THE DESERTS OF PALESTINE

Wilderness in the Thought of the Rabbis and the Desert Fathers: Geographic Reality and the Crisscrossing of Motifs

Joshua Schwartz
(Bar-Ilan University, Israel)

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, it might be difficult to understand what the deserts of Palestine, in either rabbinic thought or in the thought of the Desert Fathers, might have to do with ‘Modes of Interaction between Judaism and Christianity’. However, as we shall see, at least some of the deserts of Palestine provide ‘isolation and independence’, to use the catch words of the theme of our conference, and consequently one might ask to what extent there is or there can be ‘syncretism and dialogue’, once again using thematic catch words of the conference, when the desert in question was sacred to both Jew and Christian. Does the sanctity of a geographic entity provide for modes of interaction? The answer is more complex than one might imagine.

The desert in question is the Sinai Desert. My interest in desert and wilderness, whether of Sinai or the Judaean Desert or the Desert of Samaria, is not new and has occupied me on and off for two and a half decades (Schwartz 1980, 79–87; Schwartz 1981, 7–14; Schwartz and Spanier 1991, 252–271; 1992, 3–20; Schwartz 2000, 104–117). It is the Sinai, however, which initially attracted my attention, and the first article I ever published dealt with the Sinai Desert in Jewish tradition and thought (Schwartz 1980, 79–87). The thrust in those early studies was on Judaism with some very small amount of comparative Christian material. There was nothing there that even vaguely resembled ‘desert studies’ or ‘desert theology’ in either Judaism or Christianity and certainly nothing on eco-theology in either religion (Goehring 2003, 437–451; Kearns 2003, 466–484; Adler 2006, 4–37). Moreover, desert and wilderness in general have since become trendy topics of research in modern and postmodern studies (e.g. Jasper 2004). It was time, therefore, to return to the study of the desert and particularly to that which had first aroused my attention, the Sinai Desert.
Desert and wilderness left an indelible imprint and an ‘eternal’ one on both Judaism and Christianity. Israel received the Torah and became a people in the desert. While Christianity may not have accepted this as the Jews did or seen it in the same light as the Jews, these events likewise made a lasting imprint upon Christianity, with the route of the Exodus and the giving of the Torah in the desert serving as geographic typologies for the future. John preaches in the wilderness and meets Jesus there, and following his baptism Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness and tempted by the devil for forty days (Matt 4:1–11; Mark 1:9–13; Luke 4:1–4). Without going into detail here, it is clear that these events described as taking place in the desert or wilderness made a lasting impression on Christian thought and theology.

Before we proceed, it is necessary to make one point of a technical nature. In English, ‘desert’ and ‘wilderness’ are often used interchangeably, reflecting the Hebrew *midbar* and the Greek *eremos*. Wilderness is the better translation, although regarding the monks of Palestine and Egypt, desert is the term that has entered the theological lexicon. The *eremos* or *midbar* refers to an area that is usually lonely, uncultivated and uninhabited, and not necessarily a desert in the modern sense of the word in that it is deprived of water, although that may indeed be the case (Amir 1962, 674–678). Both *eremos* and *midbar* might also be translated as grazing land or steppe. We shall in any case continue to use the English words wilderness and desert interchangeably, although it is clear that wilderness might have other definitions in English. And one final caveat, obviously we cannot present the entire spectrum of desert–wilderness traditions of Sinai either of the Rabbis or of the Desert Fathers. Our purpose is limited to pointing out the highlights with the goal of showing what is common and what is different and perhaps what passes from one to another, or a ‘crisscrossing of motifs’, as in our title.1

---

1 As my friend and colleague Dr. Marcel Poorthuis has pointed out to me, there is a basic difference between rabbinic literature and that of the Desert Fathers. The literature of the former is basically ‘community oriented’ while the latter is less so. Thus, one might claim that the differences between the motifs found in both literatures might relate to the nature of the literature and not necessarily to intrinsic matters of the desert. We have, however, made every effort to discuss traditions that are intrinsic to desert and wilderness and not those overly dependent on the ‘form’ of the traditions.