

The Desert as Reality and Symbol*

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Christian spirituality, or life, in the contemporary world, as it attempts to find its roots as well as read the signs of our times, has surfaced certain ways of articulating spiritual self-understanding that are at one and the same time both contemporary and traditional, showing that there need not be a dichotomy between these two facets of any profound Christian life. One example of such a way of speaking is “the spiritual journey,” in which the Christian is envisioned as a pilgrim on his or her way; at times this journey is correlated with life’s passages as articulated from a psychological perspective.¹ Such an image could hardly be more traditional or more contemporary.

Another such image is that of the desert. Few words are heard more frequently in the language of contemporary spirituality, and few are more expressive of the traditional roots of the Judeo-Christian experience. The desert experience was one of the formative experiences in Israel’s history as it was later theologically reflected upon.² Both Moses and Elijah conjure up images of the desert, and greater prophets than this there could not be. Christian origins, too, cannot avoid the role of the Judean wilderness for John, the baptizer, and also for Jesus. Even Paul speaks of traveling into Arabia after his conversion (Gal. 1:17). The religious quality of the desert has come home to me in a personal way when I have had the opportunity to be there, once at Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico for forty days in 1979, and again on an excursion from the École Biblique de Jérusalem into the Negev and Sinai in 1981.

This Judeo-Christian reality or symbol manifests itself over and over. It is not only rooted in our traditions; it is a direction or trend in spirituality today. We hear much talk about a “desert experience” or a “desert day.” Susan Muto’s *A Practical Guide to Spiritual Reading* (Dimension Books, 1976) devotes a major section of her book to “Living the Desert Experience.” The second volume of *Studies in Formative Spirituality* discusses “spirituality and the desert experience.” People are reading the desert fathers. Athanasius’s life of Antony has been one of the volumes to appear in the Paulist series Classics of Western Spirituality. In a more academic way, the desert has come to the foreground with the discoveries in the Judean wilderness (for example, Qumran) and in the Egyptian desert (for example, Nag Hammadi). An important contribution has been Edward Schillebeeckx’s discussion of the wilderness background to John and Jesus.³ Outside a specifically religious context, Saint-Exupéry’s *Wind, Sand and Stars* has moved many readers. These are only a few of many possible references. Evenari, Shanan, and Tadmor in their work on *The Negev: The Challenge of a Desert* write:

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¹ E.g., Walter Hilton, “The Parable of the Pilgrim,” *Spirituality Today*, 33 (1981): 250–56. Also Evelyn and James Whitehead, *Christian Life Patterns: The Psychological Challenge and Religious Invitation of Adult Life* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1979).

² See Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Row, 1962).

³ *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), especially pp. 126–39.

It is no whim of history that the birth of the first monotheistic faith took place in a desert, or that it was followed there by the other two great religions, Christianity and Islam. The prophets of Israel repeatedly sought and found inspiration in the desert. Christian hermits fled to it to escape the pollution of the world and to commune with God, and in modern times the secular literature of the desert in the works of Doughty, Lawrence, Philby, Thomas, and many other famous travelers reveals the powerful influence it exerts on the minds and spirits of all who seek its mysteries.⁴

Thus, given its traditional and current appeal, I have chosen to begin my own contributions to *Spirituality Today* where religious experience itself often begins, whether personal or collective—with the desert.



When one thinks of desert, one thinks of desertedness and barrenness. Yet it is a barrenness balanced with beauty. The desert is not simply one thing. In its utter simplicity the desert is multifaceted. Nor can one simply say that a desert is a desert. There are different kinds of deserts. Nor is a desert simply a place without rainfall. A desert can experience flash floods, as bedouin well know and fear. It is a diminished rainfall, an unpredictable and irregular rainfall, yet a rainfall that supports widely varied and surprising vegetation.

These two words, unpredictable and surprising, are the two words with which I would describe my own experience of the desert. The unpredictability can be frightening, the surprise enlightening.

The desert is simply nature at its best, or at its worst, perhaps at its purest, and this quality it shares with mountains and oceans or seas.

Oh! that the Desert were my dwelling place,
 With one fair Spirit for my minister,
 That I might all forget the human race,
 And, hating no one, love but only her!
 Ye Elements!—in whose ennobling stir
 I feel myself exalted—Can ye not
 Accord me such a being? Do I err
 In deeming such inhabit many a spot?
 Though with them to converse can rarely be our lot.

There is a pleasure in the pathless woods,
 There is a rapture on the lonely shore,
 There is society where none intrudes
 By the deep Sea, and music in its roar:
 I love not Man the less, but Nature more,
 From these our interviews in which I steal

⁴ Michael Evenari, Leslie Shanan, and Naphtali Tadmor, *The Negev: The Challenge of a Desert* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 9.

From all I may be, or have been before,
 To mingle with the Universe, and feel
 What I can ne'er express, yet can not all conceal.

Roll on, thou deep and dark blue Ocean-roll!
 Ten thousand fleets sweep over thee in vain;
 Man marks the earth with ruin—his control
 Stops with the shore;— upon the watery plain
 The wrecks are all thy deed, nor doth remain
 A shadow of man's ravage, save his own,
 When, for a moment, like a drop of rain,
 He sinks into thy depths with bubbling groan,
 Without a grave, unknelled, uncoffined, and unknowns.⁵

Untouched nature has a purity to it that can raise one's heart and mind immediately to God. One who is in touch with the land, with nature, does not create a sophisticated view of secondary causes. There is an immediacy about nature that takes one straight to its Lord. Its barren and vast plenitude signals transcendence. The desert continually made me aware of my utter dependency on the Lord. One lives there by faith. One cannot harbor illusions of self-sufficiency. The dependency is too real, too obvious, too frightening, or even consoling. Whether it be salvation from heat, from cold, from thirst, from falling, one's human assurances are often out of reach and one must rely on nature, on God alone.

The experience of the desert is first of all an experience of dependency. Once one makes this shift from self-reliance to reliance upon God, from independence to dependence, the desert is no longer frightening but reveals an unparalleled beauty. The desert is a call to surrender; it is also the offer of delight. The awful becomes the awe-full. And neither of these two sides of nature can be dismissed. Both are part of the reality and the experience. Its barren landscape and dry breeze can inspire insecurity and facilitate fatigue. One can bake by day and freeze by night: survival is an issue. At the same time its varied colors, its fantastic shapes, its breathtaking vastness and staggering heights, its solemn silence, especially this stillness—these delight the senses, overwhelm them, can lead only to a beauty that one cannot grasp. Its uncontaminated and sometimes unthinkable purity can easily lead to the description from Deuteronomy 1:19—“that great and terrible wilderness.”

The desert invites dependency. The desert reveals its beauty. The desert is also an alternating rhythm of complaint and praise. One need not be in the desert for long, whether it be mild Judean wilderness, the stark southern Negev, or the mountains of Sinai, before the interior oscillation between fatigue/fear and beauty/delight manifest themselves in two complaints. Spiritual maturity and self-surrender do not necessarily remove the rhythm. It is like going uphill and downhill. Both are inevitable. The Israelite experience makes all the sense in the world. Even Jesus' being tested called him out of peaceful self-composure. Both these, complaint and praise, simply show

⁵ George Gordon, Lord Byron, “Childe Harold's Pilgrimage, A Romance,” canto 4, stanzas 177-79.

how readily one's heart and mind move directly to the Lord. To whom else could one complain? Whom else should one praise? When it is hot in the midday sun, one longs for the cool and promises never to complain again about being too cold. But when the midnight cold comes, one longs for the sun that will thaw one's limbs. It is as simple as that—dissatisfaction at every turn, yet turns that open up and unravel unforetold beauty as well.

But the desert, and the mountains and the oceans, wherever God's presence is more immediate to man and woman, manifest not only two sides, but many.⁶ The vastness is varied. Sand, pebbles, stones, and rocks, and no two rocks alike, neither in shape nor in color, whether grey or red, rugged or smooth, arid or flowering, windy or tranquil, the offer of life or the threat of death, and the silence speaks.

Reality becomes symbol. Reality becomes something more than simply real, or more fully real by what it reveals. Just one example—water. How the desert brings home its nature and meaning! In the desert the reality of water becomes the very symbol of life and the thin line between reality and symbol breaks down, for there is nothing more real than these symbols whose meanings are not difficult to elucidate. Water in the desert is a reality that is a gift. Every bedouin knows that. It is not to be taken for granted. One may not know with scientific sophistication its chemical composition, but one knows it contains the power of life, is a source for purification, and is always a gift, yet one upon which we depend and without which we cannot do. As symbol, its inner meaning is revealed.

The Desert as Revelatory

The desert is not an easy place in which to survive. For this very reason one becomes aware of a dependency beyond oneself. As I have mentioned before, the mountains and sea can do the same. It would take only a minor storm at sea to raise one's consciousness to a similar dependency. Not only the desert dweller but the farmer and the fisherman are well aware that their livelihood is not in their hands. But there is something else in uncontaminated nature besides survival and dependency. It has a revelatory power which is manifest in the beauty it expresses. In a strange contrast to the harshness of the desert, mountains, or sea, one is overwhelmed by their beauty as much as by one's dependency. The beauty may lie in the vastness, the strength, the silence, the color, the shapes, the vegetation, or any combination. But it is this beauty, as well as one's dependency, which turns one's heart and mind to God. The beauty reveals a beautiful face of God: God is beauty.

My first clear impression of this was at Christ in the Desert Monastery in New Mexico, and it again became apparent to me when I had several days to spend on Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain, in northern Greece. One of the effects of prayer can be described as inner peace. Yet the desert and mountains do not immediately produce this interior reality, precisely because they cause one to focus one's attention

⁶ For a valuable exegetical discussion of the wilderness theme in the Scriptures, see Ulrich Mauser *Christ in the Wilderness* (London: SCM Press, 1963). He also points to a parallel of the desert with the mountain and the sea, especially within the Gospel of Mark.

outside oneself. One can close one's eyes and pray. But one cannot close one's eyes and capture what the desert, the ocean, and the mountains have to offer—or when one does, it is for a different reason, as we shall see. These settings of beauty draw one's attention outward. Thus, in contrast to other situations of prayer in which I felt a peace within me, I can describe the experience of the desert only as my becoming part of it, rather than its becoming part of me. It was more difficult to delineate the personal boundaries. The mountains or ocean were too big for me to master like a physical or ascetical exercise. I could only admire, appreciate, be absorbed. Rather than seeing prayer as part of me, it was more akin to seeing me as part of prayer—which is why nature and beauty and symbol and liturgy are so closely related. We are called upon to participate rather than control. But perhaps I am jumping ahead too far.

There is a beauty in nature as well as the threat it provides to our very existence. The beauty turns our gaze outward and beyond ourselves. This beauty is a share in the divine life. It is precisely the moment during which nature reveals these many facets that it becomes most real—it becomes symbol. The desert becomes symbolic as it calls us forth to participate in what it shares and reveals. There is no wonder that the reality of the desert includes the desert as a symbol, and that there is no separating these two into “the reality” and “mere symbol.” Reality is at its most profound here because one shares in its fullness and not only reacts to its surface. The reality is that it is also symbolic and it would have no power as symbol if it were not for the deeper excentration into reality. Natural beauty mediates or reveals this connectedness between reality and symbol.

A symbol is a way of knowing which is not immediately either discursive or intuitive but participative. For us, in both the discursive/objective or intuitive/personal modes of knowing, the knowledge is mine, my understanding, my insight; but symbolic knowledge never becomes “mine” in this same way. I become it; I participate. I am in the grips of what I thought I could grasp in some other way. A symbol is not only a way of knowing which draws me ever deeper into sharing its reality; a symbol is a reality that always refers me beyond itself. The reality of the symbol is unconfined. To participate is to go deeper into reality. As symbol it is not just “this water,” “this height,” “this desert,” but this desert partaking of and manifesting a beauty in which it too participates and which is essential to it. Beauty is not confined by “place” but revealed “within” it. Nature and symbol mediate reality to us and allow us to share in it.

But why mediation at all? Because the human being can only take so much. Again, beauty is the best way to exemplify this. I mentioned earlier, when one is first struck by nature, one does not close one's eyes. Yet often one does, but not in order to pray or facilitate inner peace, but simply because one can take only so much. Too much beauty can become awful. I remember distinctly an experience in New Mexico which was so breathtaking that I had to turn away for a moment. A common example of this, of course, is that one seldom looks for long directly at the sun. Beauty is precisely something that I cannot control, master, manipulate; to it I can only surrender. It can be appreciated; it never becomes mine in the same way as knowledge. But symbols

allow me, nevertheless, to participate and share in them. But I can never own them, for they transcend me; and a symbol is that reality within which immanence and transcendence break down and manifest false dichotomies, for the experience of the height of Mount Athos overlooking the sea is simply a reality in which that which is so immanent is transcendence. Here reality need not be broken up; it remains whole.

Perhaps one can see more readily now my earlier reference to liturgy. For liturgy and nature are so much alike in this particular way. The liturgy is a symbol which I am not called upon to grasp fully but in which I participate, so that reality can open itself up to me more and more and I can enter into that contact with the Divine who will never be mine, I only his; and not I his as much as we his, for like beauty, liturgy is public, common. Truly no one owns the desert; it is everyone's. Thus, liturgy is called upon to create that same reality/symbol. This relation between liturgy and beauty is a factor well emphasized in Orthodox theology. But here I go too far, except for the need to make this connection. It is the desert which we are attempting to probe, but in probing it the reality that it reveals is the same reality that liturgy reveals (albeit in different ways). One can easily see why Christian monks and solitaries who thirsted for God were drawn into its arms (the arms of nature and of liturgy).

But this word *solitary* must cause us to pause. It is possible to have a solitary experience of the desert, even if not a possessive one. Liturgy, however, can never be a solitary experience. Thus we must pause and see another facet of this "great and terrible wilderness."

The Desert as Temptation

The beauty and calm of the desert, once perceived, once felt, become an alluring and charming temptation as well as a source of divine presence—the temptation to remain. This does not imply that some are not called to a life there for the sake of the larger Christian community, but rather implies that one ordinarily does not go out into the desert as a home of permanence. That is only for a certain few. The Hebrew people wandered in the desert and never mistook it for the promised land. They did not settle it as later hermits and monks would do. Elijah did not stay on Mount Horeb; that was not its purpose. Nor did John the Baptizer remain in the wilderness. No matter how long he prepared himself in the wilderness, his mission brought him forth from it. And so with Jesus, one of whose temptations we could interpret as the temptation to stay in the desert. But before long he comes forth preaching the good news of the coming reign of God.

For many, of course, the desert presents no temptation at all. For others it is a genuine vocation. But for others it can be an allurement to a more peaceful and divine life than the call to ministry to which we are all called. For these the temptation is diabolical.

The other aspect of this temptation is to see those whose lives are lived there as the holy ones, rather than seeing the holiness of God magnificently manifest in the poor and the alienated, the stranger and widow and orphan of the Hebrew Scriptures, the hungry and the thirsty with whom Jesus identifies. This was again clear to me

during my very brief sojourn on Mount Athos, the Holy Mountain. For the many pilgrims there, one must ask: What did we come out to see? Just as we can speak of the presence of God in the holy monks, and certainly in their celebration of the divine liturgy, and also in the holy mountain itself, so we must speak of the presence of God in the fishermen and laborers, mentioned but in passing in books on Athos, at the port in Daphne where pilgrims first land. Few of us come to see them, make the trip to Athos in order to visit Daphne. Yet this represents the mistake and the temptation—to conjure up an illusory view of holiness as withdrawnness from other human affairs. As if our God, the living God of Abraham and Sarah, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, ever saw noninvolvement in the affairs of his people, of humanity, as anything other than temptation. God is Emmanuel. We cannot be tempted to celebrate or recognize his presence only in a class of holy ones—whether these be priests, prophets, sages, kings, monks, nuns, ascetics, martyrs; his presence is everywhere and must be recognized in all his brothers and sisters. For, in the end, even Paul summarizes the Law as love of neighbor, and the Lucan parable of the Samaritan indicates who is our neighbor—anyone who is in need. So this is where the journey into the desert leads us—back out again.

But, first, we must go there, not in a futile effort, but for what the Lord has to reveal to us there, so that our love of neighbor is indeed a response to our encounter with the living God and not the projection of our own ego needs. The desert forms us; it ought not detain us; yet we ought not too quickly reject what history has taught us it has to offer. Let us not be too quick to interpret the desert and one's experience of it in non-geographical ways. Not every experience is a desert experience, even though the desert may provide a valid analogue. Although the desert is an experience as much as a place, it is an experience enriched by a place, and an event tied to an environment.

My reflections here are simply one response, my own, to a visit to the desert. Other responses provide other perspectives or different experiences. For everyone's experience of the desert is his or her own, as is everyone's experience of God. Yet there is something common and shared in these experiences. Do we not all need to return in some fashion to this experience of God in nature that civilized life so easily conceals?



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