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An Old Testament Biblical Theology of Wilderness: From Simple Setting to Cosmic Context

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An Old Testament Biblical Theology of Wilderness: From Simple Setting to Cosmic Context

Abstract

Initially, wilderness may seem to be a concept of little significance in the Old Testament apart from acting as the setting for various events. However, as the Old Testament advances, wilderness becomes a place of vital importance as it is described in cosmic and eschatological language. The narratives within Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy do not form wilderness as a biblical motif in its own right. Rather, they lay the foundation for such a formation to take place later in Scripture. The Pentateuch teaches us that wilderness is to be understood as a place of both divine provision and national formation but also a place of rebellion and judgment. Not only this, but as the overarching characteristic of wilderness, the Pentateuch submits the location as a testing ground for the people of God. There is a historical pattern set in the Pentateuch concerning the wilderness that later pericopes like the Prophets pick up and develop. Building upon the wilderness as a place of rebellion in the Pentateuch, prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah symbolically suggest that the wilderness is a place of chaos where sin and judgment reign. This becomes a cosmic reality, not simply a past Israelite experience. Incredibly, it is not God's plan to allow the wilderness to remain a cosmic place of chaos, but by His grace and power, the Lord intends to transform it into an Edenic place where people can experience God's presence. The rejuvenated wilderness is where God plans to gather His people to then guide them into the new exodus. What began as a mundane place of sand, rock, and rebellion has now become a glorious place of restoration.

Keywords

Biblical Theology, Wilderness, New Exodus

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Introduction

Biblical-thematic development is a feature of Scripture that should be listed among its many awe-inspiring characteristics. Just as with any good book, the Bible builds upon concepts and develops themes which work to raise the affections of readers not only toward Scripture, but also toward the sovereignty of the God of Scripture, to Whom credit must be given for intricately weaving together past, present, and future. There is no shortage of examples as concerns scriptural thematic development one could point to for powerfully illustrating this reality, and perhaps one of the more furtive examples is wilderness. To most, it might seem odd to pursue an extensive study on something like a biblical thematic development of wilderness. After all, at first thought, it does not seem that Scripture gives this concept any prominence. As we will see, however, this assumption is erroneous.

Upon an overly superficial reading of the wilderness-texts in the Old Testament—especially those that find themselves toward the beginning of the biblical chronology—it is easy to conclude that Scripture stops at simply reporting wilderness as the scene of a random smattering of plot points within its narrative. It is not that simple, however. As the Bible develops, it begins to teach us that the wilderness was not simply an arbitrary setting for events like Israel’s wanderings and *etcetera*. Rather, the concept of wilderness becomes an important motif in the Old Testament. Furthermore, contrary to one’s potentially fundamental negative suppositions related to wilderness, the setting is presented as a surprisingly salient location for the people of God. When surveying the Old Testament specifically, the concept of wilderness transforms from a mere geographical site of noteworthy events in the Pentateuch to a place of cosmic significance in the Prophets.

Orienting the Discussion

Our Term: Wilderness

Before drawing from the surprisingly deep well of biblical theology as it relates to the Old Testament’s image of wilderness, it is helpful to first orient the discussion by briefly surveying a purely lexical meaning of the term along with some related points of interest. The predominant Hebrew word translated as “wilderness” or “desert” in the Old Testament is מִדְבָּר (*midbar*). Most basically, the term means an “uninhabited land” which conjures up familiar pictures of a desolate space full of sand and rock, though it could also simply refer to a region

of plains where animals graze.¹ Thus, at its first level, the term refers to a vapid geographical location. Budding out of this first level meaning, at its second level, *midbar* refers to an “area that does not provide sufficient resources to sustain long-term community existence.”² Indeed, an area lacking common resources is therefore an area replete with threat and danger, especially if there is to be any significant length of time spent there. As a result, since locations of threat and danger often necessitate someone or something to quell those threats and dangers, one easily sees the potential for wilderness to become a place of deliverance and salvation.³

Our Structure: Pentateuch and Prophets

Framing the forthcoming study within proper understanding of the term wilderness does not necessarily reveal anything groundbreaking, though it does act as an important steppingstone to move forward since, based on our 21st century linguistic context, we sometimes incorrectly assume the meaning of biblical terms. In addition to lexical investigation, one more important steppingstone to arrange is the structure and delivery of our examination.⁴ Due to brevity of space, it is outside our purview to offer up a full biblical theology of wilderness that spans both testaments.⁵ This does not, however, make it useless or impossible to effectively discuss the topic within our shorter space. Since the major thrusts of the biblical theological development of wilderness in the Old Testament occur in two primary places, we have precedent for solely focusing on those two areas.

¹ J. D. Douglas and Merrill C. Tenney, “desert,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 352.

² D. W. Baker, “Wilderness, Desert,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), eBook, 893.

³ C. L. Eggleston, “Wilderness, Desert,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Prophets*, ed. Mark J. Boda and J. G. McConville (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), eBook, 843.

⁴ Proper credit must be given to the inspiration for the structure of study going forward. While an identical format is not used here, our flow of moving through the biblical witness to trace the motif of wilderness is modeled after Charles H. H. Scobie’s work, *The Ways of Our God: An Approach to Biblical Theology*.

⁵ For a closer and much lengthier look at a biblical theology of wilderness, one specific text is invaluable: *Christ in the Wilderness* by Ulrich W. Mauser. There is rarely a modern discussion on a theology of wilderness that does not at some point reference this work.

The two dominant portions of the Old Testament which develop the theme of wilderness are the Pentateuch and the Prophets.⁶ As the starting place of Scripture, it is important to note that “[t]he wilderness plays a significant role in the life of the Pentateuch.”⁷ Even a not so careful reader of Scripture will readily notice the vast amount of time for Israel’s life that is cast in the context of wilderness. It is here, then, that the foundation for all wilderness understanding is found since it is here that the wilderness is first introduced. While the context of wilderness certainly manifests itself in each of the five books of the Pentateuch, Genesis and Leviticus act as outliers since their concerns are primarily geared toward other matters.⁸ This leaves Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy as the cruxes of wilderness motif development in the Pentateuch, and so only these books will be referenced. After the Pentateuch, the second portion of interest are the Prophets. The Prophets stand uniquely exigent amidst the development of the wilderness motif. They, unlike other texts, cast forth a vision for the “expectation of a new time which Israel will have to spend in the wilderness.”⁹ The prophets that most clearly demonstrate this vision are Isaiah and Ezekiel.¹⁰ Upon understanding our term of focus and the structure with which we will proceed, we are now free to examine the first area of interest: the Pentateuch

The Pentateuch and Wilderness: Description

As one begins to survey the development of wilderness in the Bible, given its chronological placement, the Pentateuch naturally acts as the first conduit for understanding. It would be hard for a theme to develop if the object of that theme

⁶ Sun Wook Kim, “The Wilderness as a Place of the New Exodus in Mark’s Feeding Miracles,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no. 2 (2018), <http://journals.sagepub.com/home/btba>, 63. There is also a significant amount of material related to wilderness in the Psalms, but we have chosen to focus heavily on the Prophets because whereas the Prophets cast forth a vision as it relates to wilderness, the Psalms offer much more reflection on Israel’s wilderness journeys than they do new information. Thus, as the former has much to do with developing wilderness in the Bible, the latter is more content with reflecting upon the wilderness while elevating the importance of some of its aspects for the benefit of Israel’s life, thought, and devotion [Ulrich W. Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness* (Naperville, IL: SCM Press, 1963), 38].

⁷ Baker, “Wilderness, Desert,” 893.

⁸ S. Talmon, “*midbar, raba,*” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 8, ed. G. J. Botterweck, and H. Ringgren (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 105.

⁹ Mauser, *Christ*, 45.

¹⁰ Eggleston, “Wilderness, Desert,” 846.

was not first securely established, and this is what we find in the Pentateuch. Rather than establishing the concept of wilderness within its own theological category, the Pentateuch does not endeavor to supply the wilderness tradition any explicitly intrinsic value. Instead, its major concern is description.¹¹

Wilderness Introduced

It is not until the book of Exodus that the wilderness setting receives prominence.¹² At the concept's inception in the book, wilderness is quickly and indissolubly linked with the exodus of the Israelites and thus plays a very formative role in the broader exodus tradition.¹³ It is directly into the wilderness where the Israelites travel upon Pharaoh freeing them (Ex. 13:18; Num. 33:8) and so it is the setting of wilderness that properly inaugurates the exodus—an event in Israelite history that stands chief among the rest.

Initially, the wilderness was only to be a place of temporary sojourn as God led His people from a place of paganism and slavery into the Promised Land—the prototypical place of blessing.¹⁴ There is no early suggestion that the wilderness was meant by God to be a place of any significant residence for Israel. This is especially apparent in Exodus 3:8 where God plainly reveals His intentions for the Israelites, which was “...to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians, *and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land*” (emphasis added).¹⁵ Only Israelite residence in Egypt and then the Promised Land receives mention in this verse. Contrary to what we see play out in the Pentateuchal narrative, it seems that the wilderness was really only meant to be “a place of [brief] transition for the people of Israel as they journeyed from the liberation of Egypt to the promise of Canaan.”¹⁶ So, what began as an insignificant setting of temporary sojourn was later developed into something more precisely because the time Israel spent in the wilderness was unintended.

¹¹ Talmon, “*midbar, raba*,” 111.

¹² Baker, “Wilderness, Desert,” 893.

¹³ Bryan D. Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing a Biblical Motif* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 96.

¹⁴ Talmon, “*midbar, raba*,” 111.

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the NASB version.

¹⁶ Lynne Wall, “Finding Identity in the Wilderness,” in *Wilderness: Essays in Honour of Frances Young*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (New York, NY: T&T Clark, 2005), 67.

What was supposed to be a provisional period acting as the bridge between a bad situation and a glorious situation turned sour. Similarly to how we take past mistakes and develop them into learning opportunities for future situations, the prophets saw Israel's wilderness blunder as ripe to develop into "a motif [which could be applied] to all comparable situations later."¹⁷ We begin to recognize, then, that the Pentateuch does not by itself present wilderness as a defined motif. It is rather later texts applying wilderness to comparable situations where the motif begins to form.

The Positive Aspects: Wilderness as Place of Divine Provision and National Formation

Typically, when one conceptualizes of wilderness, perceptions tend to lean toward the negative side. As the assessment usually operates, it is a barren place, so it is also a bad place. The same kind of estimation is often true concerning the setting of wilderness in the Pentateuch, especially since we almost exclusively attribute Israel's time in the wilderness with disobedience. While disobedience certainly has a prominent place within the wilderness motif, there is still a clear positive pole associated with the setting as well. In fact, within Exodus, it is the positive pole which readers first encounter.¹⁸

Wilderness as Place of Divine Provision

As has already been suggested, the first mention of wilderness in Exodus occurs within the framework of the exit from Egypt. As a place of bondage and slavery, Egypt represented a threat toward Israel from which God provided rescue. Though the provision from God in the exodus was not the wilderness *per se*, wilderness still played a vital role within this provision. God divinely guided His people to and through the wilderness, therefore making it a *place of provision*. Interestingly, the route to exit Egypt that made the most practical sense was not the one taken. It was the longer route *through the wilderness* where God guided the Israelites, and this was to protect them from the potential threat of war posed by what was clearly the shorter route (Ex. 13:17-18).¹⁹

¹⁷ Talmon, "midbar, raba," 111.

¹⁸ George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1968), 13.

¹⁹ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 269.

The wilderness acted as the place of provision in Israel's initial exit, but it also upheld this characteristic ongoing. Even after Israel had spent numerous days in the wilderness, upon encountering the Red Sea, God continued to show provision by guiding His people through the obstacle. With the Egyptian army bearing down on Israel, there would have been serious consequences if God had not offered His provision. All of this reveals that God's sovereign hand was clearly displayed within the initial stages of Israel's exit from Egypt, and "[t]he fundamental point of this section is that Yahweh guides Israel in exodus. His guidance is plain and continual."²⁰ In fact, as juxtaposition to the Israelite's cry in Exodus 14:11 that the wilderness would become the place for Israel's *demise*, it veritably became the place for Israel's *provision*.

During reflection on this stage of Israel's time in the wilderness, Exodus 19:4 encapsulates the provision God's people experienced: "'You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings, and brought you to Myself.'" Apparently, in Exodus 13-18, God provided such a wide variety of guidance and resources to the Israelites on their sojourn through the wilderness that it was as if He flew them directly over their troubles.²¹ Truly, there is no shortage of examples of God's provision for Israel even subsequent to the Red Sea account: God guided them by using the pillars of smoke and fire (Ex. 13:21), He provided water (Ex. 15:22-27), He provided manna (Ex. 16:4), and much more.²² Looking back at the exodus event, Numbers and Deuteronomy also praise the provision of God in the wilderness. Numbers 14:22 talks of "signs...in the wilderness" which were references to the mighty acts of God as He provided for His people.²³ Furthermore, unquestionably evoking imagery of provision, Deuteronomy 1:31 describes "the years of desert travail as a time when the Lord carried Israel along as a father carries his son."²⁴ Amazingly, though the wilderness is a setting of desolation and scarce resources, it became a place of abundant provision thanks to Israel's mighty God.

²⁰ John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1987), 187.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 262.

²² Baker, "Wilderness, Desert," 896.

²³ Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 260.

²⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: B&H Publishing, 1994), eBook, 64.

Wilderness as Place of National Formation

Not only did wilderness become a place of provision for the Israelites, but it also became a place of national formation. Wilderness gained “a special meaning to the Israelites, for they were formed as the people of God in the wilderness wanderings of the exodus.”²⁵ One specific arbiter of this national formation concerns the revelation of God’s name. Although the Tetragrammaton is used throughout Genesis, it is not until Exodus that God explicitly reveals His name. While source-critical analysis and the broad strokes of the Documentary Hypothesis which discusses the chronology regarding God’s self-revelation of His name is not our concern, it is none-the-less significant that the canon presents this wilderness scene as the first explicit revelation of God’s name to His people.²⁶

The important point, then, is that the revelation of God’s name occurred in the wilderness (Ex. 3:13-15; cf. Ex. 3:1), and while it was technically revealed to Moses specifically, it occurred on behalf of the entire nation of Israel.²⁷ Part of the reason this is so important is because central to Israel’s national identity was that Yahweh chose to reveal His name to them specifically. It was to no other nation that God directly revealed His name, and so Israel received a special and prominent place. Furthermore, the knowledge of God’s name put Israel in a supremely unique position to communicate with Him as they did.²⁸

The second vital wilderness occurrence which worked to precipitate the formation of Israel as a nation was the giving of the Mosaic Covenant and Law.²⁹

²⁵ Kim, “The Wilderness,” 73.

²⁶ Mauser, *Christ*, 24. Debate swarms on whether it is at this point in history where God first reveals His full name. If not the first revelation of God’s name, at the very least, Exodus 3:13-15 acts “to underscore the precise identity of the God who is now addressing Moses” (Enns, *Exodus*, 106). In this view, the main focus is not necessarily the specific name revealed. Rather, the focus is on the *identity of the God behind* the name. As such, the God revealed in Exodus 3 becomes clearly and intricately connected to the God of the patriarchs.

²⁷ Durham, *Exodus*, 41.

²⁸ Mauser, *Christ*, 24.

²⁹ Though the broad setting of Israel’s reception of the covenant and law does occur in the wilderness, the more immediate setting is the mountain (Talmon, “*midbar, raba*,” 111-12). It is on the mountain where Moses properly receives the covenant and law, yet this does not negate the fact that it is in the wilderness where that covenant and law is brought to the people. Moses descended the mountain to give the covenant and law to the people, the people did not ascend the mountain.

It is no secret that these are crucial not only for the relationship between God and Israel, but also for the identity of Israel.³⁰ Exodus 24:1-7 acts as the major text for the covenant and law given in the wilderness. It is within this text where Moses descends the mountain to bind the Israelites to the Lord through covenant and law, and it is also here where the people gladly confess, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex. 24:7)! Thus, it is in the wilderness where Israel accepts the terms and conditions to enter a covenant relationship with the Lord.³¹ Even much later in Deuteronomy where Israel was about to enter the promised land, the covenant was renewed with Israel. Just as formerly, it was in the wilderness where Moses announced this covenant renewal and said, “This day you have become a people for the Lord your God” (Deut. 27:9). The most dominant characteristic of Israel was that they were chosen to be God’s people, and as we are beginning to see, many of the most pivotal moments where this choice was being defined occurred in the wilderness.³²

Finally, Israel experienced national formation within the wilderness since it was here where their election took place. Though it would be untrue to suggest that the people of Israel were not elected until the time of the exodus—after all, patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and *etcetera* were certainly elected—it is true that finally, as those with a true national identity, “Yahweh’s choice which made [Israel] [H]is elect people is grounded in the exodus event...[of which] the wilderness is the womb.”³³ The pinnacle electoral phrase scattered throughout the Pentateuch says as much: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Ex. 20:2; cf. Num. 15:41, Deut. 5:6). It was to the wilderness where this out-bringing led, and so it would be proper to consider the wilderness as the backdrop to that election (Deut. 32:9-12).

The Negative Aspects: Wilderness as Place of Rebellion and Chastening

True as it may be that wilderness in the Pentateuch is shed in a certain positive light, we must still recognize that it is dominated by negative connotations.³⁴ The wilderness was not supposed to be a place of extended stay

³⁰ Wall, “Finding Identity,” 72.

³¹ Durham, *Exodus*, 347.

³² Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 299.

³³ Mauser, *Christ*, 29.

³⁴ Coats, *Rebellion*, 15.

for Israel, yet that is what it became. The negative aspects of the wilderness motif are characterized by sinfulness: “[t]he delay in reaching the goal of the conquest [and their prolonged sojourn in the wilderness] resulted from Israel’s own sinfulness.”³⁵

Wilderness as Place of Rebellion

Scholars have noted that the wilderness narratives represent “the era of [Israel’s] ‘rebellion’ par excellence.”³⁶ Even immediately subsequent to the Israelites witnessing God’s mighty act of salvation from Egypt and her armies at the Red Sea, the nation fell into rebellion. First, the rebellious attitude of Israel manifested through their incessant grumbling.³⁷ The grumbings of Israel appear as early as Exodus 14:11 where the nation expresses their initial disapproval of the entrance into the wilderness. However, the scene that truly becomes prototypical of Israel’s wilderness sojourn is their grumbling just one chapter later: “So the people grumbled at Moses” (Ex. 15:22; cf. Ex. 16:2). The grumbings described were not merely harmless complaints but were rather the expressions of rebellious hearts. Despite the provisions God had already given to His people, in the face of trouble, Israel responded in faithlessness. Initially, these troubles were a lack of water and food and were a direct result of the environment within which the nation found themselves.³⁸ Very quickly, instead of trusting God to provide, Israel exhibits a malicious attitude toward their Savior.

Not only does Israel exhibit a rebellious attitude at the beginning of their time in the wilderness, but they also exhibit this same attitude well into their sojourn. Numbers 11 and the section of narrative it belongs to is characterized as an “example of the disaffection and rebellion of Israel in the wilderness in response to Yahweh’s clear provision.”³⁹ What is striking here is that, yet again, Israel responds to God’s provision with grumbling (Num. 11:1; cf. Num. 14:2). Upon examining the initial context of Numbers 11, we find that there is no legitimate reason for Israel to be grumbling. In fact, there is even legitimate

³⁵ Talmon, “*midbar, raba*,” 113.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

³⁷ Enns, *Exodus*, 330.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 201.

reason *not* to grumble given the fact that God's guidance had been clearly visible and successful up to that point in the narrative.⁴⁰

Along with the grumbings of Israel, there is another poignant example of wilderness as a place of rebellion, and it truly is the archetypical example: the rebellion of the golden calf (Ex. 32:1-6).⁴¹ The creation of the golden calf was Israel's response to what they interpreted as God's absence. Moses had been camped on the mountain longer than the people were comfortable with, and as the representative of God, Israel saw their access to Yahweh cut off.⁴² Since the Israelites were not experiencing God the way they thought was proper, they decided to take matters into their own hands and created the golden calf which was a representation of Yahweh based on their own desires and presuppositions of proper worship conditions.⁴³ As a rejection of God's own self-disclosure, the golden calf incident acted as a true representation of the people's rebellious hearts. Reflecting on the golden calf incident much later, Deuteronomy uses it as the embodiment of Israel's rebellious disposition toward God in the wilderness: "Remember, do not forget how you provoked the Lord your God to wrath in the wilderness; from the day that you left the land of Egypt until you arrived at this place, you have been rebellious against the Lord" (9:7).

Wilderness as Place of Chastening

Expectedly, wilderness is not only demonstrated to be a place of Israel's rebellion, but also of God's chastening in response to that rebellion. The Israelite's grumbling and forging of the golden calf was not met with silence by God, and while God's response was often gracious provision, He also displayed His wrath. In Numbers 11, we see that wilderness starts "to become a place of punishment rather than a gracious supply of food and water"⁴⁴ as it was in preceding examples. God's response to the Israelite's grumbling was raining down fire upon them, a common sign of judgment (Num. 11:1).⁴⁵ God's response to the golden calf incident was similar. Though Moses restrained the full force of

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mauser, *Christ*, 29.

⁴² Durham, *Exodus*, 419.

⁴³ Ibid., 422.

⁴⁴ Enns, *Exodus*, 331.

⁴⁵ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 202.

God's wrath by pleading with Him to refrain from completely wiping out the rebellious nation, Moses' pleading did not save the people from experiencing a measure of punishment. God's chastening of His people in this narrative results in the righteous killing of several people (Ex. 32:27-28).

Interestingly, whereas previous examples show wilderness to simply be a place of punishment, there is also precedent for viewing wilderness *as a punishment itself*. Numbers 24:26-25 contains one such example. In this narrative, the Lord is finally fed-up with the grumblings of His people and determines to cast the nation into aimless wandering in the wilderness until the rebellious generation dies out. Ironically, the pronouncement of judgment recalls the very first instance of the people's grumblings in Exodus 14:11 where the people ask rhetorically whether they have been brought into the wilderness to die.⁴⁶ As it turns out, that is precisely what happens, but this was not due to God's initial desire for the exodus generation. Instead, this was due to the people's own rebellion. Predictably, their grumbling turned against them.

The Neutral Aspect: Wilderness as Place of Testing

The positive and negative aspects of wilderness in the Pentateuch have been made clear, yet one aspect remains which is being labeled as neutral, and that is the testing of Israel in the wilderness. This aspect of wilderness is labeled as such because inherently, testing is neither good nor bad. As a meta-aspect, wilderness as a place of testing encapsulates the entirety of the tradition. "The wilderness is described as a time of testing, where God was ascertaining the true relationship his people had with [H]im in order that [H]e might bless their faithfulness."⁴⁷ Reflecting upon Israel's time in the wilderness, Deuteronomy outrightly submits the wilderness as a testing ground (Deut. 8:2; cf. Ex. 15:25, 16:4). Unfortunately, the biblical consensus is that Israel failed their test, and this is made clear by the nation's rampant rebellion and subsequent punishments, especially in the book of Numbers. The outcome of the test was negative though the testing itself was not. Even within Deuteronomy 8:2, the purpose for the testing is explained: so that the faithfulness of God's people could be gauged.

Understanding the wilderness as a place of testing adds something important to the Pentateuch's biblical theological contribution. Though, broadly, the Pentateuch does focus on description rather than motif development, there is still an ever so subtle seed of hope placed amidst its description. Because of God's sovereignty and benevolence, failure in the Old Testament is often

⁴⁶ Ibid., 263.

⁴⁷ Baker, "Wilderness, Desert," 896.

recognized later as opportunity for a greater measure of success. God will not allow His plans to be thwarted. If the wilderness truly is a testing ground for the people of God as the Pentateuch suggests, recognizing how Israel performed, we are left in dismay. Thus, the failure of God's people within the wilderness implicitly begs the questions, will the wilderness remain a place of failure? Will sin and rebellion be the final experience of God's people within the wilderness? Answering these types of questions is one of the major projects of the Prophets as they take up the mantle and begin to truly develop the motif of wilderness.

The Prophets and Wilderness: Casting a Vision

The foundational nature of the Pentateuch in understanding the biblical motif of wilderness is precisely why it has dominated such a large portion of the discussion thus far. It has been an important endeavor because post-Pentateuchal literature only builds upon and amplifies what has already been established. While the wilderness setting in the Pentateuch is mainly used to describe the events which transpired therein, "the wilderness in...the Prophets is filled with symbolic and cosmic characteristics."⁴⁸ The program of the Prophets is to look back at the wilderness events of the Pentateuch to cast forth a vision of a future where wilderness plays a vital role.

The Negative Aspect: Wilderness as Place of Chaos

In the interest of following our structure up to this point, it is helpful to again separate our discussion into both positive and negative poles. Though we began with the positive pole in the first section, we begin with the negative pole here to better represent the chronological development of the motif in prophetic literature. First of all, in this pericope, "[t]he wilderness represents...a general place of death and disorder, [i.e., chaos,] and prophetic literature evokes this location to communicate the depth of divine anger and the risk Israel runs if they fail to repent."⁴⁹ It is generally well known that one of the primary concerns of prophetic literature is to issue a call for repentance to the nation of Israel in the throes of their rebellion. Thus, there is little surprise that wilderness finds a home in this major theme of the Prophets.

One of the primary ways the Prophets depict the wilderness as a place of chaos is by eliciting the rebellion of Israel that took place there. Indeed, rebellion is a form of chaos in that it rejects and toils against God's order just as chaos

⁴⁸ Kim, "The Wilderness," 64.

⁴⁹ Eggleston, "Wilderness, Desert," 844.

does. The book of Ezekiel perhaps best represents the prophetic literature in this respect. Especially in the first half of Ezekiel 20, God through the prophet uses the wilderness tradition to exemplify Israel's continuing rebellion. Just as the exodus generation "rebelled against [God] and were not willing to listen" (Ezek. 20:8), the Lord sees the actions of Ezekiel's generation and asks them, "'Will you defile yourselves in the way of your fathers?'" (Ezek. 20:30)? Evidently, it was Ezekiel's purpose in chapter 20 to interpret his present situation in light of the theological past, and just as Israel's rebellion in the wilderness was met with God's intervention through chastisement, so is the people's rebellion in Ezekiel's time.⁵⁰ Though the people of Israel were not physically in the wilderness as were their ancestors, spiritually, Ezekiel seems to argue that as consequence of their rebellion they were placing themselves there none-the-less. Israel of Ezekiel's day was in the wilderness even though they were not in the wilderness. Thus, prophets like Ezekiel began to set theological precedent by developing the wilderness tradition. No longer was wandering in the wilderness strictly considered a physical reality. Rather, because wilderness was coming to be understood as a place of chaos, when chaotic events like rebellion occurred, they were depicted as manifestations of a wilderness situation.

A second poignant passage illustrating wilderness as a place of chaos is Isaiah 34. Here, rebellious Edom is described as being destroyed to give way to a wilderness wasteland. Subsequently, Isaiah begins describing this wilderness in certain chaotic terms.⁵¹ The newly made wilderness is described as a place of perpetual destruction where habitation is impossible (Is. 34:9-10).⁵² It is described as a place full of wild animals and beasts (Is. 34:11-15). Ironically, in the wilderness, even tools for construction will be turned into tools of destruction due to the utter chaos of the setting (Is. 34:11). As Isaiah employs the theme of chaos to the wilderness scene he paints, his purpose in using tools commonly associated with construction is to cast these human ordinances in stark contrast with the righteousness of God. That which mankind sees as their tools of benefit are rather tools of depravity in the eyes of God.⁵³ By no mistake, reminiscent of Isaiah's description is what wilderness became even in the Pentateuch. Just as we saw the

⁵⁰ Leslie C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), 15.

⁵¹ John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: 2003), 387.

⁵² John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 1-39*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 614.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

wilderness itself turned into a punishment for the people of Israel, here we see the same: a rebellious and sinful nation is cast into the wilderness, a place of chaos. The descriptions of Edom within a wilderness scene are not simply word pictures to promote literary admiration. They are instead offered to Israel as an example of what will happen to them barring repentance from their sin.⁵⁴ As the prophetic literature continues, wilderness ceases to be about simple description and clearly becomes a place of cosmic significance. Thus far, the cosmic significance of wilderness is found within its presentation as a place of chaos where sinful people reside.

The Positive Aspect: Wilderness as Place of Restoration

Fortunately, the prophets do not stop at depicting wilderness as a place of chaos. In the end, developing wilderness into a place of chaos serves to emphasize the gloriousness of what God plans to make the wilderness in the end: a place of restoration. Primarily in Isaiah, what the prophets teach is that the wilderness “will be transformed into a fertile land by God’s grace,”⁵⁵ and the wilderness will become a new place of gathering and guiding—a new exodus as it were.⁵⁶

First, the prophets describe the wilderness as being turned into fertile land, an idea quite contrary to how the location had been understood in the past. There is no shortage of examples in Isaiah to illustrate this reality. Immediately following Isaiah’s description of the wilderness as a place of chaos in chapter 34, he states that “the wilderness will rejoice and blossom” (Is. 35:1). Chapter 35 stands in wonderful contrast to the previous chapter and announces that the chaos of the wilderness will not be its final status. Rather, for those who trust God, the wilderness which acted as judgment will be transformed into a garden likened to Eden (Is. 51:3).⁵⁷ Isaiah even goes so far as presenting the wilderness as Eden’s replacement. Upon God’s transformation of the wilderness into a garden, this new setting is now depicted as the place where people can experience God’s presence instead of Eden. Similar language is used in Isaiah 41 where God announces that He “will turn the desert into pools of water” (Is. 41:18). This verse recalls the excursus of chapter 35, and here, one more element is added: God will not simply transform the wilderness into fertile ground for the sake of people, but also for the

⁵⁴ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 386.

⁵⁵ Kim, “The Wilderness,” 64.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 65-66.

⁵⁷ Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah*, 620.

sake of Himself. God acts in this way “So that they may see and recognize... That the hand of the Lord has done this” (Is. 41:20). At God’s transformation of the wilderness, everyone will see that He does the impossible.⁵⁸ Very quickly, we are able to observe wilderness becoming a place of restoration: “[t]he chaotic force of the desert is defeated by God as his grace turns it into green, blooming, and moist ground.”⁵⁹

Secondly, God does not transform the wilderness into fertile land simply to make it a place of beauty, but instead He does it for a specific purpose, and that purpose is for the gathering and guidance of His people into a new exodus. Later in Isaiah, the transformation of the wilderness is described as a road-making process for the coming of God to aid His people (Is. 40:3-5).⁶⁰ The aid which arrives with God is first described as a gathering of His people just as a shepherd gathers his sheep (Is. 40:11). Significantly, the gathering spoken of occurs in the context of the wilderness itself. Contrary to the first exodus, God’s people will not be gathered to then be brought into the wilderness; they will be gathered *in the wilderness itself*. In this same block of text, Isaiah also informs us that God will guide His people through the wilderness once He gathers them. Though initially the road of Isaiah 40 is being prepared for God specifically, upon God’s traverse of the road and the gathering of His people, God will guide them through that same road. Isaiah “describes Israel’s way through the desert in powerful antithetical phrases. Everything in the nature of the desert which is troublesome for the journey of the redeemed will be transformed into a condition insuring an easy passage” (Is. 40:4).⁶¹

God gathering and guiding His people in the wilderness should immediately call the exodus to mind. Unequivocally, however, the gathering and guiding discussed in Isaiah is described as “a new thing” (Is. 43:19). In this new thing, “[t]he same God who acted wondrously and powerfully in the first exodus [creates] a new and determinate ‘way’” which can effectively be considered the way for a new exodus.⁶² Though the wilderness proved troublesome for Israel in the first exodus, it is still this same barren setting where the new exodus will take place. The pivotal difference, however, is that this eschatological wilderness will be a land of blessing rather than of scarce resources and rebellion.

⁵⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 461.

⁵⁹ Kim, “The Wilderness,” 65.

⁶⁰ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 445.

⁶¹ Mauser, *Christ*, 51.

⁶² Estelle, *Echoes of Exodus*, 152.

Conclusion

Initially, wilderness may seem to be a concept of little significance in the Old Testament apart from acting as the setting for various events. However, as the Old Testament advances, wilderness becomes a place of vital importance as it is described in cosmic and eschatological language. The narratives within Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy do not form wilderness as a biblical motif in its own right. Rather, they lay the foundation for such a formation to take place later in Scripture. The Pentateuch teaches us that wilderness is to be understood as a place of both divine provision and national formation but also a place of rebellion and judgment. Not only this, but as the overarching characteristic of wilderness, the Pentateuch submits the location as a testing ground for the people of God. There is a historical pattern set in the Pentateuch concerning the wilderness that later pericopes like the Prophets pick up and develop. Building upon the wilderness as a place of rebellion in the Pentateuch, prophets like Ezekiel and Isaiah symbolically suggest that the wilderness is a place of chaos where sin and judgment reign. This becomes a cosmic reality, not simply a past Israelite experience. Incredibly, it is not God's plan to allow the wilderness to remain a cosmic place of chaos, but by His grace and power, the Lord intends to transform it into an Edenic place where people can experience God's presence. The rejuvenated wilderness is where God plans to gather His people to then guide them into the new exodus. What began as a mundane place of sand, rock, and rebellion has now become a glorious place of restoration.

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