

5. THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY: TESTING, PROVIDENCE AND JUDGEMENT

5.1. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Three themes are found inseparably intertwined in the wilderness narratives. They are the rebellious 'murmuring' or complaining by which the Israelites tested the God who was made known to them in the desert; the providential supply of their needs; and finally the judgement of God. Before embarking on a study of this three-fold thread we should notice another aspect of testing: God tested Israel in the privations of the desert. For reasons of convenience we shall consider this now.

5.1.1. God tested Israel

From one perspective, represented especially by Deuteronomy, the desert was a proving ground for Israel: God humbled and tested them, for their own ultimate good, in order to discover whether they were committed to keeping God's commandments.¹ The instructions about gathering the manna involved an implicit test of obedience and faith: the people were to gather only enough for each day; to stockpile reserves would show a failure to depend on God.² One Hebrew root used for this testing is also applied to the testing of equipment in the story of David and Goliath.³ Elsewhere God's examination is compared to

¹ Dt 8:2,16; this theme occurs also in Ex 15:25, a verse which anticipates in many respects the revelation at Sinai. Durham 1987, 213.

² Ex 16:4.

³ *nsh*, 1 Sam 17:39; *bhn*, A root of similar meaning, is used in Ps 81:7 in a wilderness context (Cf also Zech 13:9; Pss 11:4,5; 26:2; 66:10; 139:23; Job 23:10.)

the process of refining gold (or - with a different word – silver).⁴ Thus the prophet Jeremiah is appointed to test the people's conduct.⁵ In the anatomical psychology of Hebrew thought God tests the heart and kidneys.⁶ With reference to this divine testing P.C. Craigie writes:

On the one hand, the desolation of the wilderness removed the natural props and supports which man by nature depends on; it cast the people back on God, who alone could provide the strength to survive the wilderness. On the other hand, the severity of the wilderness period undermined the shallow bases of confidence of those who were not truly rooted and grounded in God.⁷

Bratton observes: 'Free of social influences and other religions, the wilderness became an unclouded mirror for the spirit of the newly forming nation.'⁸ She however suggests that the wilderness was not originally intended to be a place of testing (although such a concept is present in Deuteronomy) but 'Israel's lack of obedience to Yahweh slowly turned the wilderness into a series of difficult experiences.'⁹ This suggestion, if accepted, would link the two themes of divine testing and human rebellion.

5.1.2. 'Murmuring'

Israel by its rebellious complaining and unbelief repeatedly tested the limits of God's patience and threatened to undermine the very foundations of its election by God. The 'murmuring' tradition runs through the wilderness narratives like a geological stratum, sometimes on the surface, never far below. The root *lwn*,

⁴ Jer 9:7; Zech 13:9; Pss 17:3; 26:2; 66:10; Job 23:10.

⁵ Jer 6:27.

⁶ Jer 11:20, 12:3, 20:12, Pss 7:9; 17:3; Prov 17:3; 1 Chr 29:17; Jer 11:20; 20:12; 17:10; Ps 7:10.

⁷ Craigie 1976, 185.

⁸ Bratton 1993, 53.

⁹ Bratton 1993, 52f.

translated 'murmur' in the King James Authorised Version, 'complain' and the like in modern translations, has connotations of hostility and resentment. With a single exception it is found only in the wilderness narratives.¹⁰ Moses is often the initial target of the accusations and complaints. His first reaction is often to prostrate himself. This prostration is probably chiefly a sign of deference to Yahweh who is the real object of the murmuring and who subsequently acts to vindicate Moses.¹¹

G.W. Coats shows that the basic form of the 'murmuring' narratives is derived from legal disputes. He describes this pattern as falling into two parts: an initial exchange of accusation and counteraccusation, followed by an appeal to the judge; and a public, legal procedure.¹² The accused then typically offer a justification by way of explaining the reason for their action.¹³ The final outcome depends on the adequacy of the explanation.¹⁴ Coats finds that the categorization of outcomes in the wilderness tradition is difficult, because of the varied content and character of the narratives.

Michael Herbage suggests the following typical analysis for the 'murmuring' formula: (1) description (of Egypt or of the desert); (2) death wish (desire for death in Egypt, or fear of death in the desert); (3) transfer from Egypt to the desert; (4) provision (of water, meat or bread). This pattern is commonly preceded by an itinerary formula, and a statement of the situation which provoked the complaint. It is commonly followed by a prayer of Moses, words

¹⁰ See Josh 9:18.

¹¹ E.g. Num 14:5; 16:4; Ex 16:6b-12; Num 16:25ff. Coats 1968, 38-40.

¹² E.g. 1 Sam 24:11ff; Jer 26.

¹³ E.g. Gen 3:13; 20:11.

¹⁴ Coats 1968, 33ff.

of Yahweh, the transmission of Yahweh's words to the people, the solution to the situation, and an 'etiological' note – for example, an explanation of the origin of a place-name by means of the incident described. Not all elements of the murmuring formula or of the units of narrative are always present and the order varies.¹⁵

5.1.3. Murmuring and Providence before Sinai

Before the ratification of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel, and the giving of the law, the theme of judgement is missing from the threefold thread of the narrative.¹⁶ The murmuring, on the other hand, begins even as early as the exodus narrative. To the terrified Israelites, caught between the advancing Egyptians and the sea, Egyptian slavery appears preferable to certain death in the desert. They turn on Moses and accuse him of leading them there against their will! Moses replies with words of assurance and a promise of victory.¹⁷ Although Yahweh's disapproval is indicated in the words which follow no act of judgement follows.¹⁸ This incident foreshadows the murmuring incidents in the wilderness narratives proper.

5.1.3.1. Marah

In Exodus 15:22-25 the subject of complaint is the bitter, undrinkable water of Marah. The seriousness of the situation is accentuated by the preceding mention of three days' journey through waterless desert. Yahweh's provision takes the form of a log which, thrown into the water, makes it sweet. No mention is made of Yahweh's anger, or of judgement on the murmurers.

¹⁵ Herbage shows that this form of narrative is found outside the wilderness narratives in 1 Sam 8. (Herbage - no date).

¹⁶ Olson 1996, 63.

¹⁷ Ex 14:10-14.

¹⁸ See Ex 14:15.

5.1.3.2. The Manna

Exodus 16 contains the story of the manna. Moses and Aaron are accused of bringing the Israelites from plentiful nourishment in Egypt to starve to death in the wilderness. Moses points out that by implication they are complaining against Yahweh, not just against him and Aaron. The divine response is the provision of quails and manna – though the quails are not mentioned after verse 13. A natural substance similar to manna exists in the north Arabian wilderness and elsewhere: cakes are said to be made from this substance, which is produced by the action of an insect on the fruit of the tamarisk tree.¹⁹ The supply of the manna was an important feature of the wilderness journey.

Jan A. Wagenaar points out that Exodus 16:35 and Joshua 5:10-12 mark the beginning and end of the wilderness period, which is thus defined as the period during which the manna was given.²⁰ On the sixth day of the week the quantity of manna was doubled, so that the people did not need to labour in gathering it on the Sabbath.²¹

5.1.3.3. Rephidim

According to Exodus 17:1-7 the people disputed with Moses at Rephidim because they had no water. Again Moses appealed to Yahweh who was the real object of their clamour. In reply he was directed to make his way to a rock in Horeb and strike it with his staff. When he did so it yielded water. W.H. Propp suggests that the 'rock' was in fact a mountain. The meaning 'mountains' seems

¹⁹ Cf Childs 1974, 282f.; Houtman 1993, 143; Humphreys 2003, 289-292.

²⁰ Wagenaar 2000.

²¹ Ex 16:5,22.

to be required for the plural Hebrew word *sûrîm* in several passages;²² 'mountain' is a likely meaning for the singular *sûr* in Job 14:18.²³ This word sometimes has connotations of height.²⁴ *Sûrîm* may have crevices,²⁵ and can serve as places of refuge.²⁶ In only a minority of texts does the word connote a small, rocky outcrop,²⁷ or a substance.²⁸ We should therefore perhaps picture the source of the water in Exodus 17 as a mountain rather than a rock; Houtman remarks that mountains are among 'the places that have a special relationship with the deity, the holy places, places where theophanies happen(ed)'.²⁹

Propp points out that Yahweh (as occasionally other deities) is referred to as *sûr*.³⁰ *Sûr* is also found combined with words meaning salvation,³¹ and Yahweh is called 'the *sûr* of Israel'.³² However in these contexts the mountain is a metaphor for strength and protection and the provision of water is not mentioned. The identification of Yahweh with the rock that produces water occurs in later Jewish thought, but not in the Old Testament.³³

5.1.4. The Rebellion at Sinai

²² E.g. Num 23:9.

²³ Cf Job 9:5.

²⁴ Ps 27:5; 61:2.

²⁵ Ex 33:22; Isa 2:21.

²⁶ E.g. 1 Sam 24:2; Isa 2:10,19,21.

²⁷ Jg 6:21; 13:19; Isa 8:14.

²⁸ Perhaps Ps 89:44; Job 19:24; 28:10; and in the 'Siloam Inscription' found in the water conduit dating from the reign of King Hezekiah. Propp 1987, 21.

²⁹ Houtman 1996, 364.

³⁰ Dt 32:4,15,18,30,31,37; 1 Sam 2:2; 2 Sam 22:3,32,47; 23:3; Isa 17:10; 26:4; 30:29; Pss 18:2,31,46; 19:14; 28:1; 31:2; 62:2,6,7; 71:3; 73:26; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; 144:1.

³¹ Dt 32:15; 2 Sam 22:47; Ps 62:2,6; 89:26; 95:1.

³² 2 Sam 23:3; Isa 30:29. Propp 1987, 21f.

³³ Cf 1 Cor 10:4.

The account of this apostasy, found in Exodus 32:1-33:6, is situated within the Sinai complex. Nevertheless it shows some similarities to the wilderness murmuring narratives, especially in the account of Yahweh's anger and Moses' intercession found in Exodus 32:9-14. The text shows the rebellion as arising from the delay in Moses' return from Mount Sinai. From the gold ear-rings of the people Aaron is persuaded to make the image of a bull-calf, to which they offer worship. However the feast is also said to be for Yahweh. Auerbach suggests that Yahweh was formerly worshipped under the external form of a bull in Kadesh, Midian and elsewhere. From this point of view Aaron would appear as the conservative and Moses as the innovator.³⁴

Clearly some relation exists between the apostasy of Exodus 32:1-6 and that of Jeroboam in 1 Kings 12:26-32. Both passages contain the proclamation, 'Israel, these are your gods that brought you up from Egypt.' At first sight the plural form might appear more appropriate in 1 Kings 12:28 than in Exodus 32:4, since two calves are there in view, one at Dan and one at Bethel. Many scholars have taken the view that the former passage is more original, and that it has given rise to the story in Exodus 32. Moberley has questioned this view, pointing out that the reference to the Exodus suits the context in Exodus 32; Jeroboam's institution of two sanctuaries (at Bethel and Dan) does not necessarily imply the introduction of more than one god; and the plural is intended rather to convey a pagan idea of divinity.³⁵ The effect of the two passages together is to present the apostasy of Jeroboam as standing in a long cultic tradition.

³⁴ Auerbach 1975, 126.

³⁵ Moberley 1983, 163.

In this narrative Yahweh's judgement is a prominent theme. Moses, informed by Yahweh of the apostasy of the people, descends from the mountain bearing the stone tablets of the law, and shatters them in rage. The golden calf is burned and crushed, and the people are forced to consume the ashes mixed with water.³⁶ A difficulty here is that gold cannot be burned or pulverised.³⁷ Durham suggests as one possible solution that the calf may have been made of wood overlaid with gold; alternatively 'burning, grinding, scattering' may be an idiomatic way of expressing the destruction of an idol, or be related to a form of ritual.³⁸ In response to an appeal from Moses the Levites carry out a purge of the people in which about three thousand die; as a reward the Levites are given the priesthood.³⁹

Moses then again intercedes for the people. God promises that an angel will go before them, but nevertheless they will be punished.⁴⁰ Moberley points out that the combination of pardon with further punishment is found also elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁴¹ But here the pardon is strictly limited. Durham points out that the sending of an angel or messenger instead of Yahweh's own presence can be seen as a judgement and not a blessing.⁴² The stripping off by the people of their ornaments is an expression of penitence;⁴³ it gains extra significance from the fact that the stripping of ornaments in Genesis 35:4 is found in a context of renouncing foreign gods. Moberley suggests that here the action may be linked with the origin of the gold of the calf in the 'spoiling of the Egyptians'

³⁶ 32:15-20.

³⁷ Propp 1987, 87, note 128.

³⁸ Durham 1987, 431.

³⁹ Ex 32:25-29.

⁴⁰ Ex 32:32-35.

⁴¹ E.g. Num 14:20ff; 2 Sam 12:13f. Moberley 1983, 58, cf. 91-93.

⁴² Durham 1987, 436f.

⁴³ Ex 33:4,6. Noth 1962, 254.

and the wearing of their ornaments.⁴⁴

From this point on the element of rebellion and disobedience is intensified, and a corresponding emphasis is placed upon divine judgement. Childs includes Numbers 20:1-13 among the incidents whose structure does not include this judgement, but one could argue that judgement is in fact present, although it falls upon Moses and Aaron rather than the people. S. Talmon aptly names Numbers 11-25; 31 'The Book of Israel's Failings'.⁴⁵ This changed emphasis does not eclipse the divine mercy and providence; rather it shows them in sharp relief. In Exodus 32-34 we cannot be sure which way events will go until the dénouement of the narrative in chapter 34. In the end the conclusion is a greatly heightened revelation of Yahweh's grace: in spite of the people's stubbornness and rebellion, Yahweh finally promises to go with them.⁴⁶ Throughout this tense narrative the intercessory role of Moses is crucial, and it continues to be of paramount importance.⁴⁷ Having acted as mediator of the Sinai covenant, he continues by his intercession to mediate Yahweh's mercy, forgiveness and gracious provision.

5.1.5. Murmuring, Providence and Judgement from Sinai to Kadesh

5.1.5.1 Taberah - 'Burning' (11:1-3):

The Israelites incur divine wrath by unspecified complaining. As a result fire from the Lord rages on the outskirts of the camp, but dies down after intercession by Moses.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Ex 3:22; 12:36; 32:2-4. Moberley 1983, 60.

⁴⁵ Talmon 1966, 46.

⁴⁶ Moberley 1983, 88.

⁴⁷ Cf. Num 14:13-20; 21:4-9; Dt 10:10.

⁴⁸ Ashley points out that the location of this episode, which introduces a succession of murmuring stories, is not included in the itinerary notes of Numbers 11:35; 33:16-17. Ashley 1993, *The Old Testament Wilderness in Ecological Perspective* 76

5.1.5.2. Kibroth-hattaavah - 'The Graves of Desire' (11:4-35):

This passage contains three interwoven narratives: Yahweh graciously provides the quails; the people bewail their misfortunes, incited by a 'mixed company of strangers', and incur Yahweh's displeasure and judgement; Moses complains that the burden of caring for such a rebellious people is too heavy for him to bear, and Yahweh responds by endowing seventy of Israel's elders and officers with Moses' spirit so that they can share the burden of leadership. As Coats remarks, verse 13 implies that Yahweh has laid the burden of finding meat upon Moses in anger, and this anger may be connected with Moses' spirit of incredulity as exemplified in verses 21-23.⁴⁹ Nevertheless the whole chapter shows that God's care for Moses is at the heart of God's care for Israel. The three threads of murmuring, provision and judgement are all present in this unified narrative.

Numbers 11:4ff contains echoes but also variations of Exodus 16. In Exodus the manna and quails appear as a twofold provision and are closely connected;⁵⁰ in Numbers the manna is an occasion for complaint,⁵¹ while the quails and the subsequent plague follow the murmuring. Numbers, but not Exodus, mentions the wind from the west (an alternative translation would be, from the sea); Psalm 78:26 mentions the east wind and south wind, which Houtman interprets as a south-east wind, i.e. from the Gulf of Aqaba.⁵² As regards the quantity of the quails, Exodus 16:13 merely states that they covered the camp; Numbers 11:31 could be taken to imply that they were let lie two cubits deep, a day's

200-203.

⁴⁹ Coats 1968, 103.

⁵⁰ Cf. Ps 78:23-31.

⁵¹ Num 11:6.

⁵² Houtman 1993, 203.

journey from the camp in each direction - however the *REB* translates, 'they were flying all round the camp, three feet above the ground'. Ashley notes that quails have been netted in flight in the Sinai until relatively recent times. The two translations probably reflect two ways of reading the consonantal text.⁵³ Numbers, but not Exodus, records how long was spent in gathering the quails. The eating of the quails and the plague are not mentioned in Exodus. The similarities serve, as often, to highlight the development of events.

Likewise the sharing of Moses' burden in Numbers 11 is comparable with, but also differs from the events of Exodus 18:13-26.⁵⁴ In Exodus Jethro counsels Moses to appoint 'officers' over units of a thousand, a hundred, fifty and ten.⁵⁵ They are to be men of exemplary character and outstanding ability, who will act as judges. In Numbers the Lord instructs Moses to appoint seventy of Israel's 'elders'. Apart from the difference in the terminology of their office, the nature of their responsibilities differs: in Exodus the work is judicial; in Numbers the emphasis is more pastoral and spiritual.

5.1.5.3. Hazeroth (Numbers 12)

Here the opposition to Moses comes from Aaron and Miriam rather than the people as a whole. This passage also introduces an emphasis that becomes increasingly common in the chapters following 13-14: the authentication of Moses' authority. The judgement for this rebellion against Moses is borne by Miriam, but Moses' intercession is effective in restoring her to health.

5.1.6. The Rebellion at Kadesh

⁵³ Ashley 1993, 218, citing G.R. Driver.

⁵⁴ Cf. Dt 1:9-17.

⁵⁵ Ex 18:21,25.

The most fateful rebellion of all occurs in response to the report of the spies sent out from the wilderness of Paran.⁵⁶ The spies return impressed by the fruitfulness of the land but intimidated by the strength and stature of its inhabitants.⁵⁷ Caleb alone gives an optimistic assessment of the Israelites' prospects of conquest.⁵⁸ The fatal outcome of the murmuring spirit arose from the people's failure of faith,⁵⁹ on which the encouragement of Caleb and Joshua makes no impression.⁶⁰ Moses' intercession dissuades Yahweh from Yahweh's intention to destroy the Israelites and raise up a new people from Moses' descendants.⁶¹ Nevertheless none of that generation will live to see the Promised Land, apart from Caleb and Joshua.⁶² The forty days spent exploring the land will be followed by forty years of wandering in the wilderness.⁶³ The faithless spies die of a plague.⁶⁴ From now on a further shift of emphasis takes place. Murmuring and judgement are still present, but the emphasis is now on the approach to the Promised Land and the authority of the divinely-appointed leadership.⁶⁵

5.1.7. Approaching the Promised Land

5.1.7.1. The Rebellions of Korah, Dathan and Abiram (Numbers 16).

The rebellion of Korah the Levite is intertwined with that of Dathan and Abiram (and On son of Peleth who is not heard of after verse 1) and two hundred and fifty leading Israelites. Korah appears to claim that priesthood

⁵⁶ Numbers 13:1-3.

⁵⁷ Num 13:25-29.

⁵⁸ Num 13:30-33.

⁵⁹ Num 14:1-4.

⁶⁰ Num 14:5-9.

⁶¹ Num 14:11-20.

⁶² Num 14:21-35.

⁶³ Num 14:34.

⁶⁴ Num 14:36-38.

⁶⁵ Cf. Ashley 1993, 375.

belongs to the whole community, and not only to Moses and Aaron.⁶⁶ Moses' rebuke turns on the Levites' refusal to be content with their allotted, albeit subsidiary service.⁶⁷ The grievance of Dathan and Abiram seems to relate to civil power: they dispute the right of Moses to act as a prince. Their complaint also returns to the accusation that the 'land flowing with milk and honey' is, after all, Egypt from which they have been fraudulently removed, and not the land promised them in the name of Yahweh. Again the intercession of Moses averts Yahweh's judgement from the whole community.⁶⁸ The context in verse 22 suggests that, here at least, intercession, rather than deference to Yahweh, is the main significance of Moses' and Aaron's prostration.⁶⁹ The Hebrew word *miškān* used in the phrase translated 'the dwellings of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram' in verse 24 is also used of the Tabernacle. P.J. Budd suggests that the rebels may have set up a rival tabernacle.⁷⁰ Ashley considers that more likely Korah had withdrawn to the tent of Dathan and Abiram.⁷¹ But *miškān* in the singular is not a normal word for a human dwelling,⁷² and a different term is used for the tents of the rebels in verse 26. Budd's suggestion is preferable, unless fairly drastic emendation or rearrangement of the text is resorted to.⁷³

The ground swallows the rebels and their families. Some scholars have suggested that this story may be intended to explain the origin of a fault in the earth.⁷⁴ But Budd points out that, as an unprecedented event which left no new

⁶⁶ Num 16:3.

⁶⁷ Num 16:9-10.

⁶⁸ Num 16:20-24.

⁶⁹ Budd 1984, 188.

⁷⁰ Budd 1984, 181.

⁷¹ Ashley 1993, 315f.

⁷² BDB 1015b.

⁷³ Cf. Ashley 1993, 315f.

⁷⁴ Coats 1968, 167.

phenomena, the account does not share the characteristics of this type of story, known as an etiology.⁷⁵ A natural basis for the fate of the rebels has been suggested by reference to mudflats between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqabah, which under certain conditions can be covered with a crust of hard mud, but can become lethally dangerous.⁷⁶ But Olson points out that the language used is more suggestive of earthquakes.⁷⁷

The claim to a wider distribution of priesthood is settled by divine judgement.⁷⁸ Following a fresh outbreak of murmuring throughout the people, Yahweh's judgement issues in a plague, which is arrested through Aaron's offering incense at Moses' direction.⁷⁹ This interwoven narrative is then joined to other material relating to the priesthood.⁸⁰

5.1.7.2. Meribah (20:1-13).

This incident bears many similarities to Exodus 17:1-7, and has been thought by some scholars to be a parallel version of the same event.⁸¹ Both concern a quarrel of the people with Moses over a lack of water; in both cases water is provided from a rock; both places are named Meribah. But several significant differences also exist: in the Exodus story, but not in Numbers, the place is also called Massah; the Exodus incident is set in the region of Horeb and the Numbers account is located in the Kadesh area; on the first occasion Moses is commanded to strike the rock while on the second he is instructed to speak to it, and judged for striking it. In Numbers, the words in Numbers 20:3b may

⁷⁵ Budd 1984, 185.

⁷⁶ Kitchen 1980 (b), 1645.

⁷⁷ Olson 1996, 105.

⁷⁸ Num 16:16-19, 35.

⁷⁹ Num 16:41-50.

⁸⁰ Num 17; 18.

⁸¹ Coats 1968, 71ff.

refer to the judgement of chapter 16, and the rod in Numbers 20:7-8 may be Aaron's rod of chapter 17. Ashley points out also that only in Numbers 20:6b and 14:10b does God's glory appear as the prelude to God's response to the murmuring, and both incidents occur in the area of Kadesh Barnea.⁸² The Numbers account is therefore well anchored to its context. While some influence of one passage on the other may be suspected, the similarities between the two stories serve, as so often, to highlight the differences and to draw attention to the fact that the narrative has moved on.

5.1.7.3 Rebellion provoking the plague of snakes (21:4-9).

On this occasion the rebellion is said to be against God as well as Moses. Again the accusation concerns the exchange of Egypt for the inhospitable and lethal desert. Yahweh's judgement takes the form of an attack by poisonous snakes. In response to his intercession Moses is instructed to make a bronze snake and erect it as a standard. Those who looked at the bronze snake were healed. 2 Kings 18:4 recounts the destruction of this bronze serpent by King Hezekiah because in his time it had come to be venerated as an object of worship. G.J. Wenham records that copper serpents have been found at various near eastern sites.⁸³ Olson states that in the contemporary milieu the serpent had both positive and negative connotations: it could symbolise both evil and healing, chaos and life.⁸⁴ In this passage the snake could become a focus for idolatry, but could also be transformed by association with the worship of Yahweh into a means of healing.

5.1.8. Murmuring, Providence and Judgement in Deuteronomy.

⁸² Ashley 1993, 382.

⁸³ Wenham 1981, 156; cf. Rothenberg 1972, 127.

⁸⁴ Olson 1996, 136.

Deuteronomy 1:19-46 is in substantial agreement with the tradition represented in Numbers 13-14, but differs from it in detail: verse 21 gives the impression of an invitation immediately to occupy the land from the south, which is put on one side on account of the people's request for a preliminary reconnaissance; the spies' report is wholly positive, and the refusal to take possession of the land is therefore correspondingly more reprehensible.⁸⁵ The Israelites' unbelief is preceded by the recollection that Yahweh 'carried' them through the desert, and followed by the account of Yahweh's providential guidance.⁸⁶ Joshua is saved from the condemned generation as Moses' successor, not as a faithful spy alongside Caleb.⁸⁷ In this tradition the people are held responsible for Moses' failure to enter the land.⁸⁸ The effect is to heighten the impressions both of the divine grace and of the Israelites' rebellious unbelief.

Deuteronomy 9:7-10:11 is a narrative section within an extended passage of exhortation.⁸⁹ It recapitulates various episodes in the murmuring tradition, beginning with the golden calf incident.⁹⁰ Houtman points out differences between the accounts in Exodus and Deuteronomy: according to Deuteronomy, but not Exodus, Moses fasts on the first occasion when he receives the stone tablets;⁹¹ in Deuteronomy Moses' intercession follows his return from the mountain, rather than preceding it as in Exodus;⁹² Moses' action in making the Israelites drink water containing the burnt remains of the calf is recounted in

⁸⁵ Dt 1:25-26.

⁸⁶ Verses 31-33.

⁸⁷ Coats 1968, 195; see Dt 1:36-38; cf. Num 14:30 - but Caleb alone is mentioned in Num 14:24.

⁸⁸ Dt 1:37.

⁸⁹ Coats 1968, 196.

⁹⁰ Coats 1968, 198.

⁹¹ Dt 9:9; Ex 24:12,18.

⁹² Dt 9:18ff, 25ff; cf. Ex 32:11ff.

Exodus but not in Deuteronomy;⁹³ and Moses' intercession for Aaron is not included in Exodus.⁹⁴ Some of these differences are insubstantial; for example in Exodus 24:18 Moses' fasting is almost certainly implied in the statement that he remained on the mountain forty days and nights! Coats draws attention to the fact that, in Moses' intercession, the place where Israel is likely to die is the wilderness according to Deuteronomy, but the mountains in Exodus.⁹⁵ The overall effect of the version in Deuteronomy is to accent the fearsome aspects of the wilderness.

5.1.9. Murmuring, Providence and Judgement in the Psalms and Nehemiah

5.1.9.1. Psalm 78.

This psalm sees God's choice of David as the fitting conclusion of God's dealings with the Israelites up to that point.⁹⁶ Verses 12-16 concern the Exodus, the guiding pillar and the provision of water from the rock. The theme of rebellion is a prominent thread from verse 17 onwards. The wilderness period is in view until verse 41, and reappears in verse 52. Houtman points out that in the psalm the order of the provision of water and quails is reversed; the judgement at Taberah is connected with the murmuring before the provision of manna and quails;⁹⁷ and the miraculous, divine aspect of the provision of manna is heightened: whereas in Exodus the manna seems to be 'a form of precipitation from heaven that came with the dew', in Psalm 78 it rains down as 'grain of heaven' through the 'doors of heaven' and is 'the food of the strong'⁹⁸

⁹³ Ex 32:20; Dt 9:21.

⁹⁴ Dt 9:20; Houtman 1993, 210.

⁹⁵ Dt 9:28; Ex 32:12. Coats 1968, 197f.

⁹⁶ Ps 78: 70-72.

⁹⁷ Cf. Num 11:1-3.

⁹⁸ Houtman 1993, 202.

(*REB* 'the bread of angels' - verse 25). The miraculous element in the provision of water is also emphasised by the reference to Yahweh's 'splitting' the rock, and the comparison of the waters to 'the deep', 'streams' and 'torrents';⁹⁹ the omission of the part played by Moses and Aaron may also be seen as accentuating the element of divine miracle.¹⁰⁰

5.1.9.2. Psalm 105.

Psalm 105:39-41 describe Yahweh's gracious provision for the Israelites without any mention of murmuring or judgement.

5.1.9.3. Psalm 106.

Psalm 106:7 appears to extend the murmuring tradition as far back as Egypt.¹⁰¹ As in Psalm 78 the murmuring theme is introduced in association with food - quails but not manna.¹⁰² Verses 16-18 refer to the rebellion of Dathan and Abiram, and 19-23, unusually in a recitation of Israel's history,¹⁰³ to the incident of the golden calf. 24-27 allude to the judgement following the rebellion over the report of the spies, and evidently extend its consequences to the Exile.¹⁰⁴ The story of Baal Peor (28-31) seems to belong to the conquest rather than the wilderness tradition,¹⁰⁵ but it takes its place here as part of a series of murmuring narratives. The Meribah events are mentioned in verses 32-33: Moses' not being allowed to enter the Promised Land is attributed both to his rash words, and to the people's rebellion.

⁹⁹ Ps 78:15-16.

¹⁰⁰ Houtman 1993, 204.

¹⁰¹ Cf. Josh 24:14; Ezk 20:7-8.

¹⁰² Ps 106: 13-15; cf. Ps 78:18. Coats 1968, 227.

¹⁰³ Coats 1968, 228.

¹⁰⁴ Coats 1968, 229.

¹⁰⁵ Coats 1968, *ibid.*

5.1.9.4. Nehemiah 9.

The bulk of this chapter consists of a prayer of confession and supplication, based on a rehearsal of Israel's history, which leads to a binding declaration of loyalty to the law of Yahweh (chapter 10). The wilderness narrative occupies verses 12-21: 12-15 describe God's providential guidance, the giving of the Law and the Sabbath, and the provision of food and water; the theme of rebellion comes afterwards in 16-18, while 19-21 returns to the contemplation of God's compassion and mercy. The sending of the quails is not mentioned. According to verse 17 the wilderness generation went so far as to appoint a leader to return to Egypt.

5.1.10. Murmuring, Providence and Judgement in the Prophets

5.1.10.1. Ezekiel 20.

This chapter contains a long recital of the rebellions of the people. Because of this sinful history, the elders of the people have no right to consult the prophet.¹⁰⁶ Idolatry (even in Egypt) and Sabbath-breaking are emphasised, and the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai is foremost among the gracious gifts of Yahweh to the people in the wilderness.¹⁰⁷ The exile is viewed as an outcome of the rebellion in the wilderness.¹⁰⁸

5.1.10.2. The Judgement of the Wilderness in the Prophets.

Not judgement *in* the wilderness so much as the judgement *of* the wilderness is in view in the Prophets. The effect of Yahweh's judgement is to reduce the people to a desert condition of destitution and desolation. In Hosea's sustained metaphor of the Israelites as children of an unfaithful wife, the judgement takes

¹⁰⁶ Ezk 20:1-3, 31.

¹⁰⁷ Ezk 20:8, 10-13, 16, 21.

¹⁰⁸ Ezk 20:23; cf Ps 106:27.

the form of stripping naked like the wilderness, being reduced to a condition similar to a parched land.¹⁰⁹ In Ezekiel the mother of Israel's ruler is a vine 'transplanted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land'.¹¹⁰ (The reference is probably to Hamutal, the mother of Jehoahaz and Zedekiah;¹¹¹ a figurative reference to the state of Judah or the Davidic dynasty is less likely.)¹¹²

Elsewhere in the prophets, Yahweh's judgement will reduce a fortified city to 'a homestead stripped bare, forsaken like a wilderness'.¹¹³ Locusts, viewed as agents of judgement, change 'a garden of Eden' into a 'desolate waste'.¹¹⁴ Similar effects can also be produced by a human destroyer.¹¹⁵ The land is frequently involved in God's judgement on human sin:¹¹⁶ the desertification of the land as a consequence of human wrongdoing has a particular resonance in an age of ecological degradation.

In a plea for mercy in the third part of the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66) the desert state of the holy city is a sign of past judgement.¹¹⁷ In Jeremiah the reduction of the fertile land to wilderness is part of a terrifying cosmic scenario in which the creation of Genesis 1 is reversed.¹¹⁸ Elsewhere Jeremiah sees Jerusalem reduced to 'a heap of ruins', inhabited only by wild animals, while the land becomes a desert because of the apostasy of the people.¹¹⁹ Marauders

¹⁰⁹ Hos 2:3; the thought is similar in Jer 50:12.

¹¹⁰ Ezk 19:10,13.

¹¹¹ Cf. Jer 13:18; 29:2; 2 Kgs 23:31; 24:15,18.

¹¹² Eichrodt 1970, 254-257; Clements 1996, 83-85.

¹¹³ Isa 27:10.

¹¹⁴ Joel 2:3.

¹¹⁵ E.g. Isa 33:9.

¹¹⁶ E.g. Isa 24:4-6; Jer 7:20; Hos 4:2-3.

¹¹⁷ Isa 64:10-11; cf. Ps 107:33f.

¹¹⁸ Jer 4:23-28. Bright 1965, 33.

¹¹⁹ Jer 9:10-14.

ravage the land, making Yahweh's 'pleasant portion' a desolate wilderness.¹²⁰ Joel proclaims that Egypt will become a desolation and Edom a desolate waste.¹²¹ Elsewhere in the prophets a similar fate awaits Nineveh, and also the land of Esau.¹²² These examples show that wilderness language is frequently used in oracles of judgement.

In Ezekiel 20, to which reference has already been made, Yahweh will finally, after repeated acts of mercy, bring Israel into 'the wilderness of the peoples' for judgement, just as he brought their ancestors into the 'wilderness of Egypt'.¹²³ Probably no particular wilderness is in view in the reference to the wilderness of the people, but the desert is referred to in 'typological terminology'.¹²⁴

As we have seen,¹²⁵ God's providential care for God's people in the wilderness reaches its Old Testament fulfilment in the 'Second Exodus' imagery of the promised return from exile. Water will be supplied in the desert in abundance.¹²⁶ A safe way will be provided, and all weakness will find succour.¹²⁷

5.1.11. Old Testament Summary Overview

In the Pentateuch the themes of rebellion, judgement and providence are intertwined. The elements of rebellion and judgement are heightened after the Sinai theophany and the apostasy of the golden calf. From the rebellion at

¹²⁰ Jer 12:10-12; so also 22:6; cf. Ezk 6:14.

¹²¹ Joel 3:19.

¹²² Zeph 2:13; Mal 1:3.

¹²³ Ezk 20:35-36.

¹²⁴ Eichrodt 1970, 280.

¹²⁵ See page

¹²⁶ Isa 35:6-7; 41:17-18; 43:20.

¹²⁷ Isa 35:8-10; 3-6; 40:11; Jer 31:8-9.

Kadesh Barnea and its aftermath the emphasis shifts towards the Promised Land and the establishment of the divinely-appointed leadership. The function of Moses is paramount throughout, and his intercessory role is increasingly crucial as the narrative proceeds. Several psalms recount the sacred history, including the wilderness period. In the prophetic books various aspects of the wilderness are employed as the context requires.

5.1.12. The New Testament Use of the Themes

The 'testing' theme in the wilderness narratives finds its way into the New Testament, where it is used to instruct Christians. St Paul in 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 refers to both the senses of testing which were noted earlier in the Old Testament: we are warned against putting God to the test and grumbling; we also are tested by trials, although God will see that we are not tested beyond endurance. In speaking of the food and drink supernaturally supplied in the wilderness, the rock from which water flowed in the desert is identified with Christ. Hebrews 3:7-4:11 expounds Psalm 95:7c-11 with its warning not to rebel like the people at Meribah/Massah, lest the readers incur judgement and fail to enter into God's promises. Unbelief is identified as the root of such fatal rebellion.¹²⁸

With the 'testing' of Jesus in Matthew 4:1-11 and Luke 4:1-13 the idea of testing in the wilderness develops the connotation of 'temptation'. The agent of this temptation is the devil, but overall control is in the hands of the Holy Spirit. According to Matthew, the temptation was actually the purpose of the time in the wilderness.¹²⁹ The temptations concern food, safety and power. All

¹²⁸ Heb 4:2.

¹²⁹ I owe this observation to Richard Field.

these matters were also of importance to the wilderness generation. The correspondence between the 'testing' of Jesus and the Old Testament wilderness wanderings is underlined by the fact that all of Jesus' answers to the enticements of the devil consisted of quotations from Deuteronomy. These quotations are taken from passages associated with the wilderness period. Deuteronomy 8:3, from a context concerned with the manna, is quoted against the temptation to misuse divine power to change stones into bread: God's servant is to live by faith in the day to day providence of God. Deuteronomy 6:16, from the Massah story,¹³⁰ supports Jesus' refusal to 'put God to the test' by throwing himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple and 'daring' God to save him. Deuteronomy 6:13 forbids his offering allegiance to the devil in order to gain power to fulfil his mission, for worship is to be offered to God alone. Jesus therefore succeeds where God's people of old have failed, and thereby prepares the way for his disciples to enter into God's promises.

The Fourth Gospel does not speak of the temptation of Jesus, but it does contain two other allusions to Old Testament wilderness stories. The brazen serpent of Numbers is applied typologically to Jesus and the crucifixion;¹³¹ and the story of the manna is employed as a type of the life-giving work of Jesus.¹³²

5.2. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

The Church has been well aware that the wilderness, in both its literal and its metaphorical forms, is a place where temptation is experienced, where God's provision is received, and where sin is judged. The Desert Fathers and Mothers

¹³⁰ Cf. Ex 17:1-7.

¹³¹ Num 21:4-9; Jn 3:14; cf 12:32-33.

¹³² Jn 6:32; cf. Rev 2:7; 1 Cor 10:3. Mauser 1963, 75f.

recognised that conformity to the outward forms of desert spirituality could mask inner apostasy. The wilderness is a place where masks are difficult to sustain, and where role-playing has to cease. We are stripped naked, as it were, and exposed to the searching challenges of God's word and the demands of God's love.

Rowan Williams shows that in the spirituality of the desert fathers and mothers, relationships with other ascetics were crucial. Honesty about one's own struggles and temptations was essential to helping others.¹³³ 'Habits of self-awareness and attention to each other' were both vital aspects of living in God's presence as a fearless community.¹³⁴ The importance of silence in the desert fathers is connected with avoiding the temptation to manipulate and manage others.¹³⁵ Judgement was also to be shunned: Moses the Black is quoted as saying, 'The monk must die to his neighbour and never judge him at all in any way whatever.'¹³⁶

The desert monks and nuns were urged to 'flee' from whatever might lead them away from the truth of themselves and of God. In particular they must avoid 'thoughts' (*logismoi*). Williams describes these as 'the chains of obsessional fantasy' that can take over our inner life, and suggests that they are one form of what we might call 'projection'.¹³⁷

¹³³ R. Williams 2003, 27.

¹³⁴ R. Williams 2003, 35.

¹³⁵ R. Williams 2003, 46, 45.

¹³⁶ R. Williams 2003, 24.

¹³⁷ R. Williams 2003, 63.

