

# *Journal of the Orthodox Center for the Advancement of Biblical Studies*

**Vol. 11, No. 1 (2019)**

---

## **The Desert as Image of God<sup>1</sup>**

Robert D. Miller, II, OFS, PhD

From an early period, biblical authors perceived the South as God's domain. In particular, note five closely related poetic fragments in the Old Testament scholars have frequently read together (Fig. 1). The first is Deuteronomy 33, which gives five locations from which God has come: Sinai, Seir, Paran, "peak sanctuary," and the mountain slopes. This is not about the revelation of the Law. As we shall see, only this variant mentions Sinai, and the rest are clear in referring to Israel's southeast, not southwest. In any case, God does not come from Sinai in Exodus; he comes to Sinai, to deliver the Law. Then Judges 5 and Habakkuk 3 introduce a new term, Teman, which can simply mean "south,"—that is the Latin at this place—although the Septuagint interprets it here as a geographic proper name. While Ezekiel 25 uses the expression "Teman to Dedan" as a merism for the whole of Edom, which suggests southern Palestine, the mention of Midian in Habakkuk might put Teman even further south, into northwest Arabia. Psalm 68:8-9 also has no allusion to the Exodus. The people moving could easily refer to movement into battle with God at their lead. A comparable "Hadad went before me" appears in the Tel Dan Stele.

Since GOD MARCHED FROM THE SOUTH is the basic theme, we have a very early tradition that God has at one time resided in the south, in order for him to be able to come from there. This is not about Sinai. First, there is no tradition that has God dwelling on Mount Sinai. God arrives at Sinai from the heavens above: Exod 19:11 (J), "the Lord will come down upon Mount Sinai," and Exod 24:16 (P), "the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai." Second, nothing is said about the Law in these variants. This means "The Desert South" needs to be reckoned with as itself a divine abode. From the desert south, God has approached Israel. This is, therefore, a horizontal theophany. The south is not a place where one can worship God or where he can be encountered.

So important was Yahweh's connection with the South that he was venerated elsewhere as "Yahweh of Teman" or "Yahweh of the South." The title "Yahweh of Teman" is found at Kuntillet Ajrud, a small, single-period site situated between the southern Negev and the eastern Sinai Peninsula, dating to the 8th century BC. "Yahweh of Teman" is found in several inscriptions, once with the definite article, "Yahweh of the Teman," which might translate as "Yahweh of the South." "I have blessed you by Yahweh of Teman," and "May he bless you by Yahweh of Teman." It is also on a Wall Plaster: "Recount [praises] to Yahweh of Teman... Yahweh of the South did good...set the vine...Yahweh of the South (or of the Teman) has ...." My friend Jeremy Hutton misses the point by

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a reprint of an article published in the 2019 Festschrift volume in honor of V. Rev. Dr. Paul Nadim Tarazi.

assuming this was southerners' "locally indigenous worship of Yahweh of Teman." The fact that Kuntillet Ajrud is in the south is a red herring. Since the site belonged to the Northern Kingdom of Israel, since stylistically and petrographically its pottery is Judahite, and since it also mentions "Yahweh of Samaria" far from Samaria, such an explanation is unnecessary. Yahweh of Teman is the national God Yahweh, again described as "of the South."

In addition, Late Bronze Age Egyptian texts mention a place named "Yahweh" in this same location, evidence that historically it was Yahweh's domain, either divine abode or landscape sacred to him.

Regardless of what this says about the origins of Yahwism—and I argue elsewhere that it does—it is a theological statement. Making the South God's domain says something about the divine nature. The evidence of Kuntillet Ajrud grounds this theological claim not only in the biblical text but in ancient Israelite religious practice, as well. The biblical association of God with the South, including Edom and Midian, endured in multiple texts in spite of overwhelming onerous against both of those places, not only because it may reflect a historical reality, but because it made a theological claim biblical authors would not do without.

In this essay, I want to elucidate that claim, explaining what it means that Yahweh is "of the South." My argument is not about origins, but about biblical theology, first in the sense of the theology of the Old Testament. That is, the traditions of the God of the South—regardless of their origin—are an important part of the theological claims of the Bible, and for all the diachronic development in the history of Israel they can be elucidated as a fixed piece.

There is a second sense of the term "Biblical Theology" that I am also after, and that is theology *from* the Bible. To that end, the use of the desert archetype by Christian spirituality throughout the centuries, read historically, is of great value both as representations of the kinds of religious thinking that shaped the text itself, but also as ongoing representations of the spiritual experiences that shaped the text. This move, therefore, goes beyond the History of Interpretation or Reception History, which are post-exegetical, because seeing what the mythic value of the desert archetype is for Christian tradition helps us understand the theological intention of the biblical authors.

First, let me make two caveats. One, I am not suggesting the Old Testament sets up a "desert ideal," a favorite nostrum of older scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The Bible does not present desert life as an ideal and or advocate a return to nomadic spirituality.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, one can conflate "the South" in those biblical passages and at Kuntillet Ajrud with "the desert" of Psalm 68. For an Israelite living in Israel or Judah, the South would be a homogenous concept, bringing to mind the mountainous desert of today's Negev, Aravah, Wadi Rum, and Hejaz.

Biblical writers used the desert landscape as a symbolic resource because the natural world is open to being treated symbolically, as the French philosopher Jean Borello notes, something

---

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Nyström, *Beduinentum und Jahwismus* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1946), 109; Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif' in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," in *Biblical Motifs*, ed. Alexander Altmann, Studies and Texts 3 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Nyström, *Beduinentum und Jahwismus*, 163; Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif' in the Bible and in Qumran Literature."

concomitant with religion.<sup>4</sup> To unpack this, I begin with cognitive science, the interdisciplinary study of the mind.<sup>5</sup> When bearing upon literature, cognitive science understands meaning as what the linguist Bidisha Som calls “the stuff that mental processing is made of; it involves the basic relation between mental content and the experience of the world.”<sup>6</sup>

Mental dispositions depend on bodies.<sup>7</sup> Somatic sensations and physiological responses are the resources for cognitive processes to filter through cultural meanings.<sup>8</sup> So we must consider ancient Israelite bodies that because of travel for trade or military service would have experienced deserts.

The deserts of Israelite bodily experience are real deserts. Average annual rainfall near Kadesh Barnea is 87 mm.<sup>9</sup> And archaeology and geomorphology show that environmental conditions were similar to those of today.<sup>10</sup> Although my focus is deserts *in literature*, literary deserts of the Old Testament, nevertheless, the literary depends on the physical.<sup>11</sup> Actual places both dictate language and are in turn defined by language.<sup>12</sup> So while constructivists rightly insisted that language gives shape to our understanding of space, that there is no unmediated place.<sup>13</sup> More recent theorists like Keith Basso realize elements of topography are agents in their own sacrality.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Jean Borella, *The crisis of religious symbolism ; & Symbolism & reality*, trans. G. John Champoux (Kettering: Angelico, 2016), 43.

<sup>5</sup> Jay Friedenberg and Gordon Silverman, *Cognitive Science: An Introduction to the Study of Mind*, 2. ed (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 2, 11. It is thus far more than just neuroscience.

<sup>6</sup> Bidisha Som, “Toward a Cognitive Linguistics Understanding of Folk Narratives.,” *Lokaratna* 4 (2011): 58; cf. Borella, *The crisis of religious symbolism*, 46, 385.

<sup>7</sup> Veikko Anttonen, “Landscapes as Sacrosapes,” in *Sacred Sites and Holy Places: Exploring the Sacralization of Landscape through Space and Time*, ed. Sæbjørg Walaker Nordeide, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 11 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Troy E. Hall and David N. Cole, “Immediate Conscious Experience in Wilderness,” in *Wilderness Visitor Experiences*, ed. David N. Cole, USDA Forest Service Proceedings, RMRS-P-66 (Missoula: US Department of Agriculture, 2012), 38.

<sup>9</sup> T. Littmann and S. M. Berkowicz, “The Regional Climatic Setting,” in *Arid Dune Ecosystems: The Nizzana Sands in the Negev Desert*, ed. Siegmar W. Breckle, Aaron Yā’ir, and Maik Veste, Ecological Studies 200 (Berlin: Springer, 2008), 54.

<sup>10</sup> A. Yair, “The Ambiguous Impact of Climatic Change at the Desert Fringe,” in *Environment Change in Drylands*, ed. A. C. Milington and K. Pye (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994), 199–227; Y. Avni, N. Porat, and G. Avni, “Pre-Farming Environment and OSL Chronology in the Negev Highlands, Israel,” *Journal of Arid Environments* 86 (November 2012): 12–27.

<sup>11</sup> Christopher Y. Tilley, *A Phenomenology of Landscape: Places, Paths, and Monuments*, Explorations in Anthropology (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 31.

<sup>12</sup> Sten P. Moslund, “The Presence of Place in Literature,” in *Geocritical Explorations: Space, Place, and Mapping in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Robert T. Tally (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 31–35.

<sup>13</sup> Randi Haaland and Gunnar Haaland, “Landscape,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of Ritual and Religion*, ed. Timothy Insoll, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25; Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth* (1925) (New York: Dover, 1953), 9–11; Belden C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>14</sup> Anttonen, “Landscapes as Sacrosapes,” 13; Guy Davenport, *The Geography of the Imagination Forty Essays* (Boston: David R. Godine, 2005), 4; Jaana Kouri, “Co-Composing a Village History in the Archipelago of South-Western Finland,” in *The Relational Dynamics of Disenchantment and Sacralization: Changing the Terms of the Religion versus Secularity Debate*, ed. Peik Ingman, The Study of Religion in a Global Context (Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd, 2016), 236; Eileen Crist, “Against the Social Construction of Nature and Wilderness,” in *The Wilderness Debate Rages on: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 507–8; Borella, *The crisis of religious symbolism ; & Symbolism & reality*, 389; Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and*

Language depends on the sensual, so the literary desert depends on the physical desert. But since language also defines the desert, I will eventually return to the literary desert.

Deserts are foreign to everyday life of the biblical authors, who were not nomadic pastoralists. To the rarified environment of Jerusalem scribal culture, the desert was “desolate and still and strange...,” “barren, howling” in Deuteronomy’s words. The desert was the opposite of their urban environment. Studies find that cognitive engagement with wilderness involves focused attention on small, varied details.<sup>15</sup> For Israel, from what was learned through trade and travel, compounded by imagination, the desert was “unfamiliar and often grotesque in its forms and colors, inhabited by rare, furtive creatures of incredible hardness and cunning...”<sup>16</sup>—snakes and scorpions, owls, porcupines, hyenas, and wolves. Biblical writers knew the desert was “sparingly colonized by weird mutants from the plant kingdom ...as spiny, thorny, stunted and twisted as they are tenacious.”<sup>17</sup> They knew the desert was harsh, dangerous, and uncompromising (Ps 107). Research shows the unknown danger of the wilderness is one of the most significant experiential aspects people undergo.<sup>18</sup> For biblical writers, the desert was unknown, unmapped (Jer 51), much of it unnamed, evoking “an elusive hint of something unknown, unknowable, about to be revealed.”<sup>19</sup> The desert is immense, immeasurable.

On the other hand, the deserts of Midian, Edom, and the Negev are *bādia*, not *ṣaḥrā*, not all sand, and capable of growing vegetation and even of cultivation when winter rains send torrents streaming down the wadis (Ps 113).<sup>20</sup> Perennial plants also grow wherever ground water is available in cracks in the hard rock.<sup>21</sup> Fauna, too, abound: the habitat diversity of small mammals is very high compared to other deserts.<sup>22</sup> Thus, Muslim tradition says Rabbi Ka‘ab al-Aḥbar told Caliph Umar, “When God created things, he made for each a partner...Hardship said, ‘I am setting out for the desert,’ and Salubrity said, ‘And I go with you.’”<sup>23</sup>

Since cognitive science implicates the individual, their body and senses, let me follow

---

*Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 108; David Lawlor, “Returning to Wirikuta,” *European Journal of Ecopsychology* 4 (2013): 22, with case examples from the Huichol Indians.

<sup>15</sup> Hall and Cole, “Immediate Conscious Experience in Wilderness,” 40–41, 44.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (London: Clark, 1992), 241–42; Kerry S. Walters, *Soul Wilderness: A Desert Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 1; see Andre Miquel, “Le Désert dans la Poésie arabe preislamique,” in *Les Mystiques Du Désert dans l’Islam, le Judaïsme et le Christianisme* (Gordes: Association des Amis de Sénanque, 1975), 78–81 on how these feature in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry.

<sup>17</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 241–42.

<sup>18</sup> Michael E. Patterson et al., “An Hermeneutic Approach to Studying the Nature of Wilderness Experience,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 30 (1998): 440–41.

<sup>19</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 241.

<sup>20</sup> Jibrā’īl Sulaymān Jabbūr, *The Bedouins and the Desert: Aspects of Nomadic Life in the Arab East*, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 44–46; Avinoam Danin, *Plants of Desert Dunes, Adaptations of Desert Organisms* (Berlin ; New York: Springer, 1996), 88; Gisbert Greshake, *Die Wüste bestehen: Erlebnis und geistliche Erfahrung* (Kevelaer: Verlagsgemeinschaft Topos plus, 2004), 65; Mohamed Tawfic Ahmed, ed., *Ecosystems and Human Well-Being: El Maghara, Northern Sinai, Egypt* (Nairobi: UNEP ; Ford Foundation, 2010), 78–79.

<sup>21</sup> Sharif Harir, “Adaptive Forms and Process among the Hadendowa,” in *Survival on Meagre Resources: Hadendowa Pastoralism in the Red Sea Hills*, ed. Leif O. Manger (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1996), 42.

<sup>22</sup> J. Filser and R. Prasse, “A Glance on the Fauna of Nizzana,” in *Arid Dune Ecosystems: The Nizzana Sands in the Negev Desert*, ed. Siegmund W. Breckle, Aaron Yā’ir, and Maik Veste, Ecological Studies 200 (Berlin: Springer, 2008), 125.

<sup>23</sup> Jabbūr, *The Bedouins and the Desert*, 48.

anthropologists in using *participant observation*,<sup>24</sup> here providing some statements of those who have reflectively written on desert experiences.

Edward Abbey's first observations as a ranger for the National Park Service near Moab, Utah, in his 1968 memoir *Desert Solitaire* was "the immense silence in which I am lost"<sup>25</sup>—something highlighted by many. Thus, Aldous Huxley: the "Silence of the desert is such that casual sounds...cannot abolish it. They co-exist with it."<sup>26</sup> Jean Baudrillard extends this to the realm of sight: "The silence of the desert is a visual thing, too. A product of the gaze that stares out and finds nothing to reflect it."<sup>27</sup>

Naturalist Joseph Wood Krutch, who lived in the Arizona desert for 20 years, notes, "Under the open sky the sun's rays strike with an almost physical force."<sup>28</sup> Yet Krutch also speaks of the desert as filled with life: "The desert is sprinkled with hundreds, probably thousands, of evenly placed shrubs, varied now and then by a small tree," including the acacia abundant in the deserts of Edom and Midian.<sup>29</sup> As in Edom and Midian, "All the little annual flowers and weeds which spring up after the winter rains and rush from seed to seed again in six weeks gave up the ghost at the end of their short lives."<sup>30</sup> Yet as Krutch—like Israel—notes, the flora and fauna adapted to the desert's climate are twisted and outlandish.<sup>31</sup>

God is not merely the desert, but in Zechariah 9 a desert storm, the unforgettable desert *Khamsin* with its accompanying sandstorms.<sup>32</sup> The south wind is feared in the Levant (Jer 13; Job 37). Jeremiah 4:11 says, "A searing wind blows from the barren heights in the wilderness." Isa 21:1 speaks of "the whirlwinds of the Negev". In the Talmud, Abba Arikha claims four winds blow each day and the South is the harshest of them all: were not for the angel who blocks it, it would destroy the entire world (b. *Gittin* 31b, based on Job 39:26).

The *Khamsin* originates in Arabia and reaches Palestine dry and with high-speed winds, lasting up to seven days.<sup>33</sup> Barometric pressure plummets, visibility is impaired, and the sky turns yellow or red.<sup>34</sup> The winds "desiccate the landscape, wither leaves and fruit on trees, render the brush vegetation susceptible to fires."<sup>35</sup> Breathing becomes difficult, like a high altitude.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Kouri, "Co-Composing a Village History in the Archipelago of South-Western Finland," 232, 237–38; Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 19; Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places*, 68–69.

<sup>25</sup> Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 11.

<sup>26</sup> Aldous Huxley, "The Desert," in *Adonis and the Alphabet* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956), 77.

<sup>27</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London ; New York: Verso, 2010), 6.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph W. Krutch, *The Voice of the Desert: A Naturalist's Interpretation* (New York: William Sloane, 1966), 13.

<sup>29</sup> Krutch, *The Voice of the Desert*, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Krutch, *Voice*, 14.

<sup>31</sup> Krutch, *Voice*, 17.

<sup>32</sup> Karl-Heinz Fleckenstein, *Botschaft der Wüste* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 2016), 89; Walters, *Soul Wilderness*, 85 speaks of "Holy Sirocco."

<sup>33</sup> P. Brydone, William Beckford, and Johann Friedrich Junius, *P. Brydone's Reise durch Sicilien und Malta, in Briefen an William Beckford. Esq. zu Somerly in Suffolk : nebst einer Charte von Sicilien und Malta*. (Leipzig: Bey Johann Friedrich Junius, 1777), 345; Tage Sivall, "Sirocco in the Levant," *Geografiska Annaler* 39 (1957): 121; J. Gregoire, "Du Khamsin et des ses Effets," *Mémoires Ou Travaux Originaux Présentés et Lus à l'Institut Égyptien* 1 (1862): 369.

<sup>34</sup> Sivall, "Sirocco in the Levant," 122; Gregoire, "Du Khamsin et des ses Effets," 369, 372.

<sup>35</sup> Colbert C. Held, *Middle East Patterns: Places, Peoples, and Politics*, 3rd ed (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 1.63; Gregoire, "Du Khamsin et des ses Effets," 370.

Sandstorms stir up whirlwinds of tremendous height engulfing foliage and scouring up the soil.<sup>37</sup> As T. E. Lawrence described:

The sun disappeared, blotted out by thick rags of yellow air over our heads. We stood in a horrible light, ochreous and fitful. The brown wall of cloud from the hills was now very near, rushing changelessly upon us with a loud grinding sound. Three minutes later it struck, wrapping us in a blanket of dust and stinging grains of sand, twisting and turning in violent eddies, and yet advancing eastward at the speed of a strong gale. ...these internal whirling winds tore our tightly-held cloaks from our hands, filled our eyes, and robbed us of all sense of direction.<sup>38</sup>

Let us return to the Bible's literary desert in the literary South, to see how biblical language speaks of the desert South to evoke that place in a particular way.

Of the three words for "South," *Teman* can be a proper place name, can mean "south," or it can be translated "South Wind." *Teman* South Wind is not always negative: in Song of Songs 4, it blows on the beloved's garden spreading fragrance. *Darom*, likewise, has both a directional sense and the meaning "South Wind," which in Job 37 brings dreadful heat on the land. *Negeb* derives from a verbal meaning of "to cleanse" or "to wipe."

The same terms are variously translated "desert" or "wilderness" by English versions. *Midbar* derives from the root *DBR* in the meaning of "back, remote"<sup>39</sup> and is used for the Exodus and subsequent testing, secondarily in prophetic passages anticipating redemption through the wilderness. A number of passages describe the *midbar* as arid, uninhabited, without plant life, inhabited by snakes, scorpions, and owls. Figuratively, *midbar* is "barren, howling" and "great and terrible," noted for its wind.

The postexilic term *Tsiyya* is used for the testing in the wilderness. *Jeshimon*, from the root *YŠM*, "to be desolate,"<sup>40</sup> appears for both the wilderness testing and for predictions of future redemption through the wilderness. *Arabah*, often a proper name for the Rift Valley south of the Dead Sea, also translates as "desert" or "wilderness," particularly in predictions of redemption through it. In Jeremiah 5, it is the domain of the wolf, in 51 "arid...land where no one lives, where no human being even passes through"—exactly as Baudrillard claims: "The grandeur of the desert derives from their being, in their aridity, the negative of the earth's surface and of our civilized

---

<sup>36</sup> Gregoire, "Du Khamsin et des ses Effets," 370, 376; Brydone, Beckford, and Junius, *P. Brydone's Reise durch Sicilien und Malta*, 345.

<sup>37</sup> Jabbūr, *The Bedouins and the Desert*, 50.

<sup>38</sup> T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1935), 206.

<sup>39</sup> James Barr, "Migraš in the Old Testament," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 29 (1984): 24–25; Paul Nadim Tarazi, *The Rise of Scripture* (St. Paul: OCABS Press, 2017), 92–94 argues it is the same root as *dabar*, "word," citing as evidence Song 4:3, where *midbarim* clearly means "words" (of the "mouth")—as the LXX knows—but in the context of terms pertaining to oasis life; also Isa 5:17 and Mic 2:12, where *dober* clearly means "wilderness." But he also notes Pss 18:48; 47:4, where the hiphil *hidbir* means "drive back," allowing "back" as the base meaning.

<sup>40</sup> Narelle J. Coetzee, "Wild God in the Wilderness: Why Does Yahweh Choose to Appear in the Wilderness in the Book of Exodus?" (Diss., University of Birmingham, 2016), 327; Albert De Pury, "L'image du Désert dans l'Ancien Testament," in *Le Désert: Image et Réalité: Actes Du Colloque de Cartigny 1983, Centre d'étude du Proche-Orient Ancien (CEPOA), Université de Genève*, ed. Yves Christe, Les Cahiers du CEPOA 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 117.

humors.”<sup>41</sup> *Arabah* lacks any of the positive associations that can accompany *midbar*.

The desert/wilderness is used multiple ways in the Old Testament. The first is resoundingly negative, the desert as a sort of hell, as in Ugaritic texts it is Mot’s abode. This underlies the sending of the Azazel goat covered in sins into the desert. The demonic denizens of the desert are the שְׂעִיר of Leviticus 17; Isaiah 13 and 34 and the Lilith of Isaiah 34.

A similar view is found in cuneiform literature, where the same words are used for the desert as for the netherworld: *ki-eršetu* and *kur-šadu*.<sup>42</sup> In the interrelated Old Babylonian myths of Inanna, Ninurta, Lugalbanda, and Gilgamesh, the wilderness is a fearsome land of terrors (*Inanna and Ebih*, 116-20, 127-30; *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Wilderness*, 151-70; *Lugalbanda and Anzu*, 1-5) that nevertheless by the actions of heroes can be transformed and organized into a source of plenty (*Lugal-E*, 347-67; *Inanna and Ebih*, 121-26; *Lugalbanda in the Mountain Wilderness*, 265-325).<sup>43</sup> Outside the narrative genre, the tenor is far more negative: in magic texts, the steppe is the domain of demons, and exorcists address the desert demons oppressing their patients.<sup>44</sup> *Madbaru* is a “place of hunger and thirst”, “where there are no wild animals” (Assurbanipal).<sup>45</sup> *Huribtu* is “uninhabited” (Ashurnirari VI), a place of ghosts (*eṭemmu*; KAR 184).<sup>46</sup>

A second sense in the Bible is Wilderness as a place of trial, in particular the testing during the Wilderness Wanderings. This draws on the negative connotations of the desert, but another tradition sees that same period as a time of closeness to God (Deut 32; 1 Kgs 19; Jer 2; Hos 2; Ps 55). The Wilderness is where the Law, the covenant, the sanctuary, and the festivals originated. This positive sense is not at odds with its “testing” connotation, nor independent of being an actual desert. Desert environment serves as a contrast to the “fleshpots of Egypt”, and to the rains, fertility, and agriculture of Baal in Hosea. The use of the desert as a particular form of punishment for sin is dependent on it being a place of closeness to God and of testing.

Finally, another usage of the desert is the association we have seen in a set of poetic fragments of God himself with the desert, of the desert being the domain of the divine, the source of Yahweh’s horizontal theophany.

The desert archetype, although by no means a central image in mystic reflection, has served several distinct but non-exclusive functions in the history of Christian spirituality. The most familiar is the desert as a place to which ascetics have fled and where they encounter God, a usage that goes back to the Jewish Essenes (1QS [Community Rule] 9.19-20;<sup>47</sup> 1QS 8.12-14; cf. Philo, *De Decalogo*,

---

<sup>41</sup> Baudrillard, *America*, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Haldar, “The Notion of the Desert in Sumero-Accadian and West-Semitic Religions,” *Uppsala Universitets Arsskrif* 3 (1950): 13; Laura Feldt, “Religion, Nature, and Ambiguous Space in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mountain Wilderness in Old Babylonian Religious Narratives,” *Numen* 63 (2016): 357.

<sup>43</sup> Feldt, “Religion, Nature, and Ambiguous Space,” 363–71.

<sup>44</sup> Sylvie Lackenbacher, “L’Image du Désert d’après les Textes littéraires assyro-babyloniens,” in *Le Désert: Image et Réalité: Actes du Colloque de Cartigny 1983*, Centre d’étude du Proche-Orient ancien (CEPOA), Université de Genève, ed. Yves Christe, Les Cahiers du CEPOA 3 (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), 72, 75.

<sup>45</sup> Ignace J. Gelb, et al. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956-2010), 10.1.12.

<sup>46</sup> Gelb, *Assyrian Dictionary*, 6.251.

<sup>47</sup> Building on the understanding of the desert as a place where the Torah can be rightly followed in *Assyrian Dictionary*, 6.11, 18-20.

10-11), and Therapeutae (Philo, *De Vita Contemplativa* 2.18-20). It may explain Paul's sojourn in Arabia after his conversion mentioned in Gal 1:17. Christian reflection on this Anthonian sense of desert, exemplified in the Desert Fathers (e.g., Athanasius, *Vita Antonii*), extends from the works of Origen<sup>48</sup> to Francis of Assisi on La Verna and Ignatius of Loyola's Manresa.<sup>49</sup> It appears in slave songs of 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, where lyrics like "If you want to see Jesus, go in the wilderness," "Jesus a'waitin' to meet you in the wilderness," and "I seek my Lord in the wilderness" had the double meaning of the wildernesses of southern states where clandestine religious gatherings met.<sup>50</sup>

A second sense in Christian spirituality is the image of an interior desert, a state of solitude and detachment where the Christian mentally communes with God. Appearing first in Eucherius of Lyon's 5<sup>th</sup>-century *De laude heremi* (23, 39), this is exemplified in the West in Richard of St. Victor (12<sup>th</sup> century) and Mechthild of Magdeburg (13<sup>th</sup> century)'s *Wüstunge*.<sup>51</sup> It reappears with the Spanish Carmelites, although they also use the desert as an image for the Dark Night of the Soul, and it is a part of some contemporary spiritual direction.<sup>52</sup> In Judaism, it is suggested by the Midrash in *Numbers Rabbah* 1.7: "If one cannot make oneself open and ownerless like the desert, one can acquire neither wisdom nor Torah."

Yet the connotation of desert in Christian spirituality that comes closest to the desert God, the Yahweh of Teman, is not prominent until the Middle Ages, especially with the Rhineland Mystics, a largely Dominican movement of speculative, apophatic spirituality. Meister Eckhart (d. 1327) popularized the desert as an image for God, using it more than a dozen times.<sup>53</sup> "God's desert is God's simple nature," he writes (*Tractate* 11<sup>54</sup>). For him, God is *Stille Wüste* (e.g., *Predigt* 10). The desert is God, or God is the desert, because of the desert's solitude (*Einöde*) (*Predigt* 10).

This sense of the mythic desert imaging God is picked up by Eckhart's disciple, Johannes Tauler (d. 1361) and Jan van Ruysbroeck (d. 1381). Tauler, for example, says God is "simple hidden desert (*Wüste*) beyond being" (*Sermon* 60). He highlights both the unknowability of God (*Predigt* 11; 55.5-7) and also God's "silent desert divinity" (*stille wüste Gottheit*; 278.3). Another of Eckhart's disciples, Henry Suso (d. 1366) speaks of the "*Weiselosigkeit*" of "desert deity" (*Wüste gottheit*).

The background of this understanding is twofold and Eastern Christian. The first is a strand

---

<sup>48</sup> Uwe Lindemann, *Die Wüste: Terra Incognita, Erlebnis, Symbol: Eine Genealogie Der Abendländischen Wüstenvorstellungen in Der Literatur von Der Antike Bis Zur Gegenwart*, Beiträge Zur Neueren Literaturgeschichte 3.175 (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2000), 70.

<sup>49</sup> Markus Hofer, *Francis for Men: Otherwise We Need Weapons* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2003), 75-76; Greshake, *Die Wüste bestehen*, 40.

<sup>50</sup> Miles M. Fisher, *Negro Slave Songs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953), 68-69; Erik Nielson, "'Go in de Wilderness': Evading the 'Eyes of Others' in Slave Songs," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 35 (2011): 106-7, 111-14.

<sup>51</sup> George H. Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, Menno Simons Lectures (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962), 50-52; Michael Egerding, *Die Metaphorik der Spätmittelalterlichen Mystik* /: Michael Egerding, vol. 2 (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1997), 722; also William of Saint-Thierry, David of Augsburg, Conrad of Eberbach, Gilbert of Hoyland, and Isaac of Stella; Bernard McGinn, "Ocean and Desert as Symbols of Mystical Absorption in the Christian Tradition," *The Journal of Religion* 74 (1994): 164-65.

<sup>52</sup> Martha Robbins, "The Desert-Mountain Experience," *Journal of Pastoral Care* 35 (1981): 21; Greshake, *Die Wüste bestehen*, 110 cites examples in the writings of Nietzsche.

<sup>53</sup> E.g., in his authentic works, *Sermon Of the Nobleman*; *Predigt* 10; *Predigt* 12; *Predigt* 48; *Predigt* 60; *Predigt* 81.

<sup>54</sup> Perhaps pseudepigraphal but from his circle.



that begins with Neo-Platonism. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, Plotinus borrowed the term used for the recess within the Delphic temple where the Pythia gave her oracles, called the *αδυτον* “not to slip in” or “beyond the image,” to speak of the absolute spiritual beyond, surpassing visible reality (*Enneads* VI.9.11).<sup>55</sup> By the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century, *αδυτον* was for Simplicius of Cilicia, “the cloud of unknowing that the mystic encounters before the Ineffable One,” and Damascius explained that its inaccessible character symbolized the transcendent ultimate, ineffable principle (*Difficulties and Solutions of First Principles* I.8.6-20). This usage had already found its way into Christian thought when Gregory of Nyssa used *αδυτον* to express the unknowability of God (*Life of Moses* 2.163-64).<sup>56</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500) borrows directly from Neoplatonism, and *αδυτον* becomes in Latin *vastitas*, “wasteland.”<sup>57</sup>

In the 9<sup>th</sup> century West, John Scotus Eriugena read Pseudo-Dionysius and made the desert wasteland the image of the divine.<sup>58</sup> In his commentary on the Gospel of John (1.27.80), Eriugena says, “The desert is the ineffability of the divine nature.” When he goes on to say that the Greek word *ερημια* conveys the divine nature (*quod omnino diuinae coneunit naturae*; 1.27.85), he is echoing Pseudo-Dionysius (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 3.7; *Divine Names* 4.24).<sup>59</sup> Eckhart and his school were reading Eriugena and perhaps Pseudo-Dionysius, as well, as when Van Ruysbroeck says, “We must all found our lives upon a fathomless abyss” (*Sparkling Stone*).<sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, the Eckhartian divine desert is a development from earlier Rhineland mystics who used the “Anthonian” understanding. Thus, van Ruysbroeck draws on Pseudo-Hadewijch of Brabant (*Mengeldichten* 25-29), which draws on the authentic Hadewijch (*Mengeldichten* 1-16), both of which see the desert as a place to meet God, when he writes of “A wild, waste desert where God who lives us, lives” (van Ruysbroeck, *Werken* 3.217).<sup>61</sup> Van Ruysbroeck has taken the Anthonian desert and made it God’s abode. But he also understands the desert and its “unconditioned dark” to be God (*Seven Degrees of Love*, chap. 14).

What all of this shows is that if Yahweh is the desert God, he is strange, unfamiliar and fantastic. Yahweh is dangerous, as uncompromising as the desert, and this is especially true of how

<sup>55</sup> Walter Burkert, “The Temple in Classical Greece,” in *Temple in Society*, ed. Michael V. Fox (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1988), 36.

<sup>56</sup> Barry D. Smith, *The Indescribable God: Divine Otherness in Christian Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 40.

<sup>57</sup> Lindemann, *Die Wüste*, 88; Jean-Yves Leloup, *Désert, déserts* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), 68–69; McGinn, “Ocean and Desert,” 161–62, 166; Williams, *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought*, 52; Sarah Coakley, “Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite,” *Modern Theology* 24 (2008): 531–32.

<sup>58</sup> McGinn, “Ocean and Desert,” 162; Eriugena was the first to translate Pseudo-Dionysius into Latin, and Eckhart depended on him (and Dionysius) in many other areas, as well; Mary Brennan, *Guide des Études érigéniennes: Bibliographie Commentée des Publications 1930-1987 = A Guide to Eriugenian Studies*, Vestigia Études et Documents de Philosophie Antique et Médiévale 5 (Fribourg: Fribourg University Press, 1989), 132, 294.

<sup>59</sup> Jean Scot, *Commentaire Sur l’Evangile de Jean*, trans. Edouard Jeuneau, Sources Chrétiennes 180 (Paris: Cerf, 1972), 140–42 n.18.

<sup>60</sup> Kevin A. Gordon, “Traces in the Desert: The Poetics of Sand, Dust, and Ash in German Literature” (Diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2014), 9.

<sup>61</sup> Paul A. Dietrick, “The Wilderness of God in Hadewijch II and Meister Eckhart and His Circle,” in *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York: Continuum, 1994), 33, 35–36, 38–39; John of Ruysbroeck, *Les noces spirituelles*, trans. André Louf (Bégrolles-en-Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1993), 221; Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 49.

God appears in stories set in the desert. Yahweh is unknown, unknowable, but on the verge of being revealed. The desert God is formless and incorporeal as the desert is immeasurable, inestimable. As Aldous Huxley wrote, "Boundless and emptiness—these are the two most expressive symbols of that attributeless Godhead." All the same, Yahweh is not malevolent, he is "salubrious."<sup>62</sup> Desert silence, too, is a symbol of the divine, not a silent God, but a powerful, thick silence that Martha Robbins calls desert's "peace deeper than terror."<sup>63</sup>

The desert God is an image that expresses a paradox: Israel suggests Yahweh is wild, enigmatic to the point of alien. Where Yahweh is not surreal, he is dangerous, the awful wind, soaring, surging, and looming. Paradoxically, the same God is both "twisting and turning in violent eddies" and the "peace deeper than terror," tranquil and still as the motionless desert, dreadfully benevolent." Yahweh "engulfs you and plunges you into a dark cloud" and also allows you to hear your own breath in the uttermost silence.

Carl Jung said, "We constantly use symbolic terms to represent concepts that we cannot define or fully comprehend."<sup>64</sup> They enable authors to communicate concepts that cannot be communicated by other means.<sup>65</sup> Archetypes possess us, overwhelm us, because the experience of their encounter is vivid and momentous.<sup>66</sup> The staunchly anti-Jungian Jean Borella agrees: "Awareness of the sacred symbol is a disruptive and dazzling experience from which springs a consciousness of reality...experience of the Transcendent within the experience of its sign's presence."<sup>67</sup>

The desert, he continues: "is the archetype...of which signifier, meaning and particular referent are only distinct manifestations,"<sup>68</sup> meaning, as we have said, biblical authors did not choose the image of the desert out of the blue, but because it supported theology that was already there. As Ernst Cassirer wrote, the symbol or archetype presupposes that the ideas "are already given."<sup>69</sup> Father Tarazi shows that from the biblical perspective, the divine world is a projection of the human mind. To grasp at a God who is "solitary," "silent," "fierce," "beautiful," "unending," and "strange," we must go to the desert.

---

<sup>62</sup> Huxley, "The Desert," 73.

<sup>63</sup> Robbins, "The Desert-Mountain Experience," 23.

<sup>64</sup> Carl G. Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious," in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G Jung and Marie-Luise von Franz (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), 21.

<sup>65</sup> René Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols* (Oxford: Alden, 1962), 14 (1925).

<sup>66</sup> Murray Stein, *Jung's Map of the Soul: An Introduction* (Chicago: Open Court, 1998), 100.

<sup>67</sup> Borella, *Crisis*, 3.

<sup>68</sup> Borella, *Crisis*, 3.

<sup>69</sup> Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, 87.

**Deut 33:2:**

He said, "Yahweh came from Sinai  
And dawned on him from Seir  
He shone forth from Mount Paran  
And went from his peak sanctuary  
From his southland mountain slopes for them"

**Judg 5:4-5:**

Yahweh, when you went out from Seir  
When you marched from the territory of Edom  
The earth shook, and also the heavens, they dripped  
The clouds dripped water  
The mountains trembled  
Before Yahweh, the One of Sinai  
Before Yahweh, the God of Israel.

**Hab 3:3-7:**

God came from Teman  
The Holy One from Mount Paran...  
His brightness was like the light  
rays flashed from his hand; there he veiled his power...  
The eternal mountains were shattered;  
along his ancient pathways  
the everlasting hills sank low.  
I saw the tents of Cushan tremble  
the curtains of Midian.

**Ps 68:8-9:**

God, when you went forth before your people,  
When you marched from the desert, (Selah)  
The earth quaked, the heavens poured  
Before God, the One of Sinai  
Before God, the God of Israel.

**Zech 9:14:**

And Yahweh will appear over them  
And his arrow will go out as lightning  
The Lord Yahweh will sound the shofar  
And he will come in the storms of Teman [or "of the South"].

*Figure 1*