2. DEFINING WILDERNESS

2.1 BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

2.1.1. Vocabulary

The words used to denote wilderness in the Bible point to facets of its meaning. The one most frequently used in the Old Testament is *miḏbār,* which probably signifies originally 'pasture', a place where flocks are led.[1] Other Hebrew words used are *yᵉšîmôn* from a root meaning 'be desolate';[2] *ʿᵃrāḇâ* perhaps implying an arid area;[3] *horbâ* a wasteland;[4] and *šᵉmāmâ*, a word with connotations of desolation.[5] *’eres siyyâ* 'dry land' often functions as a synonym of wilderness,[6] but *siyyâ* on its own can have a similar meaning.[7] The word *tōhû* 'chaos' is also associated with wilderness.[8] In Genesis 1:2 *tōhû* denotes the primeval chaos which preceded God's introduction of distinctions and order; Jeremiah 4:23 contains the dreadful warning that a similar state of chaos and confusion can follow God's judgement.

Erēmos is the usual Greek word signifying desert in the New Testament. It may be either a noun, or an adjective as in the phrase *erēmos topos*, 'deserted place'.[9] It is the equivalent of the Hebrew *miḏbār,* of which it is the normal translation in the Greek Old Testament. The abstract form *erēmia* also occurs.[10]

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[1] C.H. Gordon 1965, 384.
[2] E.g. Dt 32:10; Ps 68:7; Isa 43:19,20.
[3] Jer 17:6; Isa 35:6; Job 24:5.
[4] e.g. Jer 7:34.
[5] Ex 23:29; Jer 12:10b-11.
[6] Isa 41:18; Ezk 19:13; Ps 107:35.
[7] Isa 35:1; Job 30:3; see *BDB* 851a.
[8] Dt 32:10; cf Job 6:18; 12:24b.
[9] E.g. Mt 11:7; Lk 15:4; Mk 1:35; 6:31,32.
[10] Mk 8:4; Heb 11:38.

2.1.2. Location

'Wilderness' in the Bible refers mainly to two distinct locations: the desert area where the Israelites travelled between their Exodus from Egypt and their entry into the Promised Land of Canaan; and the relatively bare, uncultivated area in the South of the Promised Land known as the Judean Desert or Negeb. The Wilderness of the Wanderings forms the main focus of this essay.

The Negeb or Judean Wilderness is not arid desert but its rainfall is meagre and fitful. The wadis can support more permanent settlements than the surrounding country, but tend either to run dry or to flood.[11] This wilderness area is especially familiar to us through the Gospel narratives of the New Testament. It is also the setting of narratives in the historical books of the Old Testament, especially those which tell of David's military campaigns.

2.1.3. David in the Wilderness

1 Samuel 21-30 chronicle David's years in the Judean wilderness as a fugitive from King Saul. Saul's behaviour was becoming increasingly threatening and erratic as his jealous rage against David took hold of him. At this time David was at risk both from Saul’s supporters and from treacherous communities in the wilderness.[12] He was inhibited from killing Saul because Saul was God’s anointed king.[13] Meanwhile the situation was complicated by the presence of the Philistines, with whom David’s relations were ambiguous and uncertain.[14]

[11] Aharoni 1979.
[12] 1 Sam 21:7; 22:9ff; 23:19-24.
[13] 1 Sam 24:4-7; 26:11.
[14] 1 Sam 21:10-15; 23:1-5; 27; 29.

Later, after David had been established as King in Jerusalem, he was again to journey through the wilderness when his son Absalom led a rebellion against him.[15] The account in 2 Samuel 15 of David's removal from Jerusalem into the wilderness is surely among the most poignant in the Old Testament. Susan Power Bratton suggests that these wilderness campaigns played an important part in preparing David for his kingly role by developing his physical prowess and powers of leadership. Indeed she suggests that Christian pastors could also gain confidence and decision-making skills in wild environments through the kind of training provided by Outward Bound courses.[16]

2.1.4. The Wilderness in the Created World

Apart from its application to the Wilderness of the Wanderings and the Judean Desert, the wilderness also refers more generally to arid parts of the earth. The people of the Old Testament were conscious of the wilderness which bordered their land.[17] Psalm 29 proclaims that Yahweh, who gives strength and peace to his people, is also the God of nature. The thunder is God's voice which shakes the whole of creation, including the wilderness which it causes to 'writhe'. The Book of Job, chapters 38-41, contains a wonderful, poetic description of the world of nature, depending wholly on God and quite beyond the power of humans fully to understand or to control. Wilderness is wild, undomesticated, alien to human purposes, and at the same time is under the care of a loving God.

[15] 2 Samuel 15-18.
[16] Bratton 1993, 73.
[17] See Dt 11:24; Ex 23:31.

2.1.5. The Wilderness as a Place of Threat

The wilderness was largely uninhabited by people,[18] occupied mainly by wild beasts. The only humans one would expect to meet there were nomadic desert people and travellers.[19] Sometimes solitude in the desert might be longed for as an escape from uncongenial company![20] It might also be a welcome refuge for outlaws and fugitives.[21] But it is also an image of judgement and desolation.[22] The wilderness was a place of danger which might 'close in' on people.[23] There one might be at the mercy of one's enemies.[24] Dying of thirst was a real possibility,[25] for the wilderness was a dry land, subject to scorching winds.[26] Resources of food were also limited - more suitable for a solitary hunter-gatherer like Ishmael than for a large company.[27]

2.1.6. Wilderness as Chaos

In the memory of the Israelites the wilderness was associated with chaos. It was 'a barren, howling waste.'[28] The word *tōhû*, as we saw above, is sometimes used both for the desert and for the primeval condition which existed before God's ordering of creation.[29] According to W. Brueggemann the wilderness is 'the historical form of chaos'. Israel is placed there and is surprised by God's presence and provision.[30] The idea of wilderness in the Old Testament is thus deeply ambiguous. On the one hand the Israelites, in common with other

[18] Job 38:26.
[19] Jer 9:26; Isa 42:11; Jer 3:2; 9:2,26; 25:24; Ezek 23:42.
[20] Jer 9:2; Ps 55:6-7; Prov 21:19.
[21] Gen 16:6-14; 21:20; 1 Sam 22:2; 1 Kgs 19:3-4.
[22] Isa 27:10.
[23] Ex 14:3 (*NRSV*).
[24] Lam 4:19
[25] Num 20:5; Deut 8:15; 2 Kgs 3:8-9.
[26] Jer 4:11-12; Hos 13:15.
[27] Gen 21:20; Ex 16:3, 2 Sam 17:29; Ps 107:5.
[28] Dt 32:10.
[29] Gen 1:2; compare Job 6:18; 12:24b; Ps 107:40b.
[30] Brueggemann 1978, 29,37,40,43.

peoples of the ancient Near East, saw it as a fearsome place; on the other hand it also proved a unique meeting place between Yahweh and Yahweh's people. In the mythological, poetic language of Psalm 68, when God marches at the head of the chosen people through the barren waste, rain falls, the land revives, and hostile forces are defeated.[31]

2.1.7. The Wilderness and the Supernatural

The fearsome character of wilderness is accentuated by the wild creatures that live there. They too are ambiguous: the English translations differ as to whether they are natural or supernatural. In Isaiah 34:9-17 Edom's fate is to be desolate like Sodom and Gomorrah,[32] and it will then become a dwelling place for creatures of the desert. While some of them are pretty clearly what we would call natural, others may be supernatural in character. The Hebrew word translated 'wolves' (REB) or 'jackals' (GNB, NRSV) can on occasion refer to a mythological creature.[33] Likewise in verse 14 'he-goats' (REB) may alternatively be satyrs or goat demons;[34] 'Lilith' (NRSV) can either be the 'nightjar' (REB) or 'the night monster' (GNB). Probably the people of the ancient world did not distinguish sharply between what we would call natural and supernatural creatures. In any case the ambiguous status of these creatures serves to emphasise the other-worldly and terrifying aspects of the wilderness.

The ritual for the Day of Atonement features two goats - one for Yahweh and one for 'Azazel'. Yahweh's goat was to be offered in sacrifice, and its blood presented in the sanctuary, to cleanse the people from ritual impurity. Aaron the

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[31] Ps 68:7-14.
[32] See Gen 19:24-28.
[33] See 'sea serpent' in Ps 44:19 (REB).
[34] Lev 17:7; 2 Chr 11:15.

high priest must then confess the people's sins while laying his hands on the head of the remaining goat, which is sent away in the charge of a man into the wilderness - to ''Azazel'.[35] ‘Azazel is often thought to be the name of some kind of demonic being, although the meaning of the name is uncertain.[36] At all events the symbolic sending of sins into the wilderness is a pointer to the way in which wilderness was regarded: it was a place outside normal human society, to which evil forces could be sent 'away', so that they could not cause harm or bring God's wrath.

2.1.8. The New Testament

The negative connotations of the Old Testament wilderness are endorsed in the New Testament Letter to Hebrews. There the trials endured by past heroes of faith include being 'refugees in deserts and on the mountains, hiding in caves and holes in the ground.'[37] On the other hand the Book of Revelation sees the wilderness as a place of refuge, where the people of God are kept safe.[38]
This brief summary has shown that wilderness, which exists within God’s created world, was experienced in the Bible stories as a place of terror and darkness, but also refuge and hope. It was a geographical location which evoked both positive and negative emotions.

[35] Lev 16:7-22.
[36] In the late Jewish book of Enoch Azazel appears as the leader of the fallen angels (Enoch 8:1; 9:6).
[37] Heb 11:38.
[38] Rev 12:6,14.

2.2. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

2.2.1. The Desert and the Origins of Monasticism

Paul of Thebes, who is thought to have died about A.D. 340, is reputed to have been the first Christian monk, living a solitary life in the desert for 97 years. He is said to have influenced Antony, who in turn provided a model for many later desert ascetics. As time went on some monks lived a coenobitic (communal) as distinct from a solitary life, retiring to their cells for sleep and prayer. Other communities lived in a style somewhere between the extremes of solitude and community.[39] The monks were not completely isolated from society: as well as interacting with each other, they also had contacts with people in neighbouring villages and in the market places.[40] The Egyptian desert was remarkable for its proximity to fertile and populated areas in the Nile Valley.[41]

Bratton points out the positive aspects of the monks' relation to wilderness. Antony, for example, loved his mountain retreat, planted a garden there, and rebuked the wild animals which damaged it.[42] Living in harmony with the will of God was conducive to peaceful coexistence with wild creatures. Many stories are told of co-operative relations with beasts by other saints besides Antony. To take one example Jerome, and before him the Palestinian abbot Gerasimus, were credited with removing a thorn from the paw of a lion, who then became a docile and faithful servant.[43]

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[39] Louth 2003, 55.
[40] Cf. Burton-Christie 1993, 267.
[41] Laurence Freeman in the Introduction to R. Williams 2003, 9.
[42] Bratton 1993, 164f.
[43] Williams 1962, 42f.

From Egypt desert monasticism spread to Palestine. There monks typically lived in individual cells grouped around a central communal worship building. Such an arrangement was known as a *lavra.* Derwas J. Chitty describes one such community established by Gerasimus. There the solitary monks would spend from Monday to Friday in their cells, living on bread, water and dates. Each Saturday they would bring ropes and baskets that they had made during the week. They would receive Communion on Saturdays and Sundays, and also eat some cooked food and drink a little wine. On Sunday evening they would return to their cells with a weekly allocation of food and palm blades for their work. This *lavra* of Gerasimus combined the 'anchoritic' life for some with a fully communal (coenobitic) existence for others, but such a combination in Judea was unusual.[44]

Several explanations have been given for the rise of desert monasticism. To some extent the rush to the desert can be seen as part of a wider movement. While religious motives impelled some to seek solitude in the desert, others fled there from political and economic oppression.[45] Douglas Burton-Christie draws attention to the complex religious environment of contemporary Egypt, where holiness was pursued both within Christian and Jewish circles, and also under the influence of pagan philosophy.[46] Christian monasticism was a 'Christian version' of a wider phenomenon.[47]

Initially the Emperor Decius's persecution played a part in the Christian movement to the desert.[48] Later, the flight to the wilderness could be seen partly

[44] Chitty 1977, 90.
[45] Chitty 1977, 6f.
[46] Burton-Christie 1993, 34-43.
[47] Ward 2003, ix.
[48] Laurence Freeman in Williams, R. (2003).

as a reaction to the Christianisation of the Roman Empire in the time of the Emperor Constantine (d. 337). This event produced mixed responses. Some, like Eusebius of Caesarea (c.260-c.340) regarded the previous persecution of Christians as a time of trial like the Israelites' experience in the wilderness, and Constantine as a deliverer somewhat like Moses. Others saw the official endorsement of Christianity as a fatal compromise with the world.[49]

Some withdrew to the wilderness for ascetic reasons. Fleeing to the desert could be a means to deny oneself honours, popularity or a position of leadership.[50] The early monks sought in solitude to eradicate the roots of sin, while awaiting the expected imminent return of Christ.[51] One way or another, in the words of the famous Christian leader Athanasius, ‘the desert was made a city’.[52]

The desert life was not always seen as a lifelong commitment. Some monks would leave their communities for part of the year to travel to the arid areas around the Dead Sea.[53] Euthymius (377-473) used to withdraw annually for a prolonged period in the ‘Utter Desert’, culminating at the end of Lent.[54]

2.2.2. Celtic Monasticism

The monks and hermits of the Celtic lands, no less than the Desert Fathers and Mothers of Egypt and Palestine, sought God in wild and untamed places. Eastern desert spirituality was not completely sealed off from the West.

[49] Williams 1962, 33, 41; Murphy-O’Connor 1998, 348.
[50] Ward 1975, 49, paragraph 176; Chitty 1977, 111, 113.
[51] Ward 2003, viii.
[52] *Vita Antonii*, C.14, cited in Chitty 1977, title page.
[53] Bratton 1993, 177.
[54] Chitty 1977, 82.

Influential Western travellers like Hilary of Poitiers returned home carrying first-hand accounts of Eastern monastic communities.[55] Commercial dealings also linked Ireland with the East.[56] But traditions of monasticism from the Egyptian desert were spread to the West especially by John Cassian (c.360-435) who spent many years with the Egyptian desert monks, but eventually settled at Marseilles and founded two monasteries there.[57] Cassian made the sayings of the Desert Fathers known in the West especially through his writings. Desert ideals in turn influenced Martin of Tours (d.397), who played a crucial part in introducing them to the Celtic communities in Britain and Ireland.[58]

In its transplantation to Western Europe the idea of wilderness underwent a change. It was no longer limited to arid, relatively infertile areas. It could now signify forests and lonely islands. In other words desert and wilderness were no longer synonyms. Esther de Waal suggests that the Celtic spirit was naturally in sympathy with the ideals of the desert.[59] At any rate Antony of Egypt and Paul of Thebes were well known in the Celtic Church, for their images appear in the carvings on some Irish 'high crosses'. Eastern influence can also be seen elsewhere in carvings and illuminated manuscripts, and in liturgy.[60] Philip Sheldrake has pointed out that the influence of the desert has even left its mark in the form of place names; Dysart in Scotland, Dysserth or Dyserth in Wales, and Diseart in Ireland bear witness to the influence of desert

[55] Chitty 1977, 46.
[56] De Waal 1991, 40.
[57] Thomas O'Loughlin considers *all* the Eastern features of the Celtic church are due to John Cassian. See O'Loughlin 2000.
[58] Sheldrake 1995, 13.
[59] De Waal 1991, 40.
[60] De Waal 1991, 40-41.

ideals.[61]

As the wilderness tradition in early Christian history developed, it largely remained true to its biblical roots. The deserts of Egypt and Palestine, and the wild mountains of Wales and Ireland, were equally remote from human structures. The symbolic aspects of wilderness had not yet become distinct from their physical and social counterparts.

2.2.3. The Developing Wilderness Tradition

In later periods, the language of wilderness was often interpreted in a purely symbolic sense. George Williams describes the development during the Middle Ages of the inner, spiritual wilderness. The spiritual, metaphorical interpretation of wilderness was strongly encouraged by Martin Luther and John Calvin, the leaders of the Reformation.[62] George Fox in the seventeenth century also referred to the world as a wilderness.[63] Subsequently the pietist German chaplain at St James's under Queen Anne published an English translation of a work by Arndt entitled *Of True Christianity* (1707) in which the wilderness was viewed negatively as a symbol for 'nationalistic churchmanship'.[64] And John Wesley (1703-91) internalised the wilderness as an experience of 'doubts, and fears, and strong temptation' following conversion.[65]

Often the mystical and the literal meanings of wilderness were combined. In

[61] Sheldrake 1995, 22f.
[62] Bratton 1993, 235.
[63] Williams 1962, 82-84.
[64] Williams 1962, 87.
[65] Wesley's Journal, 28 March 1740; Sermon XLVI, cited in Williams 1962, 89-91.

Spain, for example, the Carmelites would withdraw for a season to solitary desert retreats;[66] and Joachim of Fiore (c.1132-1202) received his formative vision during a pilgrimage to the Syrian Desert and Mount Tabor.[67]

Some persecuted minorities in post-Reformation times fled literally to wilderness areas. Among these were the Hutterites who took refuge in desolate areas of Moravia.[68] The Huguenots also sought refuge in desolate places; and they used the term 'les églises du désert' to refer to their illegal meetings.[69]

Christian wilderness spirituality has been especially influential in the Eastern Orthodox tradition – Andrew Louth points out that in the Russian tradition the forest was regarded as equivalent to the desert[70] - but it has also had its advocates in the West. It was popularised around the turn of the twentieth century by the influence of Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916). Following his conversion de Foucauld served as sacristan to a community of Poor Clares at Nazareth, living in circumstances of great poverty. Eventually he lived for many years in the Algerian desert among the Tuaregs, witnessing to Christ while living a desert life. Curiously he also collaborated with the French military, and was killed in 1916 by Tuareg tribesmen.[71] Louth draws an interesting parallel between de Foucauld and his spiritual director, the Abbé Huvelin, who resided in Paris but suffered severe physical and mental agony. Both are to be regarded as exemplars of desert spirituality, despite the difference in their physical environments. The Little Brothers and Sisters of

[66] Williams, G.H. 1962, 55.
[67] Williams, G.H. 1962, 58.
[68] Williams 1962, 65-73.
[69] Williams 1962, 92.
[70] Louth 2003.
[71] Anson 1964, 210.

Jesus, founded under de Foucauld's inspiration after his death, practise a hidden life among the poor – transplanting the ideals of the desert to the city. Thomas Merton may also be counted among the Western exponents of the wilderness type of spirituality.[72]

Recently Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild have suggested that some women, who have left their churches because they cannot fulfil the needs of their own faith development within them, can be regarded as being called by Christ into the 'wilderness'.[73] Another recent writer connects ideas of wilderness both with the 'wild' and unconscious aspects of human personality, and with the experience of God's absence.[74] Nancy Victoria-Vangerud proposes that in an Australian context, also, the desert could be rediscovered as a place of spiritual growth.[75]

The wilderness, defined more or less as in the Bible, is a constant and important part of the Christian experience. Its vitality at the present time is undiminished. To give but one example, the Christian retreat movement is connected with wilderness spirituality, both because of its link to the monastic movement, and also because it fosters a withdrawal from the customary supports of comfortable life. In the Bible the natural and symbolic wilderness are one. In recent times the symbolic and spiritual aspects of wilderness have tended to dominate Christian wilderness discourse. But the spiritual symbol may prove impossible to sustain without the existence of its physical counterpart. The

[72] Burton-Christie 1993, 10.
[73] H. Ward and J. Wild, *Guard the Chaos: Finding Meaning in Change* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1995) 3, quoted in Jamieson 2002, 66, 160.
[74] Morrison 2001, 23-41.
[75] Victoria-Vangerud 2001.

spiritual and the physical wilderness coexist and are interdependent. They are like twin images seen through binoculars: they are apt to separate – at least for people with a tendency towards double vision. But for a full perception they really need to be seen together. Especially in Christian traditions which are heirs of the Reformation, the spiritual and symbolic aspects of wilderness tend to be emphasised.[76] The present ecological crises call for a reintegration of the natural wilderness with the biblical and symbolic.

[76] Joyce Huggett (Huggett 1997) beautifully evokes the biblical and the spiritual, symbolic aspects of wilderness, but does not focus on its ecological dimensions.