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in Honor of Lee I. Levine*

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ZEEV WEISS, ODED IRSHAI, JODI MAGNESS, and SETH SCHWARTZ



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Sinai—Mountain and Desert

The Desert Geography and Theology of the Rabbis and Desert Fathers

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Introduction

During the academic year 1972–73, I studied archaeology and Jewish History with Lee Levine at the School for Overseas Students of the Hebrew University. More than a decade later, I was privileged to serve on the research staff of his Onomasticon project dealing with talmudics, historical-geography, history, and archaeology of the land of Israel.¹ While my interests in historical geography took me in different directions from Lee, the lessons I learned from him were invaluable.

My interest in desert and wilderness—whether the Sinai or the Judean Desert or the desert of Samaria—is not new and has occupied me on and off for two and a half decades. It is the Sinai, however, that initially attracted my attention, and the first article I published dealt with the Sinai Desert in Jewish tradition and thought.² The thrust in those early studies was on Judaism, with a very small amount of comparative

1. The results of the Onomasticon should be published soon. See Lee I. Levine, *Geographical Place-Names in Eretz-Israel during the Second Temple–Talmudic Periods according to the Hebrew and Aramaic Sources*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences, in preparation) [Hebrew].

2. See my “Sinai in the History of Israel and in Jewish Thought,” in *Qadmoniyot Sinai* (ed. Israel Finkelstein and Zeev Meshel: Tel Aviv: Ha-Kibbutz Ha-Meuhad, 1980), 79–87 [Hebrew]. An abridged English version appeared as “Sinai in Jewish Thought and Tradition,” *Immanuel* 13 (1981): 7–14. On subsequent studies on different deserts, such as the deserts of Judea and/or Samaria during the Hasmonean revolt or relating to the baptismal activities of John the Baptist, see Joshua Schwartz and Joseph Spanier, “On Mattathias and the Desert of Samaria,” *RB* 98 (1991): 252–71; Joshua Schwartz and Joseph Spanier, “On Mattathias the Hasmonean and the Desert of Samaria,” *Cathedra* 65 (1992): 3–20 [Hebrew]; and my “John the Baptist, the Wilderness and the



Christian material. There was nothing that even vaguely resembled “desert studies” or “desert theology” in either Judaism or Christianity and certainly nothing on eco-theology in either religion.³ Moreover, desert and wilderness in general have since become trendy topics of research in modern and postmodern studies.⁴ 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

Desert and wilderness left an indelible imprint and an “eternal” imprint on both Judaism and Christianity. Israel received the Torah and became a people in the desert. While Christians may not have accepted this as the Jews did and may not have seen it in the same light as the Jews, these events likewise made a lasting imprint on them, with the route of the exodus and the giving of the Torah in the desert serving as geographical typologies for their future. John preaches in the wilderness and meets Jesus there, and following his baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness and tempted by the devil for 40 days (Matt 4:1–11, Mark 1:9–13, Luke 4:1–4).⁵ Without going into detail here, I think 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 because of 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 but not necessarily a *desert* in the modern sense of the word in that it is deprived of water, although it may indeed be.⁶ Both *eremos* and *midbar*

Samaritan Mission,” in *Studies in Historical Geography and Biblical Historiography Presented to Zechariah Kallai* (ed. Gershon Galil and Moshe Weinfeld; VTSup 81; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 104–17.

3. These are categories that are not usually found or discussed in the study of Judaism. On Christianity, see in general James E. Goehring, “The Dark Side of Landscape: Ideology and Power in the Christian Myth of the Desert,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 33 (2003): 437–51; Laurel Kearns, “The Context of Eco-Theology,” in *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Theology* (ed. Gareth Jones; London: Blackwell, 2003); and Judith Adler, “Cultivating Wilderness: Environmentalism and Legacies of Early Christian Asceticism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 48 (2006): 4–37.

4. See, for example, David Jasper, *The Sacred Desert: Religion, Literature, Art, and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004). In a similar vein, we await Yael Zerubavel’s work in progress, *Desert Images: Visions of Counter-Place in Israeli Culture*.

5. See, for example, Ulrich Mauser, *Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition* (London: SCM, 1963). On John’s desert mission, see the sources and studies cited in my “John the Baptist, the Wilderness and the Samaritan Mission.”

6. Yehoshua Amir, “Midbar,” *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (Jerusalem: Bialik, 1962), 4:674–78.



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might also be translated ‘grazing land’ or ‘steppe’. We shall in any case continue to use the English terms *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 Sinai desert-wilderness traditions by either the rabbis or the desert fathers. My purpose is limited to pointing out the connection between the understanding of the geography of the region by both rabbi and church or desert father and the subsequent religious thought or theology of both groups and religions that developed as a consequence of their understanding of that geography or of the physical reality of the desert.

Because the attitude of both the rabbis and the Christian fathers to desert and wilderness derives to some extent from the Bible, we shall briefly point out the basic biblical motifs that influenced both Judaism and Christianity. The first and most blatant motif is that the desert is a bad place (Num 20:5; Deut 8:15; Jer 2:2, 6; Ps 107:4–5; etc.).⁷ It is deprived of fertility and God’s benediction. It is a place of desolation and demons and is often a place of punishment for human error and sin, such as the punishment of wandering in the desert for 40 years.⁸ However, biblical theology also knows a second, more positive motif. The desert, particularly in relation to the exodus is where the nation gelled, being in constant contact with God, who often showed his power through both miraculous appearances and acts.⁹ An offshoot of this develops during the prophetic age, when the desert serves as a counter to the corruption of the city and civilization. It becomes a place of purification in which humans worship God in their hearts.¹⁰

These basic biblical motifs served as the basis of desert theology for both rabbi and desert father but with one major difference, and this was such a major difference that in my view it affected both theologies in their entirety: when it came to the desert of the exodus, there was no Jewish settlement and very little Jewish presence in the Sinai Desert. It was far away from the heartland of Jewish settlement—was probably not even in the halakic land of Israel—and few Jews and/or rabbis had any

7. For a list of additional sources, see *ibid.* See also James K. Hoffmeier, “Sinai: The Great and Terrible Wilderness,” *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 35–46 and the references cited there. Cf. *idem*, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

8. And this might have implications far removed from that wilderness. See Todd A. Wilson, “Wilderness Apostasy and Paul’s Portrayal of the Crisis in Galatians,” *NTS* 50 (2004): 550–71.

9. We in no way need to discuss the question of the validity of the wilderness traditions, a question that would not have existed for ancient Jew or Christian. There are scholars of the Bible and of archaeology who would jettison the biblical wilderness tradition. See, however, Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, 235–49.

10. Amir, “Midbar”; see also Shemaryahu Talmon, “The Desert Motif in the Bible and in Qumran Literature,” in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations* (ed. Alexander Altman; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), 31–63. See also Mante Lenkaiyte, *The Model of a Monk in “De Laude Eremiti” of Eucherius of Lyons and in the Latin Monastic Literature up to the Early Fifth Century* (Ph.D. diss., Vilnius University, 2006), 38–40 and the bibliography cited *ad loc.*



business there or really knew anything about it.¹¹ Their knowledge was based on the Bible and not on firsthand knowledge of the area. Ironically, the same was also true of the other “closer” deserts, such as the Judean Desert and its various subbranches. Thus, although the Dead Sea sect may have been in the Judean Desert and although all the deserts of the land of Israel or surrounding it may occasionally have been used as a refuge, there were few “normative” settlements in the Judean Desert.¹² In any case, the Dead Sea sect had very little influence on the rabbis, and if it did influence them, it was not necessarily on matters of the desert and wilderness.¹³ The rabbis wrote about the desert as “outsiders”; as we shall see below, the Christians wrote as an “indigenous” desert people.

Bible or holiness traditions regarding the Judean Desert did not seem to excite Jewish interest or visits; they did not entice them to establish settlements, even though these areas *were* in the halakic land of Israel. Much less did the Sinai inspire them, which as just mentioned was not in the land of Israel. The rabbis, seemingly because of the inhospitality of these regions and distance (at least in the case of some deserts), were willing to make do with a virtual acquaintance, based on the Bible and the motifs briefly mentioned above. This in turn resulted in further development of negative desert traditions to continue to explain the rabbis’ lack of physical acquaintance. Ironically, as we shall see, their lack of knowledge also limited their ability to develop negative traditions. This is not to say, of course, that they were totally ignorant of basic geographic reality. One need not have the experience of Marco Polo to describe the desert somewhat, or its inhospitality. And of course, there may have been the odd rabbi who had personal knowledge of the desert and its lore, and this may have filtered into the talmudic tradition. General knowledge was not a problem; specific knowledge hardly existed.

The Fathers, however, reacted in exactly the opposite manner. The Bible drew them, like a magnet, to these desert sites—the “desert a city,” as in the title of D. J. Chitty’s classic¹⁴ (and based on the famous phrase of Athanasius, who was referring to Anthony)—even though at times this was a city of anchorites. Obviously there were other reasons for this in addition to the Bible, as we shall point out, but these secondary reasons and surrounding traditions and motifs became possible and de-

11. Y. Sussmann, “The Boundaries of Eretz-Israel,” *Tarbiz* 45 (1976): 213–57 [Hebrew]. In ancient times, Sinai was considered neither Egypt nor Canaan. See Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel*, 37. See also the comment of the medieval tosaphist R. Issac b. Samuel on *b. Šabb.* 98a, “*midbar zin*,” in relation to the various names for the Sinai Desert: “It is all one great desert.” Geographical distinctions were blurred in rabbinic thought as well as in the understanding of the later commentators.

12. Y. Sussmann, “Boundaries.” On Jewish settlement in the deserts in general, see my *Jewish Settlement in Judaea after the Bar-Kochba War and until the Arab Conquest* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1986) [Hebrew].

13. See Peter Tomson (*Paul and the Jewish Law* [Assen: Van Gorcum, 1990]), who claims that there was some influence by the sect on the rabbis in matters such as faith and righteousness.

14. Derwas James Chitty, *The Desert a City: An Introduction to the Study of Egyptian and Palestinian Monasticism under the Christian Empire* (London: Mowbrays, 1977 [1966]).



veloped only because there was a physical presence in the desert. While one might argue that the Christian presence kept the Jews away, the Jews would have been there first if they had been interested. Also, while one might argue that Christianity was pilgrimage-oriented, and Judaism or at least Roman–Byzantine Judaism was not, this was not the case regarding other regions in Palestine. Thus the same biblical basis apparently had a contrasting influence on Jews and Christians. The thinking and influences were, of course, much more complex than this, and we will discuss them further below.

We can now begin with a discussion of Sinai in rabbinic literature. Although the sources are few, we cannot present them all. It would be nice to abide by methodological strictures and to maintain a strict chronological framework in differentiating tannaitic and amoraic material; unfortunately, this is not always possible, although when it is, I shall try to abide by the standard chronological methodologies. For the most part, however, our discussion of desert motifs in the writings of the rabbis will be topical and/or thematic, and this is basically the result of the paucity of the material in general.

The Christian material is much more plentiful than the rabbinic traditions, and this makes it easier to place the various traditions of the monks and desert fathers in a chronological framework. We cannot make a perfect comparison between rabbis and desert fathers, but we can note trends and differences between the two types of traditions.

The Rabbis and the Sinai Desert

The rabbis echo the first desert motif of biblical tradition. The desert is a place of danger and desolation, full of poisonous reptiles (*Exod. Rab.* 24:4), and it is difficult to imagine why anyone would want to enter it.¹⁵ Jethro, for instance, deserves extra praise because he left all the amenities of home at Midian to go into the desolation and emptiness of the desert (*Mek. Yitro, Masekhta d'Amalek*, 1:192). Traveling in the desert without sufficient provision is obviously foolhardy (*Mek. Beshalah, Masekhta de-Va-Yissa*, 1:152). Not only is travel dangerous, but it is exceedingly difficult because of physical conditions such as sand that prevent the establishment of permanent routes. Caravans can travel only at night, guided by the stars, and not by day (*Tanh. Masei* 3; *Num. Rab.* 23:3), unless, of course, one has a guide. This was the case for the talmudic traveler Rabbah b. Bar Hanna, whom we shall now describe. This is the longest rabbinic desert tradition available, and I shall cite a good part of it:

Rabbah b. Bar Hanna related: “We were once traveling in a desert and there joined us an Arab who, [by] taking up sand and smelling it [could] tell which was

15. Cf. *Jos. Ant.* 3.1: “The country was absolute desert, devoid of anything for their sustenance, while the scarcity of water was extreme; not only could the soil furnish nothing for man but it was even incapable of supporting any species of beast, being in fact sandy and without a particle of moisture propitious to vegetation.”



the way to one place and which was the way to another. We said unto him: 'How far are we from water?' He replied: 'Give me [some] sand.' We gave [it to] him, and he said unto us: 'Eight parasangs.' When we gave [it to] him again [later], he told us that we were three parasangs off. I changed it, but was unable [to confuse] him." (*b. B. Bat.* 73b–74a)¹⁶

Rabbah needed an Arab guide in order to traverse the chaotic desert safely. The Arab clearly was at home in the desert, and Rabbah was not.¹⁷

We mentioned above that the rabbis had limited first-hand knowledge of the desert. This tradition seems to belie that claim, although Rabbah clearly needed a guide and needed tutoring in the ways of the desert. However, it is important to remember that Rabbah b. Bar Hanna was an exception to the rule. He was one of the *nehutei*,¹⁸ the sages who traveled back and forth between Palestine and Babylonia, bringing traditions from one Torah center to the other. *B. B. Bat.* 73b–74a includes his detailed itineraries and travel, although not necessarily the Palestine–Babylonia circuit, which in any case would have been of limited help to our present study. While much of the account seems to fall within the realm of the fantastic, some of the desert traditions seem to be grounded in reality.¹⁹ In any case, Rabbah apparently spent a good deal of time in travel, and consequently he was not totally unfamiliar with deserts. As for the fantastic, the tradition continues:

He said unto me: "Come and I will show you the Dead of the Wilderness." I went [with him] and saw them; and they looked as if in a state of exhilaration. They slept on their backs; and the knee of one of them was raised, and the Arab merchant passed under the knee, riding on a camel with spear erect, and did not touch it. I cut off one corner of the purple-blue shawl of one of them; and we could not move away. He said unto me: "[If] you have, per adventure, taken something from them, return it; for we have a tradition that he who takes anything from them cannot move away." I went and returned it; and then we were able to move away.

He subsequently reported this to the sages, who did not seem very surprised at hearing these adventures.

16. On this and on the Rabbah b. Bar Hanna travel traditions in general, see Reuven Kipperwasser, "Rabba Bar Bar Hana's Voyages," in *Literature and Revolt: Jerusalem Studies in Hebrew Literature XXII* (ed. Hannan Hever, Ariel Hirschfeld, and Joshua Levenson; Jerusalem: Faculty of Humanities, Hebrew University, 2008), 216–41 [Hebrew]. On desert traditions, see pp. 237–38.

17. See Richard Kalmin, *Sages, Stories, Authors, and Editors in Rabbinic Babylonia* (Brown Judaic Studies 300; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 263–72. According to Kalmin, the form טעיה that appears in our tradition should be understood in a positive manner, as opposed to the generic Arab ערבי, which is negative. The fact that טעיה is also the name of a tribe indigenous to the Arabian Peninsula does not mean that the trip took place there.

18. On Rabbah b. Bar Hanna, see Aaron Hyman, *Toldoth Tannaim Ve'Amoraim* (Jerusalem: Pri Ha'Aretz, 1987), 1076–78.

19. See Kipperwasser, "Rabba." Kipperwasser plays down the "tall tale" aspect of these travel traditions and sees them as having a core of reality dealing with cultural opposition. I shall expand on this idea in the continuation of the tradition as it relates to Mt. Sinai.



Skipping over part of the tradition relating to Mt. Sinai, which we shall discuss later on, we find the following at the end of the tradition:

He said unto me: "Come, I will show you the men of Korah that were swallowed up." I saw two cracks that emitted smoke. I took a piece of clipped wool, dipped it in water, attached it to the point of a spear and let it in there. And when I took it out it was singed. [Thereupon] he said unto me: "Listen attentively [to] what you [are about to] hear." And I heard them say: "Moses and his Torah are truth and we are liars." He said unto me: "Every thirty days Gehenna causes them to turn back here as [one turns] flesh in a pot and they say thus: 'Moses and his law are truth and we are liars.'"

As fantastic as this may be, the relationship of the desert to Gehenna seems to strengthen the motif of the desert as a punishment. As we shall see in the Mt. Sinai pericope of this tradition, there may also be a polemical element to this tradition. We must bear in mind that Christian monks used to show visitors St. Catherine's Monastery and, in particular, the Valley of the Forty, the place in which in their tradition the earth opened up and swallowed Korah.²⁰

Bearing in mind the negative characteristics of the desert, some of which we have described, one might ask why the Israelites went through the desert to begin with, when they departed from Egypt. The Bible (Exod 13:17–18) of course provides an answer. The short route through the land of the Philistines might have resulted in war, and the Israelites might have been disheartened by this and returned to Egypt. For the rabbis, however, this served as an excuse to elaborate on the second desert motif found in the Bible, which allows for something positive in the negative framework of the desert. The desert was chosen precisely because of its harsh characteristics: it would "toughen up" the Israelites, especially in the spiritual realm.

Thus, for example, had the Israelites entered Canaan immediately, they would have engaged in everyday life and not in Torah. The miracles of the desert, the manna and water, brought them into close contact with God and allowed them to engage in Torah (*Mek. Beshalah, Masekhta de-Va-Yehi Beshalah, Petihta* 76). This period was also necessary because, according to the continuation of the tradition, when the Canaanites heard about the exodus, they destroyed their own land. The 40 years in the desert allowed the land of Canaan to recover. The Canaanites assumed that the Israelites were lost forever and doomed in the desert (*ibid.; Exod. Rab. 20:16*). However, they had a gnawing fear that somehow the Israelites would survive the desert, eventually come out much stronger than before, and conquer their land (*Exod. Rab. 20:16*).

The continuation of the midrash in *Mekilta* provides four basically positive elements of the desert vis-à-vis the exodus:

"But God led the people about, by the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea" (Exod 13:18). Why? In order to do for them miracles and wondrous deeds with

20. Joseph J. Hobbes, *Mount Sinai* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 127.



the manna, the quail, and the fountain. R. Eliezer said: “‘by the way of’—in order to tire them out . . . ‘wilderness’—in order to purify them . . . ‘Red Sea’—in order to test them. . . .” R. Joshua said, “‘by the way of’—in order to give them the Torah . . . ‘the wilderness’—to feed them the manna . . . ‘Red Sea’—in order to do for them miracles and wondrous deeds.”

Thus, the positive elements can be summed up as follows: (1) desert and Torah, (2) desert and the inhabitants of Canaan, (3) desert and purification, (4) desert and miracles. Just as the two biblical motifs were positive and negative and were basically able to coexist, the same seems to be true regarding the rabbis’ view of the desert. None of this, however, seems to have aroused interest in the rabbis or Jews in general to visit or live in the desert. In the final analysis, it is in the messianic era that the deserts of Israel (or surrounding Israel) will become settled, and the settled areas (of Esau) will become desert (*Tanḥ. Masei* 3 and parallels). However, the underlying negative perception of the desert is clear. Thus it is not surprising that, in spite of all of the above-mentioned traditions, God did provide some comforts to Israelites there and even cured some who were maimed during their servitude, as a result of their hard work, so the Torah would be accepted by those who were whole.²¹

Up to this point, my comments have related to the Sinai Desert in general. We turn briefly to the way that the rabbis related to particular sites in the desert—briefly, because the knowledge of the rabbis on this matter was indeed brief, and they were fully aware that they were lacking in this matter: “For Moses did not know how to write an itinerary of travels, until the Holy One, blessed be He, provided a hint” (*Midr. Ha-Gadol* on Num 33:2).²² We shall not deal with all the desert sites but provide a few examples of rabbinic methodology regarding these sites.²³

The Israelites entered the Desert of Shur after they crossed over the Sea of Reeds and could not find any water (Exod 15:22). A tradition in *Mekilta* (*Mek. Beshalah, Masekhta de-Va-Yissa* 1:153) identifies this desert with the otherwise unidentified Desert of Kov but adds that it is a place of poisonous reptiles, which is a standard desert motif. *Exod. Rab.* 24:4 admits, however, that it has no idea where this wilderness is. Other traditions made feeble attempts at etymological explanations, none of which really has anything to do with the desert or even established halakic prin-

21. *Num. Rab.* 1:3. A king in the desert would have little in the way of the material comforts to which he was accustomed, but God gave the children of Israel, as it were, and in accordance with the conditions a king might expect, *sigmitin*, semicircular couches for reclining at meals. On God healing the maimed, see *Num. Rab.* 7:1.

22. For attempts at identifying the wilderness sites, see, for example, Michael D. Oblath, *The Exodus Itinerary Sites: Their Locations from the Perspective of the Biblical Sources* (Studies in Biblical Literature 55; New York: Peter Lang, 2004). See also Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, 47–109, 149–75; cf. idem, *Israel in Egypt*, 135–222. See also Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta’s Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 118–22 (= Excursus 9.3: “The Epic of the Exodus and Wilderness Wanderings”).

23. For an expanded discussion on some of these sites, especially on the etymologies of their names, see the articles on Sinai cited in n. 2.



ciples.²⁴ Elim was the site of springs and palms (Exod 15:27). Bearing in mind the trouble that the Israelites had with water in Shur and at Marah (Exod 15:26), it is not surprising that the rabbis praise these springs and palms, and according to one tradition, the palms and springs were there from the very time of the creation of the world.²⁵

The Rabbis and Mt. Sinai

As seen above, the attitude of the rabbis toward the Sinai Desert was ambivalent. The desert, any desert, including the Sinai was a bad, hostile place, although this very characteristic might have some positive benefit for the Israelites. They had nothing good to say about the physical nature of Mt. Sinai and, while the wilderness itinerary seems to point to a location for the mountain in southern Sinai, there is hardly enough information in the Bible to determine the mountain precisely. This vagueness of wording may have been intentional in order to stress the message and not the mountain.²⁶ Not only did the rabbis basically ignore the physical geography of the mountain, but they made every effort to play down any intrinsic connection

24. See *Exod. Rab.* 24:4. *Shur* is explained as rows (of Israelites) or as a wall in the Aramaic sense of the word. *Mek. Beshalah*, *Masekhta de-Va-Yissa* 1:155 determines when the Torah should be read, comparing Torah to water and pointing out that the Israelites went three days without water.

25. *Mek. ibid.*: 158–59. Josephus (*Ant.* 3.9ff.) describes the springs and palms as being rather limited, perhaps reflecting what Josephus thought springs and palms of the desert should be. This motif is also found in the rabbis, but for the rabbis, it is the miraculous nature of the springs and palms that is stressed. Needless to say, none of these views of the rabbis has any grounding in reality.

26. See Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, 111–48. See also Rainey and Notley, *The Sacred Bridge*, 120. See, however, Alan Kerkeslager, “Jewish Pilgrimage and Jewish Identity in Hellenistic and Early Roman Egypt,” in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (ed. David Frankfurter; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 99–125, esp. pp. 146–213. Kerkeslager points out that Jews in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods had only minimal interest in pilgrimage to “Sinai” or to “Mt. Sinai” or to other sites along the route of the exodus. However, the Sinai to which these purported pilgrims traveled was not the Sinai Desert that we have discussed and continue to discuss. Rather, Mt. Sinai, in his view, was located near the city of Madyan in northwestern Arabia. His evidence for this pilgrimage is quite convoluted and, in any case, adds little to our study. As for his identification and propensity to transfer as many of the Sinai traditions as he can to Arabia, I cite Anson Rainey regarding the location of Mt. Sinai in *The Sacred Bridge*, 120 (see also above): “There have been at least a dozen proposals for alternate locations [= not southern Sinai], in different districts of Sinai or in Saudi Arabia. All of them will be ignored in this study.” We can only agree with Rainey. As for “our” Sinai (i.e., in the Sinai Peninsula), Kerkeslager states: “Inscriptions from the Christian pilgrimage routes in the southern Sinai Peninsula demonstrate that Jews in the pre-Christian period had absolutely no interest in pilgrimage to this region. Christian pilgrimage to this region was . . . a completely new innovation” (“Jewish Pilgrimage,” 150). On this point we are in agreement with Kerkeslager. Kerkeslager’s “patterns of (Jewish) pilgrimage” to



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between the eternal sanctity of the giving of the Torah and the site of the mountain itself. This is somewhat strange, because this is in marked contrast to a number of traditions in Second Temple–period literature that expand on the sanctity of Mt. Sinai and praise the nature of the mountain.²⁷ But then, there was no competition from Christianity at that time.

The rabbis are quite adamant that just the opposite is true. The mountain is inconsequential; it has no inherent holiness; rather, its holiness is dependent on the presence of God there (*b. Ta'an.* 21b) or on the fact that Mt. Sinai was originally part of Mt. Moriah and was “‘ripped off’ that mountain as *hallah* from dough.” Any sanctity that Mt. Sinai had was borrowed, and indeed the Sinai mountain was destined to return to Jerusalem (*Midr. Ps.* 68:9: 318). The message was always more important than the mountain. The children of Israel traveled there in a state of repentance (*Mek. Yitro de-va-Hodesh* 1:204; *Mek. D'Rashbi* 19:2: 137), and traveling away from that Divine presence led to sin (*b. Sabb.* 116a)—and this, after eleven months of camping around Mt. Sinai (*Sipre Num.* 62:61). Why then did God choose to reveal himself on Mt. Sinai? One tradition maintains that famous mountains such as Mt. Tabor and Mt. Carmel came before God to be chosen, but they were rejected because they had been sites of pagan worship (*Gen. Rab.* 99:1: 1271).²⁸ Another tradition maintains that it was the very unimportance of Mt. Sinai that made God decide to give the Torah on it as opposed to the haughty mountains. God sought out the unimpressive mountain, a “humble” mountain, and the others are “blemished” in contrast to lowly Sinai (*Pesiq. Rab.* 7:21a; *Midr. Ps.* 68:9; *Num. Rab.* 13:3; *b. Meg.* 29a; *b. Soṭah* 5a).²⁹

It is not surprising, therefore, to find the following in the Rabbah bar Bar Hanna tradition that we cited above, relating to his arrival at Mt. Sinai: “He said unto me:

northwestern Arabia (pp. 201–7), theoretically along the route of the exodus(!), have nothing of substance to add to our discussion.

27. See, for instance, *Jub.* 8:19, which mentions Mt. Sinai as one of the holiest sites in the world, together with the Garden of Eden and Mt. Zion. See also *Jos. Ant.* 2.265. Josephus mentions the height of the mountain and states that it was the highest mountain in the area and that it was fertile. Cf. *Jos. Ant.* 3.75–76. Kerkeslager (“Jewish Pilgrimage,” 189, 191) places the Mt. Sinai of Josephus in Arabia, but see contra this idea Graham I. Davies, *The Way of the Wilderness: A Geographical Study of the Wilderness Itineraries in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 10–11 on the standard Sinai Peninsula identification. Davies makes reference to *Ag. Ap.* 2.25, in which Josephus appears to have placed Mt. Sinai *between* Egypt and Arabia. Compare with Kerkeslager (“Jewish Pilgrimage,” 177) on “vision quests” into the desert in a conscious effort to follow the pattern established by the experiences of Moses and Elijah on Mt. Sinai. This need not require an actual trip into the desert, but at times this is implied. See *Apoc. Ab.* 12:1–3 on the description of a journey that Abraham took to Mt. Horeb to receive divine revelation.

28. *Mek. Yitro, Masekhta de-Va-Hodesh* 5:220.

29. A small mountain but, miraculously, 22,000 chariots of angels descended upon Sinai together with God (*Tanḥ. Bub. Yitro* 14:76 and parallels).



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‘Come and I will show you Mount Sinai.’ [When] I arrived I saw that scorpions surrounded it and they stood like white asses. I heard a Bath Kol saying: ‘Woe is me that I have made an oath and now that I have made the oath, who will release me?’” (*b. B. Bat.* 74a). Rabbah reported these adventures to the rabbis, who expressed distress at the fact that he did not absolve God of his oath.

This is the third leg, as it were, of the Rabbah bar Bar Hanna traditions relevant to our discussion of the desert. The Rabbah bar Bar Hanna traditions in general and these traditions in particular explore the process of the incorporation of foreign values by rabbinic culture.³⁰ Cultural opposition is the background of these traditions. While the overall cultural milieu in the background of this opposition is that of the Pahlavi-speaking, Zoroastrian culture,³¹ it is also likely that this tradition and the other two cited above reflect the proliferation of monasticism in the Sinai, especially around Mt. Sinai, as we shall see below, in spite of the fact that Rabbah clearly lived before the expansion of monasticism in Sinai. The later editors of the traditions as well as the editors of the Babylonian Talmud, however, were late enough to have been aware of or apprised of the fast-growing monastic presence in the Sinai.

There may also be a polemical strain in the traditions that associate hatred toward non-Jews with Mt. Sinai. Thus, a tradition trying to understand the different names of Mt. Sinai associates the name Mt. Horeb with the root *hrb* meaning ‘destruction’ and states that the verdict decrying the destruction of the non-Jews was handed down at Mt. Sinai.³² The name *Sinai* is interpreted in light of the root *śnʿ* meaning ‘hatred’, and from Mt. Sinai, hatred descended on non-Jews (*Exod. Rab.* 2:4; *b. Šabb.* 89a; *Num. Rab.* 1:8).³³ The plain fact is that the desert and this mountain belonged to no one, and this was another reason that the Torah was given there. Anyone could have come there and accepted the Torah; it was open to all (*Num. Rab.* 1:7).³⁴ The vehemence and hatred found in these etymologies might be explained as part of a Jewish polemic against the massive Christian presence in the Sinai and in the Mt. Sinai area. I repeat, everyone had a chance to go there, and it belongs to all or none; it is not acceptable for anyone to claim the area or take it as his own.

30. Kipperwasser, “Rabba.”

31. *Ibid.*

32. However, the decry of “destruction” was not limited to non-Jews, and other sinners’ fates, such as that of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, were sealed there even though punishment was meted out somewhere else (*Lev. Rab.* 20:10: 464–65, and numerous parallels).

33. Obviously, this is not the original or correct etymology for the toponym *Sinai*. Suggestions have ranged from *səneh* (‘bush’) to *Sin* (the Egyptian name for Pelusium), to *Sin* (the Mesopotamian moon deity). *Sinai* is not mentioned in Egyptian texts, and it has been suggested that the term *biz*, meaning ‘mining country’, might be the Egyptian term. See Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai*, 38–40.

34. On the personal level—just as the desert was *hefker*, i.e., ‘free to and for all’, so it was necessary for one to become *hefker* in order to receive the Torah. The desert was a “freeing” experience and provided an emotional model, as it were, for accepting the Torah.



Philo: Bridge to the Church Fathers

As we already mentioned, the attitude of the desert fathers to Sinai and to Mt. Sinai was quite different from what has been discussed above. However, before we begin our discussion of Christian Sinai, I should mention a tradition in Philo that seems to serve as a bridge between the Jewish and Christian traditions. Philo, while a Jewish philosopher, introduces elements into his Sinai traditions that are not found in the rabbis but are prominent in the Fathers. Thus, Philo mentions four reasons for the sojourn in the desert (*Decal.* 2–17): (1) The rampant paganism found in cities in general. For this reason, the Torah was given in the wilderness. While we pointed out above that this motif is found in the prophetic tradition, and while the rabbis pointed out the pagan milieu of Canaan, they did not seem to pay any attention to cities per se. (2) Isolation can lead to purification and repentance. (3) The “civil constitution” of the Israelites should be received and studied before establishing settlements. (4) The miracles of the desert prove that the Torah is divine. All of these reasons go far beyond whatever the rabbis found in the desert and are very similar to strains of Christian thought. Philo also often explains the Hebrew *midbar*, in general, as seeking good.³⁵ There is of course much more of the positive here than in the rabbis and much less harping on the negative. While a direct connection cannot be postulated between Philo and the church fathers, the similarity of the ideas is interesting.³⁶

Monks and the Sinai Desert

Obviously, we cannot discuss in detail all that there is to mention regarding the desert and the wilderness in the desert fathers, and I shall make do with comparing certain prominent Christian concepts with the reality that I have described above. As I have pointed out a number of times, it is important to remember that the Bible is always in the background for Christians as well as for Jews.

Geographically speaking, there are three areas of concern for us in terms of the development of the Christian desert traditions. Although they sometimes parallel the development of monastic communities, this is not always the case: (1) Anthony left his village in Egypt for the desert around 271 C.E., and the Thebaid became the region of the Egyptian desert that was idealized in early monastic tradition.³⁷ (2) Chariton arrived in Palestine in 275 C.E., and monasticism began to spread in the

35. Philo, QG 3.27; 4.31.

36. See, e.g., David T. Runia, *Philo and the Church Fathers: A Collection of Papers* (Leiden: Brill), 1–21. Compare Kerkeslager (“Jewish Pilgrimage,” 167–68), who, true to form, claims that Philo located Mt. Sinai in the Arabian Peninsula. Philo, in his view, would have identified Mt. Sinai as the highest mountain near Madyan in Arabia. It is hard to be convinced by all this.

37. William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 61 (= “Table 3.1. Outline of the *Life of Antony*).



Judean Desert (= deserts of the Jordan, Kotila, Calamon, Rouba, Netopha, Zif, and the Southern Desert).³⁸ (3) The Sinai Peninsula: it is clear that by the mid-fourth century C.E. monks lived as hermits in communes in Sinai. Subsequently, monasticism flourished in Sinai throughout the Byzantine period.³⁹ As mentioned above, Sinai was neither in Egypt, nor was it in the halakic land of Israel, although some of the monastic centers were at least nominally connected with those in Egypt or Palestine, while some were more ideologically independent. For the desert fathers and monks, the attractiveness of the Sinai Desert was that it was the route of the exodus, the 40-year wandering, and the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. Monasticism spread along the purported route of the exodus and wandering, at least within the realms of geographical and physical possibility.

There are of course desert references outside of these geographical areas. Desert became “wilderness” for the Fathers of the Jura Mountains, but Merovingian Gaul is outside the scope of this study, and *De Laude Eremiti* of Eucherius of Lyons (fifth century C.E.), while containing many important data of a theoretical nature on the wilderness, is also outside the scope of our study.⁴⁰

I shall discuss the general attributes of the desert and wilderness in the desert fathers based on a number of rather broad categories.⁴¹ As for the rabbis, I shall first discuss the Sinai Desert in general and then Mt. Sinai.

See in general also David Frankfurter, ed., *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

38. G. Garitte, ed., *Vita Charitonis*, “La vie prémétophrastique de S. Chariton,” *Bulletin de l’Institut Historique Belge de Rome* 21 (1941): 16–42. On the location of these deserts, see Leah Di Segni, ed., *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of Monks of the Judean Desert* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben-Zvi, 2005), 80 [Hebrew].

39. Uzi Dahari, *Monastic Settlements in South Sinai in the Byzantine Period: The Archaeological Remains*, with contributions by R. Calderon, W. D. Cooke, Y. Gorin-Rosen, and O. Shamir (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2000), 13, 21–24. The earliest cases of Sinaitic monasticism may have been caused by persecution during the time of Decius. See the examples cited in Dahari, *Monastic Settlements*, 21. This form of *anchoresis*, however, does not really relate to the desert qua desert, nor does it provide theological input for our purposes, and I shall not relate to this phenomenon within the framework of this study.

40. Mante Lenkaityte, *The Model of a Monk in “De Laude Eremiti” of Eucherius of Lyons and in the Latin Monastic Literature up to the Early Fifth Century* (Ph.D. diss., Vilnius University, 2006).

41. I have made use, inter alia, of the ‘sayings of the desert fathers’, the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, a collection of sayings, dialogues, and short narratives that preserve the words of the monks of the period. While it had been assumed that the work originated in the monastic center at Scetis, in the Wadi Natrun Valley, south of Alexandria in Lower Egypt, there are those who ascribe it to the Scetis Diaspora, when many renowned figures had left there. There are also those who argue that the text originated in Palestine, and a number of Palestinian monks appear there. We use these stories only for general monastic desert traditions. See in great detail Graham Gould, *The Desert Fathers on Monastic Community* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), esp. pp. 9–17. See also Columba Stewart, “The Desert Fathers on Radical Self-Honesty,” *Sobornost* 12 (1990): 25–39 (repr., <http://monasticmatrix.org/MatrixTextLibrary/mn-S14562-stewartc-thedesertf.html>, to which I refer).



The desert fathers sought to establish a “New Society” in the desert.⁴² This New Society was an “active society”—a stadium, as it were—in which athletes could perform, and a good part of this performance was cultivation of the self, although monastic routine was often also physically demanding.⁴³ To achieve this active, new society, there first had to be liberation from the old, and the desert fulfilled this task. In the words of Peter Brown: “Desert was a myth of liberating precision. It delimited the towering presence of the world from which the Christian must be set free, by emphasizing a clear ecological frontier.”⁴⁴ It was necessary to withdraw from the old, and Near Eastern landscapes and geography provided a good backdrop for the Christian interpretation of this withdrawal. Thus, the geography of the new “community” or “society” allowed for solitaries and anchorites, in spite of the occasional tension between ideal levels of solitude desired by certain leading monks and the desire for an active community by their disciples.

While there was asceticism in the cities, the new community was possible only in the desert, and there seems to have been a connection between rising ascetic power and withdrawal from the *oikoumene*—the inhabited world.⁴⁵ What made someone like Anthony unique was not his ascetic lifestyle but where he practiced it: no longer in his home village but in the great desert.⁴⁶ There were few ascetics among the rabbis, and fewer still practiced their asceticism in a desert of any kind; in fact, I know of none.

While the desert community for the church fathers was initially a transient community—a city of monks who left their previous communities and homes but eventually sought for themselves the citizenship of the heavens, as it were—eventually the desert began to include elements of “paradise” (of monks) and became, nominally at least, a final destination in itself. Jewish tradition, including even the Dead Sea sect, never exalted the wilderness or desert as a final destination. At best it was a temporary refuge to be endured or redeemed by cultivation. While there was something of a transient nature to the desert in Christian thought, as pointed out,

42. Gould, *Desert Fathers*, 106. The desert was also full of monastic women, but their experiences at this time basically went unrecorded or were suppressed. See Stewart, “Desert Fathers on Radical Self-Honesty.” The rabbis too would have ignored or suppressed any parallel Jewish traditions, but apparently there were none. If “men” refrained from pilgrimage or visits to Sinai, it is likely that the matter never even came up for women. Moreover, not all monks who went to the Sinai (or other deserts) were seeking spirituality, and some of the first monks there were fleeing taxation or military service or the long arm of the law seeking them for criminal actions, and not necessarily a spiritual experience. See Joseph J. Hobbs, *Mount Sinai* (Austin: University of Texas, 1995), 66.

43. Adler, “Cultivating Wilderness,” 25. Asceticism is often better translated ‘exercise regimen’ than ‘asceticism’.

44. Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 216.

45. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 65.

46. *Ibid.*, 60.



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the final destination was Heaven. For the Jews, it was the earthly Canaan or land of Israel.⁴⁷ Transience for Christians helped to facilitate the final destination; for the Jews, it was just a necessary evil.

The desert, free of the problems of the cities and the vices harbored there, also offered a universally accessible spirituality serving as a bridge to the Scripture of God, even for the ignorant and unlettered. The desert gave the monks a landscape that mirrored what they sought for their own hearts: an uncluttered view through clean air.⁴⁸ Anthony tells us that a monk out of desert is like fish out of water—the monk loses his spiritual life.⁴⁹ This spirituality may be accessible through the “community” or may be found in solitude. In the case of spirituality, at first the desert was a final destination, a living afterlife. By the fourth century, however, the desert became identified with spiritual stability which, ironically, returned a bit of the transient nature to the desert, which now could serve as a vehicle for bigger and better things, even perhaps contributing to the reversal of the Fall.⁵⁰ This Christian spirituality at first glance might seem to parallel the Jewish motif of purification in the desert mentioned above, but it goes far beyond anything that the Jews might have imagined or postulated. For the desert monks, the desert allowed a full expression of spirituality, even in such mundane matters as clothing (or the rag-like nature of the clothing).⁵¹

We learn from Antony that living in the desert in spiritual solitude delivered one from three conflicts: hearing, speech, and sight—one is left only to worry about fornication.⁵² Desert became for the monks the geographical equivalent of celibacy. This is as far removed from Judaism as celibacy itself. For some, the desert could free them from all cares, as in the case of John the Dwarf (born 339 C.E.), who went to the desert to be like the angels who did not work.⁵³ Ironically, spirituality, as it soars, might become “virtual” and become detached from desert or wilderness geography, at least in the pristine sense. Thus, mountains and forests might provide a different geographical background for wilderness, replacing the desert and creating a new type of wilderness asceticism and spirituality, similar perhaps to the purification motif in Judaism but far beyond it.⁵⁴

47. Adler, “Cultivating Wilderness,” 20.

48. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 250.

49. Saint Athanasius, Patriarch of Alexandria, *Life of Antony* (trans. Robert Gregg; New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 85, 93; Sozomen, *Histoire ecclesiastique* (trans. A. J. Festugière; Paris: Cerf, 1983), 175; and Benedicta Ward, ed., *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1975), 3, 49.

50. Adler, “Wilderness,” 18, 23, 27.

51. Joshua Schwartz, “Material Culture in the Land of Israel: Monks and Rabbis on Clothing and Dress in the Byzantine Period,” in *Saints and Role Models in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Joshua Schwartz and Marcel Poorthuis; Jewish and Christian Perspectives 7; Leiden: Brill, 2004), 121–37.

52. Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 3.

53. *Ibid.*, 86.

54. Lenkaiyte, *The Model of a Monk*.



As was the case for the Jews, the desert is the site of divine epiphany and intimacy with God.⁵⁵ However, unlike the Jews who limited this to Mt. Sinai and to basically a single experience, for the desert monks, the entire desert could provide epiphany and intimacy and it was ongoing, as we find in the words of Jerome: ‘O Desert! . . . O Solitude! . . . O Wilderness that rejoices in intimacy with God!’ (O *desertum Christi* . . . O *solitudo* . . . O *heremus familiari Deo gaudens!*).⁵⁶ This could be a “high-grade” epiphany in keeping with Christian motifs and typologies, such as John Cassian (d. 435), who left Bethlehem for the Egyptian desert. He tells us that the monk experiences in the desert what the apostles did in the Transfiguration.⁵⁷ In this case, the mountain “wilderness” of Tabor is transferred to the (Egyptian) desert. On the other hand, the epiphany could be a “low-grade” constant, such as when Euthymius (5th century C.E.) speaks of being guided to caves in the Judean Desert as if by God himself.⁵⁸ The sites of these epiphanies, major or minor, are usually also the site of additional miracles, far beyond the paltry Jewish miracles described by Rabbah bar Bar Hanna. Only the Jewish desert miracles of the past might compare with any of this.

Because the desert was such a hard place, one might meet God there, and it was common for monks to wander in the desert in general during “hard times,” such as Lent.⁵⁹ However, it was not only God who could be found in the desert. Sacred landscape may induce a feeling of either well-being or of fear. The desert was the site of demonic temptation, whether “high” temptation in the form of the devil or “low” in the case of snakes and scorpions. This was not just a matter of anti-epiphany, as it were, but often a translation of the difficult conditions of the desert into the demonic.⁶⁰ For desert Christians, the desert atmosphere was a place of epiphany but also a place fraught with fresh danger from the constant presence of hosts of demons and devils. Taming them was part of the challenge.⁶¹

Whether the desert fathers considered the dangers of the desert real or supernatural, many did seem to have a sense of the physical realities (and dangers) of the desert and the caution that desert dwellers should exercise in everyday life, such as being aware of snakes and scorpions that might hide under pots or pans or be found in dark places in the house. There were men such as Abba Poemen who used this realistic desert imagery in their writings. They were also aware of the psychological

55. See, for example, David Frankfurter, “Introduction: Approaches to Coptic Pilgrimage,” in *Pilgrimage and Holy Space in Late Antique Egypt* (ed. David Frankfurter; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 26 on Coptic desert prophets.

56. Jerome, *Letter* 14.10 (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206.v.XIV.html>).

57. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 397.

58. *Life of Euthymius* 8 in *Cyril of Scythopolis: The Lives of the Palestinian Monks* (trans. R. M. Price; annotated John Binns; Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publishers, 1991), 11.

59. Dahari, *Monastic Settlements*, 24.

60. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 86.

61. Monks such as Anthony were often depicted as taming the desert and reclaiming it from the demonic. See *ibid.*



dangers of desert life and the fact that there was no guarantee that the experience would be positive.⁶² The Jews seemed to be aware of the dangers inherent in desert life and stayed away; the Christians, monks, and pilgrims went anyway. One may expect that the difficult desert conditions had a harmful effect on the health of the Fathers. Moreover, in addition to the dangers, the sources indicate that the diet of the monks was often quite limited. Perhaps all this did impair their health, but one does not receive this impression from the sources—at least not regarding the prominent solitaries, who are often depicted as being robust and healthy. Many seem to have acquired a good knowledge of wild plants and potential edibles in the desert and, as desert monasticism developed, so did the agricultural prowess of the monks.⁶³ In spite of all of the theology and other-worldly aspects of their attitude to the desert, the Fathers often became quite adept desert dwellers.

When all was said and done, however, there was a constant tension between “landscape” and “mindscape,” between imaginative and geographical space: ultimately, it is possible to find an “inner desert” almost anywhere.⁶⁴ While it may be best, for example, to walk or sleep in the desert (obviously, in an ascetic manner), if one cannot do so in the desert, he or she should do so as though in the desert.⁶⁵

Historically, much of monasticism, especially desert monasticism had a built-in irony. Anchorites and solitaries, some of whom were charismatic, attracted an ever-widening circle of monks of all types and persuasions. The monastic communities also tended to attract pilgrims, especially in the case of sacred landscape, although there was not necessarily any automatic interaction between monk and pilgrims and often the monks sought to avoid the pilgrims. In spite of this, the relatively large numbers plying the Sinai Desert resulted in the need for the establishment of administrative mechanisms, which brought even more people to the area.⁶⁶ This in turn aroused more and more interest, even imperial, and some of the monasteries may have even served as defense and protection for monks and pilgrims.⁶⁷ As we shall see below, Mt. Sinai was the major pilgrim attraction in Sinai, and more people traveling to Sinai meant the development of more traditions associated with Exodus. By the time one arrived at Sinai, there had been opportunities to stop at many supposed stations of the exodus.⁶⁸ The rabbis, for instance, made do with the occasional

62. *Ibid.*, 208, 289.

63. Adler, *Cultivating Wilderness*, 18. See also Dahar, *Monastic Settlements*, 43.

64. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

65. Ward, *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 49.

66. Dahari, *Monastic Settlements*, 63 (on the growth of the administrative system), 164 (on the lack of interaction between monk and pilgrim).

67. Hobbs, *Mt. Sinai*, 73, 77.

68. *Ibid.*, 140. However, geographical conditions and food supplies often had more to do with establishing identifications than with the exodus account. In any case, by the fifth or sixth century there was much that a pilgrim could see along the route to Mt. Sinai. See Simon Coleman and John Elsner, “The Pilgrim’s Progress: Art, Architecture and Ritual Movement at Sinai,” *World Archaeology* 26 (1994): 75–76.



feeble etymology of an exodus site. The monks established monasteries at these sites, such as the monastery at Elim identified with Raitho in southern Sinai. Local monks guiding the fourth-century pilgrim Egeria pointed out Kibroth Ha-Taavah (Num 11:34) and many other sites near Mt. Sinai.⁶⁹ Perhaps not surprisingly, and most conveniently, the majority of popular exodus sites were close to Mt. Sinai, allowing for a more efficient sweep of the holy sites.

We conclude this section on the Sinai Desert with a description of travel there, not by a monk, but by one of the many pilgrims who traveled through the desert on the way to Mt. Sinai. The sixth-century Piacenza Pilgrim described his travel in the desert from Elusa in the Negev to Mt. Sinai and beyond, apparently with Saracen guides:

For five or six days we traveled through the desert. Our camels carried our water, and each person was given a pint in the morning and a pint in the evening. When the water in the skins had turned bitter like gall we put sand in it, and this made it sweet. . . . The people that traveled through that utter desert numbered twelve thousand six hundred.⁷⁰

It is doubtful that Rabbah bar Bar Hanna had met many travelers, at least two centuries before. By the sixth century, the desert roads to Mt. Sinai apparently could become congested. Water remained an important motif in desert travel literature, and the skills of the local guides were a *sine qua non* for desert survival, as evident in this tradition as well as in the Rabbah bar Bar Hanna tradition above.

Monks and Mt. Sinai

While it was the exodus that drew monks and pilgrims to Sinai, it was around Mt. Sinai (Jebel Musa) and its environs that Sinaitic monasticism flourished. The geography of the region allowed for both solitude and the development of monastic centers or, in the words of Procopius of Caesarea: “A precipitous and terribly wild mountain, Sina [Sinai] by name, rears its height close to the Red Sea, as it is called. . . . On this Mt. Sina live monks whose life is a careful rehearsal of death and they enjoy without fear the solitude which is very precious to them.”⁷¹ To some travelers,

69. Dahari, *Monastic Settlements*, 138. The monks at Raitho lived in great poverty with no property except for their robes and lived a great distance from one another. Others identified Elim as Wadi Gharandal, farther north along the coast. See the map on p. 13. On Kibroth Ha-Taavah, see Egeria 1.2 in John Wilkinson, ed., *Egeria's Travels to the Holy Land* (rev. ed.; Jerusalem: Ariel and Aris, 1981), 91.

70. *Antoninus Piacenza* 36 (translation from John Wilkinson, *Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades* [Warminster: Aries and Philips, 2002], 146).

71. Procopius, *De Aed.* 5.8 (translation in H. B. Dewey and Glanville Downy, *Procopius VIII: Buildings* [LCL 355–57; Cambridge: Heinemann, 1954]). Cf. Philip Mayerson, “Procopius or Euthychius on the Construction of the Monastery at Mount Sinai: Which Is the More Reliable Source?” *BASOR* 230 (1978): 33. The death motif is somewhat ironic. See, for instance,



the very geography of the place looked to them as they imagined the end of days would.⁷²

The geography heightened the fear and solitude, and monks tried to keep it that way. Byzantine tradition states that people avoided the mountain and that even hermits and solitaries never spent the night there. Later traditions relate that the mountain should be ascended only by people who have undertaken spiritual preparation, and here too geography was instrumental. The spiritual preparation could be earned by climbing the “Stairway of Repentance,” which begins just southeast of the Monastery of St. Catherine and traces a steep route up Jebel Musa. According to tradition, the steps were carved by sixth-century monks. At a place two-thirds of the way up the mountain, monks tested the knowledge and piety of the pilgrims. Ironically, the tradition was that Jews could not make it up the mountain, but this information relates to the fifteenth century and afterward, when apparently there was some Jewish travel in and pilgrimage to the Sinai.⁷³

For the pilgrim, at least, Mt. Sinai and its environs embodied the geography of movement from sacred space to sacred place. In a rather brief paragraph, the sixth-century pilgrim Antoninus of Piacenza (mentioned above) lists the rock where Moses struck water (a day’s journey from St. Catherine’s), the burning bush, the spring where Moses watered sheep, the cave where Elijah fled from Ahab, and the peak of Mt. Sinai where Moses received the law. In the case of Antoninus, he was met and accompanied by monks who initiated pilgrims into some of the liturgy and ritual associated with the sites. Antoninus describes Mt. Sinai as rocky, with little soil. However, Mt. Horeb, Jebel Sufsa near Mt. Sinai, had good soil. In the valley between the two, one could find manna that could be drunk.⁷⁴

The fourth-century C.E. pilgrim Egeria (also mentioned above) provides even more detail regarding biblical sites in the environs of Mt. Sinai. We mentioned above Kibroth Ha-Taavah. She continues and mentions, all in the area of Mt. Sinai, the Valley of the Golden Calf, the spot where Moses pastured Jethro’s cows and saw the burning bush, the church and cave of Moses on the summit of Mt. Sinai, Elijah’s mountain and cave, the place where Aaron and the 70 elders stood, the site of the burning bush, the place where Moses stood in front of the bush, the site of the Israelites’ camp, the place where the golden calf was made, the rock on which Moses broke the first tablets of the law, the places where Moses had ordered the Israelites to run from gate to gate, where they destroyed the calf, where they drank its remains, and more.⁷⁵ In spite of the detailed description of the sites, she does not spend much time

Rom 8:2. In dying, Christ freed the people from the antiquated law of sin and death prescribed at Mt. Sinai! (Hobbs, *Mt. Sinai*, 32–33).

72. *Ibid.*, 124.

73. *Ibid.*, 110–11.

74. *Antoninus Piacenza* 37–38.146–47 (Wilkinson, ed., *Jerusalem Pilgrims*). As to the relative fertility of Horeb, see Dahari, *Monastic Settlements*, 48–49. There were many small monastic complexes there with small plots, orchards, and sufficient water. There were also Saracens at Horeb who held a local festival there.

75. *Egeria* 2.1–5.12, 91–98 (Wilkinson, ed., *Egeria’s Travels*).



on the surrounding physical geography, but it seems clear that all of these sites were located where at least some degree of access was possible. Access, convenience, and proximity to Mt. Sinai were apparently the most significant factors in the proliferation of these sites throughout the centuries.

Conclusion

Both Jews and Christians began at more or less the same point. However, the Jews related to the desert grudgingly. From a theological standpoint, they had to do so because of the Bible traditions, and there were indeed some mitigating positive elements. The Christians took the same starting points from the Jewish Bible, or Old Testament, and built an empire in the desert, both real and virtual. Perhaps the fact that they benefited from the support of the Byzantine Empire helped, but this does not explain the lack of Jewish interest, even before the Christians poured into the area.

In general, the Jews and the rabbis of the Roman-Byzantine period seemed to prefer their theology and normative life-style in some degree of comfort. Perhaps this was because they had to fight for it in the face of ever-growing surrounding hostility. Why fight to suffer in the desert?

One wonders, however, why the rabbis ignored desert traditions, specifically the Sinai traditions, even if they had no desire to experience the physical reality behind them. By ignoring physical elements, they missed out on the opportunity to develop both positive and negative traditions. It is a commonplace that sacred place is a storied place. It is my contention that Sinai was not really a “sacred place” for the Jews. This was true before the advent of Christianity, when the Jews might have developed some sort of Sinai or pilgrim tradition, perhaps for the reasons just cited; it was certainly true during the period of monastic hegemony in the Sinai during the Byzantine period. The more the Christians flourished there and the more sites they identified, the more the Jews turned aside. If this were Jerusalem, for instance, they would have fought back theologically. In the Sinai Desert, they did not do so.

The Christians, whose position improved over the course of the Roman-Byzantine period, took much more to asceticism. The Bible jump-started their view of the desert; they just let these motifs develop, and they did not let Jewish tradition get in the way. The Bible became alive through a tapestry of physical sites, ritual, liturgy, and material remains such as mosaics and inscriptions. Indeed, they might have felt a large degree of satisfaction from their *Verus Israel* status there.

The desert may have had its disadvantages, but its advantages were much greater (and one could be an ascetic elsewhere). The physical separation in the desert, exposure to sacred sites, and knowledge led to transformations on a personal and religious level. The Jews sought their personal and religious transformations elsewhere.

