

WILDERNESS WANDERING

Numbers

The Baker Illustrated Bible Dictionary

WILDERNESS IN THE BIBLE

Wilderness is commonly mentioned in the Bible, and although it certainly can have neutral connotations (i.e., simply describing a location), the uninhabited places often entail both positive (e.g., as a place of solitude) and negative (e.g., as a place of wrath) connotations, both in their actual geological properties and as metaphors. The very rugged and uninhabited nature of the wilderness easily lent itself to being a place of death (e.g., Deut. 8:15; Ps. 107:4–5; Jer. 2:6). It was also a place associated with Israel's rebellions and struggles with other nations. Upon leaving Egypt, Israel spent forty years wandering the wilderness before entering Canaan, encountering numerous military conflicts along the way. This forty-year period was occasioned by a mass rebellion (Num. 14), hence casting a necessarily dark cloud over that entire period, and no doubt firming up subsequent negative connotations of "wilderness." Similarly, "wilderness" connotes notions of exile from Israel, as seen in the ritual of the scapegoat (lit., "goat of removal" [see Lev. 16]). On the Day of Atonement, one goat was sacrificed to atone for the people's sin, and another was sent off, likewise to atone for sin. The scapegoat was released into the desert, where it would encounter certain death, either by succumbing to the climate or through wild animals.

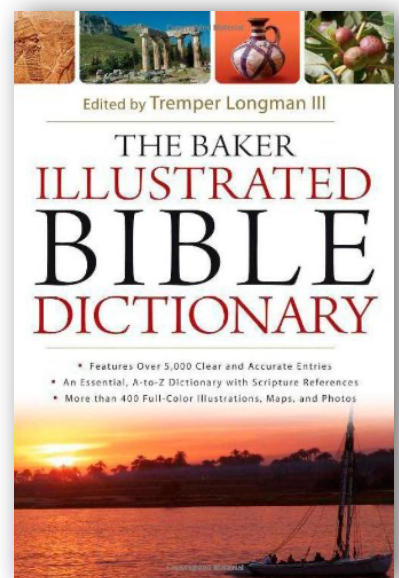
On the other hand, it is precisely in this uninhabited land that God also showed his faithfulness to his people, despite their prolonged punishment. He miraculously supplied bread (manna) and meat (quail) (Exod. 16; Num. 11), as well as water (Exod. 15:22–27; 17:1–7; Num. 20:1–13; 21:16–20). God's care for Israel is amply summarized in Deut. 1:30–31: "The LORD your God, who is going before you, will fight for you, as he did for you in Egypt, before your very eyes, and in the wilderness. There you saw how the LORD your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place."

The harsh realities of the wilderness also made it an ideal place to seek sanctuary and protection. David fled from Saul to the wilderness, the Desert of Ziph (1 Sam. 23:14; 26:2–3; cf. Ps. 55:7). Similarly, Jeremiah sought a retreat in the desert from sinful Israel (Jer. 9:2). Related somewhat to this last point is Jesus' own attitude toward the wilderness. It was there that he retreated when he could no longer move about publicly (John 11:54). John the Baptist came from the wilderness announcing Jesus' ministry (Matt. 3:1–3; Mark 1:2–4; Luke 3:2–6; John 1:23; cf. Isa. 40:3–5). It was also in the desert that Jesus went to be tempted but also overcame that temptation.

WILDERNESS WANDERING

In the biblical account of the exodus, Israel's departure from Egypt begins in Exod. 12:37. The original intention was for the Israelites to go to Mount Sinai to receive the law and instructions for the tabernacle and then to proceed to Canaan. But Israel's trip was not to be quite that simple. Because of the Israelites' disobedience in the desert, they were condemned to a forty-year period of wilderness wandering, enough time for those twenty years of age or older during the rebellion to die in the wilderness (see Num. 14, which describes what is actually the final rebellion in a series of grumbling incidents that go back to Exod. 15:22–27).

Technically, the wilderness period began immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea. The Israelites passed through the Desert of Shur, the Desert of Sin, Rephidim, and then Sinai itself. These locations, however, were only stations on the way to Sinai, and so they do not pertain to the specific forty-year period of punishment, which begins in Num. 14. Their wandering period would not be officially over until they crossed the Jordan River and entered Canaan (Josh. 3:17).



MAPPING THE ROUTE

The wilderness wandering, like the exodus and the passage through the Red Sea, are very difficult to outline precisely from a geographical and archaeological point of view. Many of the places named in the lists have not been located. Moreover, the two itinerary lists, one in Num. 33 and the other at various points in Num. 11–22, do not agree on every point. Although the two lists do not directly conflict, Num. 33 includes many more sites than Num. 11–22 and leaves out relatively few. One reason for this difference may be that only Num. 33 is actually intended to be an itinerary, whereas the sites mentioned elsewhere in Numbers are injected in the course of a narrative.

What contributes to difficulties in locating the wilderness route is that biblical names are not those used today, not to mention that many of these places no longer exist at all. Moreover, similarities between some names then and now have no necessary bearing on the issue. Also, it seems that at least some of the biblical names are symbolic. For example, “Meribah” means “quarreling,” and “Massah” means “testing.” These names seem to reflect the events recorded in Exod. 17 rather than being original names.

One of the most contested issues concerning the wilderness wandering is where it began: the location of Mount Sinai. It is commonly accepted that this mountain is located somewhere in the Sinai Peninsula, although numerous places have been suggested. Best known, perhaps, is Jebel Musa, the location of St. Catherine’s monastery, located in the southern portion of the peninsula. This is based not so much on historical evidence, however, as on church tradition. Another theory puts Mount Sinai in the eastern portion of the peninsula, near Midian. One factor in favor of this theory is that Moses first met God on Mount Sinai when he was living in Midian (with Zipporah, his wife, and Jethro, his father-in-law). According to Exod. 3:1, Moses left Jethro’s house to tend his sheep and it was on this journey that he came to Mount Sinai for the first time. Unless one presumes that he herded the sheep over one hundred miles in a southwesterly direction, into the desert, one might conclude that Mount Sinai is perhaps a more reasonable distance from Midian. But as with all theories regarding Sinai’s location, conclusive evidence is lacking.

REMINDER OF REBELLION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Interest in the wilderness wanderings, however, extends beyond understanding ancient geography. There is also a powerful theological dimension, and this seems to be of greater importance for biblical writers. Wandering in the wilderness is Israel’s punishment for disobedience and rebellion. As such, it stands as a reminder for later Israelites to encourage them not to repeat that mistake. Indeed, the events of Numbers are not recounted merely to catalog arcane events but are preserved in writing to be a reminder for subsequent generations.

Israel’s wilderness experience is referenced in various portions of the OT. The rebellion is mentioned in Ps. 106:14, 26, and wilderness is associated with a place of death. Elsewhere the desert represents a place of God’s protection and provision for the new generation of Israelites living in the desert (Deut. 8:15–16; 29:5; 32:10; Ps. 136:16; Hos. 13:5).

Another example of a later appropriation of the wilderness tradition is found in Ps. 95, where the Israelites, perhaps in an exilic setting, are warned not to rebel as the exodus generation did (vv. 7–11). This same warning of Ps. 95 is picked up by the writer of Hebrews and applied to the church (Heb. 3:1–4:13). The author argues that since a greater mediator than Moses has come, the past warning holds all the more as the church goes through its period of wilderness wandering (which lasts until the church’s entrance into its heavenly promised land). The main difference Hebrews introduces is that the church’s period of wilderness wandering is not characterized by God’s wrath but rather is a time of God’s activity in redeeming the world.