

## Wilderness

We don't usually think of "wilderness" as being a theme of Scripture, but it certainly is. There are two words in Hebrew translated as wilderness, and together they occur about 330 times in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the New Testament, the Greek word translated wilderness occurs almost 50 times. "Wilderness" refers to a desert, to a barren or open wasteland, to a dry, desolate place. Drawing deeply on the insights of Brian Rosner, presented at the 2025 Annual ETS meeting, I'd like to demonstrate here how powerful this theme is in the Bible.

It was God's intention at creation that Adam would not merely tend the Garden that surrounded the mount, Eden, on which the Lord dwelt, but to extend the garden beyond its created limits to encompass all the earth. The Garden was sacred space because that's where God Himself dwelt. Extending the garden into the wilderness outside the garden means that in time Adam and his offspring would cultivate and convert all the earth into sacred space and God's habitation would encompass the entire world. Because of the disobedience of that first couple, caused by a wicked serpent who sneaked into the Garden from the wilderness, they were banished from the Garden and exiled into the wilderness outside it, away from the presence of the Lord. In Scripture, to go "east" means to go into the wilderness. The wilderness is where God is not; it's the antithesis of sacred space. It's a place where demons dwell, a place of dreadful savagery. The wilderness is a dangerous place; there is safety only in the presence of the Lord.

After Cain murdered his brother, he went "east" to the land of Nod, deep into the wilderness. There he built a city and founded a civilization of non-theistic or anti-theistic people. At the Tower of Babel episode, God dispersed all humanity into the wilderness. The call of Abraham however reversed this movement: Abraham migrated to the Land we now call Israel, and the Lord was there with him. So a sacred space again appears in Scripture. When Lot had to separate from Abraham, Lot chose to leave the sacred space and go "east" to dwell in the wilderness city of Sodom. (It was a well-watered plain, but it nevertheless represented wilderness.) Abraham had to go into the wilderness to rescue Lot from certain invading kings (Genesis 14). After fathering the non-seed line, non-elect Ishmael with the Egyptian servant, Hagar, Sarah and Abraham sent both of them off into the wilderness, presumably to die; God however, met them there and provided for them. Jacob fled the wrath of his brother into wilderness country, but later, with wives and wealth, returned to the presence of the Lord. Because of assimilation with the Canaanites also there in the Land, the Lord caused the Israelite clan to leave for Egypt, where they were enslaved. That's how Genesis ends, exactly as it began.

Moses passed 40 years in the wilderness before his call to go to Pharaoh to deliver the people of Israel from Egypt. The Exodus took the new, miraculously liberated nation of Israel to Sinai, to meet their God. Then, returning to the promised Land, they rebelled against the Lord (the Kadesh-barnea episode, Numbers 14). In discipline, that exodus generation had to wander for 40 years thru the wilderness until a second, more faithful and obedient generation would leave the wilderness to conquer and dwell in that sacred space in the presence of their God. The wilderness was a place of grumbling, rebellion, unfaithfulness, and of judgment. But it's also where that faithful 2<sup>nd</sup> generation was born and matured to enter the Land.

It seems to have been God's intention that the Nation of Israel would be like God by obeying His Law, and take the knowledge of their God to all the nations that were dispersed in the earth, the Gentile nations of the great, vast wilderness outside of the Land. Jonah exemplified this, taking the news of salvation by faith-filled repentance to the Assyrian people in the wilderness. But total nation-wide

failure eventually occurred, reprising the failure in Genesis 3. Instead of extending the knowledge of God out beyond the Land into the surrounding wilderness, the people of the surrounding wilderness despoiled the chosen people.

Before assuming the throne at Jerusalem, David had dwelt in the wilderness, in caves. The Queen of Sheba had come from the wilderness to visit Solomon and praise his greatness. In time, due to crass idolatry, disobedience, and terrible sinfulness, the Nation was cast into Exile. That means, they were thrown out of their sacred space, away from the presence of the Lord, into the great, vast wilderness of the pagan Gentile nations of the world. The Exile reprised the expulsion of Adam and his wife from the Garden.

The Times of the Gentiles, imaged by the statue of Daniel 2, is how the nations of the wilderness organized under their controlling gods to run the world. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome would be the wilderness nations controlling the flow of history until the King of Kings, Jesus, came to restore Israel's sacred space, which then would last forever.

John the Baptist called the people of Israel into the wilderness to repent of their sinfulness and identify with the King, who would lead them into a new era, a Kingdom in the promised Land, their sacred space with their God present, in their midst. Those who responded to the message of John identified with that prior, faithful and obedient 2<sup>nd</sup> generation out of Egypt. When Jesus came, reprising the Nation of Israel, He had to go into the wilderness where He was tempted by that wicked Satan. But there Jesus, the embodiment of a faithful Israel, prevailed. Later, Paul spent 3 years in the wilderness of Arabia preparing for his ministry.

Now we come to the Church. Sending His followers into all the world with the Gospel, Jesus was really sending them into the great, vast wilderness of the Gentile nations of the world. They would be persecuted and suffer terribly, but the Spirit of Jesus would be with them so that many people would respond to the Gospel. The episode in Acts 8:26ff illustrates this great movement: Philip was sent into the wilderness to share the Gospel with a pagan, a Gentile of a wilderness nation who was elect and who responded with faith. And all thru the age, those wilderness dwellers who respond would periodically gather into local assemblies in which Jesus would be present. So each local church is really a colony of Spirit-indwelt people, a sacred space within the wilderness of the world. (America is really just another region of wilderness. And today's nation of Israel is not sacred space because the Lord is not physically present there—yet.)

The Christian life can be characterized using the metaphor of the wilderness. We pass from initial justification and regeneration into the wilderness, where we mature, awaiting the day we enter the Land of sacred space into the very presence of our Lord. In the wilderness of our Christian life, we are tested, we learn humility and to trust Jesus, we are disciplined, we express sacrifices and obedience, and we persevere in hope of entering God's rest. (See Deuteronomy 8.) Wilderness is for us (see also 1 Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3,4).

According to the writing prophets, in the future, when Jesus returns to rule, the wilderness will blossom. All the earth will become like the Garden of Eden, and all the nations of earth will desire to fellowship with a restored, regenerated Israel and Israel's exalted King. The Millennial (or Messianic) Kingdom will be a time when earth's wilderness will be converted into a place of great blessing for all mankind. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Adam will accomplish it.

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What's going on? Let me attempt to answer this. Let's observe first that there is no neutral space anywhere on planet Earth. In God's creation, everything is binary: good vs. evil, light vs. dark, saved vs. lost, seed of the woman vs seed of the serpent, male or female, Jew or Gentile, angels or demons, holiness or profane-ness/sinfulness, spiritual or fleshly/worldly, etc. And sacred space vs. wilderness. It's how God deliberately made it.

God created time, and He created space. He invented matter and created with it a physical world. God also invented embodiment: thus light was embodied in the sun, and human persons were embodied images of God. This world was to be a place where He, the invisible, Spirit God, could actualize His great, cosmic purposes, which seems to be to defeat all evil.\*

Going deeper, let's assume that, because God is love, His purpose would be to have love glorify Him. So Trinitarian love, the love that binds the Persons of the Godhead into one essence, is key to understanding all creation. We embodied persons can love our transcendent, invisible Creator, mirroring His love, and so enter into a mutually loving, eternal relationship with Him. Or not!

"Or not" is key to understanding creation. Instead of imaging love (which entails trust, obedience, loyalty, self-sacrifice, commitment, etc), we can mirror the Serpent's hatred. So God created a wilderness where rebellious rejection of God, His will and His love, can be physically manifest for those who so choose. Why? So that in time, God's love and justice can defeat it. The eternal Son on the cross and His glorious Return accomplish that. In the future, hell will contain all those who populated and reveled in the wilderness; they will be forever apart from God's presence.

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Dear reader: Let's not be deceived by modernity's glitz and allure. What we see today is the Cainite civilization gone high-tech and global. It's where the seed of the serpent dwells; it's the "world," it's Babylon. It is really *all wilderness*. Wilderness is place, it also is metaphor. We need a thoroughly biblical worldview to escape the iron grip of the wily, deceitful Serpent who dwells in wilderness.

By means of the Gospel of Jesus, God calls us out of the barren and exceedingly dangerous wilderness of paganism, idolatry, rebellion against God, spiritual ignorance, and indifference to (if not overt hatred of) God into the pure light—and safety—of the sacred space of God's presence. The Word teaches us how to live in the radically new life He offers. We're still surrounded by that wilderness, but by taking in the Word of God, which is really taking in God Himself, and then living it out as godliness, we can express God, His love, His holiness and righteousness, and so we glorify God. One future day, that wicked, ungodly wilderness will be done away with. And the exalted Jesus will share His glory with us.

This is the Bible's story of wilderness. It's a story of incomparable, insuperable love.

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\* As embodied creatures in a physical creation, we must live in a particular time and a particular place. We're emplaced, sited, in a certain tribal region, or town, or nation, or whatever, where we pass this existence along with others, with kin, for example. So most people identify with their "place," where they hope to flourish. Since Genesis 11, all places are supervised and administered by wicked supernatural beings, and God is not physically present. So "wilderness" is everywhere. Since that Tower episode, all humanity is, in a sense, in exile. In the future, when Christ returns to rule, the entire world will be transformed, Satan and his minions will be bound in an abyss, and place then will be meaningful, because all places on earth will be sacred space. The Messianic Kingdom is when all humanity will return from exile to inhabit a specific place. In this Church Age, believers are to be un-rooted, sojourners, pilgrims on mission; they don't (or shouldn't anyway) identify as particular place-dwellers.