THE BURNING SUN:
LANDSCAPE AND KNOWLEDGE IN EXODUS

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Scholars have often noted the ways in which Anglo-Saxons modelled their sense of nationhood after the ancient nation of Israel.¹ Malcolm Godden shows how the Israelites’ migrations and travels in the Old Testament functioned for the Anglo-Saxons as a veiled way of talking about their own situation …. Despite Ælfric’s insistence that the old law had been replaced by the new, at least in its literal sense, in many ways the old retained its power for the Anglo-Saxons, and it gave them a way of thinking about themselves as nations.²

Anglo-Saxons saw themselves as echoing or re-enacting the ancient Israelites’ experience, and indeed, striking parallels do exist between the roaming Germanic tribes that came to be the Anglo-Saxons and the wandering tribes of the ancient Israelites. In many ways, literary equation of the two peoples works seamlessly: they both moved from a place of exile or landlessness to a ‘promised land’, and they both saw themselves to a certain extent as a chosen people, singled out by God. Because of this perceived similarity, cultural products of the Anglo-Saxons which deal with Old Testament stories were often made to look more Germanic.

Pious Anglo-Saxon poets wanted to entertain an audience proud of its warlike history and traditions, yet felt bound by a moral responsi-

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bility to entertain them with stories that were spiritually edifying. The spiritually valuable Old Testament stories of battles, migrations and sacrifices, which paralleled Anglo-Saxon history, would have made for appealing subject matter. This is the case with the Junius manuscript, which is filled with such hybrid efforts: a poetic rendition of the Genesis story, a retelling of the story of Daniel and King Nebuchadnezzar which foregrounds the latter’s exile in the forest along the lines of Anglo-Saxon exile poetry, and a poetic intensification of the Exodus story.\(^3\) In the vernacular poetic rendering \textit{Exodus}, this sort of equation of Anglo-Saxon heroic culture with Old Testament stories continues: Moses is characterized as a great general; the Israelites, far from being a demoralized ragtag band of survivors, are a heroic warrior band, with God on their side as they push into the Promised Land and into the desert carrying fantastic banners.

While Anglo-Saxons did use Old Testament history as a means of making sense of their own position in the world, their understanding of that history remained fundamentally virtual and textual.\(^4\) We have no evidence to contradict our belief that Anglo-Saxons had no firsthand experience of the ancient Israelites’ homeland and its environmental characteristics. Thus, without direct geographic experience of the Israelites’ homeland, sometimes the poets’ mappings of the ancient Near Eastern landscape onto the English one through Germanic diction and poetic imagery is neither a smooth nor a seamless process in the Old English \textit{Exodus}. In spite of the overarching similarity between the two tribes’ itinerary towards a promised land, the physical features of their respective landscapes are quite different, and the efforts of the \textit{Exodus}-poet to reconcile those landscapes – one of which is unknown – are quite visible in the resulting poem.

Before continuing, it is important to note that the \textit{Exodus}-poet was a careful reader of the biblical text; Charles D. Wright, in his studies of the Israelites’ lion banner and the figure of Moses, shows the poet to be very sensitive to cultural parallels.\(^5\) For example, ‘his use of the