

EMMA M. AUSTIN



LANDSCAPES OF MEMORY

THE OLD TESTAMENT'S SENSORY
ENGAGEMENT WITH NATURE



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INTRODUCING MNEMONATURE



WHY WOULD I WANT TO SPEND TWO WEEKS in a boring desert? This was the question of an ungrateful teenager whose parents organized a family trip to Israel, Palestine, and Jordan in the early months of 2010. To my surprise, and like many first-time visitors to the Holy Land, I felt that the Bible came alive. The landscapes are extraordinarily diverse: rich farmland near Tel Aviv, forest-covered hills surrounding Jerusalem, the quiet basin of the Galilee, the stark beauty of the Dead Sea framed by arid mountains. Even the “boring desert” I dreaded became one of my favorite places. I stood in the wilderness of Judea and felt my smallness, the paradoxical sense of danger and beauty, and the weight of my ignorance—that I could have missed out on this life-changing experience if my parents had caved to my tantrums.

Years later, when I returned to Jerusalem University College as a master’s student, Paul Wright, professor of biblical history and geography and then-president of Jerusalem University College, pointed out that the Bible has *always* been alive, but as our awareness of the land increases, *we* come alive to the Bible.

An attentive reading of the Old Testament finds that there is scarcely a page that does not mention nature. The earth and skies, flora and fauna, water, weather events, agriculture and pastoralism, trade routes, landscapes, territories, and place names contextualize and saturate biblical poetry and



prose. We often miss these references because we don't share the same experiences or knowledge that made them meaningful to ancient readers. We can picture a flood, a raven, a dove, and a rainbow (Genesis 8–9), but when we read that Abram settles by “the oaks of Mamre” (Genesis 13:18 NRSVUE) or that Gideon “was beating out wheat in the winepress” (Judges 6:11 NRSVUE), our mind searches the storehouse of our memories for context and imagery but either finds nothing or fills in the blanks with whatever seems relevant. Unlike a novel, which might give vivid detail that inspires our imaginations, the biblical authors assume their audience is as familiar with the land as they are themselves, so mere allusions are enough to speak volumes.

This is also true for places we *are* familiar with. A resident of my hometown Brisbane, in Australia, knows what “The Valley” is, while “Dewdrop Inn” is meaningful only to my family, and a story set in either place would take on a wholly different character. Of course, a story can be engaging and memorable for those who don't know these places (such as the mysterious power of imagination), but those who do will recognize nuance, allusions, and irony that others might miss.

Jerusalem University College's teaching approach has three key parts: “Read the Land. See the Text. Live the Book.”¹ Lecturers such as Wright teach students to recognize biblical geography, history, and culture, both in its real context and on the pages of the Old Testament. Their teaching reflects a strong conviction that this background knowledge helps foster spiritual formation. The words of Scripture take on a physical dimension as we walk the same paths, see the same (or similar) landscapes, flora, and fauna, and feel the same seasons, weather, and air as the biblical authors.

Descriptions of their natural world are not arbitrary but intentional and nuanced. They creatively anchor the message in a concrete reality. As Yael Avrahami argues, the Old Testament treats the senses as the means through which people experience life and share knowledge.² The appeals to nature

¹Emma M. Austin, “Biblical Field Study as Experiential Pedagogy: Jerusalem University College as a Case Study,” *International Journal of Christianity & Education* 26, no. 3 (2022): 267–83, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20569971211064258>.

²Yael Avrahami, *The Senses of Scripture: Sensory Perception in the Hebrew Bible* (T&T Clark, 2012), 275.

connect with readers and make the message memorable. This is not simply about memorization of words but about becoming familiar with the imagery and places that draw us into the scenes they depict: Samson's journey from Zorah to Timnah (Judges 13–14), the beloved's "vineyard on a very fertile hillside" (Isaiah 5:1), or the deer panting for water (Psalm 42:1). In learning to read the land together with the text, we find that the land holds memories and facilitates our own remembering.

When introducing the physical context of the Old Testament to my students, I often show them an optical illusion: Can they spot a predator hidden in a black-and-white photo of a jungle? Usually, they cannot. Then I show them a completely black image with an odd white shape in one corner, and returning to the original image, the figure of a black panther crouching behind a bush is now clearly visible where the white space was. Awareness draws our eyes to its presence, and now that we know it is there, we can't unsee it.

I cannot imagine *unseeing* the land of the Bible. I scarcely remember how or why I thought the Old Testament was boring. That illusion is forever broken. When I read "the oaks of Mamre" or "beating out wheat in a winepress" and my mind searches the storehouse of my memory, it finds experiences of walking and driving through the land, of illuminating lectures from my teachers and guides, and of archaeological relics at sites and in museums. *I have come alive to the Bible.*

REMEMBERING THE HERODIUM

In Mark 11:23 (also see Matthew 21:21), Jesus says to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in their heart but believes that what they say will happen, it will be done for them." Before my first visit to Israel, my subconscious and unquestioned picture of this scene was a mountain on a tropical island in the Pacific Ocean. And why not? Growing up on the east coast of Australia, this was the image that the words *mountain* and *sea* evoked. The idea of a mountain flying into a sea by just faith and a word is memorable enough for its absurdity, even if the type, shape, and scenic context of the mountain and sea is left up to our imagination. But a new, more concrete picture comes to mind for me now.





Figure 1.1. Herodium, March 13, 2024. *Source:* Photo by author.

The Herodium (Herodion) is an impressive site on the edge of the Judean wilderness, about twelve kilometers (7.5 miles) south of Jerusalem. Herod the Great, the infamously narcissistic king we meet in Matthew 2, chose the highest hill in the vicinity and then had it artificially raised even higher. Then he built a luxurious summer palace and fortress on top that would be visible from miles away. Ehud Netzer, a renowned Israeli archaeologist and expert in Herodian architecture, describes this building effort as “proof of Herod’s ingenuity.”³ Herod transformed a remote, nondescript site into an eye-catching landmark that residents in Jerusalem could not ignore.

I first visited the Herodium in 2010 with John (Jack) Beck, adjunct professor at Jerusalem University College. Beck points out that Mark 11 situates Jesus and his disciples between Bethany and Jerusalem as they cross over the Mount of Olives. From here, the Herodium is in sight to the south, and the Dead Sea rests in the desert valley to the east. This setting for Jesus’ teaching suggests that even though a mountain can be raised and even moved by power, taxation, and immense human effort, there is greater power in a

³Ehud Netzer, *Architecture of Herod, the Great Builder* (Baker Academic, 2008), 183.

prayer of faith.⁴ There is still some debate about whether the Herodium is the actual object of Jesus' words—perhaps Jesus pointed to any mountain or simply painted a hypothetical scene. Regardless, Beck's insight connecting land with text has had a lasting impact on my engagement with this passage and the Bible more broadly. As a student at Jerusalem University College (2015–2017), when I glimpsed the Herodium, looming lonely and large on the horizon, from different vantage points around Jerusalem, I remembered Jesus' words, and now, whenever I read Mark 11:23, I think of the Herodium.



Figure 1.2. View of Herodium from Jerusalem, December 19, 2025. *Source:* Photo by author.

INTRODUCING MNEMONATURE

“This mountain” (both the phrase and the physical place) serves as a mnemonic, which is a device or technique that helps us remember. A mnemonic has three components: information to be remembered, a memorable object (such as an image, word, or idea), and a cognitive link forged between the two. By linking a *lesson* (information) on faith and prayer with

⁴For further discussion on the identification of “this mountain” as the Herodium, see John A. Beck, “A Lesson on Prayer from the Landscape, Matthew 21:18–22,” in *Lexham Geographic Commentary on the Gospels*, ed. Barry J. Beitzel and Kristopher Lyle (Lexham, 2018), 408–13.

the distinctive, flat-topped *mountain* (a memorable object), Jesus uses the Herodium as an effective and unforgettable visual. In this book, I introduce the term *mnemonature* (nem-oh-nature) as a heuristic lens for exploring how the natural world functions as the “memorable object” in texts.⁵ I then apply this lens to the Old Testament, which is full of memorable references to nature if, like the panther in the bushes, we know where to look.

The idea of *mnemonature* (literally, “memory of nature”) developed during my studies in Jerusalem and in the years that followed.⁶ Learning to read the land has had a lasting impact on my memory of Scripture, as I visualize it in more vivid detail. When I lead my own students on field studies, I show them mnemonic links between nature and text and know that they will also never be able to unsee the land.

I sense that believers today tend to find the Old Testament harder to engage with than the New Testament yet see it come alive through visiting the land in person. While much of the culture, history, and language of ancient Israel emphasizes the distance between past and present, the physical setting is concrete and can be experienced. It offers one of the closest points of connection with this ancient book, the facts on the ground (pun intended). No matter how foreign the dialogue and actions taken by the ancient peoples, if the text is set in Jerusalem, refers to rain and green grass in the wilderness, or paints a picture of a prophet running as fast as horses (Jeremiah 12:5), it can be visualized and is memorable. *Mnemonature* pays mindful attention to nature in the Old Testament, our memories, and the original context to recognize mnemonic links and visually engage with the text.

⁵Emma M. Austin, “‘When I See . . . I Will Remember’: Exploring the Memorability of Rainbows and Stars in Genesis Through *Mnemonature*,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 55, no. 3 (2025): 84–98, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01461079251364240>.

⁶The name *mnemonature* is inspired by Jan Assmann’s concept of *mnemohistory* (*Gedächtnisgeschichte*), a way of studying history that focuses less on what actually happened and more on how the past is remembered. Kenneth Ngwa uses a related term, *mnemogeography*, to describe how physical environments shape identity. While these approaches share an interest in memory, *mnemonature* is a literary lens that explores how biblical authors use their natural environment to shape the reader’s imagination and aid memory. Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Kenneth N. Ngwa, “The Making of Gershon’s Story: A Cameroonian Postwar Hermeneutics Reading of Exodus 2,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 134, no. 4 (2015): 855–76.

A core facet of mnemonature is sensory engagement. Each of the senses—sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell—plays a role in memory. Our brains constantly collect sensory data, convert it into mental representations, and store it in short- or long-term memory. These memories can be recalled through internal reflective processes, like when a song suddenly comes to mind, or by external triggers, known as memory cues.⁷ A memory cue can be anything that was connected to data when it was stored and that prompts its retrieval: a familiar scent, sound, sight, feeling, or taste that brings buried memories to mind.⁸ Studies show that embodied engagement with natural landscapes is important for child development and that adults find such rich sensory experiences memorable too.⁹ Collecting shells on the beach, hearing bird calls in the rainforest, watching butterflies and bees flit between brightly colored flowers in a garden—sensory memories in nature can remain meaningful in our lives for years.

Our focus in this book is the Old Testament's sensory engagement with nature and how it inspires our imaginations and memories. Mnemonature is methodologically close to Beck's literary approach to biblical geography, which examines how authors use and nuance references to geography in Scripture to shape the reader's understanding.¹⁰ Mnemonature goes a step further by asking how nature, both in the text and in our lived experience, supports and promotes memory. In *Engaging Jesus with Our Senses*, Jeannine Marie Hanger outlines an approach to reading Scripture that draws on our embodied understanding of the world. Hanger asks, "Can we gain a more fully embodied understanding of a narrative when we ask some sensory questions?"¹¹ What might the world of the Bible have smelled,

⁷Giorgio Ganis et al., "Visual Mental Imagery: More than 'Seeing with the Mind's Eye,'" in *The Visual World in Memory*, ed. James R. Brockmole (Routledge, 2008), 215.

⁸Marvin M. Chun and Marcia K. Johnson, "Memory: Enduring Traces of Perceptual and Reflective Attention," *Neuron* 72, no. 4 (2011): 520, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuron.2011.10.026>.

⁹Thomas Beery and Kari Anne Jørgensen, "Children in Nature: Sensory Engagement and the Experience of Biodiversity," *Environmental Education Research* 24, no. 1 (2018): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2016.1250149>.

¹⁰John A. Beck, *Translators as Storytellers: A Study in Septuagint Translation Technique*, Studies in Biblical Literature 25 (Peter Lang, 2000); John A. Beck, *God as Storyteller: Seeking Meaning in Biblical Narrative* (Chalice, 2008).

¹¹Jeannine Marie Hanger, *Engaging Jesus with Our Senses: An Embodied Approach to the Gospels* (Baker Academic, 2024), 23.

tasted, sounded, felt, or looked like? We can try to describe it with our words, but an embodied approach invites us to imagine the blisters on our dusty feet, the smell of herds of cattle and sheep, the sounds of children playing, the metallic taste of stale water, or the sight of a lonely vulture soaring above in a cloudless blue sky.

FOUR TASKS OF MNEMONATURE

To apply mnemonature as a lens to the Old Testament, there are four main tasks: notice nature, reflect, consider the context, and make mnemonics. I call these tasks, rather than steps, as they contribute to mnemonature but are not restricted to a consecutive order.

Table 1.1. The four tasks of mnemonature

Task 1	Notice Nature	What aspects of the natural world stand out in this passage? Look for things such as place names, landmarks, plants and animals, water sources, agricultural and pastoral practices, climate, and astronomical observations.
Task 2	Reflect	What images, memories, or emotions do those references stir? Are the associations strong, or are they just vague impressions? Are they shaped more by your own experiences or by interpretations you’ve encountered previously?
Task 3	Consider the Context	What can we learn about the authors’ social, cultural, historical, religious, and geographic context? Ask sensory questions: What might they have seen, heard, smelled, tasted, or felt?
Task 4	Make Mnemonics	How does nature help make the text more memorable? What mnemonics might the authors be appealing to? What mnemonics can you form that link the natural world of the Old Testament to your own embodied experiences? How can you use your senses to remember this text more vividly?

Notice nature. The first task of mnemonature is to look for and notice nature in the pages of Scripture. The Old Testament is full of references to places and landmarks, flora and fauna, and descriptions of water sources, agrarian and pastoral practices, routes, and astronomical observations. Shimon Bar-Efrat reminds us that these are not “merely geographical facts but are to be regarded as literary elements in which fundamental significance is embodied.”¹² They deserve our attention not only to illuminate meaning but also to engage our senses and enhance memorability of what

¹²Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (T&T Clark International, 2004), 194.

we might otherwise skip over. This task is often straightforward, though it sometimes requires a little work to uncover more obscure references.

Reflect. The second task is to reflect on what images, memories, and emotions stir when we notice nature in the text. Perhaps when we read that Eve “took of its fruit and ate” (Genesis 3:6 NRSVUE), we think of an apple, while “the spring of the waters of Nephtoah” (Joshua 15:9) calls to mind a familiar brook, or nothing at all. This initial reflection helps us identify whether we have strong or vague associations with these references to nature, what assumptions we bring to the text, and where gaps in our knowledge may lie. As John Walton puts it, the Bible was written “*for us*, but not *to us*.”¹³ Does the Genesis account specify that Eve ate an apple, and if not, where does that impression come from? Where is Nephtoah, and what does the text mean by “the spring of the waters”?

This is, by nature, a personal and reflective task. Each reader’s experiences, memories, and sensory associations will differ. Take time to pause over each reference and reflect on what comes to mind for you. Through these first two tasks, we may find that some references naturally evoke strong mnemonic associations rooted in our memories and experiences, while others require a more conscious effort to bring awareness to what does not immediately capture our attention.

Consider the context. The next task is to increase our knowledge of the ancient context of biblical authors and their original audience. The authors write with the expectation that their audience is familiar with the culture, history, and geography they describe and with the literary techniques they use to communicate their message. Descriptions of place names, landmarks, climate, geology, agricultural and pastoral practices, flora, and fauna give us clues about what the authors and their original audience knew, experienced, and remembered. A heroic event that takes place deep in the wilderness, a lion encounter along a local road, or common seasonal practices may have a stronger mnemonic impact on those who understand

¹³John H. Walton, “Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document,” in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?*, ed. Daniel Isaac Block (B&H, 2008), 327, emphasis original. See also Adam E. Miglio et al., eds., *For Us, but Not to Us: Essays on Creation, Covenant, and Context in Honor of John H. Walton* (Wipf & Stock, 2020).

the context. As readers today, we look at the same texts through our own assumptions. Some things may resonate for us, while other details that were once memorable for the original audience may pass unnoticed.

If communication can be complicated even between closely related modern languages, such as English and Spanish, this challenge is even greater when reading ancient texts. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew (and some Aramaic) and is shaped by ancient cultural and geographical contexts that may be far removed from our own. This distance can be complicated by differences in language and idiom, cultural assumptions and practices, and physical landscapes.¹⁴ For example, Genesis 24 has a relatively simple narrative arc (Abraham arranges a marriage for his son Isaac), yet Abraham expects Isaac's wife to be a blood relative (Genesis 24:7) who will leave her family with a stranger to marry a stranger in "Canaan," hundreds of miles from "the town of Nahor" in "Aram Naharaim" (Genesis 24:10). There are enough familiar components in this narrative for us to understand what is happening, so the distance may not be as noticeable at first glance, though on closer inspection cultural assumptions and place names are less familiar.

To reconstruct context, we consider both factors that go *in* a text, such as literary setting, characterization, and language, and those that go *with* it, such as the social, cultural, historical, religious, and geographic settings of the authors and their original audience. This task is inherently interdisciplinary and draws from a broad range of resources: commentaries and lexicons; Bible atlases and dictionaries of biblical imagery; historical and geographical studies; ancient Near Eastern culture, literature, art, and architecture; geographic and meteorologic data; and biblical intertexts.

Readers are also encouraged, if the opportunity arises, to visit the land of the Bible in person, gaining an embodied sense of its physical surroundings. The landscape and climate patterns of the southern Levant (corresponding roughly to present-day Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon,

¹⁴Cornelius M. van den Heever, "Translating the Hebrew Scriptures: Some Challenges and Helps," in *Ancient Texts and Modern Readers: Studies in Ancient Hebrew Linguistics and Bible Translation*, ed. Gideon R. Kotzé et al. (Brill, 2019), 211-27.

and Syria) and Egypt have remained broadly similar for over five thousand years, allowing us to draw on modern anthropological and scientific research, along with personal observation, to help reconstruct the original context.¹⁵ Even without traveling, there is a wide range of resources that offer opportunities to read the land through photographs, video and audio recordings, and virtual and augmented reality.¹⁶

Make mnemonics. *Make mnemonics* is a two-way process that is both interpretative and formative. On the one hand, the imagery and descriptions in the text spring from the original authors' experiences of their natural world. As we *consider the context* of a passage, we begin to see how they used the landscapes, animals, and everyday surroundings both to convey their message and to anchor it in memory. On the other hand, as contemporary readers, we also make mnemonics that link the natural world of the Old Testament to our own embodied experiences. Our goal here is not to impose our own experiences *onto* a text (what is known as a reader-response approach), though this is not entirely avoidable. Instead, as Hanger writes, it is "to harness our sensory lives toward a greater depth of understanding" of Scripture.¹⁷ For this final task, then, we learn to see the text, nature, and mnemonic relationships through ancient eyes, and so enrich our own mnemonic engagement with Scripture.

To model the four tasks of mnemonature, this book takes a largely historical and descriptive approach. My aim is to paint a more vivid picture of the natural world behind the Old Testament, which shaped the experiences and memories of its authors. Along the way, I share some of my own encounters with the land, not as authoritative interpretations but as examples of how embodied experiences can enrich our reading of Scripture. I invite you to practice your own mnemonatural reading by learning to notice the natural imagery of the text, reflecting on the memories and associations it evokes for you, considering the historical and geographical context, and making mnemonics.

¹⁵Adam W. Schneider and Selim F. Adali, "Further Evidence for a 'Late Assyrian Dry Phase' in the Near East During the Mid-to-Late Seventh Century B.C.?" *IRAQ* 78 (December 2016): 161, <https://doi.org/10.1017/irq.2016.5>.

¹⁶Austin, "Biblical Field Study," 7-8.

¹⁷Hanger, *Engaging Jesus with Our Senses*, 25.

METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATION

This section situates the study within scholarship on the Old Testament, nature, and memory, defining mnemonature as a distinct approach that brings these three areas into dialogue.

Memory and story. Mnemonature defines a concept that other scholars have hinted at, though often without naming it. Storytellers across cultures have long connected familiar places and natural features with characters, dialogue, setting, and plot to aid memorability.¹⁸ For instance, Anke Walter describes how the ancient Greek poet Ovid crafted an epic around a cypress tree, linking it to origin stories of other creatures, plants, customs, and landmarks. Then, whenever his listeners would see a cypress tree, they could recall part of the story, the whole story, or even the experience of first hearing it.¹⁹ The tree becomes not just a narrative feature but an experiential mnemonic device.

Similar patterns also appear in Indigenous storytelling. Among First Nations communities, oral traditions preserve memories of the land, such as tales of ancient floods along Australia's coastline that go back thousands of years.²⁰ Keith Basso observes this dynamic among the Western Apache. Names of streams, valleys, cliffs, and fields are "mnemonic pegs" that preserve wisdom for life, encouragement, and rebuke.²¹ Long before histories were recorded through writing, their stories give meaning to places and landmarks that in turn are used as creative mnemonic tools to preserve and pass down cultural memories.²² This concept of stories and wisdom that hang on mnemonic pegs of cypress trees and other natural features in the land is what mnemonature is all about.

Theology of land. Within biblical scholarship, mnemonature's connection between nature and memory builds on a robust foundation of land and

¹⁸Victor H. Matthews, "Remembered Space in Biblical Narrative," in *Constructions of Space IV: Further Developments in Examining Ancient Israel's Social Space*, ed. Mark K. George, T&T Clark Library of Biblical Studies (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 74.

¹⁹Anke Walter, *Time in Ancient Stories of Origin* (Oxford University Press, 2020), 24.

²⁰Patrick D. Nunn and Nicholas J. Reid, "Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago," *Australian Geographer* 47, no. 1 (2016): 11-47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2015.1077539>.

²¹Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 40, 113-20.

²²Dave Warren, "Places and Spaces," in *American Indian Places: A Historical Guidebook*, ed. Frances H. Kennedy (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008), 182.

memory studies. Walter Brueggemann famously describes land as both geographic and symbolic, claiming that it is “a central, if not *the central theme* of biblical faith.”²³ Undergirding God’s covenant with Abraham, the promise of land becomes a recurring theme in Israel’s story, from their deliverance out of Egypt to the prophets’ warnings of exile.²⁴ The health of the covenant between God and Israel is often reflected in the state of the land and consequences of disobedience framed as a threat of separation from place.²⁵

Scholars such as Ellen Davis, Sandra Richter, and Katharine Dell further develop agrarian and ecological readings of the Old Testament, highlighting biblical attitudes toward creation care and humanity’s role as stewards.²⁶ Mari Joerstad’s ecological and exegetical study challenges readers to be attentive “to the wishes of all God’s creatures, including those with whom most of us rarely think to relate in personal terms, such as soil, forests, rivers, oceans, and clouds.”²⁷ Their work demonstrates how deeply the biblical authors care for the earth and encourage readers to do the same. Mnemonature takes a different approach. It is primarily literary and

²³Walter Brueggemann, *The Land: Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 3, italics original.

²⁴Daniel I. Block, *The Triumph of Grace: Literary and Theological Studies in Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic Themes* (Cascade Books, 2017); Oren R. Martin, *Bound for the Promised Land: The Land Promise in God’s Redemptive Plan*, New Studies in Biblical Theology 34 (Apollos, 2015); Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Zondervan, 2009); Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (InterVarsity Press, 2006); Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, *Holy People, Holy Land* (Brazos, 2005).

²⁵Wojciech Pikor, *The Land of Israel in the Book of Ezekiel* (T&T Clark, 2018); John H. Walton, *Covenant: God’s Purpose, God’s Plan* (Zondervan Academic, 2010); Binyamin Elon, *God’s Covenant with Israel: Establishing Biblical Boundaries in Today’s World* (New Leaf, 2005); Ernest W. Nicholson, *God and His People: Covenant and Theology in the Old Testament* (Oxford University Press, 1986); Miglio et al., *For Us, but Not to Us*; Dominik Markl, “God’s Covenants with Humanity and Israel,” in *The Hebrew Bible: A Critical Companion*, ed. John Barton (Princeton University Press, 2016), 313–37, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv7h0snt.17>; Stephen C. Russell, “Space, Land, Territory, and the Study of the Bible,” *Brill Research Perspectives in Biblical Interpretation* 1, no. 4 (2016): 1–64, <https://doi.org/10.1163/24057657-12340004>.

²⁶Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2009); Sandra L. Richter, *Stewards of Eden: What Scripture Says About the Environment and Why It Matters* (InterVarsity Press, 2020); Katharine Dell, “The Cycle of Life in Ecclesiastes,” *Vetus Testamentum* 59, no. 2 (2009): 181–89, <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853309X413372>; Brittany N. Melton and Megan D. Alsene, “Harmony Between Humanity and the Natural World in Song of Songs,” in *Human Interaction with the Natural World in Wisdom Literature and Beyond: Essays in Honour of Tova L. Forti*, ed. Mordechai Cogan et al. (Bloomsbury, 2023), 113–25.

²⁷Mari Joerstad, *The Hebrew Bible and Environmental Ethics: Humans, Nonhumans, and the Living Landscape* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 12.

geographical, focusing on *how* nature functions as a tool of memory, rather than what it might teach about theology or ethics.

Social memory theory. In recent years, biblical scholars have also engaged with social memory theory, exploring how texts preserve and influence collective memory. Ehud Ben Zvi, Diana Edelman, Niels Peter Lemche, and Daniel Pioske, among others, explore the way traditions form and transform, oral traditions as cultural memory, and the role of biblical texts as commemorative artifacts that shape religious communities.²⁸ As Bradley Gregory observes, memory in the ancient world “socialized a person into a tradition that involved ethics and wisdom, and was understood to be key for proper living in the present and the future.”²⁹ This growing field of research reveals how biblical texts have been remembered, transmitted, and reinterpreted throughout history.

Often, however, these studies focus on specific *sites*, such as monuments or locations where key events occur.³⁰ As Thomas Mayes notes, “Places serve as mnemonic aids—they remind us of our memories.”³¹ Mnemonature extends this insight beyond fixed locations to include the natural world in a broader sense by focusing on memorable *qualities*. On the one hand, a particular

²⁸Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin, eds., *Remembering and Forgetting in Early Second Temple Judah*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 85 (Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 360; Sandra Huebenthal, *Reading Mark's Gospel as a Text from Collective Memory* (Eerdmans, 2020); Niels Peter Lemche, “A Social Anthropology of Biblical Memory,” in *T&T Clark Handbook of Anthropology and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Emanuel Pfoh (Bloomsbury, 2022), 373-94; Daniel D. Pioske, *Memory in a Time of Prose: Studies in Epistemology, Hebrew Scribalism, and the Biblical Past* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Johannes Unsok Ro and Diana Edelman, eds., *Collective Memory and Collective Identity: Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History in Their Context* (de Gruyter, 2021).

²⁹Bradley C. Gregory, “The Role of Memory in the Wisdom of Solomon,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 31, no. 1 (2021): 52, <https://doi.org/10.1177/09518207211023249>.

³⁰Megan Daffern, “The Psalms: Places for Remembering,” in *Holy Places in Biblical and Extrabiblical Traditions: Proceedings of the Bonn-Leiden-Oxford Colloquium on Biblical Studies*, ed. Jochen Flebbe (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 79-94; Rachele Gilmour, “The Monuments of Saul and Absalom in the Book of Samuel,” in Ro and Edelman, *Collective Memory and Collective Identity*, 243-62; Rachele Gilmour, “Remembering the Future: The ‘Topheth’ as Dystopia in Jeremiah 7 and 19,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 44, no. 1 (2019): 64-78; Gilmour, “The Function of Place Naming in 2 Samuel 5-6: A Study in Collective Memory,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 39, no. 4 (June 2015): 405-31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309089215590354>; Victor H. Matthews, “Josiah at Bethel and the ‘Monument’ to the Unnamed Prophet from Judah,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 50, no. 4 (2020): 200-206, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146107920958998>; Daniel Pioske, *David's Jerusalem: Between Memory and History* (Routledge, 2015).

³¹Thomas M. Mayes, *Why Old Places Matter: How Historic Places Affect Our Identity and Well-Being* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 9.

landscape or natural feature, such as the Herodium, can draw us closer to a text's original setting and become memorable through discovery or experience. On the other hand, our sensory engagement with natural imagery in a text does not need to depend on a specific site. A rainbow, cypress tree, or mountain can evoke memories wherever we are because nature itself is so memorable.

SOME KEY TERMS

As our goal is to reconstruct the natural world of the Old Testament, it will help to clarify some key terms.

“Biblical authors” and “original audience.” First, it is often the case with the Old Testament that the identity of a single writer is unknown. The term “biblical authors” recognizes that there may be multiple contributors to most texts, as well as oral memory of collective experiences and shared traditional conventions.³² Similarly, “original audience” does not describe a single, identifiable community but refers to the groups who first heard or read these texts and with whom the biblical authors shared common knowledge and experiences of the natural world.³³

Both authors and audience are reconstructed through what the texts themselves assume, namely that their readers already understand the landscapes of memory.³⁴ Our inquiry is not into authorial intent (what the authors meant to communicate, including whether they intended to create mnemonic associations), nor into how the original audience received or interpreted the texts. Rather, we recognize that the Old Testament is informed by facts on the ground that can to an extent be recovered, reconstructed, and analyzed through disciplines such as historical geography, archaeology, philology, sociology, anthropology, and meteorology, among others.³⁵

The “ancient Near East,” the “southern Levant,” and the “land of the Bible.” The biblical authors and their audiences lived within the cultures of

³²Francois Tolmie, *Narratology and Biblical Narratives: A Practical Guide* (Wipf & Stock, 2012), 6.

³³Jonathan S. Greer et al., “Introduction,” in *Introduction to Historical Geography*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer et al. (Baker Academic, 2018), 19.

³⁴Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text? The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Zondervan Academic, 2009), 46.

³⁵Paul H. Wright, “Introduction to Historical Geography,” in *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, ed. Jonathan S. Greer et al. (Baker Academic, 2018), 6.

the ancient Near East, whose customs and beliefs often influenced their own.³⁶ For this book, the geographical boundaries encompass ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia (corresponding roughly to present-day Iraq and parts of Iran, Syria, Kuwait, and Turkey), and the southern Levant.³⁷ While the southern Levant is our main focus, the Old Testament is full of cultural layers influenced by the surrounding cultures, languages, and literature.³⁸ This book engages with comparative data from ancient Near Eastern contexts that may inform the beliefs, assumptions, and message of the biblical authors.

Terminology for the land inhabited by the Israelites, the so-called Holy Land (Zechariah 2:12), can be contentious. *Israel* and *Palestine* have complex political implications; “Syria-Palestine” is a geographically precise title of the Roman era, though Jews primarily lived in the southern part of this region; and *Canaan* can work as an ancient name but does not reflect the same borders as regions inhabited by the tribes of Israel.³⁹ Since our focus is on the natural environment rather than on changing geopolitical boundaries, I will use “land of the Bible” to encompass Israel, Judah, and the closely surrounding regions of Philistia, Phoenicia, and Transjordan (Edom, Moab, Ammon, Gilead, and Bashan).⁴⁰ Further description of these regions will be provided as needed throughout the book.

“Contemporary readers.” Finally, I also refer to “contemporary readers,” a generic term that intends to encapsulate the diversity of experiences and insights that readers today can bring to a text. Perspectives can vary depending on our expectations of what the text depicts, allowing for a broad range of interpretations. Some readers may live in regions and cultures more closely aligned with the world of Scripture, while others may feel like foreigners in a foreign land. Jacqueline Grey encourages readers today to be cognizant of the

³⁶Beck, *God as Storyteller*, 101.

³⁷Karen Radner et al., “Introducing the *Oxford History of the Ancient Near East*,” in *The Oxford History of the Ancient Near East: From the Beginnings to Old Kingdom Egypt and the Dynasty of Akkad*, ed. Karen Radner et al. (Oxford University Press, 2020), 1:2-3.

³⁸John H. Walton, “Interpreting the Bible as an Ancient Near Eastern Document,” in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?*, ed. Daniel I. Block (B&H, 2008), 325; Walton, “Interactions in the Ancient Cognitive Environment,” in Hilber et al., *Behind the Scenes*, 333; Miglio et al., *For Us, but Not to Us*.

³⁹Bill T. Arnold, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37.

⁴⁰Edward Lipiński, *On the Skirts of Canaan in the Iron Age: Historical and Topographical Researches*, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 153 (Peeters, 2006), 225.

time and spatial distance between us and the ancient authors and audience of the Old Testament.⁴¹ In this book, the phrase “contemporary readers” primarily serves as a reminder of this interpretative distance.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Mnemonature encourages readers to recognize and explore the mnemonic links between nature and text. The Bible is full of references to the natural world, far more than can be covered in this book, so this study looks at eight case studies across the Old Testament. The imagery is structured in a subtle downward movement that mirrors creation in Genesis 1: from the heavens (rainbows, stars) to the earth (journey, drought, dust storms) to the plant and animal world (grass, lions), culminating in a reflection of all creation as a mnemonic for God (divine speeches in Job).

To model the principle of mnemonature, we will begin by looking at how nature plays a memorable role in God’s covenant promises with Noah and Abraham. In chapter two, the first two case studies explicitly connect seeing with remembering. The rainbow in Genesis 9 and the stars in Genesis 15 are visual memory cues, linking sensory experience with remembrance.

The next three case studies examine landscapes and climate imagery. Chapter three follows Abram’s journey from Ur to Canaan, imagining the realities of this long journey beyond the text’s brief account. Chapter four examines drought as a memory cue for covenant repentance and a mnemonic for God’s sovereignty over weather (1 Kings 17–19). Chapter five examines how the metaphor of “a scorching wind” in Jeremiah 4:11 evokes memorable experiences of intense dust storms (*khamasin*) as a metaphor for impending doom.

The next two chapters reflect on the divine-human relationship through plant and animal imagery. Chapter six analyzes how the visual change of grass in the landscape—from fresh greenery to withered browns—creates a memorable image of flourishing, vulnerability, and the temporary nature of the human lifespan. Chapter seven considers the fear-invoking perceptions

⁴¹Jacqueline Grey, *Them, Us, and Me: How the Old Testament Speaks to People Today* (Wipf & Stock, 2010), 46.

of lions, the apex predator in the ancient Near East, and how this informs metaphorical depictions of GOD IS A LION MASTER and GOD IS A LION.

Finally, in chapter eight, the book concludes with the divine speeches in Job 38–41. In response to Job’s suffering and lament, God directs his attention to nature, showing that all creation is designed as a mnemonic for God as Creator.

Through this book, I invite readers to journey with me through the process of spotting the panther in the jungle. I will share stories and photos of my experiences as a student at Jerusalem University College and now as a lecturer, guiding my students to read the land and create long-lasting memories. Those who have lived in, visited, or are otherwise familiar with the world of the Bible can supplement my stories and observations with their own experiences. Mnemonature encourages mindful engagement with text, land, and memory as we come alive to the Bible.

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