “to beget”, the *pual*-form (or passive *qal*) always means “to be born”⁸. It is possible to translate it in the general sense as “to be brought forth”, but only the literal translation – “before the mountains were born” – makes the birth imagery visible and leaves the gap open so that the reader can decide how he or she understands the verb. Already in this small problem of translation we find all the problems of metaphor: Can we understand ילד *pual* literally as birth of the mountains? Can God be the one giving birth to the mountains? A literal understanding is the basis for identifying a metaphor at all.

The second verb, ותחולל, derived from חיל *polel*, is ambivalent already in its Hebrew form, thus containing a gap: it can be 2nd person, masc., sing. (“you travailed / formed / brought forth in labor pains”⁹) or 3rd person, fem., sing. (“it/she [i.e. earth and mainland] formed / brought forth in labor pains”¹⁰). I prefer the first translation, which makes God the subject of this birth process. If ארץ ותבל would be the subject, then the object would be missing – one could add the mountains. Further, if we have a look at other texts with תבל as object, we find that it is almost always combined with verbs having God as subject (e.g. Jer 10,12; 51,15: כוץ; Ps 89,12: יסד). We find a parallel text in Isa 66,8, where the earth is born in labor. The transition to the 2nd person is plausible in view of the climax of the verse at the end. Understanding God as the subject of this second verb makes God the agent of the first – passive – verb ילדו as well. In the translation of ותחולל one can find the same tendency as with ילדו: The very concrete image of labour is made invisible

8. Cf. HAL, s.v.; A. GRUND, *Der gebärende Gott: Zur Geburtsmetaphorik in Israels Gottesrede*, in M. AUGUSTIN – H.-M. NIEMANN (eds.), *Stimulation from Leiden: Collected Communications to the XVIIIth Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament, Leiden 2004* (BEAT, 54), Frankfurt a.M., Lang, 2006, 305-318, here p. 307.

9. Cf., e.g., M.E. TATE, *Psalms 51–100* (WBC, 20), Waco, TX, Word Books, 1990, p. 431; H.-J. KRAUS, *Psalmen 60–150* (BKAT, 15/2), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 1989, p. 794.

10. The variant ותחולל (read by Septuagint, Aquila, Symmachus, Hieronymus and the Targum partly) is disregarded here. It would make the verb passive and leave it open whether God is responsible for this birth: “it [i.e. earth and mainland] was brought forth through labour pains”. M. DAHOOD, *Psalms 2. 51–100* (AB, 16), Garden City, NY, Doubleday, 1968, p. 323; T. KRÜGER, *Psalm 90 und die “Vergänglichkeit des Menschen”*, in *Bib* 75 (1994) 191-219, p. 193, e.g., follow this variant reading.

and understood as a general “forming” (NRSV). The unusual imagery of YHWH giving birth – even mentioning travail / labor pains – seems to be difficult for many exegetes.

Traditional Jewish explanations of this text have no problem understanding God as subject of this process, but they explain giving birth as creation¹¹: Rashi, for example, uses the standard verb for creation ברא:

“*Before mountains were born*” [Ps 90,2]: [i.e.] they were created (נבראו). Before you gave birth in labour to “*earth and mainland*” (בטרם חוללת ארץ) (ותבל¹²).

By choosing the perfect-form 2nd person sg. חוללת (“you gave birth in labor”), he points out that God is the subject of this birth. Thus Rashi explains the birth of mountains, earth and mainland as creation, making God the subject of creation. He keeps the image of giving birth in labor.

The mountains are the foundations of the earth, linking heaven and the waters below the earth. From other Psalms (e.g. Ps 18,8.16; 104,4-9) we learn that the mountains were covered with waters that flowed back after God’s command¹³. The enumeration ארץ ותבל (“earth and mainland”) is almost synonymous (cf. Nahum 1,5). This idea about the creation of the mountains is developed in a similar way in Midrash Tehillim: MTeh (Buber) 11 combines Ps 90,2 with Prov 8,25, because of its identic beginning בטרם הרים (“before mountains”):

“*Before mountains were born*” (Ps 90,2): Elsewhere Scripture says: “*Before mountains were settled/sunk*” (בטרם הרים הטבעו) (Prov 8,25). That means that the mountains of the world flew like these birds flying over the face of the waters. And where the Holy One, blessed be He, saw a very deep place, he put a big mountain in and filled it. And where He saw a level place, he put a small mountain in, because it is said: “*Before mountains were born and you were in labor with earth and mainland*” [Ps 90,2]¹⁴.

The settling or sinking of the mountains in Prov 8,25 is “explained” by a story and used to explain the birth process in Ps 90,2. The rabbis think more about the mountains on the earth than the foundations of the earth. God is explicitly the creator, the subject of the process. The Midrash leaves the birth image.

11. Cf. J. SCHNOCKS, *Vergänglichkeit und Gottesherrschaft: Studien zu Psalm 90 und dem vierten Psalmenbuch* (BBB, 140), Bonn, Philo, 2002, p. 54.

12. The Hebrew text is cited from M.I. GRUBER, *Rashi’s Commentary on Psalms* (BRLJ, 18), Leiden, Brill, 2004, p. 845. In his English translation (p. 575) Gruber makes the birth image invisible: “before You brought forth”.

13. Cf. E. ZENGER, *Psalm 90*, in F.-L. HOSSFELD – E. ZENGER, *Psalmen 51–100* (HTKAT), Freiburg, Herder, 2000, p. 610; GRUND, *Der gebärende Gott* (n. 8), p. 307.

14. MTeh (Buber) 11 to Ps 90,2.

The climax of Ps 90,2 lies at the end of the verse: God is addressed directly and reminded of his everlasting existence. The function of v. 2 is memory and reassurance. The everlasting existence of God and the close relationship between God and the one who prays have their foundation in the relationship of earlier generations (בְּדֶר וְדָר; v. 1) with God. Therefore, not only the ancestors but also the time before the creation of the world are brought into perspective. In v. 16 – together with v. 17 the second part of the frame of Ps 90 – children of the future are meant as symbols for ongoing life. The everlasting impression of time and the birth imagery is contrasted to the transitoriness of human life in v. 3. Imagery of nature occurs in Ps 90,5-6, where the grass symbolizes instability. God's understanding of time is contrasted to human understanding of time.

In Ps 90,2 the “calculated mistake”¹⁵, the gap, the clue to a metaphor lies in the fact that not human beings or animals are born, but phenomena of nature, concrete entities: mountains, earth and mainland. The unusual elements of this verse are the personification of nature and God giving birth.

The personification of phenomena of nature is visible, e.g., in Ps 65,13; 93,3; Ps 96,11. We find the image of God giving birth in a few other places in the Hebrew Bible, e.g. Deut 32,18; Ps 2,7, but in these texts God is giving birth to people or a single person, the king. Both motifs are combined, e.g., in Job 15,7, where the birth of the first human being (אָדָם) stands in parallel to that of the hills (גְּבוּעוֹת). Many semantic references link Ps 90,2 with Prov 8,22-31, the birth of Wisdom before the creation of the world: אָרֶץ “earth”, הַרִים “mountains” and תְּבֵל “mainland” are mentioned in Prov 8,23.25.26 as well, but in different order than in Ps 90,2. Two times the personified Wisdom recounts her birth with the identic הֵיל *polal*. She does not say explicitly who gave birth to her, but from the introducing יהוה קִנֵּי “YHWH created me” in Prov 8,22 follows that God is giving birth here as well¹⁶. In many other texts we find God linked with the creation of mountains or the earth. Therein creation is not linked with birth terminology, but with general terms of creation (cf., e.g., Ps 18,8.16; 93,1; 104,4-8).

The personification of phenomena of nature and the idea of God giving birth can be understood in the light of myths of the Ancient Near

15. Cf. P. RICŒUR, *Stellung und Funktion der Metapher in der biblischen Sprache*, in ID. – E. JÜNGEL, *Metapher: Zur Hermeneutik religiöser Sprache* (Evangelische Theologie. Sonderheft), München, Kaiser, 1974, 45-70, here p. 53.

16. For an illuminating discussion of Prov 8,22-31, cf. G. BAUMANN, *Die Weisheitsgestalt in Proverbien 1–9: Traditionsgeschichtliche und theologische Studien* (FAT, 16), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1996, pp. 111-152.

East. Myths rendering phenomena of nature as having a numinous, somehow personal character, are still present in the idea of birth of mountains, earth and mainland¹⁷. It is not irrelevant which images the Psalm uses to speak about God. YHWH integrates social roles¹⁸ and functions that are ascribed to different gods and goddesses in the surrounding world of the Ancient Near East.

Mountains, earth and mainland can be understood literally. Being born, they gain a numinous character and thus some kind of personality. The praying person remembers a time before their creation, when only God existed. The pre-existence of God before the creation of the mountains expresses God's might over the phenomena of nature. The process of their creation is described metaphorically as birth, as a human experience. It is insufficient to "translate" the verbs ילד *pual* "to be born" and ליל *polet* "to be in labor with" as other expressions for creation. Evoking specific associations they add aspects of meaning to the process of creation: being born constitutes a personal relationship, nearness, a close relationship between God and creation¹⁹. God being in labor is a strong image. Making visible the intensity and vehemence of birth labor, it hints at its ambiguity between happiness about new life and pain, perhaps fear. God being in labor and giving birth adds female aspects to JHWH, who is predominantly described with male social roles.

At the same time mountains, earth and mainland can be understood as images for eternity. Their lasting nature and stability contrast with the short lives of human beings. They parallel the existence of God, but, in addition to that, God's existence exceeds them all: While the birth of mountains, earth and mainland marks a starting point of their life, God is pre-existent before all phenomena of nature.

IV. WOMB OF DAWN AND DEW OF BIRTH IN PS 110,3

Ps 110 is a royal song or "at the very least a form of public utterance addressed to a royal figure"²⁰. A royal coronation at the temple in Jeru-

17. The Sumerian Goddess Ninkurra ("ruler of the mountains"), e.g., is begot by the God Enki and given birth to by the Goddess Ninnissa: cf. TUAT III, 374. The birth-giving earth is, e.g., theme of the dispute between wood and reed: cf. TUAT III, 358.

18. G. BAUMANN, *Die 'Männlichkeit' JHWHs: Ein Neuansatz im Deutungsrahmen altorientalischer Gottesvorstellungen*, in F. CRÜSEMANN, et al. (eds.), *Dem Tod nicht glauben: Sozialgeschichte der Bibel*. FS L. Schottroff, Gütersloh, Gütersloher Verlags-haus, 2004, 197-213, p. 202, uses the term "Soziomorphem".

19. G. FOHRER, *Basic Structures of Biblical Faith*, in Id., *Studien zum Alten Testament (1966-1988)* (BZAW, 196), Berlin – New York, de Gruyter, 1991, 101-131, p. 121, calls this close relationship the "correlation between God and man".

20. W.P. BROWN, *A Royal Performance: Critical Notes on Psalm 110:3aγ-b*, in *JBL* 117 (1998) 93-110, p. 93.

salem might be the *Sitz im Leben*, but it is not possible to reconstruct exact details of a coronation ceremony from the Psalm²¹: “Efforts to date it have ranged from the Davidic period right down to the Maccabean. [...] Most scholars opt for the period of the monarchy, generally in its early stages”²². The structure of Ps 110 is quite clear: It consists of two strophes: vv. 1-3 and vv. 4-7, each part containing an oracle + interpretation²³. In v. 3 a “you” is addressed, who might be the king (מֶלֶךְ is mentioned two times in the psalm – v. 4 and 5 – but not as an explicit addressee). It is ambiguous who is speaking to whom. One possibility is that v. 3 is a continuation of the divine oracle, beginning in v. 1, given by YHWH to somebody not named in the psalm who speaks about his master as אֲדֹנָי “my lord” (v. 1). He could be a court prophet²⁴.

Ps 110,3 – like the whole Ps 110 – is a very difficult text raising many unsolved questions. For almost every word of this verse we have variants – from the old manuscripts up to proposals of modern exegetes. Almost every translation takes another Hebrew text as basis of understanding. This multitude of readings visualizes the main idea of intertextuality²⁵, giving every reader the possibility to fill the gaps. The different variants are invitations to a dialogue with the text. Even the proposals of exegetes who retain MT²⁶ differ to a great extent. The manifold interpretations of Ps 110,3 essentially tend to two directions: a military context or the – perhaps divine – birth of the king²⁷. For the theme of birth only the second line is relevant. I intend to concentrate on our theme: Does this text say something about God giving birth? And what do the images of nature – dawn and dew – contribute to the theme of birth? Therefore, I refer only to the variants of words concerning these questions. In this case, textual criticism cannot be parted from syntactic and semantic questions.

21. Cf. L.C. ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC, 21), Waco, TX, Word Books, 1983, p. 83; KRAUS, *Psalmen 60–150* (n. 9), pp. 929-930; M. STOL, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible: Its Mediterranean Setting* (Cuneiform Monographs, 14), Groningen, Styx, 2000, p. 88.

22. ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 21), p. 83.

23. Cf. GERSTENBERGER, *Psalms* (n. 7), p. 263.

24. Cf. ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 21), p. 83.

25. Cf. U. BAIL, *Psalm 110: Eine intertextuelle Lektüre aus alttestamentlicher Perspektive*, in D. SÄNGER (ed.), *Heiligkeit und Herrschaft: Intertextuelle Studien zu Heiligkeitsvorstellungen und zu Psalm 110* (BTSt, 55), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 2003, 94-121, p. 99.

26. Cf., e.g., R.G. HANEY, *Text and Concept Analysis in Royal Psalms* (SBL, 30), New York, Lang, 2002, p. 113: “Your people are willing (lit. willingnesses) on the day of your strength; Your youth in holy array are to you as dew from the womb of the dawn”.

27. Cf., e.g., B. WEBER, *Werkbuch Psalmen 2: Die Psalmen 73 bis 150*, Stuttgart – Berlin – Köln, Kohlhammer, 2003, p. 222.

<i>Your people volunteer on the day of your power.</i>	3a	עמך נדבת ביום חילך
<i>In holy adornment, from the womb of dawn</i>	3b	בהררי־קדש מרחם משהר
<i>you have the dew of your childhood.</i>	3c	לך טל ילדתיך:

“power” is a keyword in the psalm: It links the sphere of war and military power with the power of birth, the strength of labor. Changing the Masoretic pointing of *בְּיוֹם חִילְךָ* “on the day of your power” to *חִילְךָ* “your birth / your labor pains”²⁸ would stress the aspect of birth. The proposal of the BHS – *חול־לֶךְ* “your labor / birth” – goes in the same direction. This reading is influenced by the *polet*-form ותחולל in the parallel in Ps 90,2. Although the root חיל is usually taken to have two different meanings: “strength / power” and “birth labor”²⁹, there can be at least an associative link between them: birth labor can also evoke the association of strength / power in giving birth.

The next text-critical problem is another example of the intertextuality of various versions: A fragment found in the Cairo Geniza, many Hebrew manuscripts, Symmachus and Hieronymus as well as many exegetes since judge *בהררי־קדש* “in holy adornment”³⁰ in Ps 110,3 as a *ר/ר*-mistake and change it to *בהררי־קדש* “on holy mountains”³¹. Arguments for this variant are the usual form *בהדרת־קדש* (e.g. Ps 29,2; 96,9) and the Egyptian mythology: the rise of the sun god between the mountains of the horizon is depicted as birth³². However, it is possible to follow the *lectio difficilior* of the MT: in the openness of the Hebrew syntax *בהררי־קדש* “in holy adornment” can either belong to the first part of v. 3 – as description of the volunteering people – or to the last part – as some kind of metaphoric illustration of the circumstances of birth.

“dawn” is a hapax legomenon. The usual form is *שהר*, but *משהר* can be explained as a *m*-reduplication in copying³³ or as a poetic

28. Cf. WEBER, *Werkbuch* (n. 27), p. 221, mentions this translation in brackets. This change is often linked with the change of *יְלִדְתִּיךָ* to *יְלִדְתִּיךָ*, an adaption to Ps 2,7: cf. ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 21), p. 80.

29. Cf. HAL, s.v.

30. G.A. RENDSBURG, *Psalms CX 3B*, in VT 49 (1999) 548–553, p. 551, suggests the translation “In the manifestation of holiness” for MT.

31. Cf. ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 21), pp. 79–80; M. SAUR, *Die Königpsalmen: Studien zur Entstehung und Theologie* (BZAW, 340), Berlin – New York, de Gruyter, 2004, p. 205; A. GRUND, „Aus Gott geboren...“: *Zu Geburt und Identität in der Bildsprache der Psalmen*, in D. DIECKMANN – D. ERBELE-KÜSTER (eds.), “Du hast mich aus meiner Mutter Leib gezogen”: *Beiträge zur Geburt im Alten Testament* (BTSt, 75), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 2006, 99–120, p. 114.

32. Cf. B. JANOWSKI, *Rettungsgewissheit und Epiphanie des Heils: Das Motiv der Hilfe Gottes “am Morgen” im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament*. Bd I: *Alter Orient* (WMANT, 59), Neukirchen-Vluyn, Neukirchener, 1989, pp. 135–154.

33. Cf. J.W. MCKAY, *Helel and the Dawn-Goddess: A Re-Examination of the Myth in Isaiah XIV 12–15*, in VT 20 (1970) 451–464, p. 458.

form³⁴, and thus is kept here. The Septuagint omits **לך טל** “for you is dew” completely, translating: *ἐκ γαστρὸς πρὸ ἑωσφόρου ἐξέγεννησά σε* “From the womb I have born / begotten you before dawn”. Another proposal is the change of **לך טל** to **כטל** “like dew”³⁵. In this case, the difficult reading of the MT should be kept as well. My intention in the following is to ask which associations these images evoke.

Prominent is the change of **יְלִדְתִּיךָ** “your youth” to **יְלִדְתִּי** “I have born / begotten you”, following many Hebrew manuscripts, Origen, the Septuagint and the Peshitta. If one translates **ילד** *qal* with “I gave birth to you”, this variant would stress the birth context and make God explicitly the subject of birth. This variant is influenced by the intertext Ps 2,7, but it is not necessary to change MT in this way. It is possible to translate **יְלִדְתִּיךָ** (cf. Qoh 11,9) as “your birth/childhood/youth”. It could hint to some kind of “nativity”, the general fact of being born or the circumstances of birth and childhood.

Contrary to Ps 90,2, where phenomena of nature – mountains, earth and mainland – are mentioned and linked with verbs of birth, in Ps 110,3 it is the other way around: The birth of the king and the first period after birth are described with images of nature: **משחר** “dawn” and **טל** “dew” symbolize a new beginning, but also fertility and blessing. **רחם** “womb/uterus”³⁶ links the two areas of imagery, birth and nature. On the one hand, it is a concrete part of the female body where the embryo grows and birth originates. On the other hand, as **רחם משחר** it becomes a metaphor. A god or goddess of dawn, giving birth to the sun every morning – as it is well-known in the ancient Near East³⁷ – might stand in the background of this image. Kings in different contexts in the Ancient Near East present their divine origin – being engendered by a god and given birth to by a goddess – to demonstrate their power³⁸.

The images of nature might contribute the association of newness and freshness to the circumstances of the birth and the youth of the king – a special Israelite king or kings in general. The birth of the king is outlined with an impersonal image of nature here and assigned to the sphere

34. Cf. ALLEN, *Psalms 101–150* (n. 21), 1983, pp. 79–80; RENDBURG, *Psalms CX 3B* (n. 30), p. 550; HAL s.v. **מִשְׁחָר**; K. KOCH, *Der König als Sohn Gottes in Ägypten und Israel*, in E. OTTO – E. ZENGER (eds.), “*Mein Sohn bist du*” (Ps 2,7): Studien zu den Königspsalmen (SBS, 192), Stuttgart, Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2002, 1–32, p. 18.

35. Cf. App. BHS; SAUR, *Königspsalmen* (n. 31), p. 205; GRUND, “*Aus Gott geboren...*” (n. 31), pp. 114f.

36. The proposal of RENDBURG, *Psalms CX 3B* (n. 30), to translate **רחם** with ‘rain’ is not convincing.

37. Cf. MCKAY, *Helel* (n. 33), p. 456; JANOWSKI, *Weltbild* (n. 5), pp. 8f.; KOCH, *König* (n. 34), pp. 19f.

38. For the Babylonian context, see STOL, *Birth* (n. 21), pp. 83–89.

of God. Birth can be the “real” event and the phenomena of nature the imagery contributing meaning to this event. At the same time, the whole sentence v. 3b.c can be understood as a timeless promise of power and the newness of being born.

This interpretation is only one of many possibilities. The history of exegesis of Ps 110 shows many ways of metaphoric reading of the birth of the king. Very early Jewish tradition connected it with Abraham³⁹: Midrash Bereshit Rabba, for example, connects Ps 110,3 with the interpretation of לך לך in Gen 12,1: God says to Abraham: מרחמו שלעולם “From the everlasting womb [or: the womb of the world] I was on the lookout for you”. This interpretation gives the idea that the rabbis do not have a problem with the mythical concept of an eternal womb – maybe the mount of Moriah.

In the continuation of the Midrash we find the dew linked with Abraham’s sins. God answers Abraham’s expression of fear that he could have worshipped idols:

The Holy One – Blessed Be He – said to him [to Abraham]: “The dew of your youth”: As this dew sprouts (פורה or: passes), your sins sprout (עוונותיך פורחים). And as this dew is a sign of blessing for the world (סימן ברכה לעולם), also your sins are a sign of blessing to the world (GenR 39,8).

This interpretation hints at aspects of dew: the sprouting, maybe passing, and the blessing of dew.

Among the Christian readings of Ps 110, starting from numerous citations of Ps 110 in the NT from the Septuagint – excluding our v. 3 –, the messianic interpretation is the dominant one⁴⁰. All these interpretations open other dialogues with our text.

V. CONSEQUENCES OF THE NATURE- AND BIRTH-METAPHORS FOR THE IMAGE OF GOD

Reading Ps 90,2 and Ps 110,3 together produces another example of intertextuality. Hebrew roots common to both texts are ילד and חיל. The textual variant בהררי־קדש “on holy mountains” instead of בהררי־קדש “in holy adornment” in Ps 110,3 opens an intertextual dialogue with Ps 90,2 because of the common word הרים “mountains”. In both texts, images of nature are used in a broad sense. The mythological background

39. Cf. G. BODENDORFER, *Abraham zur Rechten Gottes: Der Ps 110 in der rabbinischen Tradition*, in *EvT* 59 (1999) 252-266.

40. Cf. SÄNGER, *Heiligkeit und Herrschaft* (n. 25).

of the Ancient Near East, in which phenomena of nature are linked with gods and goddesses, is still at hand. Phenomena of nature bear a numinous character; they seem to be personified somehow. Mountains, earth and mainland being born in labor pains means that they are similar to human beings in their “nativity”. That the dawn has a womb evokes its personification as a goddess or god. Part of this mythological background – common to both texts as well – is God standing behind a birth process. In Ps 90,2, this is expressed explicitly, while in Ps 110,3 it is only an allusion. Both texts leave much space for the imagination of the reader. The individual elements of these images can be read literally and metaphorically at the same time. With hints at God giving birth, both texts portray an image of God that causes “gender-troubles”: it adds female aspects to many male aspects of the God of Israel. Ps 90,2 and Ps 110,3 are examples of the “dual-gendered nature” of the God of Israel⁴¹. At the same time, they show God as being neither male nor female, but standing above this distinction.

Birth images stress the close relationship between human beings, God and nature. God even having labor pains places God near to human – especially female – experiences. Metaphoric interaction means that the images influence each other mutually. The fact that birth is linked with cosmic processes of creation in Ps 90,2 and with a mythical sunrise in Ps 110,3 contributes to the idea of birth: every birth contains elements of archaic processes and divine elements beyond human reach. The difficulty we have explaining these texts – especially Ps 110,3 – has a parallel in the difficulty explaining birth and phenomena of nature⁴².

It is necessary to translate Psalmverses as near to the Hebrew text as possible to give the reader the opportunity to see the whole range of interpretations between literal and metaphorical. The timelessness of the Psalms lies in their openness to having their gaps filled in many different ways, creating multifaceted meanings.

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41. Cf. H.J. MARSMAN, *Women in Ugarit and Israel: Their Social and Religious Position in the Context of the Ancient Near East* (OTS, 49), Leiden – Boston, Brill, 2003, pp. 195, 227-228.

42. For a more detailed study, see M. GROHMANN, *Fruchtbarkeit und Geburt in den Psalmen* (FAT, 53), Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2007, pp. 70-117.