The wilderness motif of late Jewish and early Christian literature offers a glimpse into the ways in which a single theme can influence related religious traditions. The portrayal of a people, led by divine intervention through a generation of perils and dangers to the promise of a homeland, clearly appeals to those who have struggled through communal faith experiences. Thus, the scenes of the Pentateuch’s wilderness narrative form the basis of Israel’s self-perception within the Mosaic narrative. The pivotal moment of accepting a non-negotiable offer by a desert deity formed an appropriate setting into which a covenant of public morality could be inserted. And it was on this framework of struggle that Israel’s prophets subsequently built a matrix of images that the first Christians often used to define their own system of beliefs.

What remains particularly intriguing about the wilderness narrative is that its presence is so poorly represented in early Christianity's non-canonical literature. The present essay considers a few examples from what we now know as the apostolic fathers (= AF) and offers some explanation as to why the texts of the wilderness narrative came to take second place among the developing ideology of the early church’s theologians. I suggest that ultimately it was the uncertainty of the ancient Israelite theme of wilderness wandering that was seen, not only of little appeal to non-Jewish, second-generation Christian authors but, as a threat to the development of an independent self-identity within the nascent church.

Wilderness Topoi in the New Testament

Before a survey of the AF, I wish briefly to identify the general wilderness mentality that appears throughout the NT. My purpose is to classify the ways in which the motif appears in literature that both predates
and influences other late first- and early second-century materials. The theme is easily divided into succinct categories or *topoi* that are typical of how early Christians viewed themselves.

The first *topos* is associated with the idea that a true prophet of God receives divine revelation within a wilderness context. This, of course, is an ancient Semitic motif that is associated with the prophets of Israel—from Moses through Amos—and is specifically applied to John the Baptist in the Gospels as a sign of his legitimacy as a spokesman for the divine. It reappears in the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness (Mark 1:12–13 pars.) and is suggested by Paul’s encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus in Acts, recounted three times for emphasis.\(^1\) The classic tension that this *topos* presents is the ancient friction that exits between city consciousness and pastoral societies. The true way of God is found in the solitude of the wilderness; the one God of Judaism appears in the desert realms of isolation.

The second *topos* is associated with God’s self-revelation to the chosen people of Israel, again within the context of the wilderness journey as depicted in the Pentateuch. The scenes of this struggle, a series of trials to test the endurance of God’s chosen people as they seek the land that was promised to them, are aptly recalled among the various authors of NT literature. Paul refers to these ancient Israelites as he prepares to discuss the realities of the “cup of the Lord” in 1 Cor 10:1–13, recalling the supernatural food and drink that they received and the rock (“of Christ”) that followed them. The author of Hebrews identifies these same chosen people as “rebellious”, a generation that hardened their hearts as they died in the wilderness under Moses’ guidance (Heb 3:7–19). The author of Acts offers the words of the deacon Stephen as he testifies to the refusal of the Israelites to obey their leaders in the Sinai, choosing instead to build a calf and offer sacrifices to an idol (Acts 7:35–44). Even the author of the Gospel of John is aware of the wilderness motif, making deliberate reference to the serpent that Moses lifted up as the symbol of Jesus’ own death on the cross (John 3:14) and, in a more subtle sense, to the presence of the Word that became flesh and “encamped” among God’s people (John 1:14).

The final *topos* is that of the wilderness as a threatening presence. This idea constantly lurks around the edges of late Jewish and early Christian mindsets, making itself apparent in a variety of different forms

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\(^1\) Acts 9:1–9; 22:6–11; and 26:12–18.