

Mountains of the Bible: Mount Ararat, Mother of the World

For seven years now I've lived between two mountain ranges. To the west, the rugged, layered Adirondack peaks of New York. To the east, the broad, solid-sloping Green Mountains of Vermont. I turn one way and face cold, clear peaks with names like Giant, Hurricane, Upper Wolfjaw. I turn to the other and face peaks that beckon with longing and danger—Hunger, Romance, Mount Horrid.

“Look to the west,” the tour guide on the Spirit of Ethan Allen directed to the passengers on the Lake Champlain cruise. “Those are the second most beautiful mountains in the world.” We paused to take in the green-purple field of mountains beyond mountains stretching back to the horizon. “Now turn around and face the east. Those, those are the most beautiful mountains in the world.”

It's hard to argue with Camel's Hump and Mansfield, although I've seen enough of this world to know that beauty is not something God tends to be frugal with.

In this moment of the earth's history, God has placed us here on a planet in which mountains cover one quarter of the earth's surface. Per square foot, they are home to more biodiversity than any other landscape. Mountains are also hotspots of cultural diversity. In the Himalayas, the human inhabitants speak over a thousand different languages and dialects. In addition to the travel difficulties that mountains present to land-based creatures like us, biologists theorize that this incredible density of diversity is because mountain environments host the greatest number of climate types and ecotones within the smallest area. Find yourself deep in midsummer's heat and craving winter's chill? A hike up a tall peak can bring you from summer to winter, with an ascent through spring's ephemeral beauty if you approach on one side of the mountain, and a descent through autumn's plaintive letting-go if you descend on the other.

As microcosms of the earth and its seasons, mountains also appear to be that part of the earth attempting to reach beyond the earth, speaking to the human yearning for transcendence and the beyond, the realm of heaven and the dwelling place of the gods. In his classic and comprehensive *Patterns of Comparative Religion*, Mircea Eliade includes chapters on how humans have responded to the sacred in many of the earth's basic elements and features—Sun, Sky, Moon, Water, Earth, among others. Curiously, he chose not to include a chapter on Mountains. My sense is the great scholar might have felt overwhelmed, the way a novice hiker might feel as they pause at the base of a mountain they're not sure they can summit. “The symbolic and religious significance of mountains is endless,” Eliade concludes with a breath of near-surrender, when he finally mentions mountains near the end of his “Sky” chapter. “Every mythology has its sacred mountain,” he writes, as he points to how mountains, as the meeting point of heaven and earth,

appear most often in mythology and religion to represent central and centering points—the holy mountain as *Axis Mundi*, the center of the world. Because of “the consecrating power of height,” mountains gather and focus the earth’s sacred energies and desires for the divine, the sun beyond all suns. And so we build cathedral spires that aspire to be like mountains, ziggurats that provide a mountain-path-like stairway to heaven, skyscrapers that are capitalism’s attempt to commodify mountains and their “consecrating power.”

Just as mountains feature prominently in our attempts to read the sacred in the scripture of the earth, they appear equally prominently in the scriptures that make up the Bible. After even a cursory survey of the over 500 references to mountains in the Bible, I’ve come to think that it would be something almost of an understatement to say that some of the most significant events in the Bible occur on mountains.

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In 1829 a Russian army official named Khillar Khachirov lead a scientific expedition up to the top of the West Summit of Mount Elbrus, Europe’s highest mountain at 18,510 ft. This peak was said to be the mountain that Prometheus was chained to by Zeus as punishment for stealing fire from the gods. Up until that moment in 1829, Noah held humanity’s altitude record.

The first mention of mountains in the Bible are the mountains of Ararat in eastern Turkey, at the border with Armenia and Iran. Biblical reference (Genesis 8:4) and tradition locate these mountains as the place where Noah’s ark finally came to rest on dry land as the Great Flood began to recede. Specifically, legend locates the resting place of the ark on the summit of Mount Ararat—a snow-capped, now-dormant volcanic peak at 16,854 ft.

In 1253, while Noah still held firmly to his record, Flemish Franciscan missionary and explorer William of Rubruck made a pilgrimage to Ararat to visit the sacred peak. “Many have tried to climb it,” he reports in his journal, “but none has been able.” He inquired about the mountain with local residents. “An old man gave me quite a good reason why one ought not try to climb it,” he writes. “They call the mountain ‘Massis’. ‘No one,’ he said, ‘ought to climb up Massis; it is the mother of the world.’”

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Although mountains aren’t mentioned by name in the original creation story of Genesis 1-2, many interpreters have long wondered whether the Garden of Eden might have been located on a mountain. The prophet Ezekiel seems to suggest as much—“You were in Eden, the garden of God/... You were on the holy mountain of God.” (Ezekiel 28: 13-14). The idea of God living on a holy mountain occurs throughout scripture (“His foundation is in the holy mountains,” -Ps. 87: 1), and comes to particular focus with apocalyptic visions of the end times, in which God is thought to restore the world on top of Mount Zion, or in the New Testament, with the vision of the New Jerusalem that is glimpsed when the spirit takes the author up “a great, high mountain.” (Revelation 21: 10). If the world will be made perfect at the end-of-times on top of a mountain, perhaps, the thinking goes, the original garden was also in the mountains.

Still others take a more naturalistic approach, focusing on the detail about how coming out from Eden four great rivers flowed (Genesis 2: 10). We might wonder, then, about Eden's possible mountain perch, for indeed where do most of the great rivers of the world begin their course, if not from the slopes of great mountains...

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God got fed up with us. If you've ever felt despairing about what humanity has done with the gift of life—how we've marred our relationships to the earth and to one another—you'll know something of the feeling. God wonders if it might be best to dump a large bucket of water over the canvas of creation and simply start over. But on second thought, God sees that there is still yet some goodness that inheres deep down in the marrow of life—in humanity and in all the other expressions and creatures of earth. And so God directs Noah to gather this remnant of inherent goodness, two-by-two, and instructs Noah to build an ark to keep the ember of original blessing alive during the great rain-wash, the deluge, the watery re-set.

When the ember of original blessing was gathered and tended inside the ark, "the fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened," and it rained for forty days and forty nights. (Genesis 7:11-12)

"The waters swelled so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered; the waters swelled above the mountains, covering them fifteen cubits deep."

- Genesis 7: 19-20

Fifteen cubits, about twenty-two feet, above the tallest mountains made the flood just deep enough for Noah's ark to drift over Mount Everest without risk of hitting its keel.

After about five months of drifting along on the water-world, God decides the time has come to let the waters recede. God decides the time has come to begin again with the project of creation. With words that echo the original stirrings of God's creative breath over the watery deep in Genesis 1: 1, God closes back up the fountains of the deep, shuts the windows of heaven, and sends a holy breath-wind over the surface of the waters to begin evaporating the waterlogged world.

"...and in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters continued to abate until the tenth month; in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, the tops of the mountains appeared."

-Genesis 8: 4-5

Whether or not the first creation began on a mountain is likely a mystery that will be forever shrouded, like a peak that's perpetually in the clouds. But when Noah's ark finally comes to its rest on Ararat, the project of re-creation, God's great re-set and re-expression of life, finds its

place to begin and to take hold. A re-creation in which God promises never to repeat such de-creation again, setting the sign of the rainbow in the clouds as a reminder of that promise, that covenant of sustainability that God makes with humanity, all creatures, and the earth itself. Creation's original Green New Deal, as it were.

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I picture Noah looking out from the ark on the top of Mount Ararat, that great mountain of rest and restoration. There's a rainbow in the clouds, there's mist in the air, and while the world is still mostly covered in water, one by one, new mountain peaks emerge, little islands that come to view over the next days and weeks, little arms of the earth reaching up towards God and the heavens. For a few months of restful amazement, Noah gazes at a world without valleys yet, a world of water and mountains only. A world of water, and mountains beyond mountains, each mountain an island of hope, each peak a biodiversity hot spot where the original blessing that dwells deep within life can start its journey and evolution all over again.

Of course, the search for the original Eden might well forever elude us. But we can gaze at a beautiful mountain in eastern Turkey, or whatever mountain we happen to face, and we can rejoice that in the biblical imagination, creation begins again atop such peaks as these, atop such peaks as Ararat—that stunning, snow-capped, volcanic mother of the world.



Monastery at Mount Ararat, Armenia. Joel Koczowski

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Although there's an intimation of rain in the west over the Adirondacks, I set off up the trail to the peak of Snake Mountain, hoping for a sunset view from the top. Right in between the Adirondacks and the Green Mountains, Snake Mountain is like our community mountain here in the Middlebury area where I live. It's our closest and most iconic landscape feature. Fitting with its name, it snakes sinuously north-south for a few miles, seeming to rise up out of nowhere in the middle of the otherwise gently sloping, flat, fertile Champlain Valley. Its apparent solitude has led some to term Snake Mountain a monadnock, a stand-alone mountain. It's aloneness, however, is only an illusion, as Snake Mountain is part of the Taconic Mountain range that extends from Burlington, Vermont south to the Hudson Highlands north of New York City. Snake Mountain's closest siblings are Buck Mountain and Mount Philo to the north, and Birdseye and Grandpa's Knob to the south. They line up in a narrow north-south line like fire-tower wardens keeping watch over the valley.

The first stretch of the trail (approaching from the west side of the mountain) begins gently under the dark canopy of the Willmarth Woods Nature Conservancy. With deep and rich soils, these woods are noteworthy in the area for hosting a mature, mesic red oak-northern hardwood forest. At one point the trail is lined by mature birch trees which lean in on the trail like a line of tent poles. Although it's a bit early here at the end of June, the forager in me can't help but scan the forest floor and the dead or dying trees for the wild mushrooms that I know grow here—chicken of the woods, maitake, chanterelle, lion's mane.

When the trail takes a turn to the north, the ascent begins when the pines begin, although at 1,287 ft. the hike up Snake Mountain is neither particularly long nor particularly strenuous, making it a favorite day hike for families and friends. Midway up you start to see a scattering of medium sized boulders, dropped or left behind when the last glaciers retreated about thirteen thousand years ago. A bit further up and you start to notice the bedrock of the mountain itself. This is the Champlain Thrust, and it's the reason that Snake Mountain is here. Unlike the Adirondacks and the Green Mountains, which trace their bedrock back a billion years to Pangea and the basement of time, Snake Mountain is much younger, born about 450 million years ago when an archipelago-type landmass (about the size of the Philippines), crashed into the Eastern North American shore.

"Imagine shoveling your driveway in winter," David West said to me, a professor of geology at Middlebury College who takes his students on field trips up Snake Mountain, once at the beginning of the semester, and again at the end. "As you push the snow with the shovel, the denser, harder snow at the bottom, together with whatever gravel or sand you might push too, that bottom material ends up on top as you push the snow pile. Snake Mountain was formed in a similar way—as if a great big snow shovel pushed a pile of the earth westwards across the Champlain Valley."

And so as you climb the mountain, and as you pass the Champlain Thrust line, the younger, softer limestone and marble gives way to the older, harder quartzite, with the oldest, hardest rock found at the very top.

When I hike Snake Mountain, I'm always surprised when I get to the top. Partly this is because although the mountain looms large on the landscape, its elevation is low compared to the taller

peaks in the area. Partly this is because the hike up is mostly forested, offering not much by way of open views of the landscape. But when you do reach the top, and you stand on that old hard quartzite among the foundation and ruins of the Grand View Hotel that once stood on the top of the mountain in 1870, suddenly you see the land as fully and clearly as if you were looking at the most detailed, high definition map in the world. Below, a patchwork field of full-spectrum green farmland and forest makes for a breathtaking foreground and frame for the bright blue-gray of Lake Champlain and the rugged peaks of the Adirondacks to the west.



The view from Snake Mountain. Photo by Heather Tourgee.

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I find a spot to sit and spread out my tea set—yellow bandana on a flat piece of the old hotel foundation, two small cups, a small Yixing clay pot filled with a young, floral sheng-puer, my thermos of hot water. The first quick steep is traditionally thrown out and is meant to wake the tea leaves from their slumber, but this time we drink the first steep, a bracing, bitter call to attention. A few steeps in and the mind starts to adjust itself to taking in such beauty. Today the Adirondacks are dusted with a fine haze. Giant Mountain, which on a clear day is a strong and unmistakable presence, today is barely visible, its faint outline lurking like a phantom in the background. Lake Champlain appears calm, but on closer inspection the surface is covered with delicate, infinitesimal ripples. Where it meets the sun it glows and sparkles like silver-gold foil reflecting fire. Dead Creek, also in the line of the sun, is calmer and looks like a liquid, serpentine mirror hung perfectly between forest and field. The Champlain Valley is a jigsaw puzzle of every shade of green you can imagine. Pine, pea, grass, avocado, artichoke, jade, jungle, tea, teal, moss, hunter, mint. Each part and

parcel fits perfectly together—forest, field, hedge, pond, river, road, barn, silo, house, windmill, plowed and unplowed, furrowed and unfurrowed, earth itself in all of its many shades of green glory.

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In addition to meditating on the earth's beauty, the tops of mountains are among the best places to meditate on time. I put my hand down to feel the energy of this 450-million-year-old bedrock. I look out at even older mountains, made with rocks from the basement of time. I look at Lake Champlain, seemingly at peace within its shores today, but I know that it too has a deep history. Around the time when Snake Mountain was formed, this area was part of the Iapetus Ocean, a shallow tropical warm-water sea like the present-day Caribbean. Eventually, the Green Mountains rising to the east, combined with the work of the glaciers, closed in the sea, and ice overtook the landscape. Twenty thousand years ago a massive Antarctica-like ice sheet covered this area under ice that was at least a mile high, rising above the tops of all the mountain peaks in the area. Noah drifted on a world where the water covered the highest mountains, but if he had lived here twenty thousand years ago, he would have found a similar, albeit much colder situation, and would have needed an ice-sled rather than an ark.

Thirteen thousand years ago the climate warmed and the last of the glaciers retreated to the north. Since ice is heavy, the retreating glaciers left a landscape that was depressed, the earth pressed down like a flat cake by the ice. This flattened landscape allowed the ocean to once again return to this area, as the Champlain Sea flooded the scene, a salt-water environment that was host to many marine species, including the surprising discovery of the Charlotte Whale so far in inland Vermont, its preserved skeleton unearthed under ten feet of clay in 1849. At this moment in time the whole Champlain Valley would have been covered in water. Snake Mountain would have stood out as an island in this inland sea. If I were standing here looking out thirteen thousand years ago, I might have seen a similar world to that which Noah saw looking out from the ark resting on Mount Ararat—a world without valleys, a world of water and mountains only. A world of water, and mountains beyond mountains.

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Coming back down off Snake Mountain, I feel refreshed as I always do when I hike a mountain. I feel revived, as if I've just plunged into a cold river on a hot day. The mountains tend to give me something that I didn't know I needed—something nourishing, strengthening, enlivening. The mountains give me the peace of deep time, and the rest and restoration needed to start making new plans, to dare to think new thoughts, to begin again as it were, with whatever task or project or path that lies ahead. Mountains nurture and call forth that original blessing of goodness that inheres deep down in the marrow of life, in the deep bedrock from the basement of time.

And so I can understand why the Armenians traditionally referred to Ararat as Massis, the mother of the world. I can understand why the Paiute in Nevada revere the Stone Mother, and why the Puyallup in the Pacific Northwest call Mount Rainier “Tacoma,” meaning Nourishing Breast. I can understand why in India there’s Nanda Devi, Bliss-Giving-Goddess Mountain, and in Greece’s Crete there’s Mount Ida, Goddess Mountain, where in a cave on a cliff Zeus was born. I can understand why the Tibetan name for Everest is Chomolugma, meaning Mother Goddess of the World, and why the Nepali name for the same mountain is Sagarmatha, Goddess of the Sky.

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The Maasai in East Africa are one of the many peoples who believe that their ancestors originally came down from the mountains, in this case Mount Kenya. Geological anthropologists tell a similar story of humanity’s origins.

In *Origins: How the Earth’s History Shaped Human History*, Lewis Dartnell traces the origins of humanity directly to tectonic processes that created the East African Rift. The sudden uplift of mountains there beginning about 20 million years ago changed the way rain interacted with the landscape, and turned what was a dense equatorial jungle into a park-like savannah. As the upraised rocks eroded with rain, nutrients and minerals were transported into the valleys. These tectonic processes made it possible for early hominids to leave the trees and fruit-based diet and become game hunters, runners, thinkers, cooks, poets, musicians, scholars, farmers, and eventually empire and civilization builders. A similar process whereby mountains led to rivers and fertile valleys is evidenced almost everywhere that mountains are formed, including the mountain ranges that provide the headwaters for the Nile, the Tigris, and the Euphrates Rivers.

Mountains, mothers of the world, high peaks that rocked and lullabied the cradle of civilization.

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Four great rivers flowed out of the headwaters of the garden of Eden, and brought the waters of paradise to all the world. The biblical story goes that sometime after the Fall, Noah found himself floating along in a water-flooded world. It seemed for a moment as if this might be the end of the story of life on earth, as if the ember of original goodness might be snuffed out. But then the ark found a solid place to rest on Mount Ararat. The ark on the water found earth again. And Noah looked out. And soon other mountain peaks emerged, little islands of hope, the earth reaching up out of its watery death and striving towards the heavens. The earth resurrecting itself. Noah looked out at this primordial world without valleys, a world of water and mountains only. A world of water, and mountains beyond mountains. And then dove that he sent out as a scout brought back an olive branch from that mountains-and-water world, a sign that life could begin again.

The mountains, stone strong mothers of the world, had more creating to do.