

3. THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY: TRANSITION AND CHANGE

3.1. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

An attempt was made in the last chapter to sketch the outlines of the Biblical wilderness and its later developments. Our discoveries so far have been like a series of still pictures of the wilderness. For the Israelites, however, the desert was essentially a place through which to travel, rather than a fixed abode. In this chapter we shall begin to examine their wilderness journey, which constitutes by far the longest section of the Bible relating to the wilderness. This journey started at the exodus from Egypt and culminated in their arrival at the Promised Land. It was undertaken at the command of God and under the leadership of Moses. The historical recollections of this period, recorded in the Old Testament together with theological interpretations of the events, were foundational to Israel's self-understanding. They formed the basis of a motif which continues through the Old Testament and the New, and into the later Christian tradition. The journey involved a transition from slavery to freedom, and a transformation in those who took part in it.

3.1.1. Transition

The concept of 'liminality' is helpful in understanding the transitional character of the wilderness wanderings. This term was used by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep in explaining 'rites of passage'. Such rites include a 'liminal' or threshold stage between separation from one state and integration into another.¹ Victor Turner has pointed out that pilgrimages also show some of the

¹ Van Gennep, 1909; Gluckman, (ed.) 1962, 3.
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characteristics of liminality, including the suspension of social roles.² The application of this thinking to the wilderness wanderings is completed by R. L. Cohn, who remarks: 'Between the time in which the Hebrews build cities in Egypt in which they would not dwell... and the time in which they dwell in cities in Canaan which they had not built..., they are on trial, on the liminal march from slavery to freedom.'³ Similarly J. Nohrnberg finds in the narratives of the wilderness wanderings 'the introversion, sequestration, and quarantine of a corporate personality betaking itself into the uncultivated wastes to discover the patterns that are to govern its subsequent nationally-bound existence.'⁴ The wilderness period can be seen as a liminal stage in which the oppressed Hebrew slaves from Egypt became a holy community under God.

3.1.2. The Search for a 'Wilderness Ideal'

Sometimes in the Old Testament the wilderness period is idealised. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of those days as a time of youthful loyalty and bridal love, when Israel followed Yahweh through the wilderness, while her enemies were punished.⁵ By contrast the period after the entry into the Land was seen as a time of apostasy, when they failed to seek Yahweh who had led them 'through a barren and broken country, a country parched and forbidding, where no one ever travelled'.⁶ The prophet Hosea likewise remembers how the experience of God's care in the wilderness was followed by a period of apostasy.⁷ He promises a return to the conditions of those days: the Lord will 'woo' Israel's 'mother' - perhaps the nation regarded as a whole as distinct from its individual

² Turner 1978, 2.

³ Cohn 1981, 17.

⁴ Nohrnberg 1981, 42-54.

⁵ Jer 2:2-3.

⁶ Jer 2:6.

⁷ Hos 13:5-6.

members⁸ - lead her into the wilderness, and speak words of encouragement to her.⁹

In the past various scholarly attempts were made to demonstrate that such texts pointed to the existence of a 'desert ideal' in Israel. Auerbach sees the history of Israel partly in terms of a 'struggle between the desert-ideal and the assimilation to the events of daily life and the environment.'¹⁰ J.W. Flight, building on an earlier foundation in the writings of K. Budde, suggested that the prophets were widely influence by the nomadic ideal.¹¹ He believed that this ideal reached its fulfilment in Jesus, who 'raised the nomadic ideal to its sublimest heights by pointing men to the glorious simplicities of faith and love.'¹² Several pieces of evidence have been held to point to the presence of a nomadic ideal in Israel. If this case were to be proven, we would have to accept that, at least in some passages, the wilderness sojourn was regarded not as a transition but as an aspiration. We must therefore consider the arguments that have been put forward, and see whether they do prove the existence of this nomadic ideal. The arguments to be considered are three in number: a Midianite or Kenite origin has been claimed for the worship of Yahweh; the Rechabites have been seen as representatives of a nomadic ideal; and traces of a nomadic history have been seen in Israel's national character.

3.1.2.1 Midianites and Kenites

Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, whose flock Moses pastured on the edge of the

⁸ Mackintosh 1997, 40.

⁹ Hos 2:14.

¹⁰ Auerbach 1975, 168.

¹¹ Flight 1923.

¹² *Ibid.* 223.

desert, is introduced in Exodus 3:1 as priest of Midian. In Exodus 18 he appears as a believer in Yahweh. He confesses that the deliverance experienced by the Israelites is Yahweh's doing and offers praise to Yahweh. He is even involved in the offering of sacrifice and presides at a sacred meal in which both Moses himself, and even the priestly figure Aaron participate.¹³ In the second part of the same chapter Jethro gives Moses advice concerning the adjudication of disputes and the statutes and laws of God.¹⁴

H.H. Rowley suggested that probably Yahweh was the God of Jethro and Hobab, Moses' in-laws. Passages linking Yahweh with Seir, Mount Paran, Teman and Midian itself have been thought to reflect a tradition which placed the sacred mountain of God in Midianite territory.¹⁵ Jethro and Hobab are called both Midianites and Kenites.¹⁶ Kenites are associated with the tribe of Judah, and are also found settled among the Amalekites.¹⁷ As regards the name Kenite itself, its root (*qyn*) has been connected on the basis of cognate languages with working in metal;¹⁸ therefore the Kenites have been thought possibly to be a tribe of 'semi-nomadic smiths'.¹⁹

However, these data fall well short of proving a nomadic origin for Yahwism.

All that is actually asserted about Jethro is that he was Moses' father-in-law,

¹³ Ex 18:1-12.

¹⁴ Ex 18:13-27.

¹⁵ Rowley 1950, 153; see Jdg 5:4; Dt 33:2; Hab 3:3; Zech 9:14; Hab 3:7. Even if Mount Sinai were to be located in the land of Midian, we should not necessarily conclude that Yahwism was of Midianite origin.

¹⁶ Ex 3:1; 18:1; Num 10:29; Jdg 1:16; 4:11.

¹⁷ Jdg 1:16; cf. 1 Sam 30:26ff; 1 Sam 15:6; cf. Num 24:21; (see *BDB* 1952, 884a) and possibly, if with the *REB* some manuscripts of the Greek Old Testament are followed, also Jdg 1:16.

¹⁸ *BDB* 883b.

¹⁹ Rowley 1950, 152, n.7.

functioned as a priest of Midian and was a believer in Yahweh. Opinions differ concerning the interpretation of Exodus 18:12. Durham considers that Jethro presides over the proceedings as a ‘sacerdotal leader’;²⁰ but this assertion somewhat overstates what can be deduced from the text; and as Houtman points out, Jethro’s advice to Moses concerns legal matters and not religion, nor does Moses speak to him about the revelation at the Bush.²¹ Even if Mount Horeb/Sinai was in Midianite territory, it does not appear as the holy mountain of the Midianites in Exodus, and its sacred character is revealed to Moses for the first time.²² The data in question certainly constitute evidence for a belief in Yahweh outside the community of the covenant, but fall well short of showing Jethro to be the source of Yahwism. Childs considers the ‘Kenite Hypothesis’ to be ‘a brilliant cul-de-sac’.²³ Concerning the Midianites, recent study has shown that they were widely scattered in the ancient near east and not restricted to one area alone.²⁴

3.1.2.2. Rechabites

A further argument for the existence of a nomadic ideal in Israel has been based on the Old Testament story of the Rechabites. According to Jeremiah 35 the prophet brought the family of the Rechabites to a room in the Temple, set wine before them and invited them to drink. They refused the invitation because their forefather Jonadab son of Rechab had forbidden them ever to drink wine, build houses, sow seed or plant vineyards.²⁵ Instead they were to remain tent-

²⁰ Durham 1987, 240.

²¹ Ex 4:18.

²² Houtman 1993, 97.

²³ Childs 1974, 323.

²⁴ Cf G.I. Davies 1979, 64f; Mendenhall 1992.

²⁵ Jonadab is mentioned in 2 Kgs 10:15 as a supporter of Jehu, the ruthless suppressor of baal worship.

dwellers. Indeed, they were only present in Jerusalem because of danger from the Babylonian armies. This incident serves as a kind of acted parable; in the oracle which follows Jeremiah contrasts the faithfulness of the Rechabites to their ancestor with the unfaithfulness of Israel to Yahweh in spite of Yahweh's repeated warnings through the prophets. Moreover because of their loyalty to their family rule the Rechabites are promised a permanent place in the service of Yahweh. Finally, according to 1 Chronicles 2:55 the Rechabites were related to the Kenites.

A number of arguments have been raised against the claim of Rechabite support for the thesis of a nomadic ideal.²⁶ F.S Frick adduces considerable evidence that the Rechabites were a guild of craftsmen, probably metal-workers involved in the manufacture of chariots and other weapons, rather than nomads.²⁷ However this suggestion loses some of its force in view of the fact that some groups of nomads themselves practised various crafts.²⁸ More cogently, Mauser draws attention to the lack of evidence that the prophets were directly involved with the Rechabites or upheld their ideals as a divine requirement.²⁹ R. de Vaux sums up the matter of the Rechabites by observing that historically the account we have of them begins with Jehu and ends with Jeremiah. We have no evidence that they are a survival from a nomadic past; we should see them as a reactionary rather than an ancient group.³⁰ Talmon concludes from his assessment of the evidence that the way of the Rechabites was 'a reality, not a motif: an occupation... not a vocation'.³¹

²⁶ See e.g. W.D Davies 1974, 78-80.

²⁷ Frick 1971.

²⁸ Lemche 1985, 86.

²⁹ Mauser 1963, 46, note 1.

³⁰ De Vaux 1961, 15.

³¹ Talmon 1966, 37.

3.1.2.3. Did Israel Have a Nomadic History?

If Israel had a long history of nomadism, we might expect that such a history would leave a pronounced imprint on its traditions. Talmon can find no evidence that the Israelite tribes ever passed through a stage of true nomadism; rather the patriarchal groups in the Pentateuch have an ‘agricultural orientation’.³² He points to the comparative rarity in the Old Testament of such features of nomadic society as blood vengeance and tribal solidarity, and the tendency to view these characteristics in a negative light where they do appear.³³ In the story of Cain nomadism is a punishment. Talmon concludes that the desert was not an ideal, but rather a punishment and a transition.³⁴ He further suggests that the desert was for Moses, Elijah and Amos the existential framework for the receiving of a theophany (as was the Temple for Jeremiah and Isaiah). It was not something to which they aspired.³⁵ The call, ‘Away to your tents, Israel’,³⁶ may be rooted in the desert,³⁷ but may equally well take its origin from warfare.³⁸

H.N. Schneidau has collected evidence that the separation of shepherd from village culture was not as absolute as was formerly thought, and that the whole ancient near east was influenced by nomadic values.³⁹ He draws on the work of Mendenhall to show that the real contrast was not so much between pastoral

³² Talmon 1966, 34.

³³ e.g. Gen 16:12; 21:20; 25:18,27; 34:7, 30-31; Num 16:1-35.

³⁴ Talmon 1966, 35-37.

³⁵ Talmon 1966, 49.

³⁶ 1 Kgs 12:16; cf. 2 Sam 20:1.

³⁷ R.P. Gordon 1986, 293.

³⁸ Robinson 1993, 258.

³⁹ Schneidau 1976, 135.

and village culture as between village and city.⁴⁰ People who became alienated from their society, or whose land became infertile, might turn to semi-nomadic ways.⁴¹ Powerful rulers tended to gather and settle such people, often using them as a labour force in grand projects as Pharaoh did the Hebrews.⁴² Schneidau goes on to enunciate an important distinction:

What the Bible praises is the way of life of the shepherding [*sic*] semi-nomad, not that of the camel-riding Bedouin: the distinction is vital, for many reasons. For instance, the use of the wilderness in the pastoral symbolism implies the attitude not of the desert-dweller but of domesticated man. It is not the utilitarian at-homeness of the Bedouin, but the awe and fear of men for whom the desert was a danger, but also refuge and not infrequently the scene of theophany, that shapes the desert symbol in the Bible.⁴³

N.P. Lemche confirms the absence of any sharp boundary between nomadism and sedentarism.⁴⁴ People changed from a sedentary to a nomadic way of life, and vice versa, because of political and personal factors,⁴⁵ and nomadic and sedentary people were interdependent.⁴⁶

We find traces of nomadism in the Old Testament, but not a ‘nomad ideal’. Not the wilderness milieu in itself, but the encounter with Yahweh there, constituted Israel as the people of the Covenant. Apart from Elijah we find few

⁴⁰ Schneidau 1976, 123-124.

⁴¹ Schneidau 1976, 126.

⁴² Schneidau 1976, 127.

⁴³ Schneidau 1976, 128-129.

⁴⁴ Lemche 1985, 85.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 135-140.

⁴⁶ Ibid.85, 130.

traces of the idea of going to the wilderness voluntarily, ‘on pilgrimage’ as it were, to seek Yahweh. Yahweh takes the initiative in leading the people from slavery via the desert towards the Promised Land. En route Yahweh disciplines, guides and teaches them so that, if they will, they may experience in the Promised Land the blessings of the Covenant. The wilderness life is not the goal to which Israel aspired; rather the dictum of Clarence Glacken, that the Judeo-Christian worldview is ‘virtually a perfect rationalization of agriculture’,⁴⁷ may be endorsed. The positive aspects of the wilderness narrative could be picked out to convey a particular message; but throughout the Old Testament Israel’s destiny is to be found in the Promised Land, not in the desert. The transitional character of the wilderness journey stands.

3.1.3. Transformation

In the course of their transitional pilgrimage through the desert the Israelites were transformed. This transforming experience is in many ways foreshadowed by the story of Hagar told in Genesis 16 and 21. In the first of these chapters Hagar, the maid of Abraham's wife Sarah, and the mother of Abraham's son Ishmael, runs away from the jealous, abusive behaviour of her mistress. A divine messenger meets her in the desert and sends her back to the unhappy situation, with the promise of God's attention to her sufferings, and of a future for her son. As a result of this experience she gives Yahweh a new name, El-roi, which is thought to mean ‘God who sees me’.⁴⁸ In the second narrative Hagar is sent away with her son to wander in the wilderness as a result of a complaint by Sarah. Facing the threat of death from thirst for her and her son she is again reassured of God's future for him, and shown a well. As Thomas B.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Oelschlaeger 1991, 348.

⁴⁸ Gen 16:13.

Dozeman points out, while Moses is the second person in the Bible to be transformed in the wilderness, Hagar is the first. Dozeman refers to the work of D. Daube, M. Tsevat and P. Tribble in revealing the similarities between the experiences of Israel at the Exodus from Egypt, and the Egyptian Hagar. Hagar and Moses are both of ambiguous status: Hagar as surrogate wife and slave, Moses as Egyptian prince and Hebrew slave; the transition of Hagar from slave to wife, and that of Moses from prince to liberator, both lead to threatening situations; Hagar and Moses both flee to wells in the wilderness, where they both encounter a messenger of God; both are required to return to situations of danger; both receive a word of promise and leave the wilderness with a special name for God; both take up new roles – Hagar as mother of Ishmael, Moses as liberator; both are driven out into the wilderness by their original oppressors, and subsequently find liberation. Among other parallels Dozeman points out that, in each case, crying out leads to divine rescue.⁴⁹

The wilderness is a crucible of transformation also for the community of Israel. They leave Egypt an amorphous body of slaves; they reach the Promised Land a structured, disciplined nation under God. The narratives of the wilderness wanderings recount the process by which this transformation takes place.

3.1.4. Transformation and the Second Exodus

Much later in their history the people of Israel were again separated from their homeland by wilderness. In the sixth century BCE the core of the people were taken into exile in Babylon. The second part of the Book of Isaiah (chapters 40-55) contains prophetic promises of a Second Exodus, this time from

⁴⁹ Dozeman 1998.

Babylon to the Promised Land.⁵⁰ Even the hills and valleys are levelled in preparation for the coming of God at the head of the people, along a prepared highway.⁵¹ God will provide rivers in the desert, to the delight of wild animals as well as people.⁵² In such promises the barrenness of the desert itself proves transitory; the ultimate purpose of God is not aridity but fruitfulness. Although God's judgement can turn rivers into desert,⁵³ his redeeming power can conversely change desert into pools and springs of water, quenching the thirst of the needy and planting trees in the wilderness.⁵⁴ Similar imagery is found in an even more developed form in Isaiah 35, which anticipates much of the language of chapters 40-55. There the 'causeway' (*REB*) along which the redeemed people return to Zion, passes through a transformed wilderness. The desert blossoms, Yahweh's glory is revealed, and human weaknesses and disabilities are cured. The idea of a second exodus is also found in the Book of Jeremiah.⁵⁵ In the final part of Isaiah (chapters 56-66) the road is no longer in view, but the righteous are assured that the Lord will provide for them in the desert and make them like a well-watered garden and an unfailing spring.⁵⁶

3.1.5. Transformation and the Garden of God

The Garden of God is an important biblical theme. In the time of renewal described in Isaiah 32:15-20 the wilderness will become 'garden land' (*REB*). The renewal is moral as well as ecological. Justice and righteousness will pervade the land, issuing in ecological health and comprehensive well-being.

⁵⁰ Isa 48:20-21.

⁵¹ Isa 40:1-11; cf. 52:12.

⁵² Isa 43: 19-20.

⁵³ Isa 50:2.

⁵⁴ Isa 41:17-19.

⁵⁵ Jer 16:14-15; 23:7-8; 31:1-22.

⁵⁶ Isa 58:11.

This total transformation and reversal are attributed to an outpouring of the spirit. The idea of the garden is used in a simile for the transformation of the wilderness also in Isaiah 51:3, where the garden of God is identified with Eden.⁵⁷

As we have just seen, an interesting variant of the concept of transformation is found in Isaiah 58:11, where Israel will be satisfied in the bare desert; they, rather than the desert itself, will be like a garden, vital and strong.⁵⁸ The reverse image, a garden without water, is a metaphor for Israel under the judgement of God on account of her idolatrous garden shrines.⁵⁹ In Joel 2:3 the land before the depredations of locusts is like a garden of Eden, and after them a desolate waste. Conversely in Ezekiel 36:35-36 the desolated land will become like a garden of Eden in the day of salvation, and its towns will be restored. Passages such as these anticipate the promise of a new heaven and earth, freed from frustration and pain, where righteousness rules.⁶⁰

3.1.6. Transition and Transformation between the Old and New Testaments

The motif of the desert as the scene of transition to the age of salvation imprinted itself strongly on the mind of Israel. For instance it inspired the community at Qumran, which left us the Dead Sea Scrolls. By their study of the Law they saw themselves as preparing the way of the Lord, as Isaiah had said.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Cf. Ezk 28:13; 31:9. The Sumerian *edin* means the 'steppe' and also the nether world - Halдар 1950, 11,14,18; Schneidau 1976, 121.

⁵⁸ Cf. Jer 31:12.

⁵⁹ Isa 1:29-30; cf. 65:3; 66:17.

⁶⁰ Isa 65:17-25; 66:22.

⁶¹ 1QS 8:13-16; cf. Knibb 1987, 15, 77, 129; Brooke 1994.

Mauser points out that the Qumran community was structured according to the camp of the Israelites in the desert, by tribes, thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens.⁶² The 'exiles' of the desert expected to camp near Jerusalem prior to an onslaught on the city.⁶³

The Qumran sect was not alone in seeking the desert in order to practise their faith. The Jewish historian Josephus writes of various claimants to the title of Messiah, who led people into the desert with the promise of the final deliverance from oppression and compromise. Such were Theudas who persuaded many to follow him to the Jordan, claiming that the river would part for him;⁶⁴ 'a certain impostor who had promised... salvation and rest from troubles, if [the people] chose to follow him into the wilderness';⁶⁵ one Jonathan, who 'won the ear of not a few of the indigent class, and led them forth into the desert, promising them a display of signs and apparitions';⁶⁶ and in general, 'impostors and deceivers [who] called upon the mob to follow them into the desert'.⁶⁷ References to impostors from the desert are also found in the New Testament.⁶⁸

In the second century BCE Judas Maccabaeus (*d.* 161 BCE) led a successful rebellion against the imposition on the Jews of Greek, pagan customs. In the times of the Maccabean revolutionaries we are told that many Jews 'who sought to maintain their religion and law went down to live in the desert', but

⁶² Mauser 1963, 60-61; see 1QS 2:21ff and compare Knibb 1987, 88.

⁶³ Talmon 1966, 61.

⁶⁴ Antiquities 20:97-99.

⁶⁵ Antiquities 20:188.

⁶⁶ Wars of the Jews 7:437-438.

⁶⁷ Wars of the Jews 2:259-260.

⁶⁸ Matt 24:26; Acts 5:36.

were nevertheless massacred for their refusal to infringe the Sabbath.⁶⁹ Judas and his brothers Jonathan and Simon Maccabaeus all took refuge in the wilderness.⁷⁰ Such episodes recall the stories of Moses fleeing from Egypt, Elijah from Jezebel, and David from Saul. The extent to which these people of the inter-testamental period based their actions consciously on the stories of the Israelites in the wilderness is not clear, but one may assume that they were influenced in some degree by the wilderness narratives of their national history. However in those earlier narratives the emphasis is on the activity of God in graciously rescuing and guiding the people; in the later episodes the stress falls much more on human choices and efforts by which people hoped to bring about the age of deliverance.

3.1.7. The Wilderness Journey in the New Testament

St Paul discerns a parallel between the experiences of the Israelites in the desert, and those of the Church. Both communities enjoyed the signs and privileges of the people of God. Both also found themselves in transitional situations: the Church already exists in the last age of God's dealings with the world, but at the same time is subject to testing and temptation. The Christians at Corinth were warned that spiritual privilege was no safeguard against failure and its consequences.⁷¹ N.T. Wright suggests that Romans 8:12-17 similarly amounts to a retelling of the exodus story: ‘...those who patiently walk through the present wilderness, being led by the Christian equivalent of the pillar of cloud and fire, in other words by the Spirit, will eventually receive the “inheritance”.’⁷²

⁶⁹ 1 Macc 2:29-38.

⁷⁰ 1 Macc 5:24-28; 9:33; 2 Macc 5:27, cf. 10:6

⁷¹ 1 Cor 10:1-13.

⁷² N.T. Wright 2003, 257.

The Letter to the Hebrews draws a similar parallel. The Israelites were journeying towards the Promised Land, but the generation of the Exodus were barred from entering it because their unbelief disqualified them; we are on our way to the completion of the blessings that God intends for us, and should take warning from this example. The term 'rest', applied to the wilderness people in Psalm 95, applies to us also. Our 'rest' is our enjoyment of all that God wants to give us through Jesus Christ, but God will not force it on us; by making wrong choices we can fail to enter into it.⁷³ Our journey is not to Mount Sinai, the mountain of the law-giving which formed the central point of the Israelites' journey, but to 'Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem'.⁷⁴

Mauser finds that the story of Jesus in the Gospels, especially in Mark, echoes that of Israel.⁷⁵ The Israelites passed through the sea to enter the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land; Jesus goes out into the wilderness via the waters of baptism. His way has been prepared by John Baptist, who fulfilled the promise of Isaiah 40. By baptizing penitents in the wilderness John prepared them to meet Jesus the Messiah. The wilderness was thus a place of transition to the Messianic age. Unlike the wilderness prophets of the intertestamental period John did not ask the people to follow him into the desert. Nor did he form a sect.⁷⁶ Instead he pointed them to Jesus. Israel spent forty years in the wilderness; Jesus was there for forty days. Mark, alone of the

⁷³ Heb 3:7-4:11.

⁷⁴ Heb 12:18-24.

⁷⁵ Mauser 1963; this work has illuminated my understanding of the whole wilderness theme in the Gospels.

⁷⁶ Bratton 1993, 131.

Gospel writers, mentions that Jesus was with the wild animals in the desert.⁷⁷

Jesus returned to the desert throughout his ministry, up to his final journey to Jerusalem. The purpose of these retreats was to pray,⁷⁸ to avoid unhelpful publicity,⁷⁹ or to seek privacy and rest with his disciples in the midst of their mission.⁸⁰ The Old Testament appears to offer no parallel to Jesus' practice of constructive withdrawal into the wilderness to avoid being controlled by unwelcome expectations, or for prayer, unless it be Elijah's flight to Mount Horeb.⁸¹ Unlike the Qumran community, Jesus did not seek to build a community of penitents in the desert. As Bratton remarks, the wilderness spirituality of Jesus can be described as 'contemplative' rather than 'ascetic'.⁸²

3.2. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

The Israelites' journey through the desert has served as a model for the interpretation of other wilderness journeys, for example that of the first settlers in New England, and the Great Trek of the Boers in South Africa which began in 1835.⁸³ The desert journey has also become merged in the tradition of the Church with the idea and custom of pilgrimage. We have already noticed that the story of the Israelites' wandering in the desert itself shares many of the marks of pilgrimage. This impression is heightened by the visit to the sacred mountain of Sinai at the central point of the journey.⁸⁴ The community called into being by God, transformed in the desert and particularly at the holy

⁷⁷ Mark 1:13.

⁷⁸ Mark 1:35.

⁷⁹ Mark 1:45.

⁸⁰ Mark 6:31, 32.

⁸¹ 1 Kgs 19.

⁸² Bratton 1993, 143f., 137.

⁸³ Murdock 1955; Templin 1968, 282.

⁸⁴ Cohn 1981, 13.

mountain where God was revealed, is like a body of pilgrims.

Pilgrimage is of course a vast subject in itself, beyond the scope of this essay. But we should notice the prominence of pilgrimage in the Church, not least in the East and in the Celtic lands. Philip Sheldrake devotes a chapter of his book, *Living Between Worlds*,⁸⁵ to the subject of 'Pilgrimage and Journey'. Although, as he points out, pilgrimage within the Celtic Christian Church can hardly be unrelated to the pre-Christian Irish tradition of voyages, it was also an adaptation of the desert to the watery wastes traversed in sea voyages.

The exterior journey corresponded to an interior pilgrimage.⁸⁶ The Celtic wanderer would 'seek the place of his resurrection', the spot chosen by God where the remainder of life could be lived out in penitence.⁸⁷ Sheldrake points out a difference of emphasis between the Egyptian desert fathers and the Celtic pilgrim saints: in the former tradition, more importance was attached to remaining in one's cell; the practice of 'stability' was increasingly encouraged in the monastic tradition and was emphasised in the Rule of St Benedict. As time went on, even in the Celtic church the 'pilgrimage' came increasingly to be undertaken in the privacy of one's own cell. Thus pilgrims and hermits have more in common than might at first sight be supposed.⁸⁸ But in the greatest of the Celtic pilgrim saints, inward stability was combined with outward mobility.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Sheldrake 1995, 58-69.

⁸⁶ Sheldrake 1995, 58.

⁸⁷ Sheldrake 1995, 59.

⁸⁸ Sheldrake 1995, 68.

⁸⁹ Sheldrake 1995, 61.

The Celtic pilgrims travelled not only by sea and also by land, all over Europe. Although they were not 'missionaries' in the later sense, by planting communities in the countries to which they went they certainly carried the Gospel with them.⁹⁰ By renouncing their position, home and kinship, and going out in search of a place chosen for them by God, these travellers were consciously following the example of Abraham who travelled on from place to place, seeking the land promised to him by God.⁹¹

More generally in the Christian tradition pilgrimage has focused on visiting particular places, especially those associated with the Incarnate Christ. Helen (c.255-c.330), the mother of the Emperor Constantine, visited the Holy Land and founded churches at Bethlehem and on the Mount of Olives. A little later, probably towards the end of the fourth century, the nun Etheria visited sites in the Holy Land and also Mount Sinai.

The practice of pilgrimage suffered a setback at the Reformation, with its emphasis on a purely spiritual journey and its rejection of the superstitions often associated with relics of the saints; but pilgrimage has continued to be an important part of Christianity – as well as other world faiths. It continues to attract widespread interest. Ian Ball suggests that in our day pilgrimage can emphasise the quest for personal and spiritual development, and can embrace ecological concern by furthering 'interaction' with landscapes as well as people.⁹² Susan Sayers, in her book *Journey Into the Desert: Reflection and Meditation for Lent*, suggests a pattern of prayer based on an actual experience

⁹⁰ Sheldrake 1995, 67.

⁹¹ Sheldrake 1995, 61.

⁹² Ball *et al.*, (eds) 1992, 161-174.

of a pilgrimage from Nazareth to Bethlehem across the Judean desert.⁹³ The Musalaha ('reconciliation') movement in the Holy Land arranges Desert Encounters for young people, both Jews and Arabs, who follow Christ. These encounters foster openness, understanding and spiritual unity in the context of real desert journeys.⁹⁴

The idea of life as a journey speaks to people of all cultures in our society. Within that idea the concept of a transforming passage through the wilderness is particularly vivid. It may provide a point of contact with the biblical tradition for some to whom this tradition would otherwise be remote. In order to understand the motif of the wilderness journey, as it appears in the Bible, we shall need to examine not only the motif itself, but also the main themes which are attached to it. This task will occupy us for the next three chapters.

⁹³ Sayers 2001.

⁹⁴ Colin Patterson, 'Dealing with Conflict in the Church of England', *Anvil* 20:4 (2003).