

## Wilderness E1 Transcript

[The Breadth and Meaning of the Wilderness in the Bible (0:00—12:30)]

Jon: Welcome to a new study here on the podcast. In these next weeks, we're going to be tracing the theme of the wilderness through the story of the Bible.

Tim: Wilderness, as we're going to see—its primary meaning is about the absence of life. It's a dangerous and hostile place. It's where humans don't live and can't really make an existence because both the environment, there's no water, and there's creatures out there that'll kill you.

Jon: Famously, Israel wanders through the wilderness for 40 years. But pay attention and you'll notice that almost all the key characters in the Bible go through the wilderness.

Tim: Wilderness moments don't appear on every page, but they appear at key moments in the stories of Abraham, Jacob, Moses, the story of Israel, very importantly in the story of David—

Jon: In fact, we're going to find that the wilderness is the setting from which the entire story of the Bible begins.

Tim: The seven-day creation narrative and the Eden narrative both begin with a wilderness state.

Jon: By the time you get to the New Testament, the importance of the wilderness as a biblical theme is fully baked, and it's taken for granted. So we see Jesus baptized in the wilderness, he's tempted in the wilderness, and he feeds crowds in the wilderness.

Tim: And then in the letters of the apostles, the author to the Hebrews and Paul both describe the present moment of followers of Jesus as being a time of following the divine presence, that is, Jesus, through the wilderness.

Jon: What we learn from all of these stories in the Bible is that while God didn't design humanity for the wilderness, he will meet us there, and he can transform the wilderness.

Tim: What they get in the wilderness is Eden. The wilderness becomes like a little oasis-refuge in the land of death.

Jon: Today, Tim Mackie and I begin a new theme study on the wilderness. Thanks for joining us. Here we go.

[Musical Break (2:02—2:05)]

Jon: Hey, Tim.

Tim: Jon Collins. Hello.

Jon: Hello.

Tim: We're starting a new project today.

Jon: Yes, new theme study.

Tim: New project within the project.

[Laughter]

Jon: We're doing themes inspired by the scroll of Exodus.

Tim: Yes. We've done a handful so far.

Jon: Yeah. We did the new Exodus—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Which is kind of on the nose—

Tim: Yeah.

[Laughter]

Tim: Yeah. But the—

Jon: For an Exodus-inspired theme.

Tim: Yeah. The core Exodus motif that actually begins in Genesis—

[Laughter]

Tim: Has an important statement of it in Exodus and then gets replayed in creative ways—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Over and over again.

Jon: We did a theme study on the concept of redemption—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: The transfer of ownership—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Back to God—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: From slavery.

Tim: Yep.

Jon: And that takes root in the story of Exodus—

Tim: Mhm. It does.

Jon: Israel being—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Freed from slavery.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: So now we're going to do The Wilderness.

Tim: Yeah, we're going to focus on the "wilderness—into the wilderness." So we're—done a handful of these videos that are like ideas, that are events, or actions that go throughout the Bible. Redemption—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: You know, is one of them. We've done theme videos that are on key moments of time like the seventh day.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: We've done theme videos on people or figures. So the Messiah or the Royal Priest.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Uhm, whereas this is a theme video tracing a place.

Jon: Hmm, a setting.

Tim: Yes. We've done Heaven and Earth.

Jon: Okay. Those are the—

Tim: Actually o—

Jon: Big settings.

Tim: Our first—

Jon: The macro settings.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Our first theme video is Heaven and Earth. Trying to think back here. We've done the Temple.

Jon: We've done the Temple.

Tim: That's a location. Mhm.

Jon: We, we did the Water of Life, which is not a place, but it's like a—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Stream that came out of Eden.

Tim: Totally. Yes, the river, yep, that comes out of Eden. And man, going all the way back to our How to Read the Bible series, places in biblical stories are always full of meaning. Biblical authors don't have to tell us where events take place, and they often don't.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: They'll just give you the most vague or general setting. So when they do give you information about where an event has taken place, yeah, especially in the first stretch of narrative from Genesis all the way to Second Kings, there's an accumulating narrative memory of where events take place. And whenever you revisit a certain town or city again in a later story, nine times out of 10, it's building off of the memories from the earlier stories.

Jon: I think that's why Water of Life came to mind, because when we went through that, you showed all the stories that take place at, like, wells.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Yes.

Jon: Or in the Tree of Life—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: All—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: The stories that take place by—

Tim: By trees.

Jon: Important trees.

Tim: Ah. Mountain.

Jon: And in the Mountain series—

Tim: Yes.

Jon: All the stories that take place on—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: A mountain.

Tim: So the Wilderness is like those.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: There are key moments that take place in the wilderness, specifically in the first two narratives of Genesis.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: The seven-day creation narrative and the Eden narrative both begin with a wilderness state echoed by its vocabulary. And then key wilderness moments don't appear on every page, but they appear at key moments in the stories of Abraham, uh, in the story of Jacob, the story of Moses, the story of Israel, in the story, sporadically, through Joshua and Judges, but then im—very importantly in the story of David—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And then again in the story of Elijah—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And then again near the ending of the story of Jerusalem's destruction and the exile to Babylon. So that's just the Torah and Prophets.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Then, when you get into the former prophets, Isaiah through Malachi, they just work the wilderness theme. They're constantly hyperlinking back to all the wilderness moments in the Torah and Prophets. So when you get to the story of Jesus in the New Testament—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: John the Baptizer—

Jon: Yeah, he's from the wilderness.

Tim: He's out in the—he makes his base—

Jon: Not from them—

Tim: Of operations—

Jon: B—yeah.

Tim: Yeah, out in the wilderness. That's where Jesus gets baptized.

Jon: Okay. And then that's where he goes to be tested.

Tim: Yes, super important. I mean, that's a absolutely pivotal moment in Matthew, Mark, and Luke—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Their account of Jesus. It's something that happens to him in the wilderness over a period of 40 like his ancestors wandered in the wilderness for 40 years after the Exodus. Jesus fed the crowds in a wilderness place.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's specifically called a wilderness—

Jon: Oh, is it?

Tim: Spot. Yep, with the same biblical vocabulary.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And then in the letters of the Apostles, the author to the Hebrews and Paul both describe the present moment of followers of Jesus as being a time following the divine presence, that is, Jesus, through the wilderness.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: One way to imagine the present moment of following Jesus Messiah is: "Our deliverance from slavery is in the past. That happened in and through the work of Jesus Messiah. And our full inheritance of the cosmic new creation is a yet-future in its full realization. But the present moment is one of wilderness where we get tastes of Eden—little Eden oases as we journey in the wilderness." So what's cool is the meaning of the wilderness, what it means, and the types of things that happen in the wilderness. When you get to the New Testament, all of that is already baked.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Like, it's fully baked—

[Laughter]

Tim: From the Hebrew Scriptures. So when John the Baptizer chooses the wilderness to go do his thing, that's just loaded with all these layers of meaning that don't need to be explained by the gospel authors. When Jesus has his testing in the wilderness—when he feeds Israel in the wilderness—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: All that's layered with meaning. And then what Hebrews and Paul a—are doing is very similar. And then for me, it's always significant to see, for a biblical theme: does it go from cover to cover?

[Laughter]

Tim: Does it get picked up in the Revelation? And the wilderness features in specifically two really important moments in the last book of the Christian Bible, the Revelation. There's that bizarre, intense vision with a dragon who's trying to eat and consume a baby boy who's being born from this woman crowned with the stars. And the baby boy who's called, you know, her seed—it's an image of the seed—the snake crusher seed of the woman from Genesis 3:15. Right when the snake's about to devour, the woman and her child ar—

Jon: The dragon?

Tim: Are—yeah, the dragon.

[Laughter]

Tim: Yes, sorry.

Jon: No, yeah—

Tim: Yeah—

Jon: But the dragon—

Tim: The dragon—

Jon: Is the snake?



Tim: The woman and the child are whisked away into the wilderness—

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: And it becomes like a safe refuge.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It's really interesting.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And then the last time wilderness appears is where there's this prostitute riding a big red monster, and she's drinking the blood—

[Laughter]

Jon: Revelation, man.

[Laughter]

Tim: I know. Tot—and she's Babylon.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And she's riding the beast around in the wilderness.

Jon: Oh.

Tim: And that's where Babylon falls and collapses—is in the wilderness.

Jon: Okay. All right.

Tim: So truly, it's a cover-to-cover theme—rich development throughout. And these are just highlights.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Lots of events happen in the wilderness. So one interesting thing in biblical studies on the wilderness is there are times when the wilderness seems to have

what feel like contradictory meanings. And it makes you wonder: “Is this a good place to be, or is this the worst place possible to be?”

Jon: Hmm. Okay. That’s a very real thing. I was feeling that a little bit with those two Revelation comments.

Tim: Oh, oh, yeah, great.

Jon: Right?

Tim: Actually, that’s a perfect example.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. Mhm.

Jon: Yeah: “It’s a place of refuge—oh, and it’s where Babylon falls.”

Tim: Exactly. It’s like: “What makes the wilderness the worst place you want to avoid at all costs?” And then: “What makes it one of the best, worst things that ever happened to you?”

[Laughter]

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So maybe that’s a question going in. Many people feel that tension. And you can see that reflected in biblical scholarship that works on wilderness text in the Bible. I want to just paint the portrait of the many meanings of wilderness—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In the Bible. So wilderness, as we’re going to see—its primary meaning is about the absence of life. It’s the opposite of goodness, and life, and abundance, and flourishing. Wh—the primary image for that is garden and lots of water.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Whereas the wilderness is a primary symbol or image for a decline from goodness back into decay and nothingness. Maybe we might say entropy or something—

[Laughter]

Tim: Like that. But those are the bigger ideas that the biblical authors are wrestling with.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So let's take this in a few steps. One—this will maybe be less helpful for the listening audience, but I want to show you, Jon, a map.

[Laughter]

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: And we'll try and describe it in a—

[Laughter]

Tim: Helpful way for those—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Of you listening.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Because the actual geography of the land where the biblical authors lived—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Is important to see—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Or at least see in your mind—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: To get a sense of why they use the words that they do.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So we'll look at a map, we'll do some vocabulary introduction, and then we'll just do a quick survey of the many meanings of wilderness in the Bible that I think will set up some puzzles or questions for us that we'll just explore and unpack in the episodes to follow.

Jon: Hmm. The best, worst place that you could be.

[Laughter]

Tim: It depends.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: It depends. So into the wilderness.

Jon: Great.

[Musical Break (12:11—12:30)]

[A Place Hostile for Human Life (12:30—30:35)]

Tim: So I'm just pulling up Google Earth satellite imagery.

Jon: All right. We're looking at the—

Tim: Yeah, what—

Jon: Wh—eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea.

Tim: Yep. Eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. So we can see the top of North Africa, that is, Egypt.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: We can see the bottom half of Turkey. And then the eastern Mediterranean coast, that is Israel, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, all that.

Jon: Just goes up the coast of—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Turkey.

Tim: Jordan—

Jon: Now you're heading—

Tim: Iraq—

Jon: Now you're heading east—

Tim: Yep.

Jon: Into what's very brown.

Tim: Yeah, that's right. Iraq and then—

Jon: Until you get over to the Euphrates and Tigris River—

Tim: That's right. Yeah.

Jon: That come down from the north—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And then spill back into—

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: What's the sea there?

Tim: Uh, the Persian Gulf.

Jon: The Persian Gulf?

Tim: Yep. So on this map, what you'll notice is Egypt is entirely brown and tan except for a strip of green that fans out once it goes north into the Mediterranean Sea.

Jon: Yeah, the strip of green follows the Nile.

Tim: Mhm. That's—

Jon: And then—

Tim: The Nile River. Yeah.

Jon: And then when that deltas out into—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: The Mediterranean, it's just a whole bunch of—

Tim: You got it.

Jon: Lush land.

Tim: You got it. Yep. So that's where the Egyptians were enslaving the Israelites.

Jon: In the delta?

Tim: Mhm. Yeah, in the delta. Well, yeah, it's—

Jon: Somewhere in there.

Tim: Somewhere in there.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Then the Sinai Peninsula is just entirely brown.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's a desert.

[Laughter]

Jon: It's a brown triangle.

Jon: And i—a—then that opens up basically into the northern tip of Saudi Arabia in the Saudi—

Jon: If you just keep heading east.

Tim: Arabian desert. And it's just—dude. It's just a lot of rock and sand.

Jon: A lot o—a lot of brown.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But you go follow the coastline up from Egypt to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, up to then Beirut, on up into Lebanon, and then Turkey, what you'll see is that along the coast, there's these strips of green. And those strips of green is the hill country that rises up real sharply up from the coast. And then in Israel in particular, you'll see the Sea of Galilee. It's a little blue dot—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: With some green. And then a little tiny ribbon, the tiniest ribbon of green that is the Jordan River—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Going down into the Dead Sea. But the Dead Sea, man, is just a big—

Jon: Hmm. Surrounded by a tan.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah. Totally. And then you follow the green up north, and then it meets eventually the region where the Tigris and they follow—go northeast to the Euphrates. And those are two ribbons of green that flow through what is today Syria and Iraq. And then those become a delta region that goes down into the Persian Gulf. That's where Babylon and Nineveh were.

Jon: Okay. So it seems like what you're saying here is—

[Laughter]

Jon: It's a very dry area predominantly.

Tim: Predominantly dry.

Jon: But along the rivers and especially in the deltas of the rivers, and that's in the Nile, and in the Euphrates, and Tigris, there's a lot of green.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: And then there's this strip of green up the eastern coast of the Mediterranean—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: All the way down from below Jerusalem, all the way up to what we would call modern-day Turkey—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And up and around. But that whole strip—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Is hillside—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: That is very lush and green. There's no particular river that's making that green. It's just because of the hills?

Tim: It's the elevation of the hills and the weather coming in from the Mediterranean —

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Sea.

Jon: The weather coming in from the sea.

Tim: Just drops seasonal rains—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: On the hill country.

Jon: Okay. So the green is garden.

Tim: The green is garden. That's right.

Jon: The brown—

Tim: That's right.

Jon: Is wilderness.

Tim: Yeah, and from the biblical authors' perspective, who inhabited this basic area in and around Jerusalem and the hills of Judea and Israel, it's just a little oasis of green hills—

Jon: Yeah.



Tim: Desert to the south, desert to the east, desert to the northeast, and then a huge sea on the west.

Jon: Mhm.

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So within visibility—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: It's like desert on all sides and then the sea on the other side. Desert and sea—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Are the two areas where we can't go.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: I mean, you can go there, but you probably won't last very long. But that would really, like, form your view of reality.

Jon: You wouldn't—

Tim: I—

Jon: Have a map like this—

[Laughter]

Tim: No—

Jon: To look at.

Tim: No, we kn—

Jon: But if you just headed in any direction—

Tim: From Jerusalem, for example.

Jon: From Jerusalem.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: You're going to get into wilderness or you're going to hit the chaotic sea.

Tim: Yeah, quickly.

Jon: Quickly.

Tim: Quickly.

Jon: And if you head south, you're not going to hit Egypt until you go through a bunch of wilderness.

Tim: Yeah. That's right.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Between Jerusalem and Babylon, you know, as the crow flies, it is many hundreds of miles. And it's through a desert wilderness where there's—it's just a lot of rock, and sand, and really sparse vegetation.

Jon: Yeah. If you just drew a straight line, it's 560 miles—

Tim: There you go. Yeah.

Jon: Give or take. And that's through the desert.

Tim: Mhm. No one could do that.

Jon: You just couldn't do it.

Tim: No.

Jon: Physically couldn't do it.

Tim: 500 miles. Like, there's—

Jon: Through the wilderness.

Tim: Virtually no water out there. You know?

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: I mean you jus—

Jon: That's—

Tim: Humans can't do it.

Jon: Impossible. Now, if you head north, you can follow a stretch of green—

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: All the way up—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: To Euphrates.

Tim: Yep. That's right.

Jon: So—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: That's the highway, right?

Tim: Mhm. This was the highway for commerce for the ancient economy—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Also for ancient armies.

[Laughter]

Tim: So the main way was to go north from ancient Israel way up, cross—

Jon: So you're doing about a thousand miles going up and around.

Tim: There you go. It's about two times the length because you got to go up to the river region and then follow the highways that, that—

Jon: So that's the highway.

Tim: That trace the Euphrates.

Jon: There's no way through the wilderness.

Tim: Unh-un.

Jon: You can't make it through the wilderness.

Tim: No. It's—and you can see it.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: You can literally walk a few miles up—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Over the hills from Jerusalem, and you can just look east—

Jon: And I bet—

Tim: And it's just that—it's just—

Jon: Many people took trips to see: "How far could I go?"

Tim: Right. Yeah, totally.

Jon: And you'd never find the end of it.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. So that would affect your view of reality.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So we can get a sense for how these regions felt to the biblical authors by looking at their vocabulary.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So the main word that the biblical authors use to describe that desert to the south and to the east, uh, is the Hebrew word "*midbar*."

Jon: That's the Hebrew word—

Tim: *Midbar*.

Jon: For "wilderness."

Tim: Yep. "Wilderness."

Jon: *Midbar*.

Tim: "Wilderness" or "desert." It's used over 250 times in the Hebrew Bible. There's disagreement about the etymology of the word.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: What's interesting is that *midbar*—the three root letters of the word are D, B, R, dalet, beit, reish, which is the same root letters as the Hebrew word for “word” or “thing.”

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And very often if you want to put the preposition “away from,” “out from—”

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Something, you would put an M on the front. And so—“away from a thing.”

[Laughter]

Jon: Okay. That's a possible etymology.

Tim: Well, it's what biblical scholars call a folk etymology.

Jon: “Away from a thing.” “Away from a word—”

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: “Out into exile.”

Tim: You got it. So *midbar*. Here's just some examples.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Uh, Moses describes the region that Israel crossed when they went out of Egypt, which we call the Sinai Peninsula. He calls that: “The great and terrible *midbar*—”

[Laughter]

Tim: “With fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where there is no water.”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: All right.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: “The great and terrible—”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: “*Midbar*.”

Tim: It’s not a good place—

Jon: Not a kind place.

Tim: For humans that want to stay alive.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Because both the environment, there’s no water, and there’s creatures out there that’ll kill you—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: At least make your life really painful. In the speeches that God gives to Job when God shows up in the whirlwind at the end of the book of Job, and he—God’s describing, you know, how he architected all of creation. And he asked: “Who cut open a channel for the rainstorms, the torrents of the rainstorm, and who carved a path for thunderbolts? They bring rain on the land where no one lives, the *midbar*, where no human can live. And he satisfies the desert and the wasteland and causes the ground to spring up with grass.”

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: “So who did that? Who architected that whole system there—”

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: “Job?” But notice here, again, the presence or absence of water is a key factor. But specifically, the definition of *midbar* is: “Where no humans live.”

Jon: Hmm. Yeah. Because you can't live out there and just hope for the rain to come eventually.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: You'll die.

Tim: Yeah. The poet of Psalm 55, who wants to run away from all of their troubles and all their enemies, says: "Oh, that I had wings like a dove, that I could fly away and find rest. Oh, that I could flee far away. I would even go dwell in the *midbar*."

Jon: Hmm. "Because I have wings and I can get there—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "And chill out—"

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: "And then come back."

Tim: Yeah. Totally. But you can see in the imagination, *midbar* is the furthest possible from any people who could cause me trouble.

Jon: Okay. Okay.

Tim: Away from people.

[Laughter]

Tim: So he's not—

Jon: A li—

Tim: Thinking about w—

Jon: A little quiet time.

Tim: Not thinking about water—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Right here. And you're right, because a bird can go to and from the wilderness in a way that humans—

Jon: Yeah, it's like—

Tim: Can't.

Jon: "I can't live out there, but if I could just fly out there right now and just get away from these people."

[Laughter]

Tim: That's right.

Jon: "How nice would that be?"

Tim: Yeah. So it's great and terrible, with dangerous creatures and a hostile environment for human life. It's a place that's uninhabited by humans, and humans can't cultivate it. And it's the furthest possible place that you can imagine—is to go out to the *midbar*. That's *midbar*.

Jon: Great and terrible.

Tim: That's one meaning of *midbar*. However, if you think about it and think about our map, the *midbar* came right up to the eastern side of the hill country, where Jerusalem, and Judea, and northern Israel is. Which means that you could take a little day trip or a little multi—

[Laughter]

Tim: Day trip—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Over the hills down east, and go down into the *midbar*. And if you find some water sources—right—or streams or seasonal streams, you could stake out a little town there right on the edge of the *midbar*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And so "*midbar*" can also refer to that edge-region where the habitable land—



Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Transitions. There's always a little transitional zone.

Jon: Right.

Tim: And so "*midbar*" can also refer to that. And it's primarily associated with pasture land for animal grazing.

Jon: Like, seasonal pasture land?

Tim: Yeah. So famously, when Moses in Exodus three encounters God in the burning bush, he's at the back of the *midbar*.

Jon: The back of the *midbar*.

Tim: Yeah. He's down in Midian.

Jon: Can you show me that on the map?

Tim: Hmm. Mhm. So he's somewhere in this region in here. It's called Uz on this map, but Midian—

Jon: Okay, so he's far. He went far.

Tim: He went across the Sinai.

Jon: He went across the Sinai.

Tim: Mhm. Peninsula.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. Dude, he's really out there.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But he's out there with animals, which means that he—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You know, could go on a—

Jon: In the edge—edge land.

Tim: A two-week pasture trip—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Where he's just out there with his animals, just—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Cycling through the hills. So the *midbar* is a place, multiple times, where people graze animals, which means they're at least in proximity to a town that's in the transition zone.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So "*midbar*" can refer to the transition zone, too.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: David, famously, when he tells Saul about how he was protecting his flock from bears and lions, he said he had to do that in the *midbar*. That's in the *midbar*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Another word that can also be associated with that transition zone is the Hebrew word *sade*, which just means "field." And even, I think, "field" works this way in English, where "field" can refer to land that was uncultivated, like right in—on the edge of civilization. But build a little log home—

[Laughter]

Tim: I'm thinking American colonial period, and then you—

Jon: Cultivate that field.

Tim: Cultivate that field. So—

Jon: Like a wild field.

Tim: Yeah. A wild field. So the *sade*, the field, can refer to uncultivated land in that transition region where humans can just reach to and then stake out a spot. So Esau—when Isaac sends Esau to go hunting to make the tasty wild game—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Uh, he says: "Go out into the *sade* and hunt for me."

Jon: Okay.

Tim: And in many places, the *sade* is in parallelism to the *midbar*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Other words that occur a little less often, but are still synonyms—one is the *aravah*—

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: Which is the desert plains, kind of like a high desert. It gets seasonal rains, but it's kind of a transition into—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: The real desert in the south.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So that's called the *aravah*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Then you've got the word *charev*, which just means literally "to become dry," "to dry out—"so the dry land. So "*aravah*" occurs about 60 times. "*Charev*" occurs a little over 40 times in the Hebrew Bible. Then there's a really uncommon word, it's 13 times throughout the Hebrew Bible, *yeshimon*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: The root word comes from *shamam*, which just means to be empty, uninhabited. So here's some examples that work them together. Jerusalem, after it's destroyed by Babylon, is described in Jeremiah 33 as a *charev*, a dried-out place without human and without animals. And the cities of Judah and streets of Jerusalem are *shamem*, empty, desolate. So it's translated in the New American Standard as waste and desolate—

Jon: Okay.

Tim: But "dry" and "empty." The last one is the word *tzia*, which also means a dried-out land. But here we're talking about like—you know how dirt cracks open—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: When it gets real dry?

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: It's like that kind of situation.

Jon: Oh, okay.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah. What—

Tim: Uhm—

Jon: What would we call that?

Tim: Hmm. Parched land.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: There's a passage in Jeremiah where he refers to the land that the Israelites went through on their journey from Egypt to the promised land. He describes it in Jeremiah two. He says: "Yahweh is the one who brought us up from the land of Egypt, the one who led us in the *midbar*, in the land of the *aravah*."

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: The *midbar* is just describing it as uncultivated.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Then he calls it the *aravah*, and then: "In the land of the *tzia*—" of dryness. Y— then it says it's full of gorges or deep ravines, so hills with deep ravines. "A land of dryness and then of deep darkness—"

[Laughter]

Tim: Which I think he's getting a little cosmic there. "A land that no one passes through and where no human lives." That's the *midbar*.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So it can be hilly. It's not just flat.

Jon: You're going to find animals.

Tim: Yes.

Jon: You're going to find brush.

Tim: In fact, you'll find a common cast of animals.

[Laughter]

Tim: Here's just from two places in Isaiah, Isaiah 13 and 34. When Babylon and Edom have experienced their downfall and those cities become wildernesses, wilderness creatures will take up residence in the cities. It's like dystopian, apocalyptic kind of scenery. So you've got owls.

Jon: These are the desert creatures?

Tim: These are desert creatures. Owls, ostriches, shaggy goats—

[Laughter]

Tim: Hyenas and jackals, pelicans—I think of the coast.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: But pelicans, hedgehogs, and ravens. These are our desert animals.

Jon: And then snakes.

Tim: Oh, of course, snakes and scorpions.

Jon: And scorpions.

Tim: Yeah, that's right.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Dude, scorpions.

[Laughter]

Tim: So all of that—this is the base meaning. That’s what *midbar* is.

Jon: Okay, that region—those regions.

[Laughter]

Tim: Yes.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah, totally. So the basic meaning: it’s a dangerous and hostile place towards human life. It’s where humans don’t live and can’t really make an existence because of hostile creatures and lack of resources.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: However, it can sometimes refer to the transition regions between cultivated and habitable land on the edges. And that’s the base meaning of “wilderness” in the Bible.

Jon: Okay.

[Musical Break (29:54—30:35)]

[A Place of Testing and Refuge (30:35—47:09)]

Tim: The second meaning of “wilderness” is it’s a place where, when people go there, they experience hardship that creates a test of their character and purifies or refines their character and their relationship with God. So you could just say it’s a place of testing and purification.

Jon: Hmm. It's kind of its literary meaning.

Tim: It's its literary meaning.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: In other words, when characters in the Bible go into the wilderness, more often than not, they encounter death, and they encounter God. And somehow, at the precipice of death, encountering God forces them to make some decisions. And those decisions have a shaping formed of influence on their character. And this is where the Exodus scroll really comes into its own because Israel's journey in the wilderness after they leave Egypt, starting in Exodus 15, is described as both encounters with near death—

Jon: Uh-huh.

Tim: Because of lack of water—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And these are called, by God and by Moses, tests—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Of trust in God.

Jon: And it should have taken, what, a couple of weeks to get through.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: But God has them there f—

Tim: 11 days, Moses says.

Jon: Okay.

[Laughter]

Jon: "It should take 11 days. I've done it." Mo—

[Laughter]

Jon: Moses says.

Tim: Yep.

Jon: “I was on the backside of this wilderness—”

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: And they were in for 40 years.

Tim: 40 years, yeah. So the testing narratives in the wilderness in Exodus—these are in Exodus 15, 16, 17. And then there’s seven wilderness testing narratives in Numbers chapters 11 through 21. These are primary stories, and the rest of the biblical authors just constantly riff on, quote from, callback to, hyperlink to these stories. So the first story is in Exodus 15 in verse 22. They go out from the Sea of Reeds into the *midbar* of Shur, which is a, a station in between Israel and Egypt. And they went three days into the *midbar*, and they could not find water. So they grumble and—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: God provides water.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: This is also then on the other side of Mount Sinai in the scroll of Numbers—oh, and remember, the scroll of Numbers, in the Jewish tradition—

Jon: Oh, yeah, it’s called: “In the Wilderness.”

Tim: Is called: “*Bamidbar*.”

Jon: *Bamidbar*. Okay.

Tim: “In the Wilderness.”

Jon: I think that’s why this word was sounding very familiar to me.

Tim: Yeah, that’s right.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yep. “In the Wilderness.” Because the whole book takes place in the wilderness —



[Laughter]

Tim: On the transition from Mount Sinai to the promised land. And that's where Moses sends the spies, 12 spies, in to check the land, and then they come back and they're like: "Well, it's a lot of fruit, but giant fruit and giant humans."

Jon: Giant humans.

Tim: And so they rebel against Moses, say they want to go back to Egypt—the people want to go back to Egypt, and it doesn't go well. So God assigns that generation to wander in the wilderness for 40 years. And they die. And that wandering is associated with that testing of their character, and God forming a whole generation to learn how to trust him. Mana—providing mana and water in the wilderness. So this is the main meaning of "wilderness." It gets brought up in the prophets—Amos, Jeremiah, Ezekiel all talk about this wandering in the wilderness period as a period of formation.

Jon: Of testing and purification.

Tim: Yep. The Psalms constantly call back to it. In fact, in—and in one important place, Psalm 78, which is a Psalm that's all about teaching the future generations to learn how to meditate on the story of our ancestors, it opens up—it's a poem connected with the Levite singer-songwriter named Asaph. And the poem begins by saying: "Hey, listen to my Torah. I have some Torah—instruction to offer. I'm going to open my mouth with parables." That's an interesting introduction. But then he goes on to basically retell the story from the Exodus up to the time of David. That's the whole poem. And he says the purpose is so that the generation to come and the generation yet to be born will rise up and tell their children that they should trust in God, and not forget his works, and keep his commandments, and not to be like their ancestors who were stubborn and rebellious. And then one of the main sections of the poem explores and retells how often they re—this is in verse 40—how often they rebelled against him in the *midbar*, and they vexed him.

Jon: Vexed him.

[Laughter]

Tim: They vexed God in the wasteland. Yeah. So that—

Jon: Wasteland's what word there?

Tim: That's the *yeshimon*, the empty place, the desolate place.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Mhm. And there again and again, they tested God. God tested them, they tested God. So wilderness—especially associated with 40, the number 40, and tests of trust. But it's because the wilderness is a hostile place with no resources.

Jon: Yeah, it raises the stakes.

Tim: It raises the stakes and puts you in a situation of trust—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: A crisis of trust.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So the feeling of the environment matches this meaning of the wilderness pretty naturally. If you go out into the waste-place—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: You're going to have to have access to some resources beyond yourself.

Jon: Hmm. Yeah.

Tim: Which leads then—this is really the flip side, because if you fail to trust—it doesn't go well for the wilderness generation.

Jon: They die out there.

Tim: They die out there. However, there's this whole other set of characters and stories who, when they go into the wilderness, they face a crisis of life and death, and they meet God, and they trust him. And then what they get in the wilderness is Eden.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: And this is all built off of the planting of Eden story, which we'll look at in the next conversation. But Eden begins as a wilderness with wilderness vocabulary. And God plants the garden as a little Eden-oasis in the midst of a wilderness. And so there are stories connected to Hagar or with Moses that we're going to go and I—

going to look at. And there, when they meet God in the *midbar* and God hears them—comes to meet them, and they trust him, the wilderness becomes a refuge. It becomes like a little oasis-refuge in the land of death. The primary meaning is still negative. So this is less about the wilderness. It's more about, if you're with God and God is with you in the wilderness, you can hang out there.

Jon: Hmm.

Tim: So Hagar, Moses, Israel, in moments when God provides for them, like, manna or water. We're going to look at a whole season of David's life where he was fleeing and hiding from King Saul, hiding in caves and mountains. And that's all in the wilderness. And this is one of the most important periods of David's life where he really forges his close relationship with Yahweh. And what's really cool is that season of David's life—you know how there's certain Psalms attached to David? There's 73 of the 150 psalms in the Hebrew Bible—have a note that says: "Of David —"

Jon: Okay.

Tim: "Connected to David." And then there's about a dozen that have little descriptors like: "A poem that he's saying—"

Jon: Oh, right.

Tim: "When this happened or that happened."

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And most of those little notes are connected to, really, the most terrible moments in his life—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Either when he had to run from Saul in the wilderness. So there's a bunch of poems connected to his wilderness, uh, season. After he made a huge—mistake is to put it lightly—Uriah and Bathsheba. And then, when he had to flee for his life again into the wilderness when his son pulled a military coup. But those two wilderness wanderings are highlighted in the Psalms. And actually, this is a great place to kind of land the plane here. So David's experience of the wilderness, however, is both like, on the knife-edge of life and death.

Jon: Hmm. This is the valley of the shadow of death kind of place?

Tim: Yes, totally. Yes. So just a couple quick references. Psalm 63 begins: “A Psalm of David when he was in the *midbar* of Judah.” And it’s just—you can see why the poem’s apropos. “Oh God, you are my God. I will seek you diligently. My soul thirsts for—my *nefesh*—my being thirsts for you. My flesh longs for you in a dry and weary land that has no water. But I have seen you in the holy place. I have beheld your strength and your glory. Your loyal love is better than life. So my lips will praise you. I’ll bless you as long as I live. My soul, my *nefesh*, will be satisfied as with the best and most rich food.” So he’s in the wilderness—

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: But he’s had encounters in the past with God’s presence.

Jon: He’s likely hungry, and thirsty, and tired in the wilderness.

Tim: But he’s hungry and thirsty. And somehow, that longing for food and drink becomes, for him, a way of experiencing his longing for intimacy with God. And this season of his life is where he began to forge those ties of close connection. Isn’t that interesting?

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So those are our three meanings.

Jon: Okay.

[Laughter]

Jon: So I—the literal meaning, which has attached to it a, a—kind of a metaphysical meaning, which is just the uninhabited, dry place.

Tim: Mhm. And dangerous.

Jon: And dangerous.

Tim: Yeah. Not just dry. The dryness is dangerous on two fronts: the lack of water, meaning you die, and then the dangerous creatures.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Yeah. And then it becomes, when employed in the story of the Bible, especially—in stories in the Bible, it's a place where people are tested.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: You come to the end of yourself pretty quick in the wilderness.

Tim: Yeah, everything that you got from the green land eventually runs out.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: And you don't have that anymore.

Jon: Yeah. And so it requires you to make some pretty big decisions on: who are you going to trust? How are you going to respond in need? What do you long for? And then it brings us to the third meaning, which is, you're saying that there is a whole stream of stories where people are in the wilderness and, kind of, essentially, passing the test. Or at least meeting God out there—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: In a way that—

Tim: They're at that knife-edge of life and death—

Jon: And they find life.

Tim: And that's where they encounter God in a way that strips them of every resource they have of their own and then forces them to, yeah, leap out in trust.

Jon: Help me understand the difference between those two, then: the test and the place where you meet—encounter God and encounter life.

Tim: Oh, you're right. They're actually connected.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: So maybe it's: there's two main meanings and there's—

Jon: Kinda nuanced—

Tim: 2A and 2B.

[Laughter]

Jon: Yeah. I guess so.

Tim: So one is what you described, the feeling and reality of the wilderness. And then the other is the human experience of the wilderness, where your—

Jon: Your trust is tested.

Tim: Mhm. And that either goes poorly, or it goes well—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Based on—

Jon: You can, you can—

Tim: Who you trust.

Jon: Mhm. You can encounter life or death.

Tim: Mhm. Yeah.

Jon: And I guess, when life shows up in the desert, it becomes so much more wonderful and miraculous.

Tim: Yes, the oasis.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Yeah. Yeah.

Jon: And the desert never seems like the place where you're supposed to settle. It's: you're going—

Tim: Yeah.

Jon: Through the desert.

Tim: You go through it. It's a transition space.

Jon: It's a transition into a new pha—

Tim: I—it's a transformational experience.

Jon: Mhm.

Tim: So there's a lot of deep echoes here of something that's really built into the human psyche about how hardship, suffering, and lack can actually provide a refining or transformative character. The journey motif—going on a long journey and you emerge out the other side changed. So we're tapping into a pretty universal human experience—

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Of hardship as a season of developing your character. But the biblical authors have a real specific geography that they use to work those themes.

Jon: Yeah.

Tim: Mhm.

Jon: Okay.

Tim: So that's the basic set of ideas. And what we're going to look at is just cycles of stories that play out these themes. And I've picked stories and moments that the biblical authors have connected through intentional hyperlinking. But we have to start in the beginning. And we've kind of been in this territory before, but the seven-day creation narrative and the Eden narrative both use important desert vocabulary right at the beginning. And then the meaning of those words and what happens to the desert in these two creation stories is foundational for understanding how the rest of this imagery works in the rest of the biblical story. So as always, we'll have an episode—

[Laughter]

Tim: On the creation narratives before we move on into the biblical story.

Jon: Okay. To Genesis one and two.

[Musical Break (44:27—44:31)]

Jon: Thanks for listening to this episode of BibleProject podcast. Next week, we're going to turn to Genesis one and two, and see how God creates out of the chaos and nothingness, which the Bible presents as a wilderness.

Tim: Eden itself is a little oasis surrounded by nothingness. And if I want to avoid returning back into the nothingness, I need to stay here connected to a life that is outside my own, an infinite source of life.

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Frank: Hi there. My name is Frank. I live in Wales. I first heard about the BibleProject when I was looking for something to explain the Gospel of John. And scouring the webs, I found the BibleProject.

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