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# In the Wilderness

Paul Watson

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Israel had safely, miraculously crossed the Sea, and Egypt was in the rearview mirror. “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord: I will sing to the Lord for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea” (Exod 15.1). Ahead was the land of Canaan—the Promised Land, a “land flowing with milk and honey:” “You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession, the place, O Lord, that you made your abode....” (Exod 15.17). And in between—between Egypt and Canaan, between slavery and freedom, between death and life—lay the wilderness: “Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds, and they went into the wilderness of Shur” (Exod 15.22).

The book of Exodus focuses on two large series of events: Israel’s exodus from Egyptian bondage (Exod 1–15) and Israel’s covenant-making/breaking experiences at Sinai (Exod 19–40). But tucked away between these collections of Exodus and Covenant narratives is the beginning of a third series of events—stories of what happened to the people of Israel as they journeyed through the Wilderness. Exodus 15–18 records what happened as Israel travelled from Egypt to Sinai. Numbers 10–33 picks up the story and tells what happened from Sinai to the edge of Canaan.<sup>1</sup> Then, in Deuteronomy, Moses repeatedly reminds the second generation of Israelites—the generation that would actually enter Canaan—what had happened in the Wilderness, and why. Thereafter, throughout the prophets and the Psalms, the Wilderness experiences are regularly recalled and are eventually picked up and applied in a variety of New Testament texts.

## The Nature of the Journey

While each separate story—beginning with the bitter, undrinkable water at Marah (“Bitter place,” Exod 15.22–26)—has its own distinctive features, collectively the stories can be grouped into four sets of challenges that confronted Israel on her journey.

1. **Nutrition.** Put simply, the people of Israel needed something to eat and something to drink as they went along their way, and they needed it daily. But food and drink were hard to come by, given the wild, barren nature of the territory through which they passed:

*Wilderness* denotes a range of landscapes, from open plains and rugged mountains offering seasonal pasturage, to scrub or nearly barren desert, to scorched, toxic land incapable of supporting vegetation. The term typically refers to unsettled and uncultivated land, the natural habitation of wild animals but not of humans, a place through which shepherds and Bedouin pass following pasturage and travelers hasten to safer havens.<sup>2</sup>

As the people themselves put it, “It is no place for grain, or figs, or vines, or pomegranates; and there is no water to drink” (Num 20.5). What Israel could not provide for herself, God provided for her, including:

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1. Interestingly, the title of the book of Numbers in Hebrew is “In the Wilderness.”

2. Brian C. Jones, “Wilderness” in *New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 5:848.

- potable water at Marah (Exod 15.22–26)
  - manna and quail in the wilderness of Sin (Exod 16.1–36)
  - water from the rock at Rephidim (Exod 17.1–7)
  - quail at Kibroth-hattaavah (Num 11.4–15, 31–34)
  - water from the rock at Meribah (Num 20.1–13)
2. **Protection.** Travelling through unknown territory in large numbers that included women, children and the elderly, Israel was constantly vulnerable to attack by other groups who either lived in or on the edge of the wilderness and were more familiar with it. Thus, Israel experienced attacks and armed resistance by:
- the Amalekites, at Rephidim (Exod 17.8–15)
  - the Amalekites and Canaanites, in the hill country of Canaan (Num 14.39–45)
  - the Edomites (Num 20.14–21)
  - the Canaanite king of Arad, in the Negeb (Num 21.1–3)
  - Sihon, king of the Amorites (Num 21.21–32)
  - Og, king of Bashan (Num 21.33–35)
  - Balak, king of Moab (Num 22–24)
3. **Organization.** In Egypt the people’s lives had been organized for them. Egyptian taskmasters told Israelite crew chiefs what the daily quota of bricks would be and how to make those bricks (Exod 5.1–19). Now, in the Wilderness, the Israelites were on their own. Moses was their leader, but Moses could not do everything. Thus, a social structure was needed for the community to function efficiently; and that structure began to emerge in the Wilderness:
- A rudimentary judicial system (Exod 18.1–27)
  - Tribal organization and leadership for the order of march (Num 10.11–28)
  - Appointment of seventy elders to help “bear the burden of the people” (Num 11.16–30)
- There was still room for conflict and jealousy among the leadership—Aaron and Miriam (Num 12.1–16); Korah and Dathan and Abiram (Num 16.1–50)—but needed structures for judicial, military and religious activities were being established for the community.
4. **Direction.** Perhaps less obvious, but no less real, was the people’s need for guidance through the Wilderness. For Israel, the way through the Wilderness was new and uncharted; but God showed them the way, using a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod 13.17–22; 40.34–38; Num 10.11–12). Thus the frequently used designation “Wilderness wanderings” is a misnomer. *God* led Israel through the Wilderness, just as he provided physical sustenance, deliverance from enemies and human leadership—nutrition, protection, organization—all of which were necessary for Israel to survive in the Wilderness and complete her journey to the Promised Land.

### **God’s Love and Care for Israel along the Way**

Woven throughout all the Wilderness stories are two major themes—themes that would be echoed throughout the Old Testament and resounded in the New—the first of which is God’s providential care for Israel throughout the journey. As God had responded to the people’s cries when they were slaves in Egypt (Exod 2.23–25), so God responded to their cries in the Wilderness. Not once did God fail to provide for the people that which they needed, whether that need was for food or water, direction or deliverance.

Two metaphors are regularly used to describe God’s loving care for his people. One was that of a parent caring for a child. As Israel prepared for the invasion of Canaan, Moses encouraged the people by reminding them:

“Have no dread or fear of them. The LORD your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, and in the wilderness, where you saw how the LORD your God carried you, *just as one carries a child*, all the way that you traveled until you reached this place (Deut 1.29–31, *emphasis added*).

More poignant still is Hosea’s description of God’s parental love for his child, Israel:

When Israel was a child, I loved him,  
 and out of Egypt I called my son.  
 The more I called them,  
 the more they went from me;  
 they kept sacrificing to the Baals,  
 and offering incense to idols.  
 Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,  
 I took them up in my arms,  
 but they did not know that I healed them.  
 I led them with cords of human kindness,  
 with bands of love.  
 I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks,  
 I bent down to them and fed them. (Hos 11.1–4)

The second metaphor to describe God’s relationship to Israel in the Wilderness is that of husband and wife or, more specifically, groom and bride. In a word, the Wilderness was God’s honeymoon with Israel, the time and place where God the groom lavished his love on Israel his bride. The very first oracle in the book of Jeremiah uses this bride/groom metaphor:

I remember the devotion of your youth,  
 your love as a bride,  
 How you followed me in the wilderness  
 in a land not sown (Jer 2.2).

Hosea looks forward to the time when, after punishing wayward Israel, God will take Israel on a second honeymoon, as it were—back into the Wilderness:

Therefore, I will now allure her,  
 and bring her into the wilderness,  
 and speak tenderly to her.  
 From there I will give her her vineyards,  
 and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.  
 There she shall respond to me as in the days of her youth,  
 as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. (Hos 2.14–15)

This theme of God’s providential care for his people is echoed throughout both Old and New Testaments. Thus the psalmist sang:

They [Israel] asked, and he brought quails,  
 and gave them food from heaven in abundance.  
 He opened the rock, and water gushed out;  
 it flowed through the desert like a river (Ps 105.40–41).

Much later in Israel's history—well after Israel's exile in Babylon, when the Jews were in the process of reestablishing themselves in Jerusalem and Judah—Ezra prayed a great public prayer of confession and petition that included these words: “For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them” (Neh 9.15).

In the New Testament, in 1 Corinthians 10.1–4, the apostle Paul recalled Israel's wilderness experience, how the people “all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink,” and went on to say, “for they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ.” If this seems a bit far-fetched to modern ears, remember that Jesus himself had offered the Samaritan woman “living water” (John 4.13–14) and subsequently said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6.35). Indeed, the entire “Bread of Life” discourse in John 6.22–59 is an echo of the manna stories, as is Jesus' exhortation for his followers to continue to look to a good and gracious God for their every need: “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matt 6.11).

### **Israel's Unfaithful Response to God in the Wilderness**

The second, much darker theme that runs through the Wilderness stories is that of Israel's repeated rejection of God and his goodness, expressed over and over again as Israel's “murmuring” against God. Such “murmuring” or “complaining” (NRSV) was much more than a muttering under their breath. Instead, it was a shrill denial of God's goodness and care. The murmuring began fairly innocuously at Marah, where the people asked, “What shall we drink?” (Exod 15.24). Then, at the next stop, where food was in short supply, the people whined, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread.” They even went so far as to charge Moses with attempted genocide: “for you have brought us out into the wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exod 16.3).

And so it went throughout the Wilderness journey. “Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” (Exod 17.3). “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at” (Num 11.6). “Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! Or would that we had died in this wilderness! Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become booty; would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?” So they said to one another, “Let us choose a captain and go back to Egypt” (Nums 14.2–4).

The people seemingly forgot from one crisis to the next what God had done for them previously. On the other hand, their collective memory of what life had been like back in Egypt was simply false. They doubted Moses' intention to see them safely through the Wilderness. They doubted God's ability to bring them safely into the land of Canaan.

Worst of all, they abandoned their commitment to worship God alone, which was the first demand of the covenant that they had made with God at Sinai. Israel's faithless idolatry began at Sinai with the making of a golden calf—“These are your gods, O Israel,” said Aaron, “who brought you up out of the land of Egypt” (Exod 32.4).<sup>3</sup> Israel's idolatry continued on the plains of Moab, where the Moabites “invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and bowed down to their gods,” Baal Peor in particular (Num 25.1–3). Such idolatrous rejection of the Lord God could only lead to death, and it did—in the Wilderness. As Dennis Olson explains:

Before Sinai, Israel was like a newly adopted child who did not yet know the rules of the household. God, the divine Parent, bent over backwards to satisfy the legitimate needs of an Israel immediately out of Egypt. But by the time we reach Numbers, the people of Israel must take responsibility and is answerable for its relationship to God.... Israel now knows the law and is accountable for it, beginning with the first and most important of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before me.”<sup>4</sup>

3. Scholars are divided as to whether the calf represented the deities of Egypt or represented God. Either way, erecting and worshipping the calf was an act of blatant unfaithfulness. In traditional Jewish interpretation, the golden calf was Israel's “original sin.”

4. Dennis T. Olson, *Numbers* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 63. See also Thomas Dozeman, “Numbers” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 2:100.

This dark side of the Wilderness experience was never forgotten. Passage after passage that recites God's goodness to Israel in the Wilderness goes on to recall Israel's rebellion there. Jeremiah, after recollecting God's honeymoon with Israel in the Wilderness (Jer 2.2–3), compares Israel's subsequent amnesia to the (unthinkable) notion of a bride's forgetting what she wore on her wedding day (Jer 2.32). Whereas Psalm 105 celebrates God's wonderful care for Israel in the Wilderness, Psalm 106 reminds those who sing it of Israel's disloyalty to this faithful God:

“But they soon forgot his works;  
they did not wait for his counsel.  
They had a wanton craving in the wilderness,  
and put God to the test in the desert” (Ps 106.13–14).

In a similar manner Ezra, in his prayer of national confession, after reciting God's gracious acts to Israel in the Wilderness, acknowledges, “they refused to obey, and were not mindful of the wonders that you performed among them; but they stiffened their necks and determined to return to their slavery in Egypt” (Neh 9.17). Which, of course, was the very thing that Moses had said to his generation so many years earlier: “You have been rebellious against the Lord as long as he has known you” (Deut 9.24).

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul likewise moves from a remembrance of God's goodness to Israel in the Wilderness to a strong warning to the Corinthians, “Do not become idolaters as some of them did,” adding, “these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor 10.6–7). In Hebrews the preacher similarly warns his hearers,

“Do not harden your hearts as in rebellion,  
as on the day of test in the wilderness,  
where your ancestors put me to the test,  
though they had seen my works for forty years” (Heb 3.8–9; cf. Ps 95.7–11).

The Wilderness was thus the place not only for blessing but also for testing—and it still is.

### **Our Own Journey through the Wilderness**

As specific as the Wilderness *events* of Exodus 15–18 and Numbers 10–33 were for Israel, her *experience* of the Wilderness was not unique:

- David spent years in the wilds of southern Judah, on the run from both Saul and the Philistines (1 Sam 21–30).
- Elijah fled from Ahab and Jezebel into the wilderness (1 Kgs 19.1–18).
- Israel's return from Babylonian captivity was to be a new journey through the Wilderness: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa 40.3).
- John the Baptist came out of the wilderness to announce the Messiah (Mark 1.4)
- Jesus went into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (Mark 1.12–13)
- Jesus' last days were, in effect, a wilderness journey—with stopping points at Gethsemane, the house of Caiphias, the judgment seat of Pilate and the headquarters of the Praetorian Guard, before his journey ended at Golgotha (Mark 14.26—15.39).

Both individually and collectively—both as “disciples” and as “church”—we continue to experience the Wilderness:

Israel's departure from Sinai envisions the life of faith as a journey with God. The imagery of journeying with God remains central to the Christian life.... Baptism makes us citizens of Christ's

church. Residency in the church creates new allegiances. The old passes away. We are propelled on a journey with God that may lead us away from the security of home and country.<sup>5</sup>

And, we might add, will certainly lead us into the unknown, into uncharted territory, for “the wilderness is a place betwixt and between.”<sup>6</sup> The Wilderness is that place, that life situation, between sickness and health; between grief and comfort; between rejection and acceptance; between doubt and faith.

How, then, shall we transverse our own particular “wilderness,” indeed the many barren times and places of our lives? Not being surprised by the Wilderness is a good place to start. Some Christians are, you know—surprised, that is. Televangelists, among others, would have us believe that, for the “true” Christian, the “born-again” Christian (is there any other kind?), all the hardships of this life disappear—financial insecurity, marital discord, poor health and the like. Do not believe it. The Wilderness is real and it awaits us (if indeed we are not already in it).

If we are not surprised by the Wilderness, then we are much better prepared to accept it as a time for deepening our trust in God. The Wilderness remains a time of testing; but that is not in itself a bad thing. The Wilderness affords us the opportunity to allow God to lead us through it and to provide us with the spiritual stamina that we need along the way. It is not hard to trust God when all goes well. It is in the Wilderness that we come to depend upon God for our daily bread, and to learn that “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt 4.4; Deut 8.3).

Finally, the Wilderness is the proper setting for both reflection and anticipation. At each stage of our journey we can look back and “remember”—one of Moses’ favorite words in Deuteronomy. We can raise our own “Ebenezer” and gladly say, with Samuel, “Thus far the Lord has helped us” (1 Sam 7.12). At the same time, we can look ahead to the Promised Land that awaits us, knowing that the Wilderness does not last forever (even if it sometimes seems that way):

[T]he wilderness seems permanent. Forty years is a long time in the old sandbox. Even that grand mountaintop experience at Sinai looks like a one-time thing; it is out of the wilderness only to be led right back in. The wilderness is beginning to look a lot like home.<sup>7</sup>

But the Wilderness is not home. “Home” is that place Christ Jesus has gone to prepare for us (John 14.1–3). Meanwhile, we continue on our journey, living a “life beyond redemption but short of consummation.”<sup>8</sup> And when the time comes for us to pass through the valley of the shadow of death, the God of the Wilderness will see us safely home.

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5. Dozeman, 97.

6. Terence E. Fretheim, *Numbers* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1991), 171.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid., 172.