Is it “the earth” or Earth?—A Response to Şengör’s Commentary

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Humpty Dumpty: “When I use a word, … it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

—Lewis Carroll, 1872, Through the Looking Glass

In an interesting commentary, A.M. Celâl Şengör (GSA Today, v. 27, no. 3–4, p. 19) poses the question: Which is proper, “the earth” or “Earth”? Şengör argues that “the earth” is preferable because it distinguishes our planet from the others in the Solar System, which are named after Roman gods. The names of the other planets are capitalized because they are proper nouns, which Şengör argues is not the case with our home planet.

The English word “earth” is derived from the Middle English erthe, which comes from the Old English eorthe. In the kindred Scandinavian languages the word is jord, which is visually similar to the Old Norse jörð, which would be pronounced something like “yurth,” phonetically similar to the modern English earth.

The Old Norse jörð is relevant because in the Norse/Germanic pantheon, Jörd (capitalized) is a goddess who was the mother of Thor (Lindow, 2001). So, Earth, like the other planets in the Solar System, does have a divinely inspired name, and so should be capitalized. Şengör’s concerns regarding when to capitalize Earth are easily solved. Earth (capitalized) should refer only to the planet as a whole. “The earth” should be reserved for regolith, soil, and sediment.

Earth is preferable to Şengör’s suggestion of the Greek Gaia, because Gaia is not in common usage, whereas Earth is.

Şengör states that “there is a much weightier reason that we should continue calling our planet ‘the earth’ and not ‘Earth’: it is our abode, not any old planet in the Solar System.” Earth is, indeed, a unique place and it is a specific place. As such it deserves the dignity accorded to proper nouns (capitalized) and not the more pedestrian status of common nouns. After all, when we refer to our own Mother, we capitalize the word to distinguish the specific from the more general, all mothers. Should we not do the same for Earth and by doing so acknowledge the origin of the word as well?

REFERENCES CITED