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Mother Earth as a Conceptual Metaphor in 4 Ezra

Fourth Ezra, a Jewish apocalypse written near the end of the first century C.E., begins with a lament over both the human condition of sin and death in general and Israel's defeat by the Romans in particular. Ezra's mood of mourning persists through the first three of the seven episodes, which take the form of dialogues between Ezra and the angel Uriel, and into the fourth, which begins with a dialogue between Ezra and a mourning woman. Both the mood and the literary form of the book shift abruptly in the middle of the central episode, when the woman with whom Ezra is speaking is suddenly transformed into a vision of the glorious eschatological Zion. The fifth and sixth episodes consist of visions of the triumph of the Messiah, and the seventh recounts the restoration of Israel's lost Scriptures.

This paper examines a motif that occurs only in the four dialogues: the metaphorical concept of Mother Earth, which emerges in the central episode as a focus of Ezra's mourning. Mother Earth functions in 4 Ezra as an underlying "conceptual metaphor" that provides coherence among various metaphorical statements in the book. In treating the motif of Mother Earth in 4 Ezra as a "conceptual metaphor," I draw upon the cognitive theory of metaphor proposed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson,[1] refined with respect to the poetic use of metaphor by Lakoff and Mark Turner,[2] and further developed, in dialogue with cognitive science and linguistics, into a theory of "conceptual

[1] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, Metaphors We Live By (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). Lakoff brought his and Johnson's theory into conversation with studies in cognitive psychology in Women, Fire and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

[2] George Lakoff and Mark Turner, More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989). Turner carried the cognitive theory of metaphor further into the realm of literary criticism and rhetoric in Death is the Mother of Beauty: Mind, Metaphor, Criticism (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), which focuses on kinship metaphors in literature.

blending" by Turner and Gilles Fauconnier.[3] Building upon the conclusions of my book, Theologies in Conflict in 4 Ezra, I assume that neither Ezra's nor Uriel's use of the metaphorical concept of Mother Earth is representative of the author's own thinking; rather, the author is subjecting the views expressed by both of them to scrutiny.[4] I will show that the Mother Earth metaphor underlies both Uriel's analogical instructions about the eschaton (section I) and Ezra's meditations on human nature in the dialogues (section II), and that it is called into question both within the dialogues between Ezra and Uriel and in Ezra's subsequent dialogue with the mourning woman (section III).

I. Uriel's analogical use of the metaphor

One of the striking features of the dialogues of 4 Ezra is the angel Uriel's tendency to explain eschatological matters to Ezra by means of analogies to natural phenomena, especially the phenomena of childbirth and agriculture. These phenomena are connected, I argue, by the underlying conceptual metaphor of Mother Earth. The basis of Uriel's analogies is the assumption that just as the natural order is fixed by divine providence, so are the events of the end time; and while the divine plan for the end time is beyond the reach of human knowledge, it is possible to infer something about divine providence by observing and reasoning from the natural order. Uriel's analogical method of instructing Ezra about eschatology is in tension with his speeches about the "signs" of the end, which include a breakdown of the natural order.

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[3] Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

[4] Karina Martin Hogan, Theologies in Conflict in 4 Ezra: Wisdom Debate and Apocalyptic Solution (JSJSup 130; Leiden: Brill, 2008). I argue that the dialogues represent a debate between two wisdom theologies to which the author no longer subscribes; his non-rational "solution" to the problems raised in the dialogues is presented in the visions in the latter part of the book.

Uriel's first analogy to childbirth comes immediately after an extended metaphor likening the final judgment to the threshing of a harvest (4:28-32), to be treated below. In response to Ezra's question about whether the "time of the threshing is delayed for the righteous on account of the sins of those who dwell on earth" (4:39), Uriel commands him, "Go and ask a woman who is with child if, when her nine months have been completed, her womb can keep the child within her any longer" (4:40). After Ezra answers that it cannot, Uriel draws out the analogy: "The underworld and the treasuries of the souls are like the womb" (4:41), adding, "For just as a woman who is in travail makes haste to escape the pangs of birth, so also do these (places) hasten to give back those things that were committed to them from the beginning" (4:42).

Uriel's analogy in 4:41-42 focuses on one salient fact about pregnancy: it has a predetermined ending, which is signaled by "the pangs of birth."[5] Since "the underworld and the treasuries of the souls" were believed to be located underground, comparing them to the womb implies that the earth is the expectant mother of the dead, who will be reborn at a predetermined time, in the resurrection that will precede the final judgment. The explicit analogy between the underworld and the womb, which is implicit in the Old Testament in verses such as Gen 3:19, Job 1:21, Ps 139:13, 15 and Sir 40:1, entails a metaphorical identification of the dead with the unborn.[6]

The Mother Earth concept also underlies the extended agricultural metaphor (4:28-32) that immediately precedes the first childbirth analogy. This is not obvious because this passage mixes two conceptual metaphors: people are fertile ground that may

[5] Cf. Matt 24:8 par. Mark 13:8, where the messianic woes (equivalent to the "signs" of the end in 4 Ezra) are called "the beginning of the birth pangs."

[6] See Nicholas Tromp, Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Netherworld in the Old Testament (Biblica et Orientalia 21; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) 122-24.

produce either good or evil fruit; and people are plants sown in the ground, awaiting harvest.[7] The first of these metaphors is expressed most clearly by Uriel in 4:30: "For a grain of evil seed was sown in Adam's heart from the beginning, and how much fruit of ungodliness it has produced until now, and will produce until the time of threshing comes!" The "evil seed" Uriel refers to is equivalent to the "evil root" that prevents the Torah from producing fruit in the human heart, according to Ezra in 3:20-22. The people are plants metaphor is implied in the phrase "the time of threshing" (4:30), which Ezra immediately recognizes as a reference to the final judgment (4:39).[8] The passage employs two inconsistent metaphors, but what makes it intelligible is that both metaphors are coherent with the Mother Earth metaphor. In the case of people are fertile ground, people are seen to share a common material nature with the earth's surface (as in Gen 2:7 and 3:19). The people are plants metaphor also coheres with Mother Earth concept, since the ground is the matrix in which plants grow. To imagine the earth as giving birth to and sustaining human life often means to describe human beings in terms appropriate to plants.[9]

Inthe second dialogue, in response to Ezra's question to God, "Could you not have created at one time those who have been and those who are and those who will be, that you might show your judgment the sooner?" (5:43), Uriel commands Ezra, "Ask a woman's womb, and say to it, 'If you bear ten children, why one after another?' Request

[7] Of the two metaphors, people are plants is by far the more common one; see Lakoff and Turner, More than Cool Reason, Index of Metaphors. Biblical comparisons of people to plants frequently emphasize the brevity of human life; e.g., Job 14:1-2, Ps 103:15, Isa 40:6-7, 24, etc. A variation of people are fertile ground is found in the parable of the sower and its explanation (Matt 13:3-9, 18-23 par Mark 4:3-9, 14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15), in which true disciples are "good soil."

[8] Cf. Matt 3:12 par. Lk 3:17.

[9] In the Hebrew Bible, the vocabulary of human reproduction and agriculture overlap; e.g., `(rz` for both plant seed and human semen (as well as human offspring), `yrp` for both agricultural produce and human offspring, and `)cy` (in both Qal and Hif'il) used for the "coming forth" of both plants from the earth and human offspring from the womb. See Vall, "From Womb to Tomb," 42-43.

it therefore to produce ten at one time" (5:46). Once Ezra has acknowledged the absurdity of this suggestion, Uriel draws out the analogy: "Even so I have made the earth a womb for those who from time to time come forth on it" (5:48). The Latin version, "...who from time to time are sown upon it," just makes more explicit the underlying people are plants metaphor that makes the analogy work. In this analogy, the earth functions as a womb that sustains the living, rather than containing the dead, as in Uriel's previous childbirth analogy (4:41-42); each analogy foregrounds a different aspect of the Mother Earth concept.[10]

The following verse sheds some light on the assumptions behind Uriel's birth analogies: "For as an infant does not bring forth, and a woman who has become old does not bring forth any longer, so I have organized (Syr: tNQt)) the world which I created" (5:49). Speaking for the Creator, Uriel asserts that a woman's limited childbearing years are an indication of an organizing principle that governs the whole created order. This principle, which emerges from Uriel's next analogy, is that all creation is in a state of gradual decline that will end in death (i.e., the end of the world). Since this principle could have been asserted by means of an analogy to the human life cycle in general, that the author's choice to present it by analogy with a woman's limited and declining period of fertility is influenced by the Mother Earth metaphor. Ezra's next question betrays the influence of that metaphor: "Is our mother, of whom you have told me, still young? Or is she now approaching old age?" (5:50). The referent of "our mother" is surely the earth, going back to 5:48, even though Uriel has broadened the analogy to include the whole creation (5:49). By combining the principle of decline in the world with the Mother

[10] By contrast, Sir 40:1 foregrounds both aspects of the earth's maternity simultaneously, as do many Greek and Roman sources. See, for example, Lucretius, De Rerum Natura, 1:248-64, 2:991-1001, 5:257-260.

Earth metaphor, the author creates a conceptual blend, asserting that people in his own time are "born of a creation which already is aging and passing the strength of youth" (5:55). [Figure 1]

The principle of an observable decline that points to the impending end of the present world is asserted explicitly in the passages in all three dialogues describing the "signs" of the end (5:1-12, 6:18-24, and 9:1-5). For present purposes, the most interesting example is a description of the overturning of the normal expectations of human reproduction and agriculture: "Infants a year old shall speak with their voices, and women shall give birth to premature children at three and four months, and these shall live and dance. Unsown places shall suddenly appear sown, and full storehouses shall suddenly be found to be empty" (6:21-22).[11] These "signs" cut both ways vis-à-vis Uriel's analogies: on the one hand they reinforce the principle that the world is an aging organism, since the eschatological breakdown of the natural and social order is comparable to the accelerated failure of bodily systems that precedes natural death. On the other hand, the reversal of expectations inherent in many of the signs undercuts the assumption behind Uriel's analogies: that it is possible to infer something about eschatological events or even about the world to come based on observation of everyday phenomena of the present world.

The blending of the principle of decline with the Mother Earth metaphor points to a possible resolution to the tension between Uriel's analogies and the "signs" of the end: if the death of the present world coincides with the birth of a new creation, then it is

[11] Cf. "women shall bring forth monsters" in 5:8. Rebecca Raphael discusses these signs, particularly "anomalous births," as symptomatic of "cosmic decay" in her essay, "Monsters and the Crippled Cosmos: Construction of the Other as an Anomalous Body in 4 Ezra," to be published in a Festschrift for John J. Collins entitled The Other in Second Temple Judaism (ed. Matthew Goff, Daniel Harlow, Karina Martin Hogan and Joel Kaminsky; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

possible to conceptualize the world to come as the "child" of this world, both discontinuous with it and at the same time related to it. In the eschatological scenario in the third dialogue (7:26-44), Uriel foretells that after the world has been "returned back to primeval silence for seven days, as it was at the first beginnings" (7:30), "the earth shall give back those who are asleep in it, and the dust those who rest in it; and the treasuries shall give up the souls which have been committed to them" (7:32). By conceptualizing the general resurrection as a birth (cf. 4:41-42), Uriel implies a genetic relationship between the present created order (which merges with the concept of Mother Earth in 5:48-50) and the world to come. This implied genetic relationship is a justification for Uriel's analogies between the phenomena of this world and those of the world to come, despite the eschatological reversal of the natural order.

II. Ezra's use and questioning of the metaphor

The motherhood of the earth is also a recurring motif in Ezra's speeches, and while his use of the metaphor is not consistent, it is certainly persistent, entering into every one of his reflections on the creation of Adam, many of which have to do with the origins of human suffering.[12] It is subtly present at the outset of his very first speech in the book, which begins, "O sovereign Lord, did you not speak at the beginning when you formed the earth—and that without help—and commanded the dust and it gave you Adam, a lifeless body? Yet he was the creation of your hands, and you breathed into him the breath of life and he was made alive in your presence" (3:4-5). Although these verses

[12] On the figure of Adam as a focus for reflections on human nature, see John R. Levison, Portraits of Adam in Early Judaism From Sirach to 2 Baruch (JSPSup 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1988). Ezra generally evokes the Mother Earth metaphor in the context of allusions to the first chapters of Genesis.

emphasize that God is the sole creator of the earth and the primary creator of Adam (in that God gave Adam life), they do contain a rather unusual acknowledgement that the dust "gave" God Adam's "lifeless body." The idea that the earth is the co-creator of humankind appears more clearly in 7:62-63: "O earth, what have you brought forth, if the mind is made out of the dust like the other created things! For it would have been better if the dust itself had not been born, so that the mind might not have been made from it." In the context of the larger passage, the "mind" (understood to be perishable, like the body) is the part of human beings that makes them uniquely human: mortal creatures that are acutely aware of their own mortality (7:64). If the mind stands for humankind by metonymy, these verses are coherent with the Mother Earth metaphor, in that human beings are seen to share a common material substance (dust) with the earth.

In 7:116, Ezra most fully personifies the earth as the mother of Adam: "This is my first and last word: that it would have been better if the earth had not produced Adam, or else, when it had produced him, had taught him not to sin." Here, for the only time in the book, the author includes the metaphorical entailment of moral instruction or discipline in the source domain of motherhood, rather than simply pregnancy, childbirth and physical sustenance. Stone offers a plausible explanation for this anomaly: Ezra is euphemistically blaming the "mother" for what he really sees as the "father's" (i.e., God's) fault: not hindering people from sinning (cf. 3:8).[13] Thus 7:116 is doubly metaphorical: the earth is represented as a mother in order to make a point about God's parental responsibilities toward human beings.

Ezra's remarkable meditation on God's involvement in the creation of every human life in the womb (8:4–14), which space does not allow us to treat here, represents

[13] Stone, Fourth Ezra, 258.

a turning point in Ezra's use of the Mother Earth metaphor. His subsequent uses of the metaphor show an increasing consciousness of its limitations and the differences that it obscures between the earth and actual mothers. Uriel appears not at all swayed by Ezra's eloquence in that meditation and subsequent appeal for divine mercy, as evidenced by the analogy he employs to reiterate his earlier point that "many have been created, but only a few will be saved" (8:3): "For just as the farmer sows many seeds and plants a multitude of seedlings, and yet not all that have been sown will live in due season, and not all the plants will take root; so also those who have been sown in the world will not all live" (8:41). This agricultural analogy presupposes the Mother Earth metaphor, in that "those who have been sown in the world" clearly refers to human beings via the people are plants metaphor. Ezra's response (8:42-45) is his only direct challenge to one of Uriel's analogies, but it is a vehement one:

> I answered and said, "If I have found favor before you, let me speak. For if the farmer's seed does not come up, because it has not received your rain in due season, or has been ruined by too much rain, it perishes. But man, who has been formed by your hands and resembles your own image, and for whose sake you have formed all things—have you also made him like the farmer's seed? No, O Lord who are over us! But spare your people and have mercy on your inheritance, for you have mercy on your own creation." (8:42-45)

Ezra calls into question the people are plants metaphor (and indirectly the Mother Earth metaphor that it coheres with) by pointing out several differences between people and plants. The fate of plants (or, more precisely, crops) depends on the right amount of rainfall at the right time, while human beings, created in God's image, presumably have

more control over their destiny, as Uriel himself has been arguing (e.g., 7:127-31). Asserting that the rest of creation exists for the sake of humankind (8:44), Ezra renews his appeal to God for mercy on Israel ("your people...your inheritance," 8:45), on the grounds that they are God's "own creation," collapsing (as he often does) the distinction between humankind and the chosen people.[14]

Ezra also calls into question the second agricultural metaphor used by Uriel in 4:28-32 (and by Ezra in 3:20-22 and 8:6), the people are fertile ground metaphor, which is also coherent with the Mother Earth metaphor. In the monologue that opens the fourth episode, Ezra imagines God addressing Israel at Sinai as follows: "...I sow my law in you, and it shall bring forth fruit in you, and you shall be glorified through it forever" (9:31).[15] Alluding to Uriel's remarks about the law in 7:20-24, Ezra observes that while the fruit of the law did not perish, because it was God's, those who received the law "perished because they did not keep what was sown in them" (7:32-33). Ezra then constructs an elaborate triple analogy to show that this is the opposite of what common experience leads one to expect: how could the ground be destroyed and the seed that was sown in it nevertheless survive? (7:34-37).[16] Even though Ezra's argument is contorted, it induces the reader to think critically about the people are fertile ground metaphor, which might in turn lead some readers to question the related Mother Earth metaphor.

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[14] Other examples of Ezra's collapsing this distinction include 3:21-22 and 6:54-55; Uriel similarly collapses it, for example in 7:20-24, 70-74, 127-31. Ezra reasserts the distinction, however, in 8:15-16.

[15] Another example of an imaginary quotation of God, also set at Sinai, is God's command to Moses in 14:6, "These words you shall publish openly, and these you shall keep secret."

[16] I have argued that this passage is meant to be a parody of Uriel's analogies. See Theologies in Conflict, 153-56. In reading the passage as ironic, I follow Egon Brandenburger, Die Verborgenheit Gottes im Weltgeschehen: Das literarische und theologische Problem des 4. Esrabuches (ATANT 68. Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1981) 63-67.

III. Ezra's dialogue with the mourning woman

Fourth Ezra's last and most explicit use of the Mother Earth metaphor is part of Ezra's speech to the mourning woman, which he begins in anger: "You most foolish of women, do you not see our mourning, and what has happened to us? For Zion, the mother of us all, is in deep grief and great affliction" (10:6-7). The epithet "the mother of us all" apparently reminds him of the earth, because he continues:

> It is most appropriate to mourn now, because we are all mourning, and to be sorrowful, because we are all sorrowing; you, however, are sorrowing for one son. Now ask the earth, and she will tell you that it is she who ought to mourn over so many who have come to being upon her. And from the beginning all have been born of her, and others will come; and behold, all go to perdition, and a multitude of them are destined for destruction. Who then ought to mourn the more, she who lost so great a multitude, or you who are grieving for one? (10:8-11)

Setting aside the irony that the mourning woman turns out to be Zion, let us examine the conceptual blend that the author creates by having Ezra contrast the woman's loss with that of the earth. "The mourning Mother Earth" is a blend because it emerges from the projection of a generic space, containing the structures of motherhood and loss of offspring, and two input spaces, representing the mourning woman and the earth, into a blended space. The resulting conceptual blend [Figure 2] is more than just a superimposition of the generic space on the two input spaces, since it contains an explicit claim (posed as a rhetorical question in verse 11) that the earth has more cause to mourn than the woman.

Ezra immediately calls the blend into question, however, by imagining the woman's objection:

> But if you say to me, "My lamentation is not like the earth's sadness, for I have lost the fruit of my womb, which I brought forth in pain and in sorrow, but it is with the earth according to the way of the earth—the multitude that is now in it goes as it came"; then I say to you, "As you brought forth in sorrow, so the earth also has from the beginning given her fruit, that is, humankind, to him who made her." (10:12-14)

Even though Ezra attempts to refute the woman's imagined objection, it is, after all, he who raises the objection, and the refutation does not really answer the objection. Ezra, speaking for the woman, brings up an entailment of motherhood, pain in childbirth, which does not normally have an analogue in the earth. In contrast to the woman's overwhelming grief, to which she can imagine no relief other than death (10:4, 18), the earth feels neither pain when "the multitude that is now in it" comes into the world, nor sorrow when it departs, Ezra objects on the woman's behalf. The passing of generations is simply "the way of the earth."

At the same time that Ezra, speaking for the woman, raises these objections to the Mother Earth metaphor, he insists on its validity, even in the words he ascribes to the woman, calling her child "the fruit of my womb." The familiar phrase "fruit of [the] womb" depends on the Mother Earth metaphor for its meaning, since it implies an analogy (made explicit in 10:14) between fruit, a product of the earth, and a child, the product of the womb.[17] Moreover, in refuting the imagined objection, Ezra returns to the

[17] This analogy is also apparent in the juxtaposition of "fruit of your womb" with "fruit of your ground" in Deut 7:13 and 28:4, 11, 18, 53; and cf. Hos 9:16.

image with which he began his first monologue (3:4-5)—the earth, created by God, "gave" God Adam—only it is generalized to all humankind in 10:14. In generalizing the image, Ezra suppresses his earlier observation that the first human being that the earth produced was a "lifeless body" (3:5) in need of animation by God. Yet God's active and extensive participation in the creation of every human life was at the forefront of Ezra's mind in his objection to Uriel's seed analogy in 8:43-45 (and in his monologue on God's involvement in procreation, 8:4-14). In Ezra's dispute with the mourning woman in 10:12-14, which is really a dispute with himself, he runs up against a limitation inherent in the Mother Earth metaphor: it is not really compatible with the image of God as a nurturing parent that Ezra also wants to maintain. In fact, it lends itself to a rather impersonal and mechanistic view of the human life cycle, in which people are comparable to plants. Ezra tries to gloss that over by implying that the earth also grieves over her lost "children"— "As you brought forth in sorrow, so the earth also..." (10:14)—but he stops short of claiming that the earth actually does feel sorrow at giving her human "fruit" to God. Thus the author, by allowing Ezra to speak for a moment from the woman's perspective, induces the reader to think critically about the conceptual blend of the mourning Mother Earth that he set up in 10:8-11, and hence to recognize the limitations of the Mother Earth metaphor.

IV. Conclusion

The prevalence of both maternal and agricultural imagery in 4 Ezra has been explained here as the result of the author's fascination with the conceptual metaphor of Mother Earth. The concept of Mother Earth is not debated explicitly in the dialogues, but it does not escape critical examination. Nevertheless, it gives the author a way to

conceptualize the relationship between human beings and the world, and between this world and the world to come. Human beings are understood to share a common material substance with the earth, being made from the dust (3:4-5, 7:62-63; cf. 7:116, 10:14), and sometimes are described as fertile ground that can produce fruit (3:20-22, 4:30-32, 8:6, 9:31-37). At other times, the dependence of human beings (among other living things) upon the earth for sustenance is expressed via metaphors that liken people to plants (4:28-29, 5:45-48, 8:41). It is this last group of metaphors that is difficult to reconcile with Ezra's belief in God's personal involvement in the creation of each human life (8:4-14, 8:44-45).

In a conceptual blend of the principle of a declining cosmos and the Mother Earth metaphor, the present creation is described as a mortal female in decline, nearing the end of her childbearing years (5:43-55; cf. 6:14-16). This is an apocalyptic adaptation of the Mother Earth concept, based on the belief that "the Most High has made not one world but two" (7:50). Not entirely consistent with the notion of the present creation as an aging mother, but coherent with it, the general resurrection that marks the beginning of the world to come is imagined in 4 Ezra as a birth of the dead out of the womb of the earth (4:40-42, 7:31-32). By extension, the world to come may be conceptualized as the child of the present world, discontinuous with it but related to it. The power of birth as a metaphor for a new creation may explain the author's fascination with the Mother Earth metaphor, despite his awareness of its limitations.

Figure 1

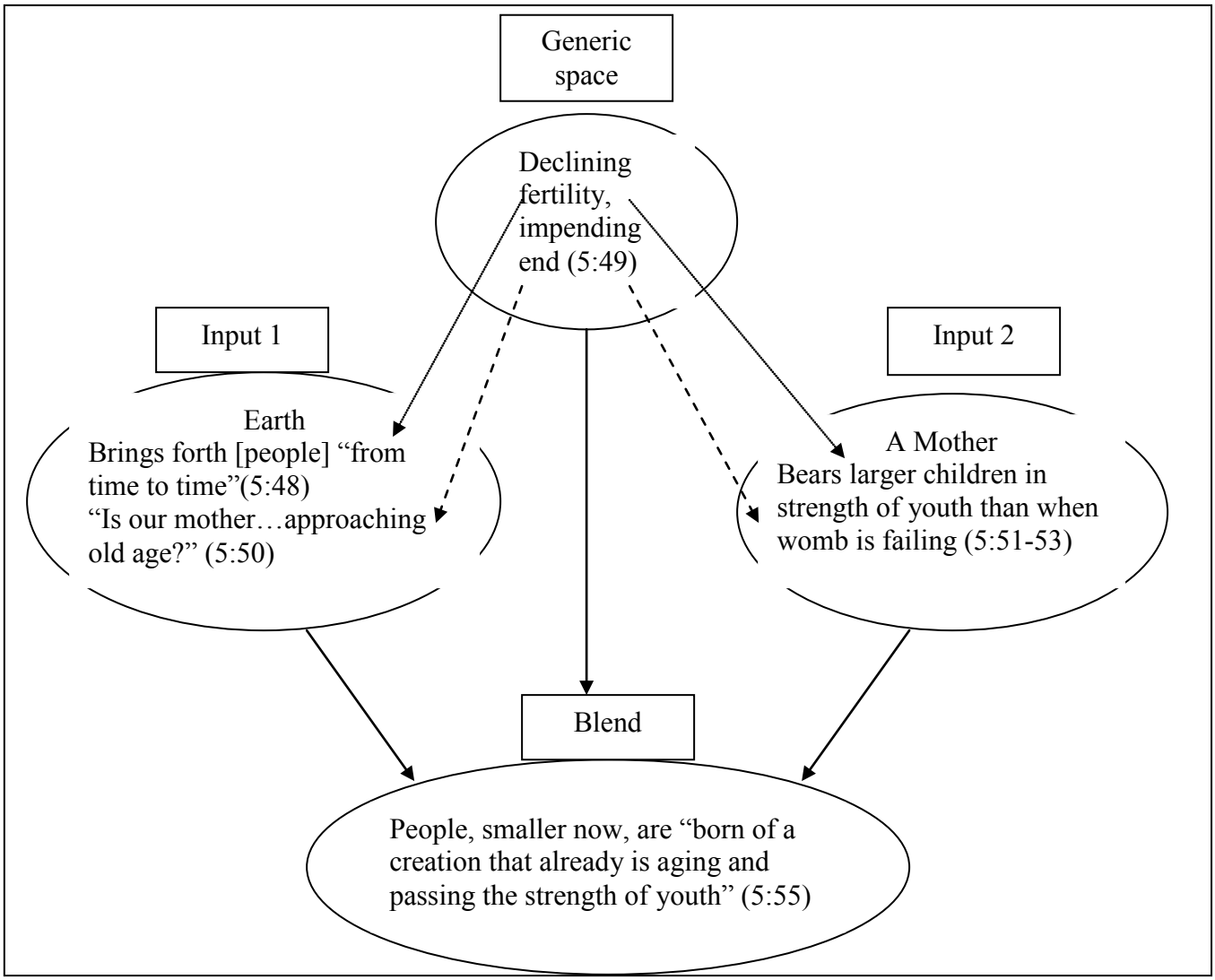
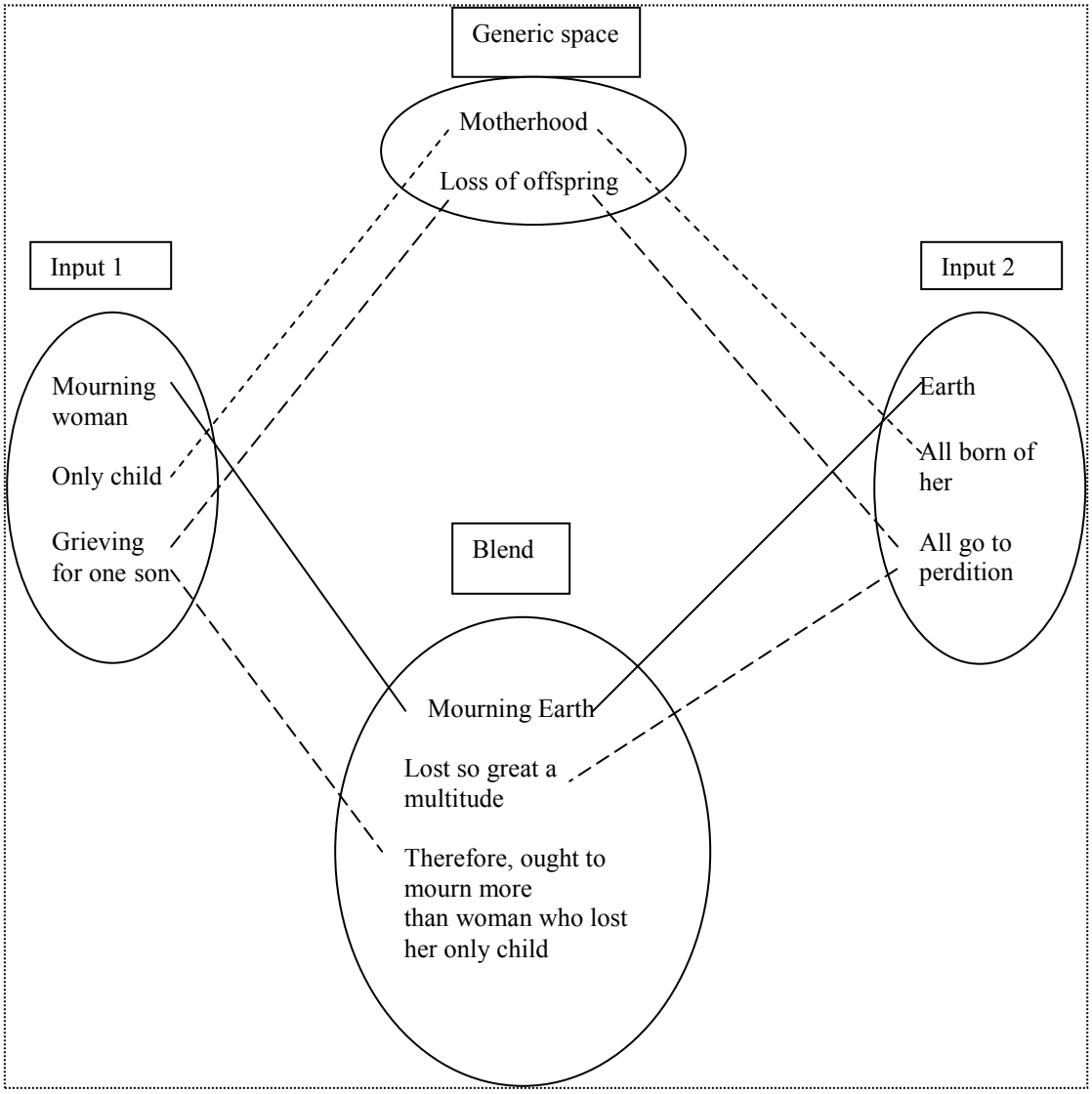

Generic space
Declining fertility, impending end (5:49)
Input 1
Earth
Brings forth [people] "from time to time"(5:48)
"Is our mother…approaching old age?" (5:50)
Input 2
A Mother
Bears larger children in strength of youth than when womb is failing (5:51-53)
Blend
People, smaller now, are "born of a creation that already is aging and passing the strength of youth" (5:55)

Figure 2


Generic space
Motherhood
Loss of offspring
Input 1
Input 2
Mourning woman
Only child
Grieving for one son
Earth
All born of her
All go to perdition
Blend
Mourning Earth
Lost so great a multitude
Therefore, ought to mourn more than woman who lost her only child