

## **4. THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY: REVELATION**

### **4.1. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS**

To a casual glance the story of the Israelites' journey in the wilderness may appear to be a monolithic block of material; but if we look more closely at the narrative we see that it is a richly textured composition including various themes. Each of these themes can be examined, and has its own patterns which add to the richness of the wilderness passages as a whole. When the wilderness narrative is regarded in this way - seeking to discern its component themes - revelation emerges as the most prominent. God is revealed to Moses, and through Moses to the people. The revelation is focused on Moses' call at the burning bush, the pillar of cloud and fire, the Ark and the Tent, and the giving of the Law at Sinai. A common feature linking the episodes of revelation is the appearance of fire. Fire appeared in the bush, in the guiding pillar of God's presence which also appeared in the Tent of Meeting, and in connection with the giving of the Law. But of what kind are these phenomena which accompanied the revelatory events?

#### **4.1.1. The Nature of the Phenomena**

How then should we understand the burning bush, the 'fiery, cloudy pillar' and the awe-inspiring events at Mount Sinai? A number of different approaches have been suggested.

W.J. Phythian-Adams is one of several writers who have proposed that Mount Sinai was a volcano, and the pillar of fire and cloud, and the burning bush,

were also associated with volcanic activity.<sup>1</sup> A difficulty of this view is that such activity has not occurred in historic times within the Sinai Peninsula, where all the locations most commonly proposed for Mount Sinai are situated. If a volcano were the setting of the Sinai events, it would have to be situated east or south east of the head of the Gulf of Aqaba.<sup>2</sup> Such a location of Mount Sinai has been thought to be inconsistent with the itineraries contained in the Pentateuch.<sup>3</sup> G.I. Davies notes the existence of an ancient view that Sinai was in the Arabian peninsular, although he believes this view cannot be sustained.<sup>4</sup>

John Bright considers the narrative of Exodus 19 to be consistent with storm imagery, without invoking the volcanic explanation.<sup>5</sup> Others have pointed out that fire and smoke could be produced by the effect of lightning on vegetation<sup>6</sup> - though whether this explanation is consistent with the intensity of the phenomena as described, is open to question. On the one hand the most natural reading of the descriptions suggests volcanic imagery.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand Houtman has argued that the narrative does not suggest lava flows, and that the presence of the people near an erupting volcano is unlikely.<sup>8</sup>

Attempts have been made to explain the burning bush in terms of a phenomenon such as St Elmo's Fire. Martin Noth cites a collection by H. Gressmann of parallel accounts from the area of Syria and Palestine of bushes

<sup>1</sup> Phythian-Adams 1934, 140-151. Cf. Noth 1962, *in loc.*

<sup>2</sup> Auerbach 1975, 150. However G.I. Davies (1979, 66) hints at a possibility of volcanic activity in historical times in the areas of Jebel Hauran, Jebel Druze and southern Transjordan.

<sup>3</sup> See Exod 19:1; Num 33:1-49.

<sup>4</sup> G.I. Davies 1972.

<sup>5</sup> Bright 1960, 114.

<sup>6</sup> Cohn 1981, 48.

<sup>7</sup> *E.g.* Ex 19:18; Deut 4:11. G.I. Davies 1979, 65.

<sup>8</sup> Houtman 1993, 119.

which burned but were not destroyed.<sup>9</sup> A 1999 television programme told of a desert plant which generates an inflammable gas capable of being ignited by sparks from falling rocks. The presenter suggested that this phenomenon underlay the story of the burning bush.<sup>10</sup>

Others have suggested that volcanic imagery has become attached to the Sinai tradition, although it originated elsewhere.<sup>11</sup> The question remains whence the biblical writers derived the volcanic imagery. Auerbach suggests that the tradition that the God of the Hebrews was associated with the fiery mountain may have been maintained by a particular group of Levites.<sup>12</sup> G.I. Davies attributes the knowledge of Israelite poets about volcanic phenomena to traders, or travelling tribespeople such as Midianites.<sup>13</sup> But an accidental accretion to the tradition via passing travellers or neighbouring tribes seems a slender foundation for such a dominant feature of Hebrew poetry as the theophany.<sup>14</sup>

Another possibility is that the phenomena described are a poetic representation of an inward experience; the fire and thunder symbolise Moses' experience of God.<sup>15</sup> However, the narrative clearly envisages the theophany as involving convulsions of nature, as well as the human reactions of the people who were present.<sup>16</sup> More recently R.W.L. Moberley has suggested that the volcanic/storm imagery should be understood as religious language, 'evocative

<sup>9</sup> Noth 1962, 39, citing H. Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit* (Göttingen, 1913), 26ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Supernatural*, BBC1, 6 April 1999.

<sup>11</sup> Auerbach 1975, 148-153.

<sup>12</sup> Auerbach 1975, 152.

<sup>13</sup> G.I. Davies 1979, 66.

<sup>14</sup> Cf.. Jdg 5:5; Ps 18:7-15; Mic 1:3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Sanday 1908, 20.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Exod 19:16; cf. Heb 12:21.

and only secondarily, if at all, descriptive'.<sup>17</sup> But even if a subjective experience were being described, the question of the origin of the symbolism would remain.

Some have drawn attention to the parallels between the Sinai phenomena and cultic language used in Israel and elsewhere in the ancient near east. T.W. Mann has pointed out the links between the Sinai theophany and the image of the God of Israel riding upon the clouds. This imagery is partially paralleled in Canaanite literature, where Baal is attended by cloud-messengers<sup>18</sup> But to suggest, as Clements does, that the Sinai imagery is merely part of the 'conventional portrayals of a theophany, both in terms of an erupting volcano and a thunderstorm',<sup>19</sup> does not seem to take account of the fact that the theophany in Exodus is distinctive in being witnessed by humans at a particular geographical spot. To dissolve the setting in history into mere mythology would be a step too far, at least for this student.

The physicist Dr Colin Humphreys has recently revived the 'volcanic' theory, working from a scientific base and adopting a multidisciplinary approach.<sup>20</sup> He concludes that 'Mount Sinai' was an Arabian volcano named Mount Bedr. Humphreys reconstructs the stopping-places on the Israelites' route in the light of geographical and historical research, giving particular attention to the modern pilgrim routes which are thought to follow ancient trails. The resulting itinerary forms a fairly direct route from Egypt to the proposed site of Mount Sinai. The pillars of fire and cloud, he suggests, were a volcanic plume. The

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<sup>17</sup> Moberley 1983, 135.

<sup>18</sup> Isa 19:1; Pss 18:10f; 68:4, 33; Deut 33:26. Mann 1971, 20.

<sup>19</sup> Clements 1972, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Humphreys 2003.

burning bush is attributed to a volatile gas emitted by a cleft in the rock; this gas, once ignited by high temperatures, sets fire to a type of shrub which readily turns to charcoal and glows.<sup>21</sup> With reference to Mount Sinai itself, Humphreys states that lightning bolts are a normal feature of volcanic eruptions,<sup>22</sup> and the sound of a ‘trumpet blast’ could be produced by the forcing of gas through clefts in the rock.<sup>23</sup> Humphreys suggests that, even when an eruption was in progress, the people could have stood on the other side of the mountain.<sup>24</sup>

Humphreys presents a comprehensive case which illuminates many aspects of the biblical narratives. His ‘volcanic plume’ theory is weakest when applied to the occasions when the luminous presence of Yahweh descends on the Tent of Meeting. His explanation also appears to be strained by the account of the journeys after Sinai, in which the Israelites only journeyed when the cloud lifted from the Tent.<sup>25</sup> These episodes fall outside the scope of Humphreys’s study, which covers the journey from Egypt to Sinai. Nevertheless they suggest caution in regarding a naturalistic account of the phenomena as a sufficient interpretation of the narrative – even though, as Humphreys admits, a miraculous element would still remain in the *timing* of the phenomena.<sup>26</sup> We cannot tell to what extent cultic and prophetic influences helped to mould the tradition. The data unearthed by Humphreys certainly show a *congruence* between the wilderness events and the natural creation. But we must not lose sight of the fact that, when all is said and done, God has spoken. The events are

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 69–80.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>23</sup> Ex 19:16. Humphreys 2003, 89.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>25</sup> Numbers 9:15–23.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 337.

presented as both physical and also spiritual, and the same goes for the wilderness tradition as a whole.

#### 4.1.2. The Burning Bush

Exodus 3 recounts that God (verse 4), or rather an angel as God's intermediary (verse 2), was revealed to Moses in (or as - the Hebrew can mean either) a flame of fire which blazed in a bush but did not consume it. This event occurs after Moses has led the flock of his father-in-law Jethro beyond the wilderness and come to Horeb, the mountain of God. The relation between the angel and the flame is left undefined. C. Houtman suggests a comparison with the story of Manoah and his wife where the flame appears to be the 'vehicle' in which the angel goes to heaven.<sup>27</sup> He thinks that here 'the messenger is present in the form of a man... while the flame around him makes him recognizable as emissary of YHWH.'<sup>28</sup> The question is not unimportant: God is not identified with the bush, or with the flame, but is revealed in association with them. Deuteronomy expresses the relation by calling Yahweh 'him who dwells in the burning bush'.<sup>29</sup> Nature is transformed by God's presence. A natural location is made holy by God's self-revelation. Houtman cites a number of occasions on which theophanies (revelations of God's glory) occurred near trees.<sup>30</sup> He suggests that 'the thornbush, as the place where vital power manifests itself, belongs to those spots in the desert (like e.g. also the spring of water, Gen 16:7ff.) that are uniquely suitable as places where the deity, in whom all life is concentrated, can reveal himself.'<sup>31</sup> Fire also is a constant element in theophanies throughout

<sup>27</sup> Jdg 13:20.

<sup>28</sup> Houtman 1993, 338f.

<sup>29</sup> Deut 33:16; the word 'burning' does not appear in the Hebrew.

<sup>30</sup> *E.g.* Gen 12:6f.; 18:1; Jdg 6:11,19.

<sup>31</sup> Houtman 1993, 340f.; cf. Wright 1996, 311.

the Old Testament.<sup>32</sup> In some cases it is the fire of judgement which consumes.<sup>33</sup> At times also the meaning of 'the fire of God' appears to shade into that of lightning.<sup>34</sup>

At the Burning Bush Moses is commissioned as God's spokesman before Pharaoh, and God's agent in delivering the people from their oppression in Egypt, despite his diffidence and self-doubt bordering on rebellion.<sup>35</sup> He receives a Name of God who is identified as the God of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.<sup>36</sup> In confirmation of his divine commissioning, Moses is promised a sign. The sign is that after the Exodus the people will worship God on this same mountain.<sup>37</sup>

The episode of the Burning Bush is connected to the Sinai tradition by this promise, and by the theme of fire. Other links may also be seen: the Lord calls to Moses from the Burning Bush and from the mountain,<sup>38</sup> and the ground in both cases was dangerously holy.<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless the two occasions are also sufficiently different to indicate that one is not a mere reflection of the other. At the Bush Moses is ordered to remove his footwear; this expression of reverence is not required of the people at Sinai. In Exodus 19 the people are given three

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Ps 18:12f.

<sup>33</sup> See Exod 24:17; Deut 4:24; 9:3.

<sup>34</sup> See Job 1:16; Exod 9:23f.; Ps 148:8; 1 Kgs 18:24,38; 2 Kgs 1:10-14.

<sup>35</sup> Ex 4:1-14.

<sup>36</sup> Ex 3:13-16. We shall consider in section 4.1.6. some of the meanings that have been attributed to the name Yahweh, and its relation to the title 'I am'.

<sup>37</sup> Ex 3:12. The majority of scholars accept that, at least in the final form of the text, Sinai and Horeb are different names for the same place. See e.g. Childs 1974, 79; Cohn 1981, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Ex 3:4; cf. 19:3.

<sup>39</sup> Ex 3:5; cf. 19:10-15, 21-24.

days' warning of the theophany; Moses in chapter 3 is taken unawares. Finally the patriarchs are mentioned in chapter 3 but not in chapter 19 (except in that the name 'the house of Jacob' given to the people in 19:3). The revelation at the Burning Bush therefore bears the marks of an independent unit, which however is related by various verbal links with the Sinai tradition.

### 4.1.3. The Pillar of Fire and Cloud

We have noticed already that fire can symbolise the presence of God. Cloud symbolism, also, can be associated with the divine presence. A thick cloud signified the divine presence on Sinai,<sup>40</sup> and Yahweh descended in a cloud and spoke with Moses at the Tent of Meeting.<sup>41</sup> According to Deuteronomy the mountain 'was ablaze with fire to the very skies, and there was dark cloud and thick mist'.<sup>42</sup> Here the cloud seems to have been a cloud of smoke. Elsewhere also smoke is a sign of God's presence.<sup>43</sup> In the Genesis account of the making of God's covenant with Abraham 'a smoking brazier and a flaming torch', symbolising the divine presence, pass between the severed halves of the sacrificial animals.<sup>44</sup> Smoke apparently signifies the holy presence of Yahweh in Isaiah's vision also,<sup>45</sup> and is among the 'portents' of the Day of Yahweh in the prophet Joel's apocalyptic scenario.<sup>46</sup> Elsewhere smoke is associated with God's righteous wrath.<sup>47</sup> However the terminology of cloud is used far more frequently than that of smoke, to signify the presence of God's glory.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ex 19:9,16; 34:5.

<sup>41</sup> Num 11:25.

<sup>42</sup> Deut 4:11; cf. 5:22.

<sup>43</sup> Ex 19:18; cf. 20:18.

<sup>44</sup> Gen 15:17.

<sup>45</sup> Isa 6:4; 4:5.

<sup>46</sup> Joel 2:30.

<sup>47</sup> Deut 29:20; 2 Sam 22:9; Pss 18:8; 74:1; 80:4.

<sup>48</sup> Ex 16:10; 24:15-17; cf. 34:5.

This numinous cloud in due course fills the Tent of Meeting,<sup>49</sup> where Yahweh's presence was located above the cover of the Ark.<sup>50</sup> During the desert wanderings the cloud covers the tent, only removing when the Israelites are to continue their journey.<sup>51</sup> When in the time of Solomon the Temple was built, the cloud of Yahweh's glory filled that also.<sup>52</sup> Ezekiel saw this same glory departing from the House of the Yahweh as a token of judgment,<sup>53</sup> and returning in the time of restoration.<sup>54</sup> In Psalm 97:2 'cloud and thick mist' surround Yahweh, and the enigmatic and difficult verse Isaiah 4:5 appears to promise the restoration of the cloud and fire as a sign of God's blessing and protection upon Mount Zion.

The cloud is associated with Yahweh as a symbol of the divine mystery, a concealing veil, and perhaps also a deterrent from presumptuously drawing near. This numinous cloud is by no means confined to the wilderness, or to specific locations within it. But the form of a *pillar* of cloud is peculiar to the wilderness wanderings. The significance of the Hebrew word translated 'pillar' can be gathered from the fact that it is also used for the 'posts of acacia-wood' used in the construction of the tabernacle;<sup>55</sup> the pillars supporting the Philistine temple;<sup>56</sup> pillars in Solomon's palace,<sup>57</sup> and in that of King Ahazuerus,<sup>58</sup> and the two bronze pillars of the Temple.<sup>59</sup> The same word is used to denote the pillars

<sup>49</sup> Ex 40:34-35.

<sup>50</sup> Lev 16:2.

<sup>51</sup> Num 9:15-23; cf. 10:11-12, 34; 16:42.

<sup>52</sup> 1 Kgs 8:10-11; 2 Chr 5:13-14.

<sup>53</sup> Ezk 10:3-4.

<sup>54</sup> Ezk 43:4-5.

<sup>55</sup> E.g. Ex 26:32, 37; 36:36, 38.

<sup>56</sup> Jdg 16:25ff.

<sup>57</sup> 1 Kgs 7:2, 3, 6.

<sup>58</sup> Est 1:6.

<sup>59</sup> 1 Kgs 7:15ff.; 2 Kgs 25:13; Jer 52:17; cf. 2 Kgs 11:14; 23:3; Ezk 42:6.

which were thought to support respectively the earth and the heavens,<sup>60</sup> and also the seven pillars of Wisdom's house.<sup>61</sup>

On their journeys through the wilderness the Israelites were guided by this pillar, which consisted of cloud by day and fire by night.<sup>62</sup> At the crossing of the Reed Sea the pillar moved from in front of the Israelites to take up its position behind them, thus shielding them from the pursuing Egyptians.<sup>63</sup> Its movement coincided with that of the angel of God.<sup>64</sup> Yahweh's presence was in some sense located in this pillar.<sup>65</sup> On occasion Yahweh descends in a pillar of cloud to stand at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.<sup>66</sup> In the context of intercession for the people Moses remarks, '...your cloud stays over them, and... you go before them in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.'<sup>67</sup>

Some have thought that the pillar of cloud, and the cloud which settled on Mount Sinai and the Tent of Meeting, represent originally separate motifs; one represents Yahweh as journeying with the people, and the other Yahweh's presence with them.<sup>68</sup> However the final form of the text presents us with a single narrative. One possible interpretation is that the cloud of Yahweh's presence takes on the form of a pillar when leading the people; otherwise its shape is undefined. But this interpretation does not always apply: the *pillar* of cloud may occur without the leadership theme,<sup>69</sup> and the cloud and fire are

<sup>60</sup> Job 9:6; Ps 75:3; Job 26:11.

<sup>61</sup> Prov 9:1.

<sup>62</sup> Ex 13:21-22; Neh 9:12,19.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Ps 105:39.

<sup>64</sup> Ex 14:19.

<sup>65</sup> Ex 14:24; cf. Ps 99:7.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. Num 12:5; 14:10.

<sup>67</sup> Num 14:14.

<sup>68</sup> See Coats 1972, 291f.

<sup>69</sup> E.g. Deut 31:15.

sometimes mentioned without being called a 'pillar' in the context of the journeys.<sup>70</sup> Houtman suggests that the bank of clouds (by day) or the fire (by night) was situated generally above the earth, but descended when Yahweh wished to be revealed.<sup>71</sup> As regards the relation of the pillar of cloud to Sinai, the close connection in Psalm 99:7, between the pillar of cloud and the 'decrees' and 'statute' of Yahweh is to be noted.

#### 4.1.4. Sinai

Mount Sinai is at the centre of the wilderness revelation. The subject of Sinai bristles with intriguing and complex questions of geographical and historical interest. The location of this holy mountain has been hotly disputed, but cannot be dealt with in this paper. The traditional site near Jebel Musa was universally accepted in early Christian tradition.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless some elements of the biblical text have been thought to favour a more northerly site.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, as we have seen, a persuasive case has also been made on more general grounds for a location in northern Arabia. However, further consideration of this fascinating question lies beyond the scope of this essay. Also omitted here is any comprehensive consideration of the history of the tradition behind the text, or of the relation of the Sinai material to the other elements of the wilderness complex.<sup>74</sup>

Vast tracts of the Pentateuch are set within the Sinai complex including the whole of Leviticus, whose laws are said to be received from Yahweh by Moses

<sup>70</sup> Deut 1:33; Ps 78:14.

<sup>71</sup> Houtman 1996, 254.

<sup>72</sup> Chitty 1977, 71f, 168; G.I. Davies 1992, 48b.

<sup>73</sup> Wenham 1981, 225; Gray 1954, *passim*; 1970, 409.

<sup>74</sup> Von Rad 1984(a), 1-78; Nicholson 1973 *passim*; Coats 1972 *passim*.

at the Tent of Meeting, or at Mount Sinai.<sup>75</sup> The narrative portions of Leviticus presuppose the people camped in the wilderness with the Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle.<sup>76</sup> The people do not leave Sinai until Numbers 10:11. This extensive tract of narrative, although bearing the marks of a complex history,<sup>77</sup> in its final form exhibits a theological unity. Deuteronomy also contains echoes of the Horeb-Sinai tradition,<sup>78</sup> which agree substantially with the accounts in Exodus and Numbers.

Many verbal and topical links connect Sinai to the Exodus material. Exodus 20:2 ties the Ten Commandments to the Exodus. Another reference to the Exodus occurs in Exodus 19:4, and Exodus 19:1-2a relates to the itinerary note in Exodus 17:1.<sup>79</sup> The dominant presence of Moses is another link between the Sinai narrative, particularly Exodus 19, and the wilderness wanderings.<sup>80</sup>

In the wilderness narrative the Sinai material is central. This centrality is emphasised by the arrangement of the text. As Olson points out, three-day journeys both precede and follow Sinai;<sup>81</sup> before and after it are incidents concerning Moses' Midianite relatives,<sup>82</sup> and incidents concerning a spring of water occur in Exodus 15:22-25 and Numbers 21:16-18.<sup>83</sup>

The various sections of the Sinai narrative will now be examined in turn.

<sup>75</sup> E.g. Lev 1:1; 25:1; 27:34.

<sup>76</sup> E.g. Lev 8:3,10.

<sup>77</sup> Durham 1987, 258-261.

<sup>78</sup> Dt 4:10-14, 33; 5:2-31; 9:24-10:5; 10:10-11.

<sup>79</sup> Exodus 17:8 should also be noted. See Alexander 1999.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Nicholson 1973, 82.

<sup>81</sup> Ex 15:22; Num 10:33.

<sup>82</sup> Ex 18:1; Num 10:29.

<sup>83</sup> Olson 1996, 62; cf. Cohn 1981, 18.

## 4.1.4.1. Exodus 19:1-20.21.

The purpose of the Sinai theophany is the authentication of Moses as the mediator between God and the people.<sup>84</sup> A further reason for the theophany is to inculcate in the people a reverent and obedient spirit.<sup>85</sup> Moses' repeated ascent and descent of the mountain, which have been thought to indicate the confusion of different sources, serves in the canonical form of the narrative to build up tension in preparation for the proclamation of the law which follows. In Exodus 19:23 Moses appears to protest against Yahweh's repeated instruction to warn the people against forcing their way up the mountain, reminding Yahweh that they cannot ascend the mount because this warning has already been given. But Childs shows from parallel passages that Moses is not presuming to correct Yahweh; rather this passage conforms to a well-documented pattern in Hebrew dialogue.<sup>86</sup> Yahweh's coming is accompanied by smoke, fire, the sound of a trumpet and thunder.<sup>87</sup>

## 4.1.4.2. Exodus 24.

Verses 1-2 are connected with verses 9ff. They also form a transition from the warning at the end of the Book of the Covenant (Exodus 20:22-23:33) to the commitment of Israel to the covenant in verses 3-8.<sup>88</sup> E.W. Nicholson does not regard the meal of verses 9-14 as a covenant meal, because the covenant is not

<sup>84</sup> Ex 19:9 - in Ex 20:19-21 the people themselves ask Moses to fulfil the role of mediator.

<sup>85</sup> Ex 20:20.

<sup>86</sup> Childs 1974, 361-364.

<sup>87</sup> Ex 19:19. The 'thunder' could possibly be a voice; the voice of Yahweh is identified with thunder in Ps 29. See Childs 1974, 343.

<sup>88</sup> Durham 1987, 342. Durham also points out that seventy elders are mentioned both here and also in Num 11:16-17, 24-25. Durham 1987, 343.

mentioned in verses 9-11, and no part of the meal is offered to God as, for example, in Exodus 18:1-12.<sup>89</sup> This opinion stems from Nicholson's view, also held by other scholars, that verses 3-8 and verses 1-2, 9-11 originate from different sources and therefore should be treated separately. If the final form of the chapter is allowed to determine its interpretation, the combining of the two elements gives the meal covenant significance.

In verses 12-14 Moses is summoned up the mountain of God to receive stone tablets containing the law of God. The exact identity of what was written on the tablets is not stated, although we may surmise that it consisted of the Ten Commandments.<sup>90</sup> Verses 15-18 describe the appearance of the divine presence in terms of cloud and fire.

#### 4.1.4.3. Exodus 32-34.

While Moses receives instructions concerning the Tabernacle and its furniture, and the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests, the apostasy of the golden calf takes place. After the consequent judgment, through Moses' intercession God's grace towards the people is renewed. The final stage in Israel's rehabilitation is reached in chapter 34, where the two tablets of the law are replaced by new tablets, and Yahweh agrees to go with the people in person<sup>91</sup> - for the renewed covenant of verse 10 is a response to Moses' intercession in verse 9. This intercession in turn follows a private theophany to Moses, in which he hears the pronouncement of the divine name and character. The description here is reminiscent of Exodus 20:5b-6 which follow the second

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<sup>89</sup> Nicholson 1973, 68-70, 79-83.

<sup>90</sup> Cf. Ex 34:1, 27, 28. See Durham 1987, 345.

<sup>91</sup> Ex 34.9-10.

of the Ten Commandments.<sup>92</sup>

In Exodus 34:28 Moses is said to receive the Ten Commandments divinely written on stone tablets. However what precedes is not the Decalogue of chapter 20, but a series of commandments substantially different in character.<sup>93</sup> They include, along with the prohibition of idolatry and the command to observe the Sabbath, various other commandments of a ritual nature. Attempts have been made to see these as a 'ritual decalogue', and as a variant account of the Sinai covenant.<sup>94</sup> But Moberley, working with the finished text, points out that Exodus 34:11-26 consists rather of a selection from the laws given in chapters 20-24, chosen according to the changed circumstances following the golden calf episode.<sup>95</sup> These are to be written by Moses; the Ten Commandments are said to be written by Yahweh.

The skin of Moses' face shines when he returns from the mountain. To alleviate the people's fear he places a veil over his face when he addresses them.<sup>96</sup> Auerbach comments that wearing a mask for divine worship was common among many peoples, but that in this case the usual course of events is reversed: the mask here is removed in the presence of God instead of being worn then and afterwards removed.<sup>97</sup> The shining face, and therefore also the mask, symbolised the authority of Moses.<sup>98</sup> In Exodus 34:33-35 the scene evidently changes from Mount Sinai to the tent of meeting described in

<sup>92</sup> The revelation of the divine name will be discussed later in this chapter; the apostasy of the golden calf in Chapter 5.

<sup>93</sup> Ex 34:17-26.

<sup>94</sup> See Childs 1974, 607f.

<sup>95</sup> Moberley 1983, 96.

<sup>96</sup> Ex 34:29-35.

<sup>97</sup> Auerbach 1975, 137-141.

<sup>98</sup> Durham 1987, 467ff. Other comments on this text are given by Moberley (1983, 106-109) and Dozeman (2000).

33:7-11.<sup>99</sup>

#### 4.1.4.4. Other Old Testament References

References to Sinai occur in the poetic parts of the Old Testament, both within and outside the Pentateuch.<sup>100</sup> Sinai/Horeb does not feature explicitly in the prophets apart from Malachi 4:4, but the prophetic books do refer to matters which in the Pentateuch are linked to Sinai. For instance the Covenant to which Jeremiah summoned the people to return was the same which Yahweh made with their ancestors at the Exodus.<sup>101</sup> The Book of the Law, found in the Temple, which sparked the reformation of King Josiah, is thought to be very closely related with the Book of Deuteronomy.<sup>102</sup> Josiah's 'epitaph' included the encomium that he followed 'the whole law of Moses'.<sup>103</sup> Although Jeremiah prophesies that Yahweh will establish a *new* covenant with his people,<sup>104</sup> this new covenant differs from the original, not in content, but in its inwardness and in the associated outpouring of Yahweh's forgiveness. And the historical summary in Ezekiel 20 includes the giving of statutes and laws in the wilderness.<sup>105</sup> Houtman correctly observes that the prophets assume the reception of laws by Israel prior to the conquest of the Promised Land, and also a connection between the Exodus and the lawgiving.<sup>106</sup>

In the closing chapters of Ezekiel the vision of the restored Temple is based

<sup>99</sup> Dozeman 2000, 31.

<sup>100</sup> E.g. Dt 33:2; Jdg 5:5; Pss 68:8, 17; cf. Hab 3:3f.

<sup>101</sup> Jer 11:1-17, esp verse 4; cf. 7:22f).

<sup>102</sup> 2 Kgs 22;23. See Bright 1965, 89.

<sup>103</sup> 2 Kgs 23:25.

<sup>104</sup> Jer 31:31-34.

<sup>105</sup> Ezk 20: 10-11.

<sup>106</sup> Houtman 1993, 208.

largely on that of Solomon which is similar in its basic plan to the Tabernacle,<sup>107</sup> while the allocation of the land to the tribes, although 'purely theoretical and schematic',<sup>108</sup> bears a passing resemblance to the camp in the wilderness in that the tribes are arranged with the sanctuary in their midst.<sup>109</sup>

Reference to the wilderness wanderings is also made by Amos. In Amos 5:21-27 Yahweh seems to reject utterly the cultic feasts and ceremonies, and offerings of all kinds, and even the music used in the cultus, calling rather for justice and righteousness. This diatribe is followed by the surprising question, 'Did you, people of Israel, bring me sacrifices and offerings those forty years in the wilderness?'<sup>110</sup> This is normally taken to be a question expecting the answer 'No'; indeed 'No!' is supplied by the *REB* at the beginning of verse 26.

According to the interpretation implied in the *REB*, Amos was familiar with a tradition of the wilderness wanderings which contained no ritual requirements.<sup>111</sup> But the matter is perhaps not quite so simple. W.D. Davies points out that verse 25 can be taken in a number of ways: 'Was it only sacrifice and offerings that you offered to me in the wilderness and not also moral obedience?' - expecting either a negative or a positive answer; or with a different emphasis, 'Did you bring *me* sacrifices...?' The latter appears to be the line of interpretation followed in Acts 7:42-43.<sup>112</sup> F.I. Andersen and D.N. Freedman judge that the word order in verse 25 precludes the meaning that they brought nothing.<sup>113</sup> They follow H.H. Rowley in interpreting the apparent

<sup>107</sup> Eichrodt 1970, 542.

<sup>108</sup> Muilenberg 1962, 590b.

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Num 2.

<sup>110</sup> Am 5: 25.

<sup>111</sup> Mays 1969, 111.

<sup>112</sup> W.D. Davies 1974, 80.

<sup>113</sup> Andersen and Freedman 1989, 531.

negation as implying a comparison.<sup>114</sup> Thus, sacrifices and offerings were not the most important gifts brought. The rhetorical question is a less complete expression of the principle enunciated in Hosea 6:6: ‘For I require loyalty, not sacrifice, acknowledgement of God rather than whole-offerings.’

Amos contains allusions to material contained in the Book of the Covenant which included both cultic and moral requirements;<sup>115</sup> e.g. garments taken in pledge and the prohibition of combining sacrifices with leaven.<sup>116</sup> Did Amos know of these commandments in a context other than the law-giving on Sinai? In view of the possible ambiguity of the verses in Amos 5, no definite answer can be given, and no definite conclusion has been reached in the wider debate about the relation of the prophets to the worship of Israel.<sup>117</sup>

#### **4.1.5. The Ark and the Tent**

During the people’s travels in the wilderness, Yahweh’s presence with them was manifested at the Tent of Meeting and symbolised especially by the Ark of the Covenant.

##### 4.1.5.1. The Ark of the Covenant.

When the Israelites departed from Sinai, accompanied by the cloud of Yahweh, the Ark of the Covenant travelled ahead of them.<sup>118</sup> However the Ark was associated not only with guidance, but also with warfare.<sup>119</sup> The imagery

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 532; cf. Jer 7:22.

<sup>115</sup> Exodus 20:22–23:33.

<sup>116</sup> Am 2:8, cf. Ex 22:26; Am 4:5, cf. Ex 23:18. W.D. Davies, *loc. cit.*

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Eichrodt 1961, i, 367, note 1.

<sup>118</sup> Num 10:33f.

<sup>119</sup> Cf Numbers 10:35–36.

implies that Yahweh is seated upon the ark as a throne, from which he arises to champion the Israelites, and to which he returns. This association of the Ark with warfare is continued in the books of Samuel.<sup>120</sup> Auerbach thinks that the ark was originally a palladium of war, and only acquired its guiding role as a result of a process of theological reinterpretation.<sup>121</sup> At any rate in the finished text both ideas are present. The basic significance of the Ark was the presence of Yahweh, which was of importance for both guidance and warfare.<sup>122</sup> When the Israelites went to battle presumptuously, against the divine command, Moses and the ark did not go with them and they were defeated.<sup>123</sup>

In the instructions for making the tabernacle and its furniture this 'ark' was a box of acacia-wood, overlaid with gold, carried with poles by means of gold rings.<sup>124</sup> It contained the 'Testimony' - the stone tablets of the Law - and so could be called 'the Ark for the Testimony'.<sup>125</sup> The box was fitted with a cover of gold. Two golden cherubim were to be crafted and placed at either end of the cover, shielding it with their wings.<sup>126</sup> There, between the cover and the wings of the cherubim, Yahweh would meet Moses and charge him with the commands that he was to lay upon the Israelites.<sup>127</sup> When the Tabernacle was constructed, the ark was to be placed in the most sacred place, beyond the inner curtain.<sup>128</sup> While the company was on the march, the Levites responsible for the

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<sup>120</sup> E.g. 1 Sam 4:3; 2 Sam 11:11.

<sup>121</sup> Auerbach 1975, 121.

<sup>122</sup> See Sakenfeld 1995, 66.

<sup>123</sup> Num 14:44-45.

<sup>124</sup> Ex 25:10-16.

<sup>125</sup> Ex 31:7.

<sup>126</sup> On ancient near eastern parallels to the cherubim see Von Rad, 1984(b), 110-112.

<sup>127</sup> Ex 25:17-22; cf. Num 7:89.

<sup>128</sup> Ex 26:33-34.

care of the ark covered it with the curtain used to screen the most holy place.<sup>129</sup> Although in some accounts Yahweh was thought of as enthroned upon the cherubim,<sup>130</sup> G. Von Rad points out that in Jeremiah 3:16f. the ark itself seems to be Yahweh's throne. He suggests that the same idea also underlies the story of the boy Samuel in the tent of meeting: Samuel was in the place 'where the Ark of God was', when God spoke to him.<sup>131</sup> Although, as von Rad has shown, the symbolism is not identical in all parts of the tradition, the function of the ark as a focus for Yahweh's presence remains constant.<sup>132</sup>

In Deuteronomy the ark appears to be solely a receptacle for the tablets of the law. It is first mentioned in the narrative of the giving of the Law for the second time, after the apostasy over the golden calf.<sup>133</sup> A tension exists in the tradition between the ark as receptacle, and the ark as throne of Yahweh.<sup>134</sup> The two ideas are not incompatible.<sup>135</sup> The placing of the tablets beneath the 'throne' of the deity would emphasise the sacred character of the law and the sanctions against those who infringed Yahweh's holiness. In the Hittite treaties studied by G.E. Mendenhall, a similar motive led to the placing of the treaty documents in the deity's temple.<sup>136</sup>

Auerbach connects the ark with Jethro, father in law of Moses.<sup>137</sup> In treating of Numbers 10:29-36 Auerbach suggests that a break is to be found after verse 32.

<sup>129</sup> Num 4:5.

<sup>130</sup> 2 Kgs 19:15.

<sup>131</sup> 1 Sam 3:3,10.

<sup>132</sup> Von Rad 1984(b), 108f.

<sup>133</sup> Dt 10:1-5.

<sup>134</sup> Von Rad 1984(b), 112.

<sup>135</sup> Cf. C.J.H. Wright 1996, 143.

<sup>136</sup> Nicholson 1973, 39; Auerbach 1975, 118.

<sup>137</sup> Some confusion is evident among the names Jethro, Reuel and Hobab. See Sakenfeld 1995, 64.

No answer is given to Moses' request for guidance through the wilderness. Auerbach suggests that in the missing section Jethro procures the ark as a substitute for his own presence with the Israelites.<sup>138</sup> This suggestion appears to be based on Auerbach's emphasis on the Midianite influence on Moses, rather than any textual evidence. The omission of the answer may rather be designed to emphasise the theological aim of this section of Numbers, which is to show that the ark was crucial in guiding the Israelites.<sup>139</sup>

#### 4.1.5.2. The Tent of Meeting.

A distinction is strictly to be drawn between the tent of meeting and the tabernacle. The tent was made of three layers of skins, and protected the tabernacle which was made of wood and fine fabric.<sup>140</sup> However the two are obviously closely connected and sometimes appear to be synonymous.<sup>141</sup>

In Exodus 33:7-11, between the instructions for making the tabernacle and their implementation, embedded in the aftermath of the apostasy of the golden calf, is a narrative concerning a tent of meeting which already existed. Moses was in the habit of setting up this tent outside the camp. Anyone who sought Yahweh could go to it, and Yahweh would descend in the sacred cloud and converse with Moses there.<sup>142</sup> This tent was outside the camp, whereas the Tabernacle was in the centre of it and symbolised Yahweh's presence among the people.<sup>143</sup> This appearance of 'two tents' has been much discussed. Durham accepts that

<sup>138</sup> Auerbach 1975, 114.

<sup>139</sup> Sakenfeld 1995, 65f.

<sup>140</sup> Ex 26.

<sup>141</sup> Ex 39:32; 40:2,6,29; 1 Chr 6:32; Num 3:25; Ex 35:11; cf. Ex 29:30,32; 30:26.

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Num 11:24,26; 12:5,10; Dt 31:14-15.

<sup>143</sup> Num 2:2; Lev 26:11-12.

the tradition refers to two tents; he regards Exodus 33:7-11 as an insertion, with no connection to the surrounding narrative and interrupting its progress.<sup>144</sup> But Moberley shows that chapters 32-34 as a connected whole make excellent sense in view of the ultimate rebellion of Exodus 32. Israel has forfeited the presence of Yahweh, symbolised by the shrine in their midst. The fact that this tent was set up at a distance from the camp<sup>145</sup> is significant in this regard. As for the identity of 'the Tent' Moberley suggests that it may either be Moses' tent or else be equivalent to *a* tent.<sup>146</sup> Questions of the existence and history of the 'second tent' are difficult to resolve, but Moberley at least gives a coherent account of the text of Exodus 32-34, and of the place of Exodus 33:7-11 within it.

#### 4.1.6. Name and Word

We have seen that Yahweh's revealed presence was symbolised by fire, cloud and smoke, and focused on the Burning Bush, Mount Sinai, the Ark and the Tent. But the events in which God is revealed do not speak for themselves: they are regularly followed by speech. The theophany at the burning bush is accompanied by Yahweh's calling Moses by name; warning him to show reverence for such a holy place; identifying Yahweh as the God of the patriarchs; acknowledging the sufferings of the people in Egypt, announcing their imminent redemption, and commissioning Moses to be its agent.<sup>147</sup> When God appears in the sacred cloud at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, the

<sup>144</sup> Durham 1987, 440-442.

<sup>145</sup> Ex 33:7.

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Ex 18:7. Moberley 1983, 64. As for the episode in Numbers 11-12, where also the tent has often been taken to be outside the camp, Moberley argues that this is not necessarily the case, and 'the parallel is apparent rather than actual'. *Ibid.*, 175-176.

<sup>147</sup> Ex 3:4-7.

theophany is followed by a word of judgement or blessing. According to Numbers 7:89, Moses heard the voice speaking to him 'from above the cover over the Ark of the Testimony from between the two cherubim'.<sup>148</sup> The great theophany of Horeb/Sinai is followed by the giving of the Law. Indeed the *word* appears to be the purpose of the *theophany*. Nicholson comments that 'the theophany leads up to and is followed by proclamation'.<sup>149</sup> Durham suggests that the central Sinai narrative begins with Exodus 19:9-15 and finishes with Exodus 20:18-21; if so, the theophany includes the Decalogue itself.<sup>150</sup> C.J.H. Wright commenting on Deuteronomy 4:10-20 points out that the emphasis there is on the '*verbal revelation* of God's mind and will', and the contrast is '*between the visible and the audible*'.<sup>151</sup>

The fundamental verbal communication is the revelation of the divine Name. In the story of the Burning Bush God says to Moses, 'I AM that I am. Tell them that I AM has sent you to them... You are to tell the Israelites that it is the LORD [Yahweh], the God of their forefathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who has sent you to them. This is my name for ever; this is my title in every generation.' Much scholarly discussion has centred on the meaning of 'I AM that I am' and its relation to the name Yahweh.<sup>152</sup> Houtman suggests the meaning 'I am whosoever I am'; 'What does it matter who I am?',<sup>153</sup> and proposes that this phrase clarifies the name Yahweh: Yahweh is but one aspect of God's nature, which is not exhausted by the name Yahweh.<sup>154</sup> According to Childs the words in Exodus 3:14 are 'both an answer and a refusal of an

<sup>148</sup> Cf. the story of the child Samuel, 1 Sam 3:1-14.

<sup>149</sup> Nicholson 1973, 79.

<sup>150</sup> Durham 1987, 302.

<sup>151</sup> C.J.H. Wright 1996, 50 (original italics).

<sup>152</sup> Ex 3:14-15.

<sup>153</sup> Houtman 1993, 95.

<sup>154</sup> Houtman 1993, 368-369.

answer... God announces that his intentions will be revealed in his future acts, which he now refuses to explain.<sup>155</sup>

The name Yahweh, which probably comes from the same Hebrew root as 'I AM',<sup>156</sup> identifies the God who now reveals himself to Moses, with the God of the patriarchs.<sup>157</sup> As Durham points out it conveys not 'conceptual being, being in the abstract, but active being'.<sup>158</sup> Thus also in the private theophany to Moses the pronouncement of the divine Name (or Glory) consists of a description of divine attributes as experienced by God's people.<sup>159</sup>

In the narrative of Elijah's flight to Mount Horeb in 1 Kings 19:1-18 wind, earthquake and fire accompanied Yahweh's passing by. But Yahweh was not in these phenomena. Yahweh's presence was discovered in that which followed. Yahweh is associated but not identified with the forces of nature. In Elijah's case the voice which followed the theophany conveyed political and practical instructions, and news of a faithful remnant.<sup>160</sup>

#### **4.1.7. The Deity Experienced as Unpredictable and Hostile**

On the margin of the divine self-disclosure in the desert is the mysterious incident described in Exodus 4:24-26, in which Yahweh accosts Moses and threatens to kill him. The history of interpretation of the text shows that it has long posed a problem for Jewish and Christian interpreters alike.<sup>161</sup> Auerbach suggests that Yahweh is here regarded as a fearsome demon into whose area

<sup>155</sup> Childs 1974, 76.

<sup>156</sup> 'ehyeh.

<sup>157</sup> Ex 3:15.

<sup>158</sup> Durham 1987, 39.

<sup>159</sup> Ex 33:18-23; 34:4-7. See Bratton 1993, 47.

<sup>160</sup> 1 Kgs 19:15-18.

<sup>161</sup> Houtman 1993, 439-447.

Moses has unintentionally stumbled, and whose sexual jealousy is appeased by Zipporah's action.<sup>162</sup> Such an idea might be in the background of some earlier stage of the tradition, but like all attempts to reconstruct the history of the text is conjectural; it is not warranted by the present form of the text.<sup>163</sup> Childs points out that the emphasis in the narrative is on the circumcision carried out by Zipporah, by which Moses is saved.<sup>164</sup> Houtman comments that 'Zipporah circumcises her son, and so vicariously also her husband; him she "circumcises" with blood.'<sup>165</sup> James Nohrnberg points out that this episode follows a warning to Pharaoh that, if he fails to let Yahweh's 'firstborn son', Israel, go to worship Yahweh, Yahweh will kill Pharaoh's son; he suggests that 'Moses' own sparing by a rite of circumcision resembles the sparing of the Hebrew houses on the night of Passover'.<sup>166</sup> Seen in this perspective, the section anticipates the Passover narrative of Exodus 12:21-30. At any rate the episode is about circumcision.

This narrative also forms one of a series of incidents where people struggle with Yahweh who appears unpredictable and hostile. The closest parallel is perhaps the struggle of Jacob at Peniel in Genesis 32:22-32 with 'a man' (verse 24; with God in verse 28). But the incident also bears some similarity to those in which Yahweh's anger is placated, for example by Moses or Phinehas.<sup>167</sup> The difference is that in the latter class of passages the reason for Yahweh's anger is made clear. Within the world view of the Old Testament all of these are examples of the tension experienced by people between God's love and

<sup>162</sup> Auerbach 1975, 48-50.

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Childs 1974, 97.

<sup>164</sup> Childs 1974, 100.

<sup>165</sup> Houtman 1993, 425.

<sup>166</sup> Nohrnberg 1981, 54.

<sup>167</sup> See Ex 32:10-14; Num 25:11.

holiness - a tension which is part of God's very 'Name'.<sup>168</sup> Brueggemann writes of the 'disjunction' within Yahweh's character according to Israel's witness.<sup>169</sup> He suggests that the disjunction receives a 'proximate resolution' within the Old Testament in the concept of Yahweh's righteousness.<sup>170</sup> In Christianity God's power and love are identified, especially on the basis of the crucifixion of Jesus.<sup>171</sup> The tension which is not fully resolved within the Old Testament, in Christianity is healed by the Cross.<sup>172</sup>

#### **4.1.8. The Wilderness Revelation and the Wilderness Milieu**

The wilderness was the furnace in which the self-disclosure of God was forged into the faith of Israel. The prophetic tradition referred back to this faith revealed in the desert. If the new revelation had taken place, say, in Mesopotamia, Egypt or Canaan, each of which had its own gods,<sup>173</sup> it would merely have modified the existing culture and worship. Even after the events in the desert, the Israelites constantly tended to adopt the customs of the Canaanites such as fertility worship at the 'high places', after they had taken possession of the land. Without the wilderness experience the new beginning which was the worship of Yahweh would have been impossible. In the wilderness a new faith was forged, in which God was not identified with the phenomena of nature, but was clothed in them. The phenomena revealed, but also concealed God. The lack of alien religious impedimenta, and the privations of the desert, opened the Israelites to the new revelation. W.D. Davies also describes a rabbinic perspective on the giving of the Torah in the wilderness

<sup>168</sup> See Ex:6-7.

<sup>169</sup> Brueggemann 1997, 268.

<sup>170</sup> Brueggemann 1997, 283.

<sup>171</sup> Brueggemann 1997, 311.

<sup>172</sup> See Gal 3:13-14.

<sup>173</sup> Cf. Josh 24:14-15.

rather than the Promised Land: any appearance of partiality to a particular tribe was avoided, and the Torah was shown to be for all nations, and not only for Israel.<sup>174</sup>

The revelations at the burning bush and the mountain could only happen in a desert environment. The pillar of fire and cloud, and the sacred Tent, belong to the conditions of the wilderness. The ark within the shrine symbolises Yahweh's presence and leadership in the midst of the people during their desert journeys. Yet Yahweh is not found in the desert in a sense which implies that Yahweh is absent elsewhere. As Herbert N. Schneidau observes, 'the unearthly landscape of the desert is not God's "home" but a scene appropriate to him, for he too is unearthly'.<sup>175</sup>

#### **4.1.9. Wilderness Revelation in Later Judaism**

The revelation in the wilderness was foundational and unrepeatable in Jewish theology. Later wilderness-orientated movements positioned themselves in relation to the Israelite wilderness community of old. Those mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus looked for authenticating signs in the wilderness.<sup>176</sup>

The Qumran Community meditated on the Law in the desert in order to prepare themselves for the triumph to come.

#### **4.1.10. Wilderness Revelation in the New Testament**

In the New Testament the new revelation in Christ is represented as building on and surpassing the Old Testament revelation. 2 Corinthians 3:4-18 contain a reflection on the veil worn by Moses when he descended from Mount Sinai.

<sup>174</sup> W.D. Davies 1974, 89-90, note 27.

<sup>175</sup> Schneidau 1976, 142.

<sup>176</sup> See page

The fading glory of the written law is surpassed by the lasting glory of the new covenant. The veil is given several interpretations: it was designed to prevent the Israelites from gazing at the end of the transient glory; it also prevented the Israelites and their unbelieving successors from understanding the true meaning of the law; in Christ through the Spirit the veil is removed so that the true glory can be seen. In verse 18 the additional element of the mirror appears:<sup>177</sup> having no veil, and seeing the glory of the Lord as in a mirror, 'we are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, through the power of the Lord who is the Spirit.' The theme of transformation here receives its ultimate fulfilment in the final revelation.

In Stephen's speech the revelation to Moses of 'the living utterances of God' was said to be given to Stephen and his hearers.<sup>178</sup> In Hebrews 12:18-24 a contrast is drawn between Sinai, mountain of the terrors of the Law, and Zion, interpreted as the heavenly Jerusalem, centre of the redeemed. Sinai and Zion are closely connected in Old Testament theology. In Isaiah 2:2-4 Zion has taken

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<sup>177</sup> N.T. Wright argues that the 'mirror' in which Christians see the glory of Christ reflected is their fellow-Christians. See N.T. Wright 1991, 185-189.

<sup>178</sup> Acts 7:38. The effect of Acts 7:44-50 is to present the Tent of Meeting, made according to the pattern revealed to Moses, in a favourable light compared with the Temple built by Solomon, for in fact 'the Most High does not live in houses made by men', as Isa 66:1f. confirms. Mauser (Mauser 1963, 71) suggests that the Palestinian cult is here viewed as a direct prolongation of the idolatry of the golden calf. This is a possible but not inevitable inference from the text. It depends on the hypothesis that Acts is based on a tradition which favoured the diaspora understanding of the Old Testament as against the Palestinian (Mauser 1963, 68f.). Another reading of the passage would see it as contrasting the Christian community, which had no buildings, with the Jewish people who had the Temple. At all events these verses display a strong bias against the Temple. But such a bias is a general feature of the New Testament going back, according to the documents, to Jesus himself (See N.T. Wright 1992, 459ff.)

over the role of Sinai as the centre for revelation of God's law.<sup>179</sup> In other texts some of the phenomena of Sinai appear at Zion.<sup>180</sup> Cohn observes that 'Mount Sinai, the source of Torah, and Mount Zion, the site of the once and future temple, represent the alpha and omega of biblical sacred geography.'<sup>181</sup> H.W. Attridge describes Jewish speculations that the last age will include a repetition of features of the Sinai theophany. He suggests that Christian writers adapted these traditions and applied them to the Christ, who fulfils the hope of Israel.<sup>182</sup>

In the Gospels the wilderness was the setting of the revelation at Jesus' baptism.<sup>183</sup> The Transfiguration of Jesus took place on a 'high mountain' where he had taken with him Peter, James and John – to pray, says Luke.<sup>184</sup> The element of revelation in this account is emphasised by the presence of Moses and Elijah, both of whom had encountered Yahweh at Mount Sinai/Horeb.<sup>185</sup> U.W. Mauser sees Peter's suggestion of the three tents as expressing a desire for new 'tents of meeting' on the Mount of Transfiguration.<sup>186</sup> The cloud and the divine voice are also reminiscent of Mount Sinai. In Matthew 5-7 the 'Sermon on the Mount' is generally understood to be intended as a Christian counterpart of the revelation of the Law on Mount Sinai. The setting for the 'apocalyptic discourse' in which Jesus unveils the future fulfilment of God's purposes, is the Mount of Olives,<sup>187</sup> and according to Mauser every episode in Mark's Gospel which has the character of a revelation is related to wilderness, mountain or

<sup>179</sup> Cf. Cohn 1981, 58.

<sup>180</sup> Isa 4:5; 6:4.

<sup>181</sup> Cohn 1981, 43.

<sup>182</sup> Attridge 1989, 374.

<sup>183</sup> Mk 1:9-11.

<sup>184</sup> Mk 9:2=Mt 17:1; in Lk 9:28 'a mountain'.

<sup>185</sup> Bratton 1993, 138.

<sup>186</sup> Mk 9:5; see Mauser 1963, 113.

<sup>187</sup> Mk 13:3/Mt 24:3; cf. Mk 11:1; 14:26.

sea.<sup>188</sup>

## 4.2. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

The members of the mainstream Christian church did not seek in the wilderness fresh knowledge about God apart from the revelation recorded in the Scriptures. Their faith was based on the sacred history. The Desert Fathers and Mothers were no exception. Burton-Christie has shown that the Bible lay at the heart of the spirituality of the Desert Fathers, and their Sayings bear witness to this orientation;<sup>189</sup> the instruction given in the desert communities had a strong scriptural basis which is often seen in the various encounters between masters and disciples.<sup>190</sup> Great importance was attached to the *synaxis* - the public and private recitation of the Scriptures - and to meditation and rumination on them.<sup>191</sup> Burton-Christie shows that the written Scriptures were available and present within Egyptian monasticism. That is not to say that many of the desert monks possessed their own personal copies. Sometimes the possession of books, even the Scriptures, could appear to conflict with the monks' devotion to poverty.<sup>192</sup> Moreover, although some monks and nuns were learned,<sup>193</sup> many were illiterate. Much of the biblical knowledge in monastic communities was therefore oral.<sup>194</sup> This knowledge was essentially practical; merely intellectual understanding was regarded as suspect.<sup>195</sup> Burton-Christie shows that the 'desert hermeneutic' of the Scriptures was in keeping with the methods of

<sup>188</sup> Mauser 1963, 143.

<sup>189</sup> See Burton-Christie 1993; cf. Ward 1975.

<sup>190</sup> Chitty 1977, 25f; Burton-Christie 1993, 61.

<sup>191</sup> Burton-Christie 1993, 107; 117-122.

<sup>192</sup> Burton Christie 1993, 111-116.

<sup>193</sup> Mother Silvanus was said to have read three million lines of the works of Origen, and two and a half million lines of Gregory, Stephen, Pierius and Basil (Jasper 2004, 33).

<sup>194</sup> Burton-Christie 1993, 43ff.

<sup>195</sup> Burton-Christie 1993, 151-153.

interpretation practised generally in the early Church.<sup>196</sup>

The Desert Fathers looked for personal illumination, guidance and spiritual formation, in a mental world governed by the Scriptures. Throughout the centuries Christians have sought clarity and integrity in the desert for their following of the God revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. We are entitled to deduce from the wilderness stories of the Bible and later Christian tradition that the desert is conducive to such clarity and integrity. This principle applies to all the various facets of wilderness: to sojourns in places relatively untouched by human activity; periods of personal or professional loneliness; or times of spiritual dryness and desolation. In circumstances where supportive people and structures are reduced or lacking, we may see something of the glory of God.

The wilderness journey always begins with the gracious revelation of God. The human response is flawed and ambiguous. The fascination of the biblical wilderness narratives lies in the tension between the divine grace and the qualified faith and partial obedience of the people of God. This spiritual counterpoint forms the theme of the next chapter.

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<sup>196</sup> Burton-Christie 1993, 166-171.  
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