

[The Wilderness E7 Transcript]

[Recap of the Theme and Setup for the Prophets (0:00—16:07)]

Jon: The story of the Bible begins with a vast wilderness where God creates humanity out of the dust of that wilderness and then plants them in a good garden. And all of this life in the wilderness is sustained now by the creative power of God. So to exist in the garden is to exist within God's life.

Tim: The condition of being in the garden of God's infinite life is about trusting in God's wisdom, partnering with God, and letting God guide our choices about good and bad. And if we don't want to play that game, then God escorts us outside the garden into the wilderness that we choose for ourselves.

Jon: Tragically, humanity ends up back in the wilderness. But God doesn't give up on them, he follows them into the wilderness to provide for them. And he uses the wilderness as a training ground to teach them how to trust him.

Tim: The wilderness is a place that God guides his people through as a period of testing, and of purification, and character formation.

Jon: Today, we're going to look at the different ways Israel's prophets discuss the theme of the wilderness. We'll look at Hosea, who describes the wilderness as a place of restoration.

Tim: Hosea is describing, like, an intervention with somebody who's so self-destructive that you have to put them in an environment where they can't do very much anymore. God's going to cut off access to self-made Edens.

Jon: For Hosea, the wilderness is a severe mercy, an opportunity to connect to God in a deep and intimate way.

Tim: The wilderness first was like a prison to prevent you from destroying yourself. But now, that wilderness becomes a place to fall in love again.

Jon: This positive portrayal of the wilderness continues in Jeremiah, who describes Israel's time in the wilderness like an engagement period between two people in love. On the other hand, the prophet Ezekiel portrays Israel's entire history as a tragic

wilderness rebellion. Israel has proven that no amount of wilderness will prepare them for garden life. And so the only hope is for God to do something fundamentally new.

Tim: He's going to put his own life-breath, his Spirit, in the hearts of his people, take out their stony heart, give them a new heart. Then a human could learn what they need to learn in the wilderness and actually live in the garden land for good.

Jon: Today, Tim Mackie and I will explore the many different ways that Israel's prophets talk about the wilderness: a prison, a romance, a tragedy, a promise. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[Musical Break (2:44—2:50)]

Jon: Hey, Tim.

Tim: Hello, Jon Collins.

Jon: Hello.

Tim: Mhm. Good morning, real time—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: For us.

Jon: Good morning. And real time, we've taken a bit of a break—

Tim: Mmm. Mhm.

Jon: From the wilderness theme.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And so I would love—

[Laughter]

Jon: A bit of a reminder—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Of where we've been.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Get my head back in the game—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Tim.

Tim: We are many conversations into exploring the theme of the wilderness in the biblical story. Wilderness is a repeated location for really important events throughout the story of the Bible. It's introduced in the first sentences of Genesis. The pre-creation state, the blank canvas, so to speak, that God addresses with his word, is described as an unordered, uninhabitable wilderness. It's this realm of disorder. It is not conducive to human life.

Jon: Yeah. And then you showed us how God creates a garden in the wilderness, and he forms humans out of the dust of the wilderness, and then places the humans in this good, abundant garden.

Tim: Yeah. And so humans are destined and created for, designed for, flourishing and life. God sustains their life just like God sustains the garden. But the condition of being in the garden of God's infinite life is about trusting in God's wisdom, partnering with God, and letting God guide our choices about good and bad. And if we don't want to play that game, then God escorts us outside the garden into the, the wilderness that, so to speak, we choose for ourselves. And there, it's not just that it's disordered and empty, but that it is actually full of creatures that are dangerous and it's an environment that's now dangerous primarily—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Because of a lack of water—hostile to human life. So the nothingness from which God called creation is described with this—

Jon: Wilderness—

Tim: Uhm—

Jon: Image—

Tim: Wilderness image, but then, the literal wilderness of the opposite of the garden of Eden becomes, metaphorically—

[Laughter]

Tim: A place of, like, cast back into the, the nothingness.

Jon: And God sends Adam and Eve out of the garden into the wilderness as a severe mercy, but with the hope—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Of—

Tim: Of return.

Jon: Return.

Tim: Yeah. If humans desire to stake out some realm of independent existence apart from God's, you end up in this limbo existence—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Of semi-non-existence. And the wilderness is an image of that.

Jon: So you can put yourself there, you can put other people there, but then—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: We get to the story of Israel being rescued—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: From slavery.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: And then we get to that really interesting passage where you hear that there was a direct route. They could have gone—

Tim: The short—

[Laughter]

Jon: Out of Egypt—

Tim: That's right, the coastal route.

Jon: The coastal route, and they would have gotten to the promised land within—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Days.

Tim: Yeah. A few weeks.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Or a couple weeks.

Jon: A couple weeks.

Tim: Mhm. Mhm.

Jon: And God knew that if they went that way and they encountered trouble—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: They're going to encounter people who say: "We don't want you here. Leave," and they're going to go, turn around, go back to Egypt, and God wants them out of Egypt.

Tim: Yeah. Mhm.

Jon: He wants them to be in a garden land. And so: "I can't send you the direct route. You're not ready."

Tim: "You're not ready." That's right.

Jon: You're not ready.

Tim: The—yep. Humans aren't ready to fully inherit the abundant garden land. So Israel's 40-year sojourn through the wilderness adds a new twist or adds a new layer of meaning that the wilderness is a place that God guides his people through as a period of testing, and of purification, and of character formation.

Jon: Yeah. So I think the twist there is, like: This time you don't have to go through the wilderness. I'm ready just to bring you back into the land.

Tim: Sure. Yeah, no, you could technically go right back into the land.

Jon: Technically.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "I'm inviting you back into the land."

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: "You're not ready."

Tim: "But you are not ready." Yeah.

Jon: Now, if we think about these two, kind of, wilderness exiles together, one is Adam and Eve being sent out, and then one is Israel being sent out. Is there some interplay? And when God tells Adam and Eve: “You can’t be in the garden,” it’s because they’re not ready. They don’t know how to trust God’s wisdom.

Tim: That’s right. Yeah.

Jon: And so if they stay there, they’re just going to keep defining good and bad on their own terms—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And they’re going to make a mess of—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: It.

Tim: That’s good.

Jon: So there is kind of a sense of not—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Being ready—

Tim: That’s right.

Jon: As well.

Tim: Already, aren—that’s a great point. So in that sense, humanity’s life outside the garden from Genesis three onward—the wilderness becomes metaphorically a way to think about all of human history—

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And all of biblical history as taking place in the wilderness.

Jon: So the wilderness is a consequence, but a wilderness is also an opportunity, right?

Tim: Yeah. In—I guess it’s an opportunity simply because God isn’t going to let the wilderness be the last word. Because he—

Jon: Well, it’s also: Why through the wilderness?

Tim: Mhm. Hmm.

Jon: Right?

Tim: Yes. What's—if you're not ready to really inherit and become a full partner with God in the promised land—and this is why Moses interpreted that season of 40 years as a long season of God testing and inviting Israel into a deep, deep relationship of trust—as a son does with a father—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Was the metaphor he chose.

Jon: That's cool. Now it seems like then there's also kind of two modes that you're in the wilderness in. There's a mode of: I'm in the wilderness. I'm like Cain. I'm going to just murder my brother. I'm going to go further in the wilderness. I'm going to build a ci—I'm just kind of on my own—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Doing my thing in the wilderness.

Tim: Yeah. You've kind of—you're—you've so forgotten what a garden existence would be like—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You've become one with the wilderness.

Jon: You've become one with the wilderness.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And you're being ground back in the dust. But then there's the way that God wanted Israel to be in the wilderness, which is: "Trust me, I will transform the wilderness into garden when you need it."

Tim: Yes. Yeah. That's right. The wilderness becomes a temporary season of suffering and of lack—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Interspersed with these little Eden moments where God will provide an oasis with 70 palm trees, and—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: 12 springs—

Jon: Right.

Tim: Or manna, the daily Eden bread.

Jon: Yeah. So God wants to teach us in the wilderness. And part of that is learning to listen to his voice.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And so if he says: “Go and collect the manna, but only a day’s worth—”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: You listen to that. If he says to Moses: “Strike the rock,” he listens to it.

Tim: Yeah. If he—

Jon: Uhm—

Tim: Says to Moses: “Speak to the rock.”

[Laughter]

Jon: Then you listen to that.

Tim: Then, then you listen to that. Yeah.

Jon: And if you’re hungry, and thirsty, and you feel like at the end of yourself, you still learn to trust that God will show up.

Tim: That’s right. Or David, who was in his long sojourn in the wilderness that we looked at. And the one moment where he actually lost his cool and was about to use the sword to take life because somebody dishonored him, God raises up this wise woman, Abigail, who brings a feast—

[Laughter]

Tim: A garden feast—

Jon: Brings Eden to him.

Tim: In the wilderness, and teaches him wisdom—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: To not take life if he doesn't need to.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So David's garden is to be the king of Israel. And he's not ready for it yet.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: He needs the wisdom of Abigail and the garden feast that she brings to make him ready. So it's not just the wilderness generation of Israel. It's actually many biblical characters find themselves in the wilderness. But it's God's leading them there to teach them things that they would not otherwise learn to prepare them to inherit a new Eden.

Jon: Mhm. Yeah. Which begs some questions like: Well, how does God decide how long I need to be in the wilderness?

[Laughter]

Jon: Uhm—

Tim: Things we would like to know.

[Laughter]

Jon: And then you can frame all of life as the wilderness, right? Because—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: We are living outside of Eden.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: But then, there's these moments in life, these seasons of life, that are much more intensely wilderness moments.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: And are we supposed to be thinking about wilderness in both of those ways?

Tim: Hmm. Well, I guess, it just—wilderness is the binary opposite of the ideal state of creation, which is union with God and God’s abundant life in a Heaven-on-Earth spot. And so garden is like the iconic image of that.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And wilderness is just the opposite of all of that.

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But if wilderness is what humans keep bringing upon themselves, God will meet his people in the wilderness—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: As a long training ground to prepare them for the inheritance of the garden that he has. How long will it take? That’s a great question. But maybe that’s a—also a way of thinking about all of human history. But at the same time, life outside of Eden for humanity is still marked by these haunted echoes of Eden—

Jon: Hmm—

[Laughter]

Tim: Right—that we have. And whether it’s moments of transcendence in loving relationship or community, a season of your life where you feel like you truly belong and are loved, or more fleeting moments of like—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: A good meal—

[Laughter]

Tim: You know, or a—uh, an amazing concert.

Jon: Yeah. There's a way to be in the wilderness where you actually are experiencing the garden.

Tim: Mhm. Yes.

Jon: And that's what God invites Israel into.

Tim: Yep. That's right.

Jon: And that's what David largely finds in his wilderness community out there.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And we haven't gotten to Jesus, but he has his wilderness—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Season.

Tim: Yeah. Exactly. We will get there. We're going to do one stop—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Left in this conversation—is to just survey the diverse palette of wilderness imagery in Israel's prophets, the prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible. So Israel's prophets are the figures that come along at different moments in Israel's history once they're in the land, so post-wilderness into the promised land. And God is guiding his people in the land, but they consistently just do stupid replays of Adam and Eve, and Cain and Abel, and Pharaoh, and all that. And so the history of Israel in the land under their kings, which is told in the books of Samuel and then Kings, is just a long story of replays of failure.

[Laughter]

Tim: Uh, and then—

Jon: It's just like one slow-motion grabbing for the tree of knowing good and bad—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: In—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: The garden.

Tim: But replayed.

Jon: But replayed.

Tim: So it's like—keeps—

Jon: Over and over.

Tim: Happening.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. It's like some weird, avant-garde art film—

[Laughter]

Tim: That just keeps—

[Laughter]

Tim: Replaying the same thing over and over again.

Jon: Grabbing, grabbing, grabbing.

Tim: Yeah. With occasional, like, good figures in there—Solomon has some good moments—Hezekiah, Josiah. So Israel's prophets are these figures, these Moses-like figures, that had a live wire to the heavens, and their special connection with God gave them the ability to see the big picture of Israel's history and to talk about that moment in Israel's history within the whole context of God's purposes for all of creation. And so the poetry of the prophets is often doing that. They're talking about a moment in their own life, what they see on the scene in Jerusalem or in the hills of Israel, and what the kings are doing, and the people, and the temple, but they talk about it in these cosmic images. And wilderness is one of these main images.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So I just want to sample some important poetic moments. And I think we'll see it's just filling out this picture of the wilderness as a place that's hostile. But then, when it becomes a severe mercy, the wilderness can become a place of testing and purification. And in that sense, it becomes a kind of refuge where you meet God in a way that you wouldn't otherwise have if you just perpetually lived in the garden.

[Musical Break (15:34—16:07)]

[Hosea's Wilderness as Containment and Reformation (16:07—27:40)]

Tim: In the book of Hosea, even though he doesn't come first in the—any of the orderings of the prophetic books—it's the first of The Scroll of the Twelve. And he's one of the earliest writing prophets. He's working somewhere in the eighth century, maybe late ninth centuries—eight hundreds, seven hundreds. So he lived in northern Israel. And he's most well-known for the fact that God asked him, as a symbolic, prophetic, public act, to marry a woman who was known to be very promiscuous, sexually promiscuous, and who would continue to be even while they're married.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And so he did this as a symbol in his community. I mean li—just what a—really difficult news to receive from God—

[Laughter]

Tim: That this is going to be your life. So the story is that he does this, he marries a woman named Gomer. They have children together. And then, you know, she's unfaithful to him. And then God tells him to go find her and pledge yourself to her again and stay with her. And this becomes this image of God's commitment to Israel in the midst of centuries of idolatry, and bad leaders, and so on. And so in Hosea chapter two, uh, you get this poetic retelling of Israel's story that begins in verse one. We're going to pick up in verse five, where God describes Hosea's wife, who has become a mother. They had some children together. And so he says: "The mother was unfaithful." And here the mother is Gomer, Hosea's wife, but as a symbol of the people—

Jon: Th—

Tim: Of Israel—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: In the poetry.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So: “Their mother was unfaithful, the one who conceived children, acted shamefully, saying: ‘I will go after my lovers.’”

Jon: And these are the gods.

Tim: So these are other gods, other nations, and their gods—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mhm, that Israel’s kings and priests actually, like—

Jon: Worship and—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Yeah—

Tim: That’s right.

Jon: Give allegiance to.

Tim: Yeah. And so in this story, this wife, who’s a symbol of Israel, saying: “I’m going to go after these lovers,” other gods, “these are the ones who have given me my bread and my water, my wool, and my oil, and my drink.”

Jon: Mmm. I go and sacrifice to these gods or worship these gods, and they are giving me—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: What?

Tim: Yeah. “Baal—”

Jon: My abundance?

Tim: “Baal is looking out for me.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “God—he provides the rain. He provides the fertile crops.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And God says: “Okay, if that’s what you’re going to do, then I am going to build a hedge in her path.” So the idea of: you’re walking along a road, and a hedge, meaning a bush-fence.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So God’s going to build a big barrier, and it’s going to have thorns. There’s your clue.

Jon: Mmm. It’s a wilderness image?

Tim: Yeah. That comes from the garden or from Genesis three—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Thorns and thistles. So God’s going to surround her with a wilderness or surround her—like, block her in the wilderness. “I’m going to build a stone wall against her so she cannot find her paths. And she’ll chase after her lovers, but she won’t overtake any of them. She’ll seek her lovers and not find them.” So God’s going to c—this is the severe mercy. He’s going to cut off her access to her self-made Edens by pursuing other gods, and, like, trap her, trap Israel. It’s an interesting image. “And then she’ll say: ‘Well, okay, maybe I’ll go now and return back to my first husband,’” that is Yahweh—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “‘Because, well, it was—it was better for me then than it is now.’ She didn’t know that I was the one who gave her all of that grain, and new wine, and oil, and silver, and gold, which they made into idol statues of Baal.” So you can get the feel here.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So what is this trap? What is this—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: The wall e—enclosed by thorn bushes?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: What’s that about? So w—but we’re getting this image that God’s going to, like, put her in this containment zone that doesn’t sound very pleasant. And maybe that will compel Israel to trust Yahweh again.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: That’s the idea.

Jon: Because in this zone, it's going to be hard for her to find what she's looking for on her own terms.

Tim: Oh, that's good. Yes. Okay.

Jon: Right?

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. That's right.

Jon: That's the image?

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Like, it's going to be hard for her to go and seek after these lovers—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Which is the image of seeking out after other gods.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: So—

Tim: To give you rain, and crops—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And fruit, and—

Jon: It's just: "I'm going to make it not work anymore."

Tim: That's right. "I'm going to put my people in a zone where the solutions that they've created to provide for themselves—"

Jon: "Stop working."

Tim: "But that actually are destroying themselves and other people—"so it's like a wilderness. It's called a wall of thorns—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: That enclose Israel.

Jon: That's interesting because that's the kind of wilderness you, kind of, I think—initially imagine wilderness being because of the severe mercy.

Tim: Yeah. Yes. Right. Right.

Jon: It's not the wilderness you think of with Israel's wanderings, right?

Tim: Hmm. Hmm.

Jon: He rescued them, and it feels like—more like: “Now I just got to prepare you.”

Tim: Oh, yeah.

Jon: Preparation wilderness versus a, like: “I need you to get out of your own way—”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: “And like, just—”

Tim: But don’t you think—

Jon: “Sit in your mess.”

Tim: That’s a form of preparation? Sitting in your own mess—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Ideally, will help you learn something.

Jon: It does. I guess it does make her realize: “Oh, I bet it would be—”

Tim: “I—”

Jon: “Better if I—”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Go and listen to—”

Tim: “I should—”

Jon: “God’s voice.”

Tim: “Go back to Yahweh, because it was better for me. At least when I did that, even if I felt like, whatever, he’s a bad deity—”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “Who is way too demanding, asks me to love my neighbor as myself—”

[Laughter]

Tim: “But that w—better now th—”

Jon: There’s a difference between someone who’s, like, making a mess and it’s like: “I got to contain you—” God’s like: “I got to contain you, get you out of your own way, and

you're going on a time-out," versus someone who's like: "I'm ready to bring you in the promised land." And they're like: "Yeah, let's go." And then God says: "Actually—"

Tim: I see.

Jon: "You know what?"

Tim: Okay. Yeah.

Jon: "I don't think you're quite ready."

Tim: That's a good point. Hosea is describing, like, an intervention—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: With somebody who's so self-destructive that you have to put them in an environment where they can't do very much anymore.

Jon: So I guess this is kind of like, there's a spectrum—

[Laughter]

Jon: Of wilderness.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Like, there's the intervention side and then there's just the, like, I'm-preparing-you side.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: But it's all wilderness.

Tim: Yeah. And interventions, ideally—

Jon: Are preparing you?

[Laughter]

Tim: Are preparing you. And actually, here, let's just—a few verses further. In verse—still describing this containment zone down in verse 13, God says: "I will punish her for the days of worshiping the Baal—"

Jon: The containment is a—

Tim: ““Gods.””

Jon: Punishment.

Tim: Yeah. It’s a—

Jon: Consequence.

Tim: Consequence.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. ““These gods to whom she burned incense and dressed herself up with ornamental rings and jewelries to go after her lovers. Look, I am going to allure—””i—it’s the word seduce, entice—so now God’s going to be like this—now, this is where he’s like Hosea going back to find the woman who’s been unfaithful to him. And now that’s Yahweh. ““I’m going to go back and entice her and bring her into the wilderness. And there I will speak to her heart—””literally, in Hebrew. ““Speak tenderly to her.””

Jon: Okay. Yeah. This feels different than, like: “I just need to contain you.”

Tim: Yeah. So the wilderness, first, was like a prison—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like a thorn wall-hedge—

Jon: Huh.

Tim: To prevent you from destroying yourself, but now, that wilderness becomes a place to fall in love again. Like: “Let’s take you out there so that I can woo you back to—”

Jon: It’s not—

Tim: “A new, new relationship.”

[Laughter]

Jon: W—I don’t think that’s where you should take—

[Laughter]

Jon: Take dates.

[Laughter]

Tim: No, I agree. But that's the image here.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So the wilderness is first a containment zone, a kind of punishment.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But then, ideally, it's a preparing where it's like: "Listen, you can trust me."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: "I love you. I want to provide for you in a way that you won't feel like you have to provide for yourself in ways that hurt you and other people."

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: "So I will bring her into the wilderness—" verse 14—"Speak to her heart." And then verse 15: "And from there, I will give her vineyards." Oh: "And the valley of *Akhor* will become a door of hope." So the Valley of *Akhor* is the place where—i—"akhor" means "trouble." This is where—

Jon: David?

Tim: Achan—no, all the way back, that story in Joshua about a guy named *Akhan* or Achan who stole a bunch of plunder from Jericho—

Jon: Mmm. Mhm.

Tim: It was a terrible moment. And then they lost a bunch of battles—

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: And Achan and his whole family died. So: "That valley," which was about folly, and selfishness, and death, uh—"That valley will become a doorway into a future hope." So we're recalling that story.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Somehow, that memory of failure, though, was followed by a season of great gift, and fruitfulness, and abundance in Israel's story. And so similarly, this containment zone —

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Of Israel will become like a painful place that will give way to a, a, like, a door of hope. So all of this is talking about what Hosea sees coming for the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which is that the nation of Assyria is going to come take them out.

Jon: He's forecasting this?

Tim: He's forecasting that.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Yeah. That's what the wilderness means—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Is getting captured by your enemies and dispersed in exile.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Isn't that interesting? So the wilderness has a rich set of meanings in Hosea's—but I like this: Intervention—

[Laughter]

Jon: Containment—

Tim: Containment, but then also a form of preparation.

Jon: Yeah. And an intimate form of preparation. And that's the new image for me right now is that, while in the wilderness, you can have this intimate connection with God and actually—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Find what you're looking for—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Get what you need, even though you're still in the wilderness.

Tim: Yeah. That's good.

[Musical Break (27:04—27:40)]

[Jeremiah's Romance and Ezekiel's Tragedy in the Wilderness (27:40—49:58)]

Tim: So let's go a couple centuries forward and down to Jerusalem, where Jeremiah lived, right on the cusp of another imperial threat breathing down Israel's neck in the form of Babylon. And in Jeremiah two—we'll just start reading. But we're in Jerusalem. Babylon's a big threat. Northern Kingdom that Hosea lived in, they got trashed by Assyria just like Hosea said—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: 150 years ago.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Now here we are in Jerusalem—another threat Babylon, and Jeremiah's like a new Hosea but to his generation. And Jeremiah two begins: "The word of Yahweh came to me," Jeremiah says, "Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem." Jerusalem is going to be depicted here as a, a young woman. "This is what Yahweh says: 'I remember about you, the loyal love of your youth, the love of your engagement period, your betrothal time.'" "Remember when we were engaged?"

[Laughter]

Tim: "I was your God and you were my people. My temple was in your midst."

Jon: Is he talking about, like, David's reign?

Tim: Well, okay. "I remember when you were going after me in the wilderness—"

Jon: Huh.

Tim: "'In the land that was not sown.'"

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So Jeremiah is depicting the wilderness season of Israel's life before living in the promised land as this ideal—

[Laughter]

Tim: Engagement period.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: "We were getting to know each other."

[Laughter]

Jon: "I was giving you the tabernacle—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "And the laws, and—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "Showing up for you with manna."

Tim: Yeah. "And you loved me." And you're like: "Really?"

[Laughter]

Tim: "Is that how it went?"

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So what's fascinating is the prophets will use the wilderness memory—

Jon: Yeah, it's another intimate moment.

Tim: To do lots of different things. In the Torah, it's either preparation that God chooses or it's just failure and containment.

Jon: "It's when we fell in love."

Tim: “It’s when we fell in love.” Which you’re hard pressed to find this idea of the wilderness when you read through—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers. But notice what he does with the image. He says: “Israel was holy to Yahweh. You were my special, set-apart people. You were like the first fruit of Yahweh’s produce.” So Yahweh’s like a farmer. And Israelite farmers dedicated their first fruits as holy to give to Yahweh as a gift. And that’s what Israel was to Yahweh. And so: “Anybody who came along and tried to eat and consume his first fruits, God held them guilty, and disaster came on them.” So like Amalek. The Amalekites—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Attacked them in the wilderness—

Jon: Right.

Jon: And God protected them. And the Amalekites were defeated. So those were the good old days. “But what injustice did your ancestors find in me that they went so far from me and they went after—” there’s that word “going after.” Israel was going after Yahweh. “You were going after me in the wilderness.”

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: It’s like pursuit that “they started to go after—” and then Jeremiah uses one of his favorite words for idol gods, which is a word *hevel* from Ecclesiastes, vapor.

Jon: Yeah. Okay.

Tim: That’s his word to describe—

[Laughter]

Jon: A mist.

Tim: Yeah. “They went after vapor, and they became vapor.” You become what you worship. “And they no longer said, ‘Where is Yahweh, the one who brought us up out of Egypt, you know, the one who led us through the wilderness in the land of desert plains, and gorges, and the dry land where no one lives, where no humans can even live?’” So they forgot the God that they fell in love with in the wilderness, who led them through the wilderness. They just forgot all together about that. And so they went after other

gods. “I brought you into the land of the orchard, the garden, to eat its fruit and all of its good things.” I mean, come on. That’s like right from the garden—

[Laughter]

Tim: Of Eden story. “And you entered, and you defiled my land. And you made my inheritance a detestable thing. Even the priests,” who were like gardeners—

[Laughter]

Tim: Metaphorical gardeners—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Of God’s presence, “not even they said: ‘Where is Yahweh?’ Those who handle the Torah, they don’t even know me.”

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: “The shepherds,” that is the kings, “have rebelled—”

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: “Against me. The prophets, they prophesy in the name of Baal,” another god, “and they go after things that do not profit.”

Jon: Hmm. So it seems like there’s this ambiguity about what part of Israel’s history he’s talking about—

[Laughter]

Jon: Right? And is that what you’re saying with the layers—

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly.

Jon: Where, when he says, like: “We fell in love in the wilderness,” what’s he referring to?

[Laughter]

Jon: And so it seems like: Well, it must be the Sinai—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Wilderness generation o—meeting in Sinai, that covenant moment. That makes sense. But like in—

Tim: Like—

Jon: What way did Israel really, like, follow after Yahweh—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Like, in an ideal way?

Tim: Yeah. It's hard t—

Jon: So it doesn't fully compute.

Tim: It doesn't fully compute. Moses, despite his moments of failure, did. You had Caleb and Joshua. They were among the tribal leaders who didn't rebel. And they said: "No, we can go into the garden land and God will protect us." So the prophets do this. They engage in revisionist history—

[Laughter]

Tim: For the sake of their sermons—

Jon: How interesting.

Tim: In the moment.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: That's what he's doing.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So he's painting the most generous possible portrait—

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Of—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: The wilderness, I think, in order to heighten the tragedy of what happened when they entered into the, the garden promised land.

Jon: They enter in, and they start going after their gods. And that's chasing after vapor, becoming vapor—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Defiling the land. And no one was looking for Yahweh. So they—

Tim: No.

Jon: Had fallen in love—

Tim: Yeah. They fell—yeah.

Jon: Purs—pursuing Yahweh.

Tim: It's a very typical story.

Jon: Yeah. And now it's like: "Yahweh who?"

Tim: "Yahweh who? Now we—you know, we bought the home, built the picket fence."

[Laughter]

Tim: Right?

Jon: Yeah. "We could do this on our own now."

Tim: "We're raising kids and now it's—"

Jon: Now it's—

Tim: "Like you got tired of me—"

[Laughter]

Tim: “And you fell out of love.”

Jon: And Baal’s looking pretty—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Interesting.

Tim: Exactly right. Yeah.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So he adjusts the wilderness story to be—it really was the founding period of—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Their relationship with God—

Jon: Right.

Tim: But he paints it in—

[Laughter]

Tim: Very positive terms to heighten the negative contrast of what they did once they went into the garden land.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So this revisionist approach that the prophets have for the sake of making a sermon point—

Jon: Mhm.

[Laughter]

Tim: I think pastors should feel encouraged—

[Laughter]

Tim: By the prophets to engage in a little r—

Jon: Really?

[Laughter]

Jon: Sounds dangerous. That sounds like a dangerous tip.

Tim: Yeah. This bothered me for a while. I remember when I r—really started studying the prophets, and there would be moments where they retell a story from Israel's past and they have, like, a twist on it that you're like: "Wait a minute, that's not quite how it reads in the Torah or the Prop—in the narratives." And yeah, I don't know what to say other than just pointing it out.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So the prophet who engages in the most intense forms of revisionist history, however, is, uh, Jeremiah's contemporary Ezekiel, who went through the very traumatic experience of being taken captive in Babylon's first wave of attack not long after Jeremiah wrote that poem. And then, with thousands of other people, was hauled off into exile and find themselves in a refugee camp at the beginning of his book. And what he's trying to do is convince his generation of Israel that is blaming Yahweh or blaming their ancestors for everything that happened—and his job is to convince them that: "No, this is our generation's fault, too." Like: "We are partly to blame or entirely to blame for why we're sitting in exile here." Ezekiel 20 is one of the strongest examples of prophetic revisionist history.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: We'll just read it. "In the seventh year of the fifth month," Ezekiel says, "some of the elders of Israel came to inquire of Yahweh." He's known as a prophet. He's had very powerful experiences of God's presence and word. "So the elders of Israel come and they sit in front of him."

Jon: Okay. This is w—this is in Babylon?

Tim: This is in Babylon.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So they're sitting in a—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Like a tent house—

Jon: Sure.

Tim: You know, in a refugee camp. “And the word of Yahweh came to me, saying: ‘Son of a human, speak to the elders of Israel and say to them: ‘This is what Yahweh says: ‘Are you here to inquire of me? As I live, declares Yahweh, I will not be inquired of by you.’” “You, you think we’re on good terms, that you can just go to the prophet and say: ‘What does Yahweh have to say to us?’” “No, judge them, son of a human.” That’s what God calls Ezekiel, “son of Adam.” “Let them know the abominations of their fathers. Here’s what you should say—” and the rest of his—Ezekiel 20 is a retelling of Israel’s history. An—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And you’ll recognize it, but then you’ll also be like: “What is going on?” So I’ll kind of summarize, and we’ll hop in here. It goes in four steps. He first retells the story of the Exodus generation. So he says: “On the day that I chose Israel, I lifted my hand on oath to the seed of the house of Jacob and made myself known to them in the land of Egypt, saying: ‘I am Yahweh, your *Elohim*.’ I lifted my hand on oath that I would bring them out of the land of Egypt.” So this is a retelling of, like, the burning bush and commissioning Moses—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: To lead his people out. Uh: “And I said that I’m going to lead you into a land of milk and honey, and I’m going to take you into the good lands.” However, verse seven: “I told you there in Egypt, cast away the detestable things of your eyes,” that is, your idols. “Don’t make yourselves impure with the idols of Egypt.”

Jon: Hmm. Yeah. That’s not a detail in the story.

Tim: No, it’s not. So it’s as if we’re remembering a moment where Moses had like a sit-down with the elders of Israel, saying: “Okay. You’ve been worshiping the gods of Egypt —”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “For generations now, because you don’t know anything different. Stop that.” Verse eight: “But they rebelled against me. They weren’t willing to listen to me. And so they didn’t cast away the detestable things, and they didn’t forsake their idols of Egypt. So I said to them, then and there: ‘I will pour out my hot anger on them, finish my anger, and destroy them in the land of Egypt.’”

Jon: Hmm.

[Laughter]

Tim: So—

[Laughter]

Tim: Well, I—it, it tells itself. When did you read about that—

Jon: Right.

Tim: In the Exodus?

Jon: Is it possible that that story just didn't make it in the Torah?

Tim: Okay. Yep. That's one possibility.

Jon: It was documented in their history books of s—whatever. Their—

Tim: Yeah. So one possibility—

Jon: Scrolls of their—

Tim: That's right—is that prophetic shapers of the Torah over time didn't include memories of Israel worshiping the gods of Egypt while they were enslaved. It's possible. It could also be that Ezekiel is inferring: Well, if it's the same people who made the golden calf later, they didn't just wake up one day and think it was a good idea.

Jon: This could be something God's informing them of now—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Or is—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: He's inferring it. Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. Uh, that he's inferring that the golden calf was just one of a long history of their habit of idolatry—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: From—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Egypt.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: What he says is—God says is: “But right there before I even liberated them, I acted for the sake of my name so it wouldn’t be defiled in the eyes of the nations. And I brought them out of the land of Egypt.”

[Laughter]

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So already, the Exodus is taking place amidst a fractured relationship.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: This is—couldn’t be more opposite of Jeremiah chapter two—

Jon: Oh—

Tim: Which is: “I brought you into the wilderness and we fell in love.”

[Laughter]

Jon: “We fell in love.” Well—yeah.

Tim: And he’s like saying: “Before—”

Jon: Different portrait, yeah.

Tim: “Before I even brought you into the wilderness—”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “The relationship was fundamentally broken.”

Jon: Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Tim: And that’s what he’s going to go on to say here, then. “So I brought them out of Egypt into the wilderness—”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “And I gave them my statutes and my judgments by which if a person does them, he will have life.” So we’re remembering the giving of the laws of the Torah. Verse 13: “But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They didn’t walk in my statutes, and they rejected my judgments. So I said: ‘I’m done. I’m going to pour out my hot anger on them in the wilderness and bring them to an end.’” And you’re like: “Okay, that—”

Jon: Yeah: “We—”

Tim: “We—”

Jon: “Read about that.”

Tim: Yep. “We read about that in Numbers, especially.” “But I acted for the sake of my name so it wouldn’t be defiled in the eyes of the nations. I lifted my hand on oath to them in the wilderness and said: ‘I’m not going to bring you,’” that is, this generation, “‘into the land, the promised land.’” And we’re like: “Oh, yeah. That reads like Numbers. Yep. Yep.” “So I said to your children in the wilderness—”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: This is like the Deuteronomy generation—“Don’t walk in the statutes of your fathers. Don’t do what they did. Don’t make yourselves impure with their idols. I am Yahweh, your *Elohim*.”” Verse 21: “But the children rebelled against me.”

[Laughter]

Tim: And y—you get—starting to get the pattern. So it goes on to talk about how the children of the Exodus generation rebelled. And you’re like: “Huh, I didn’t really read about that in Deuteronomy or really in Joshua. The Joshua generation did pretty good.” But what he says is, he made a promise to them even before they went into the land that he was going to scatter them and exile them from the land.

[Laughter]

Tim: And then he tells the story of the generation in the promised land, and you can just guess, like, it’s the pattern. So what God says is that this long history culminates in a

moment of God bringing this generation of Israel into what he calls in verse 35: “The wilderness of the peoples, the wilderness of the nations.”

Jon: This is exile.

Tim: Yes. So now—this is like what Hosea said. “I’m going to contain you, bring you out into the wilde—a new wilderness that’s going to be another terrible experience of scarcity, and suffering, and hardship.” And Hosea saw it as a place to fall in love again—

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: Like how Jeremiah thought about the first wilderness. Ezekiel says the first wilderness was a disaster, but so is every period of Israel’s history. But this latest wilderness of exile will be a place where: “I’m going to,” verse 37: “Make you pass under the rod.” It’s a shepherding image of, like, counting the sheep. “And I’m going to bring you into the bond of the covenant.” So we’re going to forge a new covenant in this setting. “And I’m going to purge the rebels from among you—”

[Laughter]

Tim: “Who have transgressed against me.” And then he goes on to say that: I’m going to bring you into the land, and you are going to worship me, and have a new garden existence on my holy mountain. That’s the shape of Ezekiel 20.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So you can see the wilderness playing the same role that it did in the Torah as a place of testing and purifying, to purge the rebels so that if there are any righteous—

[Laughter]

Tim: Right—who are faithful to Yahweh, that he’ll bring them into the garden land.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But this—

Jon: But the shape of the, the rhetoric of it is like: It didn’t work. Didn’t work. Didn’t work. Didn’t work.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So I'm going to do it again.

Tim: I'm going to do it again, and—

Jon: And then—

Tim: I'm going to make it work.

Jon: And I'm going to make it work.

[Laughter]

Tim: Yeah. Totally. And that's Ezekiel. He will later on talk about how he's going to put his own life-breath, his Spirit, in the hearts of his people, take out their stony heart, give them a new heart. So now we're back to: Well, if we're never really ready—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: If—

Jon: How are we going to get ready?

Tim: How are we going to get ready? And Ezekiel's—

Jon: If the wilderness never actually does its job—

Tim: That's right. That's right.

Jon: How are we ever going to be ready?

Tim: Yeah. So God's going to have to do something to so radically change the human being so that they are still human beings, but they're, like, divinely charged human beings who have God's breath animating their every thought and desire. Then a human could learn what they need to learn in the wilderness and actually live in the garden land for good.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So that gets us into themes that we'll talk about in future conversations. I think I just want to honor Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. They all have the wilderness on the brain. Like, this was such a formative season. And maybe it was such a rich and turbulent season of Israel's story that the prophets pulled different layers of meaning out of it. It's like a kaleidoscope of meanings that they tell around the wilderness. But it was foundational in their experience.

Jon: Mhm. It could be a time where you fall in love with Yahweh. It's the setting of the romance—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Where you learn to pursue the wisdom of Yahweh. But it could also be a time of containment to save you from yourself in a time of preparation. It also didn't work—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: For the Israelites, but also it's going to work this time—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Somehow.

Tim: Yeah. It points out both just drastic failure and also just radical hope in the generosity of God, yeah, to bring about the true lessons of the wilderness in a way that they stick.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So there's no better setup then to walk into the New Testament from here. And lo and behold, where does the story near the beginning of all of the Gospels find the reader? Meeting a guy named John the Baptizer in the wilderness where Jesus goes. And then he goes through a great test in the wilderness, and he passes. Like, the wilderness does its job.

Jon: The wilderness does its job.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So who saw that coming?

[Laughter]

Tim: But the wilderness testing of Jesus is so important when you see the role that the wilderness played in the Hebrew Bible. It just pops with new layers of meaning. So we should look at that next.

Jon: Great.

[Musical Break (47:23—47:27)]

Jon: Thanks for listening to BibleProject podcast. Next week, we'll look at John's baptism of repentance in the wilderness, and we'll see how Jesus surprisingly asks John to baptize him.

Tim: Jesus has nothing to repent of. So we're already seeing here a pattern of Jesus identifying with the weakness, and frailty, and suffering, and sin of his people, an amazing act of generosity.

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