

## 1. INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### 1.1. The Natural Wilderness

Wilderness has never seemed so popular. Television programmes about wild places and wild creatures abound. Adventure holidays engaging with nature in far away places are in demand. Intrepid explorers continue to pit their strength against extreme conditions at the ends of the earth. Among some lesser mortals hill walking and other ‘natural’ pursuits hold more attraction than the artificial wonders provided by electronic science. Proposals for development in green and wild locations rightly provoke protests and opposition - whether in our local open spaces, or in the vastness of Alaska or Antarctica. Yet still the erosion of wilderness continues.

Many human activities pose a growing threat to natural systems. Unbridled tourism, the greedy over-exploitation of natural resources, the destruction of natural habitats, the ravages of pollution, and the underlying disengagement from the world of nature constitute a failure to live in harmony from the rest of the created order. I do not believe that we can survive in any tolerable form without a radical shift of values and worldview.

I am under no illusions that wholly unspoilt nature exists today: in Britain every landscape is to some extent a human construct; even the remotest parts of the earth are touched by global warming and other forms of human pollution. Nevertheless in places where nature is left even partially to take its course, glimpses can be caught of true wilderness.

## 1.2 The Biblical Wilderness

The wilderness is a major component in the biblical landscape. In the Scriptures two wilderness areas are mainly in view. The archetypal Wilderness is the area through which the Israelites wandered during a crucial period of their history. And the Judean Wilderness formed the hinterland of the region where Jesus' ministry took place. We can infer from the Gospels that he visited it often. The wilderness motif in the Old and New Testaments also has symbolic significance. The Christian Church adopted and adapted the symbolism of wilderness. And in the physical desert, the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt and Palestine began a movement whose echoes continue down to the present.

## 1.3 The Symbolic Wilderness

Wilderness symbolism is not confined to the Church. The physical wilderness has a spiritual and emotional counterpart. Even in secular thought political and business leaders can be said to be 'in the wilderness' when their careers have suffered a setback; episodes of emotional confusion or mental disorientation can be called wilderness times. Periods of reduced support from other people and social structures can cause feelings of stress, vulnerability and even horror, akin to the emotions produced by the literal desert. I believe this secular usage grows in part from biblical roots.

Some may consider that only the symbolic or interior wilderness is relevant to our lives, and that the physical wilderness is unimportant. I would suggest that the continued viability of the symbolic wilderness may depend on the existence somewhere of literal, if limited wilderness areas. I can accept the dictum of Henry David Thoreau that 'in Wilderness is the preservation of the World';<sup>1</sup> as a

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<sup>1</sup> Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking', *Excursions: The Writings of*  
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Christian I also believe that wild nature and barren places belong to God, and God's purposes alone are ultimate. Wilderness is a part of God's world, of which Jesus Christ is the Saviour.

The wilderness is deeply ambivalent. On one hand the conditions of the wilderness can enable us to contemplate the revelation of God, defined by Scripture and mediated by our encounters with nature and other people, with clearer vision. The relative simplicity and vulnerability of the desert also reveal our dependence on God for survival. On the other hand the removal from normal social and ecclesiastical structures, which is typical of wilderness experience, can bring temptations to turn from God and conform to the moral demands of the world and of our own unredeemed nature.

Through the process of encountering wildness one may be given a clearer insight into one's own identity, and direction for the next steps of life's journey. The experience of wildness also forces us to the recognition of our physicality and the 'wild' aspects of ourselves. And when the experience of 'wilderness' is shared with others, distinctions of age, experience and social role give way to an awareness of our shared humanity in God's wilderness.

#### **1.4 Conclusion and Acknowledgements**

*This essay seeks to explore these three faces of wilderness – the natural, the biblical and the symbolic – and to explore the relations between them.* First we shall examine the significance of the wilderness motif in the Old Testament, and its development in the New Testament and in Christianity. This

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*Henry David Thoreau; Jack Turner, "In Wildness is the Preservation of the World"* in *Sessions*, 1995.  
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investigation occupies chapters two to six. In chapter seven I ask what are the differences and the points of contact between Christian and secular attitudes to wilderness. The postscript suggests some outcomes.

The study is directed firstly to my fellow-Christians, in the belief that we need to make connections between the natural and the spiritual worlds spanned by the idea of wilderness. It is also offered to 'Green' people, among whom I also count myself, in the belief that Christianity has a contribution to make to our thinking about wilderness.

This work grew out of my MPhil dissertation, *Wilderness in the Old Testament*.<sup>2</sup> As my reading and thinking have developed, the original dissertation has undergone a process of considerable alteration, being abbreviated in some parts and greatly extended in others.

I am grateful to Dr John Bimson who supervised the original study. The Revd Richard Field and The Right Revd David Wilcox have helped me by commenting on earlier versions of this study. Professor Andrew Louth kindly read a previous draft and pointed out several of its shortcomings. The remaining ones are my responsibility alone. My debt to many scholars whose works I have read or consulted is obvious and incalculable. I have made considerable efforts to acknowledge these debts, but the possibility exists that I may have unconsciously absorbed and reflected some ideas and insights without being aware of their source. If any accidental plagiarism has taken place I apologise and, if it is pointed out, will correct it immediately.

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<sup>2</sup> *Wilderness in the Old Testament: Narrative, Environment and Interpretation* (unpublished dissertation, University of Bristol 2000).

