

Chapter Three

The Desert

Recapitulating and Going Beyond Ellul

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IN MANY WAYS THIS rediscovered essay on “The Desert” offers Ellul’s theological perspective and method in a nutshell: prioritizing the revelation of God in history and thus in narrative and relationship. Long before narrative theology was a widely known approach, Ellul recognized theology must not be done in ontological categories, nor in moral prescriptions, nor even through the lens of personal experience. Rather, Ellul believed theology is the revelation of God *in history of history*; the inbreaking of a divine narrative into the false and absurd narratives of human construction (myth).¹

As such, theology is movement. It is a dialogue, a relationship, not an image or icon. But this movement has a design, an architecture, as Ellul’s book *Apocalypse* explores in the book of Revelation.² Theology occupies the meeting point of time and eternity in space in the person of Jesus Christ. It is the radical inbreaking of the Wholly Other.³ This inbreaking dislocates humans. It questions their stories, their justifications, their own creations. It liberates through exile in the wilderness. Indeed, the presence of God leads to the necessary judgment of the world as the Platonic world of imitative

1. My PhD thesis, “Revelation and the Sacred Reconsidered,” covers this Ellulian movement in greater detail.

2. See Rollison, *Presence in the Postmodern World*, for full coverage of this movement and architecture.

3. The influence of the early Karl Barth should be evident here.

shadows that it is. Only, it reveals that humans are not chained prisoners in a cave, but puppet masters, constructing a world of simulacra and calling it reality. This is the human desert, of which Ellul speaks in this essay.⁴ This desert is the place where humans are incapable of encountering God, but it is also the place where God appears to liberate the self-alienated captives and lead them to reconciliation.

As revelation in history of history, the divine narrative of meaning does not end with the close of Scripture, even though this is where the authoritative commentary on history ends. For Ellul, the Bible comments on all of history, not simply the historical events it narrates. It is by engaging with this authoritative commentary that one can re-narrate the narratives of one's own milieu in relationship with God.

And yet, Ellul has a striking thesis, that God has abandoned us and is silent in the modern world. According to Ellul, the modern world is particularly devoid of meaning because it has begun to occupy a wholly self-enclosed technical milieu of its own creation. The mythological systems of modernity are so effective that they have driven the voice of God out of hearing. One gets the sense from Ellul that he thinks God will not bother speaking where God knows he is not going to be heard. Thus, Ellul's theological reinterpretation of the modern milieu quite nearly aligns with Israel's captivity in Egypt.

By this dual reading of the Word of God and the situation of humanity today, Ellul elicits what God might say were he to speak. This is what we will briefly survey in this Chapter, with the caveat that this synchronic summary of Ellulian thought overlooks changes in Ellul's work over time.⁵ It is with the dead and silent Ellulian *corpus*, not unlike with the living but ostensibly silent God, that we must freely and responsibly interpret.

4. As Ellul puts it in *The Humiliation of the Word*, 189–90: “But was I also supposed to take the freed prisoner by the hand, make him my pupil, and teach him what he should and could do? Doesn't this purely negative deed produce freedom? Now that he is unfettered, the person can stand up, begin to walk, and choose where he wants to go; he could do none of this before. Well, let him do it! But only he can do it, and if he prefers to stay hunched up in his prison wishing for his chains back, what further positive deed can I do for him?”

5. Rollison traces the synchronic changes to Ellul's thought in *Presence in the Post-modern World*.

The Word and Meaning

Before speaking of creation it is vital to understand that one of Ellul's major theological assumptions is that interpretation is necessary for meaning. Ellul believes interpretation is not something to which we turn when there is misunderstanding, because for him, all experience is always-already interpreted.⁶ In the absence of the word of God, meaning is thus constructed with the resources available to human creatures, and therefore meaning necessarily is false as it leaves out who is absent: the Creator of the heavens, the earth, and everything in both.

Creation

For Ellul, creation does not establish ontological norms that must be rediscovered to attain true moral uprightness before the Creator-Judge. Rather, the period of creation is itself completed and God ceases to act. For Ellul, the major point of creation is the Word of God. In "The Desert," he ignores New Testament passages about creation (e.g. John 1; Heb 11:3) and prioritizes the Genesis account, thereby questioning *creatio ex nihilo* to highlight God as speaking into the wilderness, which in the Ancient Near East was a symbol of chaos. While Ellul is inaccurate on a few points here,⁷ his main point holds. God is the one who speaks order, who creates by the very act of interpretation or judgment, and God does this in the context of what would seem the ultimate desert of chaos.⁸

The creation of humans as the image of God is the creation of a species capable of speaking, hearing, and interpreting.⁹ As such, humans are

6. There are some significant thematic overlaps between Ellul and Martin Heidegger and the phenomenological school. Ellul, however, refused to engage Heidegger because of his Nazism. Ellul, *Living Faith*, 79; Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 295; Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 148. See also Rognon, *Jacques Ellul*, 305–7, 323–25. But Ellul saw that their humanism was itself a vain attempt at creating a new meaning and new history based on humanity alone. It was vain because the fruit of this tree was that major thinkers like Heidegger and Sartre were caught up in the "collective imbecility" of the mass movements of Nazism and Stalinsim respectively. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 63.

7. Namely, *barah* is a uniquely divine action in the OT, and so it is not unfair to attempt to give it a uniquely divine rendering beyond "fabrication." See Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden*, 152–53, for more on this subject.

8. However, I argue that chaos is a human state of mind or experience rather than a kind of real reality. Wagenfuhr, *Plundering Eden*, 28–31.

9. Ellul writes in *Humiliation of The Word*, 45: "God speaks. We must answer him.

uniquely capable of engaging in the relationship of love that characterizes God. Such love requires that humans be autonomous and free. This freedom enables humans to lie, to intentionally misinterpret and falsely narrate. Such freedom allows for the possibility of breaking the relationships of love and truth displayed by the Creator for his creation.¹⁰

Freedom and the Seventh Day

Ellul believed that God's rest on the seventh day of creation is the enduring state of the whole history of the world. God ceased to act as the Creator because the creation was complete. His rest is not silence, but the rest of satisfaction in an enduring relationship of love with his creation. But God is not the Aristotelean Prime Mover, or first cause. This would imply a relationship of necessity that binds God to always be acting as Creator for the creation to continue its existence.¹¹ Creation is free, and this means free-from God as the omni-causal power whose providence foreordained everything that comes to pass. History is not the cause of events, it is the interpretation of them. The word of God is active and capable of transforming the direction of events, but it is not providence, a belief Ellul thinks is a subversion of Christianity that came through Islamic influence.¹² So, God's rest is the freedom of creation to act, and God's interventions in creation are always liberative (through judgment).

Although it is tempting to see Ellul as arguing for Open Theism, or even a modified type of Deism, Ellul does not fit within either of these theological categories. Against Deism, Ellul's God speaks and intervenes even

God creates human beings as speaking beings. Perhaps this is one of the meanings of the image of God: one who responds and is responsible; a counterpart who will dialogue, who is both at a certain distance and has the ability to communicate. The human being is the only one, out of the entire creation, who is capable of language. Like God who speaks or God who is said to speak, humanity has this capacity which comes from its creator. Speech constitutes human specificity, just as it constitutes the specificity of God as compared with all other gods. God summons a person through the word, and induces him to speak in dialogue. If God is freedom, there is someone there to live out freedom. If God is love, there is someone to respond to love through the word. The human word exists only because it is a product of the Word of God: I would not speak if you had not previously called me. 'Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, thou knowest it altogether,' (Ps. 139:4)."

10. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 23.

11. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 152–66.

12. Ellul, *Subversion of Christianity*, 107.

though he created a creation capable of autonomous continuity. Against Open Theism, Ellul's God speaks an authoritative interpretative word, predestines creation to a divinely chosen end, while participating in history. Where Deism and Open Theism are more or less ontological statements about God, each fruit of different Enlightenment philosophies (e.g., empiricism and Hegelianism), Ellul comes to understand the character of God through the revelation in the Bible as the one whose love is characterized by interventions for liberation, to reestablish the freedom of the rest of his Seventh Day. For Ellul, the type of religious metaphysics involved in both Deism and Open Theism are attempts at binding God and destroying love by creating a predictive divine order. Ellul's God descends in a disorienting revelation that liberates people to responsibility in freedom.¹³

Temptation, Alienation, and Abandonment

In freedom, humans fall into their own alienations. The three temptations of Jesus are quite often used by Ellul as the divine word on all human temptation.¹⁴ Jesus was tempted in every way we are (Heb 4:15). These economic, political, and spiritual temptations that Jesus resisted are what humans fall prey to, and in so doing, break their relationship with God and need Jesus to restore that relationship. This leads humans into a kind of wilderness or desert, a world of silence in which God's voice has been muted by rebellion. The silencing of God is the descent into unmeaning, and it demands the construction of meaning. Constructing meaning is not simply done in word, but in concrete and in spiritual power. For, the order of alienation creates its own evil powers, its own evil logic. Powers are created beyond human control, but not separated from human existence. These powers are what actively enslave and oppress people.

It is when these powers are empowered, served, and worshipped that humans are alienated beyond any hope of self-rescue. While Ellul believes in human freedom, he is not a Pelagian or even semi-Pelagian. God alone can break through the authority of the principalities and powers with his

13. See Ellul's lengthy discussion on Revelation and religion in chapter 16 of *Living Faith*.

14. For example, Ellul, *Si tu es le fils de Dieu*, 70–85; Ellul, *Défi et le nouveau*, 984–86; Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 57–59; Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 52–62; Ellul, *Living Faith*, 139–40; Ellul, *Meaning of the City*, 114; Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 298.

Word and so liberate a people who are incapable of liberating themselves, try as they might.

The concrete form of human alienation is in the very works of humanity, its cultures, its architecture, its cities, and civilization. All of these are the concretization of human rebellion and refusal to live in the desert of their own making by their rupture with God as Ellul describes at length in *Meaning of the City*. In the city, powers beyond human means are created. In the city, humans totally abandon God because they have the means of doing so. Satan's words are spoken in the city, and the Word of God appears in the desert. It is by listening to our own babblings in our own isolated and self-enclosed milieus, a constructed mirror of ourselves, that God is silenced. The voice of God can be drowned in a ceaseless transmission of sound, image, propaganda, and political illusion. Modern life so perfects alienation that humans are now more than ever subjected to a predestination and providence of the Evil One.¹⁵ We live within a closed-off world that has structurally silenced God, as Ellul argues in *Hope in Time of Abandonment*. So, God has left off speaking and abandoned us to our self-made desert.¹⁶

Election and Revelation

And yet, God will not remain silent forever, nor forsake his people forever. God chooses a people within the human wastelands of their making; people like Abraham, or Israel under Moses. God's choice of a people is, at least later in his life, universal. Because, while only some are liberated in time, in eternity, all will be freed from the reign of sin and alienation. This is what love demands, Ellul says.

But liberation must act from the outside, and this only can come by revelation. It is the Word of God speaking into the human desert of so-called civilization that liberates people. This Word became flesh in Jesus Christ who is, for Ellul following Barth, elect humanity in himself. The ultimate remnant of the elect people of God in Jesus represents the whole.¹⁷ The word of God is the breaking-in of God into the human world, and this creates a breakdown of the human world that enables the act of liberation.

15. In the first chapter of *Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul argues that the best modern term for the biblical understanding of sin is "alienation."

16. See Ellul, *What I Believe*, ch. 14.

17. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 39.