

Chapter One

The Desert¹

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‘A Preliminary Remark on’ Biblical Vocabulary²

AMONG THE HEBREW WORDS for “desert,”³ I will mention two: one, which is by far the least common, is *yeshimon* (יְשִׁימוֹן), which means *solitude*

1. I use initials in footnotes to designate who has written the content because two editors and one translator worked on this manuscript. Jean-Philippe Qadri is listed as J-P.Q.; Kelsey Haskett as K.H.; and myself as M.M.

J-P.Q. “The Desert,” an unpublished manuscript from family archives, ff. 1–10 + 4 ff. not numbered, placed in an envelope with a postmark indicating the year 1977. The notion of the “human desert” also appears in Ellul, *New Demons*, 131.

K.H. This text on the desert has now been published as ch. 15 of Ellul’s *Vivre et penser la liberté* [*Living and Thinking Freedom*].

M.M. As noted by J-P.Q. and K.H., the unpublished manuscript is titled “The Desert,” so it is important to specify that this volume, not Ellul’s original essay, is titled *Desert, Wilderness, Wasteland, and Word*. I felt the latter title poetically communicates central themes of Ellul’s essay, while also capturing the foci of the critical engagements comprising this volume.

2. K.H. A number of passages in this text were written by Ellul as notes, rather than full sentences. The editor of the original French version, Jean-Philippe Qadri, has expanded these to sentence form, using single stroke quotation marks to indicate the words he has added for the sake of clarity or fluidity. He has done the same with headings and subheadings he has added in part or in whole.

3. K.H. The French word *désert* can be translated both as *desert* and *wilderness* in English. The two words are used in this translation, both to reflect their usage in certain well-known biblical passages and to bring out nuances that may differentiate the desert, with its specific geographical features, from the wilderness, with often broader implications. However, both words may be used metaphorically, and are often used interchangeably, both here and in biblical passages.

or *waste land*—basically ‘caused by’ human action. The other is *midbar* (מדבר), whose root is *dabar*, *the word* (essentially the word of God), *speech*, or *promise*. From there all the combinations exist within two streams of thought:

- The word which resonates in the desert. Because it is received in the desert, it implies this desert. The word can only be heard well in the desert (one is faithful). The promise only has its fullest meaning in the desert (elsewhere it is smothered by all that fills our lives).
- The word that cries in the wilderness (for the one who hears it, or for the surroundings).

Whatever it may be, the tie between word and desert is fundamental. Obviously in understanding what the *origin* of this connection could have been, one can take *two directions*: either *the tie between the two words was first of all a given*, and all the biblical narratives in which we see the people or prophet going to the desert to receive the word are built on this. Or else, *the language follows the historical experience*: the people (and Abraham) learn through experience that in every case it is in the desert that they receive the Revelation, and therefore establish the linguistic relationship between the two terms. ‘This study will consist of two parts’: that which is stated in the biblical text, and then the theological perspective (with the spiritual desert, the theological desert, and the Ethics of the desert).⁴

I—What the Bible States

I. ‘The Place of Temptation and Meeting’

A first glance at the texts (outside of the narratives to be studied) shows us the desert *as an essentially ambiguous place*. The desert is *both good and bad*: *good* because it is the place to which God sends man or man encounters God; but at the same time *bad* because it is a place of absence, deprivation, void, and chaos. Thus, it signifies *both* a promise and a threat: “I will bring you back to the desert”⁵ (towards Israel’s first experience of encountering

4. M.M. Ellul often uses capitals and lowercases, punctuation, and typographic emphases inconsistently in unpublished manuscripts. Although it is tempting to ‘correct’ these inconsistencies, we have chosen to represent Ellul’s work as close to ‘as written’ as possible.

5. J-P.Q. Cf. Hos 2:16; 12:10.

God), but also, in numerous texts, “I will reduce the land to a desert” (Ps. 107:33; Hosea 2:3). And the final promise is precisely that there will be no more desert, that the desert itself will become fertile (Isa. 32:15; 35:1, 6; 43:19–20; 51:3; Joel 2:22; Ps. 107:35). The desert is at the same time the place of the devil and demons, *and* of encountering God (Hosea 3:5). This association probably comes from the idea that is common to all Semitic peoples that the desert is a place of spirits (*djinn*).⁶ But here the ‘meaning’ is much more extreme because it is all or nothing (*cf.* the scapegoat and the column of fire). A final aspect of duality remains: the desert is *the place of man’s weakness*, of the absence of food, of solitude; and at the same time it is *the place of man’s initiative*, of conquest, and the point of departure for the human adventure—totally touching the sociological ‘domain’—but all founded on the searching of the soul.

II. ‘Biblical Texts on the Desert’

Next, the biblical narratives in which the desert is an essential place can be taken on a simply descriptive level [knowing that I am not seeking, from a biblical point of view, to provide a theological update to the Jewish thinking on the desert between the eighth and second centuries before Christ. I take the texts exactly as they are, in their theological rather than historical sequence. But I do not do a dogmatic analysis that is simply confirmed by the texts: I prefer to take the texts themselves in large units and to let them speak, as they weave a whole for us, with the constant interplay of references coming from each of the narratives and causing a progressive pattern to appear.]⁷

1. Creation—The first mention of the desert is found in the story of the

K.H. In many references to biblical texts, the author is summing up an idea, even if he uses quotation marks. The verses referenced from the French Bible (probably a version of the Louis Second Bible) are occasionally numbered differently from the verses found in English translations (for example, throughout Hosea). I have translated Ellul directly, and not changed the verse numbers he cites, except in cases where a particular English version is quoted (NCV, NIV, or NLT), because its meaning closely reflects the French.

6. J-P.Q. One of the words the Koran uses to designate *demons* and other *spirits*. According to Paul Ballanfat, “Genies,” 981, “genie” [spirits] were considered demigods in pre-Islamic Arabia. They were nymphs and satyrs living in the desert and they represented the threatening side of nature.

7. J-P.Q. Note from an independent folio.

creation (Gen. 1:2) where not only chaos (*tohubohu*) but also the desert is brought into play: the earth is “formless and void”—and the Spirit of God is moving on the surface of the waters. We need to trace the logical contradiction: the earth is already there, and yet God creates it (v. 9–10); there are already waters, although God creates (v. 9–10). But this reveals two things: first, the desert is a place of contradiction—and also of all possibilities. Everything is blended together. Everything is virtual: the formlessness and the void is that which can give birth to form and which is waiting to be filled. The desert is the place of waiting for the accomplishment, so it is natural that it has a connection to the promise.

The promise is spoken in and over the desert. And it is the first tie between the word and the desert: the word of God is that which alone can give shape to and fill this absolute void.

The other aspect of this text resides in the “creation.” It is common ‘to interpret this passage’ according to Greek philosophy and creation *ex nihilo*. ‘However, creation is’ never ‘mentioned’ in the Bible. All that is shown is the act of separation (and *barah* really means *fabrication*). There is “something” when God creates: no enlightenment on a point zero, but only that which is necessary for us to recognize who is our God. He brings order to the chaos; he fills the desert with his word—that is, he gives meaning to absence. But it is not only a negative absence: it is an absence that is there, an insignificance that is substantial (just as Death is an active power). Thus, what is negative is still something: the desert.⁸

2. Abraham—The second mention of the desert concerns Abraham, at the time of his departure from Ur (Gen. 12:1–4). This already establishes the importance of the desert, which is situated first at the starting point of creation and then at the starting point of the election.

Abraham is called to leave the fertile crescent and cross the desert to enter into the land which God gives. This journey is sometimes interpreted as an initiation rite; in reality, it marks the stretch of desert between what one leaves and what God gives—between the world, society, humanity, civilization, and the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not in the same place as we are. The kingdom of God is not in continuity with what we are doing: a rupture is needed, an abandon. The transition to the desert

8. M.M. For further commentary on Ellul’s interpretation of the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2, particularly as they concern the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo* as mentioned here, see Ellul, *On Freedom, Love, and Power*, 22–23. Ellul also discusses this in the untranslated *La Genèse aujourd’hui* (*Genesis Today*).

is a transition to absence, to nothingness, on the simple declaration of the Word of God, to receive something unknown: in fact, it is not specifically said in the call that the promised land will be better or superior (this will be added much later): what he will find beyond the desert is not necessarily more than what he has lost. God promises him a country “that I will show you,”⁹ so it is not even known in advance. And in reality, all that is confirmed four times in two verses is the Blessing: the good word that God speaks. Abraham has nothing else with which to cross the desert but the Word of God. Thus, the desert is identified with a questioning of faith, radical or not, in this Word.

3. Ishmael—The third mention of the desert concerns Ishmael (Gen. 16:17 and 21), the counterpart of both Abraham and Isaac (*yīšmā’ ē’l* means *God will hear*).

Birth in the desert is the counterpart inherent in the disobedience of Abraham (‘bringing about the promise’ by himself)—and the opposite to his former obedience: the desert here reveals the temptation to substitute oneself for God. Ishmael chooses to be a wild man amongst men (*pere adam*),¹⁰ a wild man born in the desert and who wants to live in the desert which he chooses (Gen. 21:20). By doing this he is exempt from any “place”—proof that nomadism in itself is not holy! But Ishmael and the desert also signify the absence of a future. Isaac, whose name means *he will laugh*, is situated in time. There is a future for him, a plan orientated by the promise. While Ishmael ‘is also characterized by laughter, this laughter is defined’ by the present: “he laughs” (Gen. 21:9). Ishmael sneers, with the laughter of bitterness and mocking. The desert here is the absolute dominance of the immediate, the present without any depth. A situation outside of Time and Place.

But God meets Ishmael, as well, in the desert. For not only did God “hear” ‘the distress of Hagar his mother’ (Gen. 16:11), as well as the ‘prayer of Abraham for Ishmael,’ (“I heard you,” Gen. 17:20), but “God heard the

9. J-P.Q. Compare Gen 12:2–3 (Abraham’s departure from “his country” for “the country” that God will show him, without other details) with Gen 13:15 (first mention of the large expanse of land, but still limited to what a person can see) and Gen 15:18 (the expanse of land henceforth going beyond human limits because it goes “from the River of Egypt to the Great River”).

10. J-P.Q. In his commentary on the Torah, Rashi of Troyes interprets the prophecy over Ishmael in Gen 16:12 (“He will be a wild man” (*hāyâ pere’ ādām*) by the fact that “he will be a man of the desert.”

cries of the boy” (Gen. 21:17). However, even if God receives this weeping, even if Ishmael is not abandoned (as compared to Cain), even if he is helped, and even if this desert he chooses is not an obstacle between him and God, he is not led there by God to receive the word of God (new ambiguity).

4. Moses—Now comes the explicit meeting with God in the desert (Exod. 3; 5:1–3), which allows God to be named the “God of the desert.” First of all, it is in the desert that God reveals himself and gives his name¹¹ (thereby showing a progression: after his secretive action comes the revelation). Moses chances to go the desert, to feed his flocks; there is no deliberate choice or memorial act. Now on this occasion, when he is separated from everything by the desert, he receives a double revelation:

- On the one hand, the knowledge of the Holy Land: God isn’t from a place built by man, in the midst of men; the desert alone is likely to be the place ‘claimed by God’ because there can be no confusion there, no misunderstanding; the “nothingness” becomes holy because God is there and the desert marks a “separation” from everything else (holiness);¹²

11. J-P.Q. Exod. 6:3 (NLT): “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as El-Shaddai—‘God Almighty’—but I did not reveal my name, Yahweh, to them.”

12. M.M. Ellul often points out *holiness* means *otherness* and *separation* when used to describe God’s holiness. For Ellul, this has theological and moral implications for the people of God in that their holiness ought to be a God-derived otherness, or separateness that does not retreat from the world, but lives in and cares for the world in a distinct, God-reflecting way. Capturing the radicality of this holiness in an apocalyptic key, Ellul writes in *To Will and To Do*, 109: “In the wall of morality which man wants to build for himself, behind which he hopes to find shelter from God, there must be a breach for God’s will to pass through. It is the tension lived by the Christian between the two moralities in this society which is, of itself, the breach of God, the breach through which God passes, whenever his word causes his requirement to reecho in a life within which the Christian has born witness, in a society in which the Christian has lived, in which he has participated. And when the word is presented so alive that God’s requirement is beyond dispute, then the tension can disappear, for the word carries its decisive contradiction to the moral order which can only explode. The choice becomes radical and necessary. There is no longer any obedience which holds to the order of the world. There is a judgment of that order by holiness. The explosion of the revelation destroys the ethic of the world. Whether it is a question of the morality of the individual, his decisions and his choices, or whether it is a question of the moral order of society with its imperatives, ideals, and structures, the tension would be still another compromise and a betrayal if it were the lasting solution to the contradiction. But not this tension itself is continually called into question by the requirement of absolute obedience to, undivided loyalty,