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Borderless Boundaries – as Means of Death and Life: Wilderness Portraits in Patristic and Rabbinic Literature¹

Daniel Maoz*

The Negev – so powerful a geographical reality – offered deliverance for an entire people enslaved by Egyptian tyranny only to swallow up the rebellious among those who found refuge in it. The Midbar – setting for human sacrifice to kill a son of promise, ground of redemption for those who understand the message of the Akedah as unquestioning response of obedience to divine and paternal command. The Arabah – land of death and life within the context of unbounded freedom. The desert – a seemingly immeasurable boundary wherein one can either perish in futile wandering or sojourn faithfully toward fulfillment of divine promise.

The desert played a prominent role in Exodus and Annunciation, two formative narratives central to Jewish thought and Christian theology. The outstanding leadership of Moses was both tested and cemented throughout forty years of wilderness wanderings. Jesus was proclaimed to be the long awaited Coming One by “a voice crying out in the wilderness,” he overcame overwhelming temptation by the devil while fasting in the desert, and he demanded of his disciples a solitary thought-life and faith-commitment to the Gospel that inspired future generations of his followers to remove themselves to desert places in order to experience intense spirituality.

But beyond Scripture, in the context of the many and variegated expressions of Jewish and Christian traditions, both Rabbinic and Patristic imagination developed a frame of mind wherein the desert served metaphorically as a contextual stimulus for sanctification for the one and for virtue for the other.

Language and Terminology

In the Hebrew Bible, the term מִדְבָּר (*midbar*) represents uninhabited land wherein humans eke out a nomadic existence. This is, among desert vocabulary, a most common Hebrew word. מִדְבָּר can refer to fields where domestic animals graze and also where wild animals dwell, in contrast to cultivated land; as the prophet Joel refers to “the pastures of the wilderness.” (Joel 1:19–20) Another commonly employed word, עֲרָבָה (*arabah*), differentiates from מִדְבָּר as steppe land, although in poetic synonymous parallelism the two terms are used interchangeably, and so the prophet Isaiah: “The מִדְבָּר (wilderness) and the

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* Daniel Maoz (PhD Strasbourg 1986) is Jewish Scholar in Residence at Waterloo Lutheran Seminary, WLU. He is also Vice President of the Canadian Society for Jewish Studies and a Research Associate with Concordia University, Montreal, QC. Daniel plays with ancient Aramaic aggadic midrash texts as well as with the Jewish foreground of the New Testament.

parched land shall be glad; and the עֲרֵבָה (desert) shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.” (Isa 35.1) Other less familiar Hebrew terms for desert include חֲרֵבָה (*chorbah*): land that lies fallow (Lev 26.33: “Your cities will become desolate) and יִשְׁמֵן (*yeshimon*): land without water (Deut 32.10: He found him בְּאֶרֶץ מִדְבָּר (in a desert land), and in the void (*u-ve-tohu*; וּבְתֵהוּ), יִשְׁמֵן (a parched wilderness). He encircled him, cared for him, kept him as the apple of His eye.). None of these terms, however, completely captures in equivalence the comprehensive nature of the English word wilderness.

In the Septuagint and New Testament, ἔρημος is the preferred Greek term for all of the above Hebrew words, with the exception of the synonymous use of מִדְבָּר and יִשְׁמֵן in Deut 32.10 where the Greek term [έν] ἀνύδρω (waterless) is brought into play for יִשְׁמֵן. Two other NT occurrences of ἀνύδρος, each in parallel reference, appear at Matt 12.43//Lk 11.24 (δι' ἀνύδρων, where exorcised unclean spirits go through dry places, in futility seeking rest) and at 2 Pet 2.17//Jude 12 (ἀνυδροί, where waterless fountains and clouds become a metaphor describing the ungodly for whom the gloom of darkness has been reserved)]. Otherwise, two cognates derive from ἔρημος, one with positive application and a second more neutrally descriptive. The Apostle Paul notes that many more are the children of τῆς ἐρήμου (*the single mother*; or possibly *the desolate mother*) than the children of women with a husband (Gal 4.27). Later, the Pastoral author urges Timothy to offer up entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings for all people, including kings and others in authority, so that all may lead an ἡρεμον (*secluded; solitary*) and quiet life in all godliness and dignity (1 Tim 1.2).

Desert as Metaphor

For some Rabbis and Church Fathers, the desert became a metaphor for long and wasted years. For others, it was viewed as a setting for purification and correction. For still others, it prefigured promise of deliverance by establishing moral and ethical boundaries, first engraved on stone tablets but thereafter inscribed on human hearts. In the following presentation, I will discuss the life of Antony, a τύπος (*tupos*; figure, model, type) for Christian mystical spirituality, especially as interpreted in Eastern Orthodox tradition. For Patristic sources I will look at the *Vita Antonii* of Athanasius and the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, as well as a few texts accessed by traditions within Christianity that centrally value spiritual lessons of the desert and wisdom of the Desert Fathers. Included in this short list are the *Apophthegmata* (a-po-theg-mata) of the Orthodox Church, the *Philokalia* [an eighteenth century translation by Macarius of Corinth (1731-1805), and Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain (Mt. Athos, 1748-1809); first published in Venice in 1882]. I also include one quote from *The Wisdom of the Desert* by Thomas Merton.

Rabbinic sources are less unified, in part due to the nature of the corpus and in part due to the lack of any monastic tradition or practice within Judaism. Desert concepts and language, however, are very evident in Rabbinic Literature as we will see below.

Patristic Sources

Athanasius (*Vita Antonii*)

Athanasius (*Vita Antonii*) was overwhelmingly impressed by the results of extreme solitude practiced by Antony of Egypt.²

I have seen him often – and whatever I was able to learn from him who was his companion over a long period and poured water on his hands. (7)

In detailing ascetic aspects of Antony of Egypt's life, Athanasius concluded that the manner of self-denial practiced by Antony acted to empower a person in gaining control over one's own destiny.

(Antony) devoted all his time to ascetic living, intent on himself and living a life of self-denial ... Whoever wished to concern himself with his own destiny practiced asceticism by himself ... (3)

Athanasius further noted the austerity of Antony's ascetic desert life as follows, reporting alongside his own amazement the testimony of his contemporaries how such solitary devotion made Antony physically healthier and spiritually stronger through fasting, in effect a prescription for societal ailments of grief, exhaustion, and melancholy.

His food was bread and salt, his drink, water only. Of flesh and wine, it is superfluous even to speak. (7)

Those who saw him wondered at the sight, for he had the same habit of body as before, and was neither fat like a man without exercise, nor lean from fasting and striving with the demons, but was just the same as they had known him before his desert retreat. And again his soul was free from blemish, for it was neither contracted as if by grief, nor relaxed by pleasure, nor possessed by laughter or dejection. (14)

Athanasius cautioned that such an isolated life, with its powerful positive affect on one's spirituality and self-control, would elicit the attention of the devil, who would attempt to first distract and then dissuade the practice of such effective spiritual discipline – all to no avail.

But the devil who hates and envies what is good, could not endure to see such a resolution in a youth, but endeavored to carry out against what he had desired to carry out against others. First of all he tried to lead him away from the discipline (5)

Greek philosophy was linked to demonic activity, traceable back to the ancient Greek oracles, due at least in part to the challenge that Greek philosophers presented to Antony.

² All citations from Athanasius were taken from r. T. Meyer, *The Life of Saint Antony (Vita Antonii)*. Westminster, Maryland: Newman Press, 1950.

Antony strongly challenged the Greek philosophers of his day. (72)
Thus it was that the Greek oracles arose and thus the people of old were led astray by demons. (33)

Athanasius was persuaded by Antony's conviction that the Kingdom of Heaven was not afar off, requiring academic travel or opulent accommodation such as the Greeks allegedly claimed, but God-pleasing virtue could be fostered by means of self-discipline in lowly desert places.

Greeks go abroad and cross the sea to study letters; but we have no need to go abroad for the Kingdom of Heaven nor cross the sea to obtain virtue. (20).

Augustine

In his *Confessions* Augustine recounts how one "Ponticianus, a fellow countryman of ours from Africa ... spoke of Anthony, the Egyptian monk, whose name was in high repute among *God's* (your) servants," a name as yet familiar to Augustine. Such was the glowing report that he exclaimed, "We all wondered--we, that these things were so great, and he, that we had never heard of them." Augustine admitted further ignorance to "the multitudes in the monasteries and their manners so fragrant to *God* (you), and to the teeming solitudes of the wilderness," including a monastery at Milan ... under the fostering care of Ambrose." Ponticianus continued to relate how "some of the 'poor in spirit' ('of such is the Kingdom of Heaven'), notably two "secret service agents" ... "found the book in which was written the life of Anthony," - ... "began to read it, to marvel and to be inflamed by it" and became suddenly overwhelmed "with a holy love and a sober shame and as if in anger with self." The book, affecting these agents as a kind of powerful relic, left them "inwardly changed, counting the cost--namely, of forsaking all that they had" and turning to wholeheartedly dedicate themselves to follow God. (*Confessions* 8.6.15)³

The Apophthegmata – Orthodox Mysticism: Practical Outworking / Personalizing the Desert Metaphor

While from the perspective of the Eastern Church, Western Catholicism emphasized negation and renunciation as primary components of contemplation, Orthodoxy wished to add what it terms a deifying union with God's Spirit. Only upon cessation of intellectual activity can spiritual illumination begin. The French expression, *Démontrer, c'est montrer*, is apt here: "If it were possible for me to find a leper,' said one of the Desert Fathers, 'and to give him my body and to take his, I would gladly do it. For this is perfect love.' Such was the true nature of *theosis*, or deification." (*Apophthegmata*)⁴

The Philokalia

Just as the desert protected one from the ravages of city life with all its distractions, diversions, and demands, the Philokalia teaches its devotees that a community can be separated from these deterrents to godliness by the exercise of spiritual desert-like isolation, a kind of mystical inner solitude.

³ Augustine, *Confessions: or Praises of God*. Dublin: James Duffy Publisher, 1840, *in loc.*

⁴ *Apophthegmata*, P.G. lxxv, Agatho 26

Basil of Caesarea defended mystical desert spirituality against many charges including the claim that the Desert Fathers were anti-intellectual, inferred from teachings that the mystical experience was primarily beyond the grasp of reason. According to St. Macarius, spiritual subjects can only be grasped through meditation and self-denial, not by means of human reason. Only then is

a saintly and faithful soul (is) helped in its understanding by the participation of the Holy Spirit. ... Then you will know, from the experience of the eyes of the soul, in what blessings and mysteries the souls of Christians can participate even in this life.

Signs of Religious Ecstasy

St. Isaac claimed that the solitude of the inner desert life would lead to a naturally ardent love for God, leading the soul to a state of ecstasy.

This spiritual intoxication was experienced of old by Apostles and martyrs. The first traveled far and wide over the whole world, working and suffering persecutions; but the latter had their limbs cut off, shed blood like water, but, suffering the most terrible tortures, never lost courage and valiantly bore everything; being wise they were considered foolish. Yet others wandered among deserts, mountains, caves and precipices of the earth, remaining well-ordered amongst all disorder. May God grant us such disorder!

Finally, Thomas Merton addressed the powerful impact of the desert upon those who wanted a kind of spirituality that sought a God-out-of-the-box experience.

In the fourth century A.D. the deserts of Egypt, Palestine, Arabia and Persia were peopled by a race of men (who) sought a way to God that was uncharted and freely chosen, not inherited from others who had mapped it out beforehand. They sought a God whom they alone could find, not one who was 'given' in a set stereotyped form by somebody else.⁵

Rabbinic Sources

A powerful intimate connection exists between the wilderness and Judaism. The complexity of the wilderness for the Israelites cannot easily be overstated. It was in the desert where they united into a people, metamorphosed from slaves into free people, rebelled against and submitted to God, were punished severely, and were given the Torah. Israel's self-consciousness as a covenant people congealed during the wilderness experience.

Philo

Reflecting on those who choose a contemplative life, Philo employs language more prevalent of the Church Fathers than of the Rabbis, although he believes these people would judge their meditative activities as "the work of philosophizing." For Philo, this type

⁵ *The Wisdom of the Desert.*

take up their abode outside of walls, or gardens, or solitary lands, seeking for a desert place (as) expounders of the law, having first of all laid down temperance as a sort of foundation for the soul to rest upon, (all the while) proceed(ing) to build up other virtues on this foundation.⁶

But Philo represents a form of Judaism that lies outside the margins of Rabbinic tradition. Consideration of desert perspectives in the Babylonian Talmud, Halakhic Midrash, and Aggadic Midrash permit us to trace voices of authority that move from the centre of Jewish tradition on through to its acceptable margins, respectively. Hermeneutically, this categorization of text generally progresses from Peshat to Derash, from the literal interpretations of text to metaphorical ones, although aggadic material in the Talmud is substantial.

The Babylonian Talmud

Perhaps the greatest metaphor employing desert language is not *in* the Talmud but rather *about* the Talmud: One editor, undoubtedly overcome by the immense nature of the 2.5 million word compendium, introduced his florilegium of talmudic quotations with the following words:

[The Talmud] is a literary wilderness. At the first view, everything – style, method, and language – seems tangled and confused. The student, however, will soon observe two motives or currents in the work; at times harmonious, at times diverse. One displaying the logical mind, which compares, investigates, develops, and instructs; the other, imaginative and poetical. The first is called “Halakhah” (Rule), and finds a vast field in the Levitical and ceremonial laws; the other takes possession of the ethical and historical portions of Holy Writ. It is called “*Aggadah*,” (“Hagadah”) or Legend, not so much in our present acceptance of the term, as in the wider sense of a saying without positive authority, an allegory, a parable, a tale.

We are not surprised at the literalness of desert language in so much of the *Bavli* as it halakhically provides a *crux interpretum* for covenant life and thought in its desert sections that, for the most part, echo and embellish the fourth book of the Torah, Bamidbar (*in the desert*). Talmudic questions relating to Torah content presume a simple and unquestioning reception of Torah narrative. Instruction, for example, on sending the scapegoat, Azazel, into the wilderness on Yom Kippur [Lev 16.10; *b.*, Yoma 66b] is in no way understood to represent an extension of Babylonian, Akkadian, Hittite, or even Hellenistic portrayal of a mythical creature framed in metaphorical legend, despite the known fact that the ritual custom of sending a goat out of a city into the desert to transfer and rid a community of infirmity or transgression appears in this earlier ancient world literature. In the Talmud, according to Rabbi Yishmael, it was fact, not fiction that a crimson wool thread tied to a door of the Temple would turn white when Azazel reached the wilderness, bringing to fulfillment the prophetic promise, “Though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow.” (*b.* Yoma 68b)

⁶ Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*, 4.33, 34.

Endless are the examples of Talmudic literalness when employing desert language. A compelling metaphorical application of desert talk, however, raises questions as to the nature of interaction between Christian theology and Jewish thought as relates to Moses' dashed hopes of entering the promised land toward which he spent a third of his life leading his people.

Rabbi Samlai expounded, Why was Moses so solicitous to enter the Land of Israel? Was he anxious to eat the fruit or to enjoy the other good things of the land? The reason was this: Moses knew that Israel was commanded to observe many precepts, and as some of these could not be observed anywhere else but within the Land of Israel, therefore he wished to enter it, in order to be able to observe all. But the Blessed and Holy One said to Moses, 'As you desire to do this for no other reason than to receive a reward for observing the precepts, I will therefore count it to you as if you had actually observed them, and will reward you accordingly, as it is said, (Isa 53.12), "Therefore, I will Divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he has poured out his soul unto death, and he was numbered with the transgressors; he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors, therefore I will divide him a portion with the great.'" Perhaps you will say, "'With the great' of the latter generation which entered the land of Israel," and not "'With the great' of the former generations;" therefore the text says, "He shall divide the spoil with the strong" – that is, he shall have a reward as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were strong in the Torah and in the mitzvot. "Because he has poured out his soul unto death," for he gave himself up unto death on behalf of Israel, as it is said (Exod 32.32), "If not, I pray, blot me out of your book." "And he was numbered with the transgressors," for he was numbered with those that died in the wilderness for their transgressions. "And he bore the sin of many," for he made atonement for the sin of the golden calf. "And made intercession for the transgressors," because he prayed for mercy on behalf of the transgressors of Israel, that they might be led to repentance." (*b. Sotah 14a*)

To what degree, if any, did Moses play an apologetic or even polemic role against the Christian theological adaptation of this Isaiah passage for Talmudic Rabbis who created this text?

Finally, several famous passages in the Talmud speak in metaphorical desert terms with reference to the commitment required to study Torah.

When a person makes himself [or herself] similar to the desert, Torah is given ... as a gift." (*b. Nedarim 55a*)

Anyone who does not make himself *הפקר* (*hefker, ownerless*), like a wilderness, cannot gain wisdom and Torah.

or, as is more commonly reframed positively

Whoever wants to receive Torah must become like a wilderness. (*Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7*)

In these and thematically related Talmudic passages we can hear common echoes of desert talk such as Patristic sources earlier cited regarding solitude and separateness by which the Desert Fathers practiced extreme spirituality.

Halakhic Midrash

Based on a literal understanding of the Torah, but extending the application for instruction gained in the wilderness through Torah, halakhic midrash moves away from the literalist centre largely represented in Talmudic desert talk. In response to the question, “Why was the Torah given to us in the wilderness?” *Tanchuma* responds,

Because just as the wilderness is accessible to anyone, so is the Torah accessible to anyone.
(*Tanchuma, V'yakhel, 8; Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7*)

Aggadic Midrash

Several aggadot address Torah given in the wilderness, each for a different purpose. The earliest aggadic sources raise the question in order to teach about maintaining humility and to encourage deep devotion through spiritual surrender.

In the ownerless wilderness the Torah was given to the people of Israel. For if it were given in the Land of Israel, the residents of the Land of Israel would say, "It is ours"; and if it were given in some other place, the residents of that place would say, "It is ours." Therefore it was given in the wilderness, so that anyone who wishes to acquire it may acquire it. (*Mechilta D'Rashbi; Bemidbar Rabbah 19:26*)

Why was the Torah given in the desert? To teach us that if a person does not surrender himself to it like the desert, he cannot merit the words of Torah. And to teach us that just as the desert is endless, so is the Torah without end. (*Pesikta D'Rav Kahana*)

Later, twelfth century commentators echoed *Tanchuma's* question, adding a proof text follow-up by its own counter-question, altogether implying that by belonging to no-one the desert belongs to everyone.

Why was the Torah given in the desert? Because the wilderness is open and accessible to all humankind, as it is said (Isa 55:1) *Let everyone who is thirsty come for water* (meaning, for Torah). (*Bemidbar Rabbah 1:7*)

Why was the Torah not given in the Promised Land? So that no one tribe would have a preferred claim. (*Bemidbar Rabbah 19:26*)

In *Aggadot Bereishit*, a tenth century collection of Aggadic Midrash possibly based on an early version of *Tanchuma*, the desert is a place both of death and deliverance. The rabbis would have us to consider to what degree, if any, God is the responsible initiating agent for myriads of deaths brought on as a consequence of transgression as well as the sustainer and protector of life or whether the well-being of Israel is God's sole consideration. If the latter, then death was an unwanted, though not unexpected consequence of human disobedience, a choice on Israel's part as set against a perpetual divine compassionate appeal to “Choose life,” and not death. (Deut 30.15-19) God knowing the choice Israel would make, the midrash focuses on the ongoing pledge to seek the lost and save them. Israel lost herself in the wilderness and would surely perish without divine intervention; God mercifully cried out in that same wilderness to deliver her in keeping the covenant to always watch over “the apple of God's eye.” (Zech 2:12)

A voice cries out [in the wilderness]." (Isa 40.3) Rabbi Levi said, "Why in the wilderness? Ordinarily when someone has a pearl and has lost it, where will he search for it? Will he not [search] for it in the place he has lost it? So the Holy and Blessed One lost Israel in the wilderness, as it is stated, 'In the wilderness they shall come to a full end, and there they shall die.' (Num 14.35) There he goes to search for them. A voice cries in the wilderness." (*Aggadat Bereishit* 68 [Nevi'im])

As Patristic texts highlighted virtue as a product of the desert experience, so ethical emphases in Aggadic Midrash on occasion link various aspects of virtue to desert imagery from the Tanakh.

A man that has good works and has studied much in the Torah is like a tree that stands close to the water, having few branches and many roots: even the four winds of the world may dash against it, they cannot move it from its place, as it is said (Psa 1.3): "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water." A man that has no good works and has studied the Torah is like a tree that stands in the wilderness, having many branches and few roots; a wind dashing against it uproots and overturns it, as it is said (Jer 17.6), "He shall be like a heath in the desert, and shall not see when good comes." (*Avot de Rabbi Natan*, 22)

The New Testament description of "faith working through love" (Gal 5.6) as well as the adage "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2.17) remind us that Judaism and Christianity share this ethical foundation.

The virtue of hospitality draws on biblical desert narrative to validate the imperative of its practice.

God says to us, "As I welcomed Jethro the Midianite in the wilderness of Sinai, so must you welcome anyone who comes to you to join your people." (*Yalkut Shim'oni*, Yitro, 268)

Many other texts that have not attracted much attention to date explore the aggadic portrayal of women in the wilderness where, according to the Rabbis, the women had no part in the making of the golden calf – only the men contributed their jewelry – to the end that not a single woman perished in the judgment that followed. (*Bemidbar Rabbah* 21.10) However, I must leave this topic for another study. Instead I will conclude with desert words that link people and land, covenant and spirituality, desert and oasis.

With exemplary regularity the Jew chooses to set out for the desert, to go toward a renewed word that has become his origin... A wandering word is the word of God. It has for its echo the word of wandering people. No oasis for it, no shadow, no peace. Only the immense, thirsty desert, only the book of his thirst..."⁷

⁷ Edmond Jabès, *From The Book to the Book*. Wesleyan University Press, 1991, pp. 166-67.