

6. THE WILDERNESS JOURNEY: CONFLICT AND VICTORY

6.1. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

In the wilderness narratives Yahweh was present in the midst of the Israelites to deliver them, as well as to guide and provide for them in spite of their frequent rebellions. We have seen that the two themes of guidance and warfare are both associated with the ark. Ancient liturgical war cries are attached to the ark even though the context is about guidance in the wilderness.¹ The concept of the holy war is especially at home in the narratives of the conquest of the land, but it is present also in the wilderness narratives. Coats observes that, in certain passages, ideas normally connected with the conquest tradition are set firmly within the wilderness journey, e.g. by the itinerary notes;² they have undergone changes to suit their ultimate setting³ - although the boundary between the wandering and the conquest is itself somewhat blurred: in Deuteronomy the dividing point appears to be the Zared or perhaps the Arnon;⁴ in Numbers the Jordan marks the beginning of the Promised Land and Transjordan appears to be less highly regarded than the Promised Land itself.⁵ We shall now consider four passages which fall within the wilderness narratives but which deal with warfare and conquest.

6.1.1. Rephidim

Exodus 17:8-16 recounts the defeat of the hostile Amalekites. According to a genealogy in Genesis 36 Amalek was descended from Esau;⁶ Genesis 14 states

¹ Num 20:14-21; 21:1-3, 21-35; Cross 1966, 24-25.

² Num 20:1,22; 21:4; 22:1.

³ Coats 1976, 185.

⁴ Dt 2:13-15,24.

⁵ Coats 1976, 186.

⁶ Gen 36:12.

that Amalekite territory existed in the region of Kadesh;⁷ elsewhere we find that the Amalekites lived as far south as Shur;⁸ according to the report of the spies sent out from the Wilderness of Paran the Amalekites inhabited the Negeb.⁹ They were therefore centred to the south and south west of Canaan.

The Old Testament expresses Yahweh's implacable enmity against these people.¹⁰ Sometimes the enmity is connected with their opposition to Israel after the Exodus, and their failure both in compassion for the weak and defenceless, and also in reverence for God.¹¹ Houtman comments that Amalek is 'Pharaoh redivivus.'¹² The uplifted hands of Moses, holding the staff of God, were critical in achieving the victory at Rephidim. Childs understands this symbolic action as magical in origin, but transformed in the final text into a sign of God's personal intervention.¹³ Durham interprets the uplifting of hands as a 'symbolic cultic blessing.'¹⁴ At all events the action emphasises the fact that victory is given by God and is not the result of independent human effort.

6.1.2. Hormah

The incident narrated in Numbers 14:39-45 likewise emphasises the fact that victory is only given by the presence of Yahweh among the people. After the sentence of judgement against the wilderness generation following the return of the spies, the people attempt to conquer the land from the south.¹⁵ This venture, driven by remorse, leads only to defeat at the hands of the Amalekites and

⁷ Gen 14:7.

⁸ 1 Sam 15:7; 27:8.

⁹ Num 13:29.

¹⁰ E.g. Ex 17:14.

¹¹ 1 Sam 15:2; Dt 25:17-19.

¹² Houtman 1996, 377.

¹³ Childs 1974, 315.

¹⁴ Durham 1987, 234.

¹⁵ Num 14:26-35, 40.

Canaanites. The theological lesson of the incident is completed by the second, successful battle of Hormah, which belongs to the next section: thenceforth battle was only joined at the divine command.

6.1.3. Victories after the Departure from Kadesh

Following the refusal of the king of Edom to allow the Israelites safe passage through his territory, they change direction and avoid a conflict.¹⁶ A second battle at Hormah, following aggressive action by the king of Arad, is victorious because sanctioned by Yahweh.¹⁷ Overtures to Sihon the Amorite king were also met with hostility and his defeat by the Israelite armies.¹⁸ The Israelites then captured Jazer, and overcame Og to take possession of Bashan.¹⁹ A direct command of Yahweh is mentioned only in the case of Bashan; Yahweh's consent is recorded in that of Arad; we may assume that Yahweh's commission or consent is implied in connection with the intermediate encounters also.

Deuteronomy 2-3 give a variant account of the events described in Numbers 21. Sakenfeld remarks on both the general agreement and the sharp difference between the two narratives.²⁰ Additional material has been included in Deuteronomy which is not present in Numbers. For example, according to Deuteronomy Yahweh himself forbade the Israelites to engage the descendants of Esau in battle, on the grounds that Yahweh had given Esau the hill-country of Seir; moreover they do not need to obtain anything from the descendants of Esau except by purchase, since Yahweh personally provides for their needs.²¹

¹⁶ Num 20:14-21.

¹⁷ Num 21:1-3.

¹⁸ Num 21:21-31.

¹⁹ Num 21:32-35.

²⁰ Sakenfeld 1995, 119.

²¹ Dt 2:1-7.

The account of these events in Numbers is quite different: the divine instruction is not mentioned; the Edomites refuse to accede to the apparently innocuous request of Moses and send a large army against the Israelites who then change course and avoid a conflict.²² Throughout the two narratives, we find agreement in substance together with marked differences in detail. Numbers includes more itinerary material; Deuteronomy contains more information about the previous history of the territories mentioned. In Deuteronomy the conquest of Sihon and Og in Transjordan is immediately followed by the assigning of their land to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and the half-tribe of Manasseh;²³ in Numbers the conquest occurs in chapter 21 and the allocation of the land not until chapter 32. The narrative in Numbers is more circumstantial.²⁴ In both accounts, however, victory is given only when Yahweh has sanctioned the conflict.

6.1.4. Midian

In Numbers 31 the execution of the ban on Midian takes place. The sacred character of the attack is shown by the mention of Yahweh's vengeance, and the presence of the priest with the sacred equipment and the trumpets. All males were killed, together with all except virgin women. The army, and all the spoil and captives, must be purified prior to the distribution of these gains. This seemingly harsh sentence on Midian is connected in verse 16 with the apostasy at Baal Peor recorded in Numbers 25. The two narratives are also linked by the involvement of Phinehas.²⁵ The impression of the Midianites given by this chapter seems startlingly at variance with the picture of Moses' relations with his wife's Midianite family. However, recent studies have suggested that the

²² Num 20:14-21.

²³ Dt 2:26-3:1; 3:12-20.

²⁴ C.J.H. Wright 1996, 39-40.

²⁵ Num 31:6; 25:7.

Midianites were a loose-knit federation of tribes rather than a single people;²⁶ therefore different groups might be involved.

Conflict and victory in the wilderness are not confined to the stories of Moses and the Israelites in the Pentateuch. We should also remember David's wilderness campaigns when he was threatened by Saul and later by Absalom. Bratton comments that in these narratives the wilderness appears always to be on David's side, offering protection and a way of escape.²⁷

However we account for the 'bloodthirsty' parts of the Old Testament within a theory of revelation, they do not form a model for Christian conflict today; the conflict for us is spiritual, not military. Whether Christians should ever regard war as an acceptable method of solving international issues in a world that has wandered in many ways from God's will, is in itself an important theological question. However the Old Testament conflicts are different from modern warfare theologically, technologically and in scale. As Philip Jensen points out, they are regarded in Christian theology as models for spiritual, not physical warfare – although the details of the physical battles determine the spiritual shape of their Christian counterparts.²⁸

6.1.5. The New Testament

The wilderness forms the setting for Jesus' conflict with the devil at the inauguration of his ministry. This conflict continues in the exorcisms,²⁹ and reaches its climax in the Garden of Gethsemane.³⁰ The battle was finally and

²⁶ Wenham 1981, 209; Ashley 1993, 589.

²⁷ Bratton 1993, 66, 70-71.

²⁸ Jensen 2002, 26.

²⁹ E.g. Mk 5:1ff.

³⁰ Mk 14:32-42.

decisively won through the Cross and the Resurrection.³¹ In one parable the desert (literally 'waterless places') is the haunt of restless, unclean spirits; but the fact that the unclean spirit finds no resting place there is significant; its desired residence is in a human being.³² The conflict with evil is thus one theme associated with the wilderness, although Bratton is correct in her assessment that it is not the only or even the predominant one in the Gospels.³³ This conflict is of course seen as spiritual and not military.³⁴

6.2. LATER DEVELOPMENTS

Spiritual conflict with evil was a prominent theme in early desert spirituality. John Cassian wrote concerning the hermits in the wilderness:

By no means satisfied with that victory whereby they had trodden under foot the hidden snares of the devil (while still living among men), they were eager to fight with the devils in open conflict, and a straightforward battle, and so feared not to penetrate the vast recesses of the desert.³⁵

Bratton remarks that evil spirits were believed to have been driven by the prayers of the faithful out of the cities to live in the desert.³⁶ There they attacked the monks both from the outside, and also by stirring up evil from within.³⁷ The monks did battle against the demons by prayer and self-denial.³⁸ They sought to model themselves on Jesus, who fasted and was tempted in the

³¹ Col 2:15.

³² Mt 12:43-45//Lk 11:24-26.

³³ Cf. Bratton 1993, 137.

³⁴ See Jn 18:36; Eph 6:12.

³⁵ *Colloquia* (III), xviii:6; xix:5, quoted in Passmore 1980, 108.

³⁶ Bratton 1993, 171.

³⁷ Burton-Christie 1993, 193.

³⁸ Bratton 1993, 179; Chitty 1977, 10.

wilderness.³⁹ Meditation on biblical texts was of primary importance in this spiritual contest.⁴⁰

A matter of concern for us is the extreme asceticism, verging on hatred of the body, practised by some of the Desert Fathers. A monk named Dorotheus is quoted as saying concerning his body, 'It kills me, so I kill it'!⁴¹ The Bible by contrast sees the human body as a valued part of God's creation, animated by God's gift of life.⁴² The New Testament goes further, seeing the body of a Christian as a temple of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit.⁴³ The negative view of the human body can be traced to certain traditions within Greek thought, but not to the Bible.

According to Burton-Christie the 'self-abnegation' seen in the desert fathers is based on self-knowledge rather than self-hatred.⁴⁴ Rowan Williams points out yet another important strand in desert spirituality: an emphasis on mercy to penitents, and gentleness towards the human frailty of others.⁴⁵ Clearly, extreme self-negation is not the whole story. Nevertheless it seems clearly to be present. An apparently negative attitude to sexuality is especially noticeable: at least one monk was married but never consummated the marriage.⁴⁶ Perhaps attitudes to the body, like so much in the wilderness, were ambivalent. Despite such modern misgivings the Sayings of the Fathers show that basically the desert was seen as a place for seeking God through prayer and austerity, and for

³⁹ Burton-Christie 1993, 198.

⁴⁰ Burton-Christie 1993, 122.

⁴¹ Chitty 1977, 50.

⁴² Gen 2:7.

⁴³ 1 Cor 6:19-20.

⁴⁴ Burton-Christie 1993, 238; cf *ibid.*194.

⁴⁵ R. Williams 2003, 28-31.

⁴⁶ Chitty 1977, 11.

encountering and defeating evil by the power of God's name and a life of holiness. Their ultimate aim is shown by the example of Saint Antony, who eventually emerged from his wilderness home in a state of wholeness and peace.

The Celtic monastic communities, like the Desert Fathers and Mothers, contended by their prayers and holiness against the forces of paganism.⁴⁷ The monastic land was seen as a place of holiness, protected from the demon-infested 'wilderness' outside.⁴⁸ However the ambivalent character of wilderness is shown by the fact that the monastic space at Kells included a 'desert' area where ascetics might take up residence.⁴⁹ Sheldrake suggests that the ambiguity of the wilderness was a general feature of early Christianity. On the one hand evil dwelt there, but on the other it was the place where holiness could be sought and found. 'It is both a paradise, where people may live in harmony with wild animals, and at the same time a place of trial where ascetics encounter the inner and outer demons.'⁵⁰

The wilderness, both place and state, uncovers the basic spiritual conflict between God and the devil. The ultimate spiritual issues can be masked by involvement in society and the demands of social roles. In solitude, without human props and interactions, temptation can be intensified, though in a different form from those encountered in the midst of society: perhaps temptation may be said to come from the devil and the flesh, rather than the 'world' – although we should note that the demons also worked against the

⁴⁷ Bratton 1993, 183.

⁴⁸ Sheldrake 1995, 35.

⁴⁹ Sheldrake 1995, 40.

⁵⁰ Sheldrake 1995, 40.

Desert Fathers partly by stirring up memories from their earlier life in the world.⁵¹

⁵¹ Burton-Christie 1993, 125.