

Introduction

Into the Desert, Wilderness, and Wasteland

*A Word of Warning and Encouragement concerning
In/Visible Life and Death*

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FINDING, EDITING, TRANSLATING, AND studying Jacques Ellul's desert manuscript was an archaeological discovery, dig, restoration, and viewing. Two editors and one translator lifted this essay's pieces out of the Ellul family archives, brushed off what they found, and fused the fragments. Seven theologians studied what was assembled and wrote down what they saw. What I observed at various stages in the production of this volume has been a timely, communal, and apocalyptic-prophetic answer to the question God asks the priestly-prophet Ezekiel in the Valley of Dry Bones: "Mortal, can these bones live?" (Ezek 37:3). Ellul's essay and each piece engaging with it echoes Ezekiel's response in a unique, provocative way. We collectively say, "O Lord GOD, you know" (Ezek 37:3), but we say it in different ways. The surface appearances of our respective deserts with dry bones differ from Ezekiel's, but the deeper, foundational ideologies and idolatries producing the death-filled deserts are identical. As we learn from Ezekiel, other stories in Scripture, and many stories today, whenever people worship a god who is not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, desert valleys materialize and they start getting filled with in/visible death.

Fortunately, Ezekiel's story in chapter 37 *starts* with in/visible death. It *ends* in in/visible life. The positive side of the negative theological-ethical warning about ideology and idolatry offered above is captured in God's response to Ezekiel's reply to God's initiatory question about dry bones: "Prophesy to these bones [Ezekiel], and say to them: O dry bones, hear the Word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the LORD" (Ezek 37:3–7). Ezekiel's story can become our story, but only if we are willing to do what Ezekiel did when the Lord God communicated with him in the death filled desert valley: speak prophetically to dry bones with hope that the Lord God will appear in the midst of death and be the God who speaks words of life.

Robert Jenson's well-known meditation on the Ezekiel 37 scene consequently emerges as a theological frame for this volume. In the introduction to *Theology in Outline*, Jenson writes the following about this harrowing and hopeful Ezekiel scene:

The church and its thinking—its theology—begins with that little group of Jews who became convinced that Jesus' resurrection was God's own answer to the question the Lord posed to Ezekiel. They declared the dead bones of God's people, Israel, and the dead bones of humanity in general can indeed live again. Jesus' first disciples thought they should pass on this news. Death does not win, they said.¹

Ellul and each contributor to this volume echo Jenson's definition of the church's theology as articulated here, but in ways that formulate apocalyptic, prophetic proclamations in the desert, wilderness, and wasteland of today; a desert that, as Ellul so often reminds readers in his work, is a desert of our own making:

Such valid human activities as political involvement and business become works of death and sin when they are shut into a world which has excluded God in order to glorify, to force, to seduce men. This is no reason to believe that perversion reigns only in the city, that outside her gates business, government, and money are sanctified! But in her we can certainly see the major perversion. Besides, without the city, where would business and government be? In any case, the city has chosen her special role by specifically and voluntarily shutting herself off from any divine intervention.

1. Jenson, *Theology in Outline*, 11–12.

Stubbornly, obstinately, of her own will, she applies all her attention to herself. And her world without God is also a world of gods. If the desert is the place of demons, the city is the place of idols.²

As earthly cities sprawl outwards and upwards, reinforce their walls, stockpile arms, pillage land, pollute water, go to war, and worship the gods Mammon and Mars, the demonic desert grows. The ‘chosen’ few generate money and power and the harassed and abandoned ‘unelect’ suffer and cry out. With such stark realities in view, Ellul and each contributor describes why such suffering and death *apparently* Are winning today, yet they follow up such descriptions with prophesies that confidently proclaim suffering and death *assuredly will not* win, despite any appearance to the contrary. In this way, every author offers us the gift of an essay that exposes all mirages of hope in the desert, and inspires an apprehension—a revelation even—of true, communal, bone, flesh, and blood, hope in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the kind of God who shows up, journeys with us, and cares for us in the desert.

With all of the above said, I will share the word of warning and encouragement to which the title of this introductory essay alludes. First, the warning. You may prematurely close this book if you are hoping for a completely coherent theology and ethics that immediately orients you in a disorienting desert valley. But, and now the word of encouragement, persist through the disorientation! Keep reading through the incoherence! As you continue reading, keep a firm grasp on a hope that the incoherent theology and ethics will cohere, precipitate a hearing of God’s Word, and provoke a worshipful response from you, the reader who I hope is willing to experience a moment of disorientation in order to hear God’s reorienting Word in the desert, wilderness, and wasteland of today.³

As Ellul articulates in the essay that lays the foundations for this book, true worship of the God revealed in the Holy Scriptures only appears when people are willing to leave behind all they count as coherent religion. “From the moment [we] stop trying to understand this God and to build a coherent theology, the only possible relationship is worship,” Ellul writes.⁴ He

2. Ellul, *Meaning of The City*, 54.

3. When I use the terms orientation, disorientation, and reorientation here I have in mind Walter Brueggemann’s work on orientation, disorientation, and reorientation in *The Message of the Psalms* and John Swinton’s use of these themes in the chapter “Finding God in the Darkness,” from *Finding Jesus in the Storm*.

4. Ellul, “Desert,” 30.

continues: “Worship [is] the humbling of the mind, knowledge, [and] philosophy” as “entering into worship becomes the opening of the self to the one whom we recognize without knowing.”⁵ How is it that one would recognize God without knowing God; apprehend God without entering into a relationship with God, let alone worshiping God? One of Jesus’ rebukes of the religious leaders of his day offers an answer to this question. The pharisees rebuked in chapter 23 of Matthew’s Gospel are depicted as constructing and propagating a coherent theology that manages the people and the world they are in. This construction, propagation, and management helped the pharisees accumulate power, but the cost was a warping of themselves and a damaging of others. To such coherence—and power-addicted managers of people and the world, Jesus presents the following lament: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! *For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth.* So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matt 23:27, emphasis added). Not all dry and filthy bones are discovered in desert valleys. Not all infertile and hostile desert climates are external. Rotten bones and infertile climates like these can be internal, inside people like these pharisees. Inside people like you and I.

Is there any hope for the rebuked pharisees and people like us? To answer this question, let’s return to the question God poses to Ezekiel in chapter 37. Can dry, filthy bones be clean again and brought back to life? Can infertile and hostile climates become resting places for God’s fertility and peace? Only if there is worship inspired by the kind of incoherent, apocalyptic-prophetic theology and ethics that materializes when the presence, work, and words of the enfleshed Son of God are not only apprehended, but received with reverence and a willingness to go anywhere with this God at anytime, no matter the circumstances—including venturing with this God into the desert, where time dilates and contracts, space expands and constricts, and nothing is certain except the past promises of God that will be realized at some point, either in the present or the future.

Will you enter this kind of desert with us, reader?

We hope you will.

Now, a brief cartography of this book to guide you as we enter the desert, wilderness, and wasteland.

5. Ellul, “Desert,” 30.

A Brief Cartography

The first chapter features Ellul's essay titled "The Desert," which appears to have been written in 1977. It was never finished or published until now, in fragmentary form. Jean-Philippe Qadri, the editor of the original French version of this essay, masterfully pieced together the fragments of Ellul's work. Qadri was able to fill in many empty spaces in the primary manuscript with content he discovered in a variety of folders housed in the Ellul family archives. He also provided many helpful annotations to contextualize certain pieces of Ellul's work and guide readers in places where they might otherwise be lost. Likewise, the translator of this essay, Kelsey Haskett, excelled at the difficult work of moving a text out of its original language and into a new language, while keeping the words on the page as reflective of the author's original voice and intent as possible. I am grateful for their work, which I am confident the reader will benefit from greatly.

The form and content of "The Desert" essay will be familiar to anyone acquainted with Ellul's theological-ethical work, but the incomplete form of this piece, combined with the jarring tone and content, will likely create space for a unique encounter with the prolific Ellul writing in his most apocalyptic style. By *apocalyptic*, I mean the kind of apocalyptic-messianism fleshed out by theological ethicist Hans Ulrich in his book *Transfigured Not Conformed*: "To be made a witness is to have any perceptions of the self or of the phenomena that obscure or obliterate God's own actions ripped away,"⁶ Ulrich writes. "The paradox of deliverance is that in it phenomena that seemed incontrovertibly real are exposed as fundamentally indeterminate. Seemingly stable and nonnegotiable realities are interrupted and *unveiled* in their ephemerality."⁷ For this reason, Ulrich concludes, "[The apocalyptic-messianic aspect of God's word] is an act of witness to having made the transition from thinking and reflecting on human agency and its sources and conditions to the recognition of God's own reality and agency, that is, to God's own ethos within which His partners or children participate. It is in this way that we become witnesses to God's story."⁸ As I see it, the gift of Ellul's essay resides in its offering the kind of witness mapped out by Ulrich here. "The Desert" essay is far from clean, predictable, and manageable. It is wild like the desert it pulls readers into. But its

6. Ulrich, *Transfigured Not Conformed*, 36–37.

7. Ulrich, *Transfigured Not Conformed*, 36–37.

8. Ulrich, *Transfigured Not Conformed*, 37.

mess, unpredictability, and unruliness can cause a transition from shallow, navel-gazing treatises on what can be accomplished by human efforts in the wasteland of today to explosive, life-bestowing recognitions of the God who invites us into a story that simultaneously surpasses, enters into, levels, and rebuilds human stories and efforts in a wasteland that could be re-wilded with the generative presence of God.

Amy Erickson's chapter works with the strains in Ellul's essay that force into view the human actions that produce the kinds of deserts described earlier in the passage from *Meaning of The City*. Technology as this age's human action *par excellence* is analyzed by Erickson to expose and undo the ways technologies can produce a human-made wasteland where isolation, loneliness, and impotence abound. Not content to end with a bleak account of the human situation, however, Erickson contrasts this wasteland with a hopeful word about "the biblical wilderness" (38) and the "ecclesial reservoirs" (43) of resurrection, Sabbath, and Eucharist, all meeting together in a "rhythmic resting together and feasting together" as we "prepare to suffer together" (57) in the desert of our day.

Gregory Wagenfuhr's chapter ruminates on Ellul's mid-career contention that God has abandoned the world to itself and chosen silence, offsetting this claim with other facets of Ellul's writing that describe a totally transcendent God who enters into creation and history to liberate both. From these foundations, Wagenfuhr builds upon Ellul's work on liberation in the desert by offering an ecclesial, eschatological, and ecological account of the Promised Land to come, crowning an eco-ecclesial-eschatology with the following proclamation of recapitulation: "[Recapitulation] is the inclusion of all diverse stories of each subatomic particle in the person of Jesus Christ as God becomes king over all creation" (74). He concludes with a word of challenge lest people receive Wagenfuhr's words on recapitulation as permission to wait passively until God's shows up to take us home: "Recapitulation is the mission of the church because it is the reconciling of all things in Christ. Recapitulation is fundamentally ecological in that it is aimed at the liberation of creation from all sin" (74). So, Wagenfuhr pushes for a *participatory* recapitulation in which Christians do not deny the alarming burgeoning barrenness around them but see it and respond with appeals to God for help as they start to act in accordance with God's fruitful presence and action in the deserts of our making.

Emily Hill's chapter fills the sails of Erickson's and Wagenfuhr's chapters as it takes a serious look at the ways churches in North America are