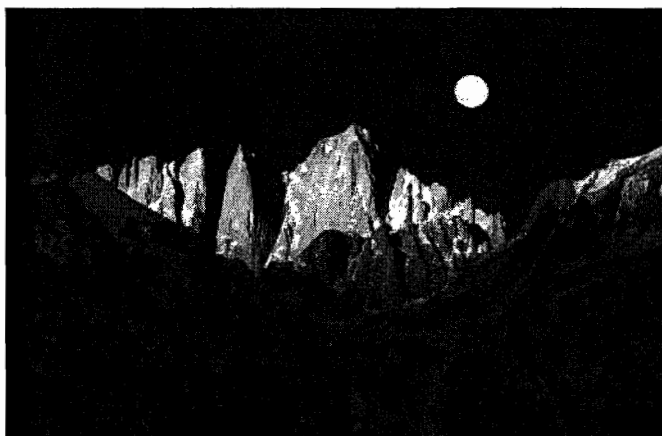


Biblical Wilderness Theology: Spiritual Roots for Environmental Education

By Gregory E. Hitzhusen

Several years ago I participated in Yitziah, a 21-day Jewish Outdoor Environmental Leadership Training backpacking course in western North Carolina. As the lone Christian participant in this thoroughly Jewish program, I was curious to witness how wilderness experiences could be connected with Jewish religious practice, in hopes that I could make the translation into my own faith tradition. The course was held during the time of Shavuot, when Jews celebrate the constitutive occasion of receiving the Torah at Mount Sinai. Our group was to follow in the footsteps of Judaism's forebears, whose religious and spiritual identity was born out of the freeing yet challenging experiences of the Exodus. By actually returning to a wilderness area to commemorate Shavuot, we would learn a great deal about Jewish laws and traditions, and also about the character of wilderness living through which they were gained.



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Yitziah also coincided with Rosh Chodesh, the celebration of the new moon, and so several days later, as the moon peeked through the clouds, we observed Kiddush Levanah, the sanctification of the moon, and recited a blessing thanking God for the moon's soft light and regular presence. Throughout the journey we davened (prayed), shared our own stories of faith and meaning, and experientially engaged a range of Jewish tenets of environmental ethics (e.g., Biers-Ariel, Newbrun & Smart, 2000). Near the end of the course we immersed in a mikvah, observing the Jewish ritual cleansing ceremony (the precursor to Christian baptism) as we sought purification from spiritual burdens. These and many other exercises shaped the spiritual journey we shared together, rooting it in familiar and resonant traditions of the Jewish faith, while also shedding new

light on the relevance of those traditions for our contemporary lives.

As an outsider to Judaism, my own Christian faith was deepened through the experience, and my respect for Jewish tradition also strengthened. This immersion into Jewish thinking and living helped me appreciate parallel elements of my own tradition, and enriched my understanding of the Jewish roots of Christianity. It also gave me a whole new set of lenses through which to view my spiritual life in relation to wild nature. I have yet to find an equally opportune Christian celebration to champion in wilderness ministry (especially in temperate North America—if only Lent fell closer to summer!), but have continued to discover the many powerful biblical themes that suggest a vibrant spirituality of relationship to God, others, and nature. These themes are not only rich in theological significance, but their Judeo-Christian pedigree makes them approachable and adoptable by a majority of U.S. citizens.

Spiritual and Theological Sources

The wilderness stories and nature-focused commentary in the Bible suggest several themes relevant to spiritual formation and conducive to ecological mindfulness. Susan Bratton (1993) has systematically discussed the range of categories of relationship to wilderness and wild nature seen in the Bible, and here I distill seven basic themes that characterize the potential of biblical wilderness theology to enrich environmental education. These themes can be connected with contemporary outdoor experiences, and I suggest environmentally relevant points of integration for each from a Christian spiritual perspective. Further commentary on some of these themes can be found in a new wilderness study guide developed by the National Council of Churches (visit www.ncccojustice.org/wildbounce.html).

God Provides

In many biblical stories, the characters learn profound spiritual lessons from experiences in nature. The first of all lessons is that God provides. Hagar and Ishmael, for instance, were the first recipients of God's provision in the wilderness (Gen 16 & 21). Abraham was likewise provided a sacrificial ram to spare his son Isaac (Gen 22). Ravens provided food for Elijah in the wadi Kerith (1 Kgs 17). God constantly provided for the Israelites during the Exodus in the desert, saving them from their oppressors and providing manna (and quail) to eat and water to drink. Jesus fed the 5,000 on a remote mountainside (Mt 14; Mk 6; Lk 9; Jn 6).

Often God's provision in biblical stories meets a desperate need, and in my own experiences, I've been similarly graced. For instance, there was the time a double-headed axe "appeared to me" on a side trail that some small inner voice had compelled me to veer down during a backpacking trip after five days of cold and freezing rain. The axe allowed my group to cut dry heartwood from soaked fallen logs to make a fire, dry out some clothes, and recover from early stages of hypothermia. In retrospect, my discovery felt akin to when Hagar was thirsting in the desert, and God "opened her eyes and she saw a well of water" (Gen 21:19). The truth of these ancient stories resonates in my own experience, locating some of my own most profound spiritual encounters within a larger tradition of experience. If I can trust God's provision, I, like the lilies, may be able to live without vain worries and with less compulsion to exploit others and nature for material gain.

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God Appears

A theophany is an appearance of God—a powerful manifestation of God's presence in sensible form that makes a lasting impression on witnesses. Moses met God in the burning bush (Ex 3) and led the people through the wilderness guided by God's pillar of fire and cloud (e.g., Ex 13). Elijah perceived God in the "still small voice" while in the wilderness (1 Kgs 19). God's Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove as John baptized him in the Jordan River (Mt 3:16; Mk 1:10; Lk 3:22; Jn 1:32). Martin Luther encountered the divine in a clap of thunder.

In my own life, out of a special need for healing, my wife and I once felt inspired to stop and pray by a small stream. Precisely at the moment we ended our prayer, a whistling chirp greeted us, and we looked up to see a hummingbird hovering right in front of us above the water. It paused amid our "amen," and then ascended into the heavens, its fleeting path recalling a wisp of incense lifting our intention up to God. The moment is emblazoned in our memories.

Theophanies are unmistakable and specific, but Christian tradition holds that God's presence, God's "invisible qualities, eternal power, and divine nature" (Rom 1:20) are revealed more generally through contemplation of God's creation. This sensibility is captured nicely in the Catholic Bishops' Pastoral Letter on Appalachia (1995):

To dwell within these mountains is to experience, in their height, God's majesty; in their weight, God's strength; in their hollows, God's embrace; in their water, God's cleansing; in their haze, God's mystery. These mountains are truly a holy place.

Encounters and understandings such as these reinforce a sense of the sacred in nature, and counter the profane view that nature is merely a repository of resources to be exploited.

Testing

Another important theme found in biblical wildland stories is testing, testing associated with refinement, character building, and vision. Jacob wrestled with an angel while alone on a riverbank, and was blessed with the name Israel (Gen 32). David's leadership skills were honed during his wilderness adventures, such as when he proved his character in sparing Saul's life in a cave near the Crag of the Wild Goats (1 Sam 24; see also Peterson, 1997). The Israelites were found lacking when they tested God's patience and fated their generation to death in the desert, failing to appreciate God's blessings. John the Baptist's spiritual formation occurred in the wilderness, from where he emerged to herald Jesus' coming. Jesus was tested in the wilderness after his baptism and there demonstrated his readiness for ministry.

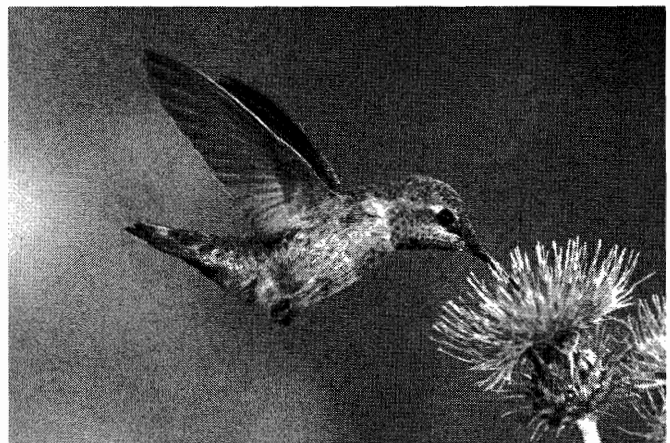


Photo Courtesy of USDA NRCS

Faced with solitude and an environment entirely of God's making, our time in the wilderness often confronts us with fundamental questions of who we are and how we are to live. The unremitting austerity of wilderness existence can also bare our souls and provide a needed reality check (Lane, 1992). A wilderness canoe trip once pushed me to confront questions about my life's journey, and inspired me to make difficult changes amid challenging vocational circumstances. On another occasion, during a solo exercise on a backpacking trip following a particularly trying period in my life, I found in some driftwood a metaphor for my own suffering. Worn by the forces that had burdened me, I recognized a new beauty and smoothness in myself, as the wood's graceful shape helped me appreciate and

accept the blessings of my difficult path. In many cases, these lessons of the wilderness also foster humility, which tempers our selfish will and need for control, expands our sense of realities beyond our individual desires, and reduces egotistical illusions of grandeur and the need to prove ourselves by lording our power over others and nature.

Solitude, Rest, Contemplation

Solitude and peaceful space to think is another feature of nature that is reflected in the Bible. Many of the encounters with the divine mentioned above occurred in solitary, quiet places, where the forces of human culture are largely undone or unremarkable. In the Bible's most famous Psalm, God "makes me lie down in green pastures, and leads me beside still waters" (Ps 23). Jesus and his disciples frequently retreated to wilderness to pray and renew themselves (Luke 5:16; Mk 6:31), and Jesus often spent time in prayer on a mountainside before major miracles or other important events (e.g., Mt 14:23; Mk 6:46; Luke 6:12). The Christian monastic tradition that arose in the Alexandrian deserts draws in part from the same well (Merton, 1960).

Environmental educators have never hesitated to highlight Native American and Eastern beliefs when providing examples of cosmological and metaphysical perspectives on nature; these positive biblical themes merely add to that repertoire.

In my own life, I have occasionally retreated to wilderness to find rest and gain perspective. Shortly before entering seminary I spent five days alone in the wilderness of the Badlands in South Dakota, backpacking, thinking, reading, writing, and praying. As I navigated the wild land and reflected on my own life direction, I learned lessons that later provided me with remarkable guidance, and continue to inspire me today. In a culture that hardly has time for vacation, when the ringer of a phone or the hum of an engine is rarely out of earshot—where "more" increasingly proves to be less—a retreat to wilderness can be life saving. The gifts of solitude, rest, and contemplation are prerequisite to any sense of what life means, and as such are critical for healthy, ethical, and sustainable living.

Renewal, Purification, Restoration

The famous lines of the 23rd psalm quoted above lead to a related theme. After lying down in green pastures and being led beside still waters, the psalmist adds: *God restores my soul*. Rest and repose in nature lead to healing and restoration. Certainly this explains part of the significance of Jesus' frequent wilderness retreats, when he and his disciples escaped the pressures of the crowds to re-center and re-charge. Similarly, the Israelites

were purified in their desert wandering—while one generation passed on, their hopes were renewed in their children, who proceeded to the Promised Land. The prophet Hosea hearkened to this time in Israel's history when exhorting his contemporaries to faithfulness, and proclaimed that a return to the wilderness could effect the needed change. Hosea prophesied God's intentions: "I will allure her [Israel] and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her" (Hos 2:14); there a faithful relationship would be restored and God would bestow blessings on land and creatures alike (Hos 2:18, 21-22). For Hosea, the memory and promise of blessings to Israel in the wilderness, and the closeness of God there, were a source of restoration and renewal.

Personal stories of renewal and restoration in nature are common. Some of the most striking examples I can think of involve my grandmother, several years beset by Alzheimer's, who on several occasions "returned to herself" when wheeled into garden paths to examine flowers, or when birds chirped outside her window. More generally, the regular practice of church retreats, or the success of wilderness therapy programs, attests to the healing and re-centering qualities of nature. And just as rest, solitude, and contemplation—so abundantly available in quiet natural areas—lead to renewal, so can this personal renewal lead to a larger process of restoration for all of creation, as renewed people find new energy to extend healing beyond themselves (cf., Santmire, 2000).

Christians have further theological reasons to consider the healing and redemption of nature, since Christian redemption is understood to extend freedom and restoration to all of creation (Rom 8:19-23). Thus Christian salvation and the redeemed Christian life should be good news for nature. And yet this good news may often remain hidden, unrevealed by the way many Christians live—ecological wholeness diminished by self-centered notions of well-being or a generalized lack of connection with creation. Renewal in nature can revivify these connections, and can help Christians in particular remember the cosmic dimensions of their redemption.

Beauty

One of the most obvious blessings of nature is its beauty. As Greek Orthodox Bishop Kallistos Ware (2002) has noted, the goodness of the world, in the biblical view, goes hand in hand with its beauty. Ware contends that the English phrase "very good" makes a weak translation of God's assessment of the whole creation in Genesis 1:31; the Greek Septuagint phrase is *lian kala*, or "altogether good and beautiful." The Greek word for beautiful, *kalos*, shares the same root as the verb *kaleo*, "I call," or "invite"—suggesting how beauty calls to us and draws us to itself (Ware, 2002). Indeed, nature's beauty is part of what inspires a sense of wonder in the face of creation. "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers...what is man that you are mindful of him?" says the psalmist (Ps 8:3-4). This sense of wonder was familiar to biblical authors—"Listen to this,

Job; stop and consider God's wonders" (Job 37:14)—and is commended as critical to a proper human perspective.

Beauty is something we have all experienced – whether in a sunset, a person, a distant scenic view, the grandeur of a mountain, the elegant power of a waterfall, or elsewhere. Aldo Leopold referred to this sense in his *Sand County Almanac* (1949) when discussing the moral and religious value of wildlife. Describing the boy taken by the beauty of warblers, Leopold wrote:

There are yet many boys to be born who, like Isaiah, 'may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this.' But where shall they see, and know, and consider? In museums?"

Such beauty is too precious a gift to destroy. Beauty is also the first thing to "unself" us and bring us out of our selfish preoccupation (Murdoch, 1970). Surely the beauty of nature is part of what makes nature a likely location for spiritual formation both in the Bible and in people's lives in every age. Beauty elevates the soul. And if we appreciate nature's beauty, our desire to protect it, like the impulse to preserve a great work of art, is enhanced. For believers who see nature as God's creation, and beheld by God as altogether good and beautiful, the impulse is only deepened.

Sabbath

A final theme drawn from biblical sources is that of Sabbath. People are to provide for the redemption of the land according to the Jewish law (Lev 25:24), and the Sabbath requires giving land and human labors a rest one day in every seven and one year in every seven (Ex 23:10-12; Lev 25). In fact, the Genesis account makes Sabbath rest part of the very fabric of creation, as God spends the seventh and penultimate day of creation resting from creating (Gen 2:2-3). If humans transgress this ordering of the universe (and also indeed if they disobey the law in other ways), the land will be laid waste (scripture elsewhere says the land will "vomit out" its disobedient inhabitants (Lev 18:28; 20:22)). But at least when the land lies desolate, it will get the Sabbaths it was denied when the people lived in the land (Lev 26:34-35, 43).

The above scriptures describe dire consequences for failure to observe Sabbath rest, but there is also a more positive focus on Sabbath spirituality. As Norman Wirzba (2006) has suggested, Sabbath is much more than a time of rest. Sabbath is a time for celebration, scripture study, conversation, and reflection. Sabbath observance, says Wirzba, is the fulfillment of a religious life that is harmoniously tuned to the life-giving and life-promoting ways of God. Sabbath is not just resting, it is learning to see and welcome the divine presence wherever we are.

Sabbath observance during Yitzhah meant a layover day with no cooking, pack-schlepping, or other work. Instead we celebrated

Sabbath liturgies and embraced the rhythms of thanksgiving. The value of the Sabbath for today's world is clear, as we relentlessly press the land, the oceans, the atmosphere, and ourselves to limits beyond what God intended and what creation can bear. Biblical traditions are utterly clear that God intends Sabbath observance as part of the very fabric of existence, and we ignore that path at our peril. Observing the Sabbath can help anchor sustaining but less consumptive life habits, and can solidify other life-giving practices. In a sense, wilderness areas are full-time Sabbath-places for land, people, and wildlife, and for those with no regular Sabbath practice, perhaps being in a Sabbath-place can help bring Sabbath living home.

Conclusion

Many of the themes above are recognizable as universal spiritual experiences that arise from wilderness travel, but they can be reinforced for members of biblical traditions by connecting them with sources from their own faith tradition. In part this helps address the perennial critique that the impact of outdoor programs is diminished by their being one-time-experiences. Instead of registering only once, spiritually reinforced outdoor experiences can be woven further into a person's life, renewed as that person's spiritual tradition continually recalls the experience. Environmental educators have never hesitated to highlight Native American and Eastern beliefs when providing examples of cosmological and metaphysical perspectives on nature; these positive biblical themes merely add to that repertoire.

These themes also make good roots for Jewish and Christian wilderness and camping programs, especially as environmental issues continue to increase in importance as part of religious life in America. Current examples could easily multiply, given some education and training, through the thousands of religious camping programs in the country. The National Council of Churches' wilderness study guide offers some starting points (www.ncccojustice.org/wildbounce.html), and environmental educators may consider ways to lend expertise to such a task.

Finally, these themes are complementary to many concepts taught in environmental education (Hitzhusen, 2006). This suggests promise for partnerships between faith groups and environmental educators. For instance, Yitzhah was a partnership between the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life, Camp Isabella Freedman, and North Carolina Outward Bound. As a result, many Outward Bound practices complemented the Jewish spiritual exercises during the course. Alternatively, an outdoor ethics program I used to direct made inroads toward including participants' faith traditions simply by offering an optional, non-denominational Christian devotional service as part of its weekend programs. Opening up outdoor education programs to empower participants to consider spiritual connections with their own traditions both enriches their tradition with the spirit of outdoor education, and increases the chances that important ethical understandings of nature will be

reinforced over that person's lifetime of communal and religious participation. In the United States, such roots can be a critical part of the fabric of environmental ethics.

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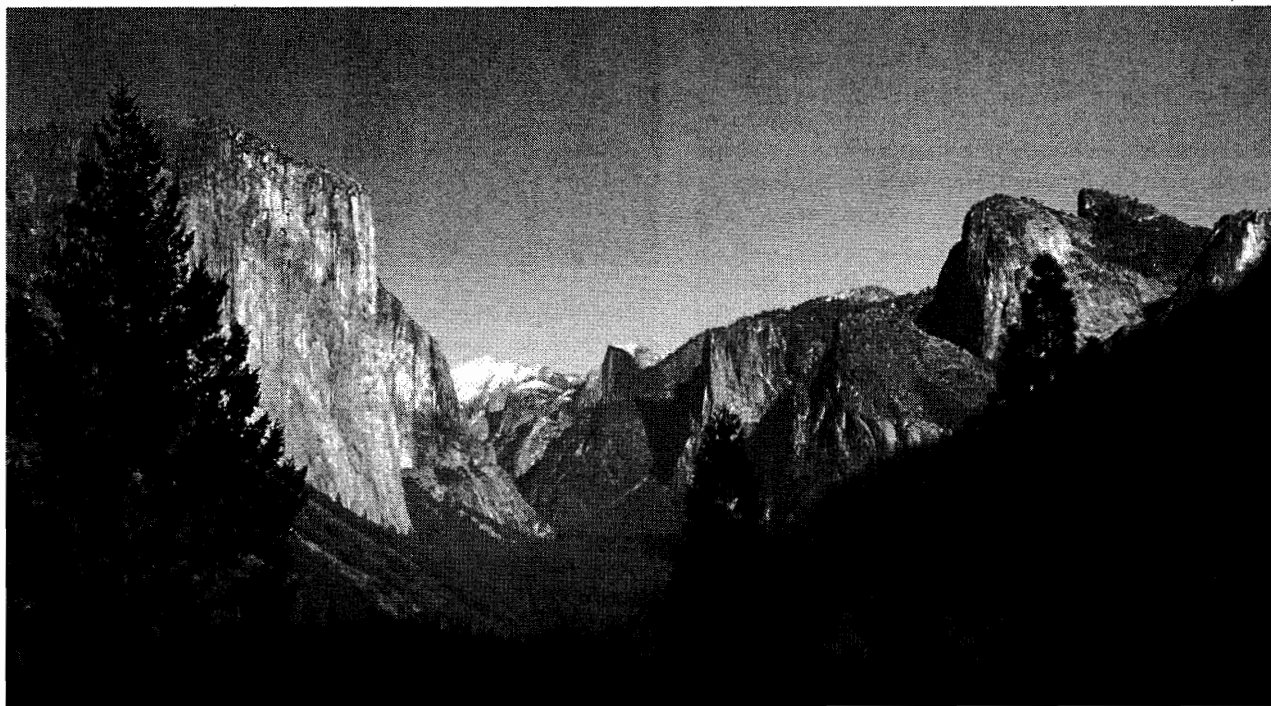


Photo Courtesy of the National Park Service

A black and white photograph of a forest. Sunlight filters through the dense canopy of trees, creating a dappled light effect on the forest floor and the trunks of the trees. The trees are tall and slender, with some branches visible in the foreground.

Taproot

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