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The Biblical Wilderness Pilgrimage in Luke and The American Road Movie

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“Are we on a spiritual pilgrimage?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what a pilgrimage is, I guess.”

“I think it’s when you are looking for the answer to something, or when you are trying to figure out God,” I tell him.

“Are you trying to figure out God?” Paul asks.

“I don’t know. I think I did, a bit, back in the canyon, but then you have to kind of jump into it, don’t you? I mean, you have to see and believe the world is God’s, that He is there and He made it for us.”

—Donald Miller, *Through Painted Deserts: Light, God, and Beauty on The Open Road*¹

The wilderness plays a perennial role in pilgrimage, road, and journey stories because it is both a space in which a journey takes place and a symbol for how the journey is experienced. The wilderness shares traits with the journey itself. Both signify liminal and chaotic spaces that exist outside of society. As such, being on the road is encountered like being in the wilderness. Like rites of passage, journeys are times when people find themselves in a state of flux, betwixt and between. They represent pivotal moments between departure and arrival. Such periods can be transformative.

While there are social values and a distinctiveness of modern American culture that put us at a disadvantage for grasping an ancient Eastern text like the Bible, there are other cultural traits, such as the wilderness journey, that may facilitate our understanding of Scripture. As an immigrant people, our own national sense of the American pilgrimage—the American journey and our encounter with the frontier and wilderness—has shaped us in a way that helps us grasp the Scriptural theme of journeying and the biblical role of the wilderness. Indeed, the wilderness is a powerful, complex, and persistent symbol that has played a significant role in the history and traditions of both Israel and America. The wilderness plays a part in our national mythology; we don’t only remember it historically, we re-appropriate it in seasons of crises, confusion, and longing.

This is hardly novel. In *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan notes that “theology mediates between a cultural matrix and the significance and role of a religion in that matrix.”² Against a classical conception of the unchanging nature of culture, an empirical understanding of culture underscores both its shifting nature and the role of specific context. Theological reflection on Scripture necessitates grappling with prevailing cultural influences or “the set of meanings and values that informs a way of life.”³ Explicit engagement with cultural influences, in all their particularity, is not just valuable but essential.

Given theology’s mediating role, we should note that, for most of the last century, film has been the dominant media in the West and certainly one of the most prominent cultural influences in America. Film provides an exceptional opportunity for this kind of cultural engagement, providing collective images of culture that reflect contemporary questions, crises, and movements. Film also provides a way of exploring societal myths in all their complexity and contradiction. “[Film] can illuminate issues and provide a mythic perspective which transcends ideological differences grounded in standard political rhetoric.” Moreover, film shares the narrative or storied quality of Scripture recently recovered in theological discourse, making for a fitting dialog partner.⁵

Indeed, focused dialogue between Scripture and film provides a unique opportunity to grasp the meaning of the complex symbol of wilderness sojourning in both biblical and American culture. And the contemporary film genre that embodies this dynamic for our own culture is the American road movie. American road movies, animated as they are by recurrent subtexts of spiritual searching, exemplify a distinctive American character of restless spirituality. Europeans from Alexis de Tocqueville to Jean Baudrillard have commented on this restless nature of Americans. Our restlessness and our road genre are tied to the vast amount of land and open space found in America as compared to Europe. Notably, geographical movement through and the symbolism attached to different regions of America are a key part of the genre. As such, road movies frequently capture individuals in transition and explore occasions of liminality and *communitas*, or “threshold experiences,” to draw on the language of Victor Turner.

Complimentary to its deep roots in our national identity, American road movies mesh well with Luke’s Gospel, a Gospel that engages with the wilderness on a complex level and fully employs a pilgrimage or journey motif.

Beginning as early as the birth narratives, Luke evokes the prominent biblical theme of journeying.⁶ Jesus is portrayed as the pioneer of the Christian way, whose entire life's journey typifies and is instructive for the Christian life in this world. Jesus speaks of his own death as a journey or "exodus" (Lk 9:31). The final journey to Jerusalem is greatly expanded (Lk 9:51–19:44), serving as a context for instruction in discipleship and for the gathering of a sojourning community. In Acts, the journey motif is also underscored in Stephen's speech, which repeatedly emphasizes the sojourning nature of God's people in the past (Acts 7). The early church is also often simply designated "the Way" (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22), and Paul's journeys fully advance this motif.

Moreover, a significant number of themes present in Luke's journey motif are also found in American road movies. Since Luke's call to discipleship takes the form of a journey narrative, a "road story," if you will, a consideration of noteworthy American road movies provides a unique context for sustained and mutually illuminating dialogue. In this environment, facets of our American cultural makeup can help us better listen to Luke's Gospel and hear its call to discipleship in our own context.

I first cultivated this approach as Visiting Professor at Fuller Theological Seminary in 2007 while teaching a course titled *Luke and The American Road Movie*. Since then I have regularly taught this course for Fuller and several other seminaries. Like the current study, that course pursued a dialogue between the biblical journey motif in Luke and the American road movie, engaging shared themes such as pilgrimage, dislocation, race, gender, wealth, family, community, and reconciliation. We considered the chief passages and theological themes found in the extensive journey motif in the Gospel of Luke in cultural dialog with select American road movies, such as *The Grapes of Wrath*; *Easy Rider*; *Into the Wild*; *Thelma and Louise*; *Smoke Signals*; *The Straight Story*; *Rain Man*; *Planes, Trains, and Automobiles*; *Paris, Texas*; *Road to Perdition*; and *O Brother Where Art Thou?*

Get Your Motor Runnin': The American Road Movie

The American road movie plays an interesting role in our film tradition. In numerous ways, it is the heir to the Western and contains frequent use of myths and symbols of the West and the frontier. The Western played a significant role last century as a means of representing and reformulating American ideology,

especially in times of identity crisis and social turmoil. Though not uncritical, these films pay tribute to the mythology of America's formative history. "[T]he passage from the Western to the road movie highlights America's struggle with its self-conscious recognition of its dependency upon a story of progress and moral righteousness (Manifest Destiny) which was only partially based in fact."⁷

Nevertheless, the encounter with the frontier is what transformed Europeans into Americans.⁸ The significance of our geography lends itself to this personal and national story. Our unique geography provided the impetus for this transformation of character and persists as a distinct feature of our national identity. Since World War II, cars themselves have been a potent symbol of American character, representing an extension of the driver's identity and speeding up the slow advance of the pioneers to an ecstatic and fast-paced adrenaline rush.

In what follows, space will allow us to facilitate only a brief and focused conversation between Luke and the American road movie. Specifically, we will concentrate on one portion of Luke's Gospel and one American road movie: Luke 3:1-4:13 and *Easy Rider*. As I have taught in graduate and undergraduate contexts over the last decade, I have found it helpful to begin this exploration with *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Easy Rider*.⁹ Both films are paradigmatic of the genre and represent periods of social turmoil and wrestling with American identity. Like *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Easy Rider* explores national questions by focusing on the journey of specific individuals.¹⁰

As we will see, the wilderness plays a significant yet complex role in both accounts. Mutually illuminating dialogue can be pursued between these narratives in light of several shared traits.

1. Both narratives evoke the positive role of the wilderness sojourn in hallowed national histories by means of figural recapitulation.

2. Both accounts place the wilderness in tension with or over against contemporary society.

3. In each narrative, people encountered in the wilderness have a reciprocal relationship that reflects the symbolism of the wilderness itself.

4. In both accounts, the wilderness represents the start of a confrontational journey that fatefully progresses from periphery to center.

5. In both narratives, the journey itself functions like the liminal wilderness, as an alternative socializing structure.

Wildness

There are two prominent symbols of chaos in biblical idiom: the chaotic waters of the sea and the wilderness. The symbolism related to the sea is derived from the mythology of surrounding cultures. The wilderness, however, was a salient feature of Israel's own personal history and geography. As such, the wilderness proves to be an enduring image in Israel's symbolic universe. As the first destination of the Exodus, it represented freedom from Egypt and the place where they became a nation. It was a context of trial and temptation, wandering and failure. The wilderness left its imprint on Israel.

The chaotic wilderness in Israel's symbolic universe was understood as that unknown and dangerous region beyond the meaningful, ordered world which threatens existing archetypes. On the social level, it is a place of anti-structure; on a personal level it is a place of liminality. The wilderness manifests these characteristics because, as J.D. Levenson notes, "the desert serves as an oracle for this primitive universalism of social elements which are outside the control of government, in that it is a space free of any political authority whatsoever and of any organized governmental-cultic establishment."¹¹

By the first century, the wilderness had already developed a formidable tradition as a "counter-cultural" symbol. Josephus lists a number of revolutionary prophets who led people into the wilderness to receive heavenly portents or to perform prophetic signs in opposition to Jerusalem and the temple.¹² The Qumran community, as well, envisioned themselves as living out a present dimension of God's salvation in the locale of the wilderness, over against Jerusalem.¹³ In Acts, even Paul is confused by a Roman tribune for a certain Egyptian who led a multitude into the wilderness and performed prophetic signs of Jerusalem's destruction on the Mt. of Olives (Acts 21:38).

Nevertheless, because it stands in a dialectical relationship with Jerusalem as a sacred center, "it remains as a creative challenge, as a source of possibility and vitality over against, yet inextricably related to, order and the Sacred."¹⁴ Sinai and Zion persist as creative polarities that are in tension throughout Israel's history. In this sense, the wilderness continues to serve as a locus of new beginnings for God's people, an arena for new initiatives in God's saving purpose.¹⁵

In the following, as we *cycle* between the beginning of Luke and *Easy Rider*, we will seek to discern points of intersection and conversation in how both of these stories engage the hallowed formative narratives of their respective cultures through the shared symbolism of the wilderness.

Easy Rider

“Get your motor runnin’
Head out on the highway
Lookin’ for adventure
And whatever comes our way”
Steppenwolf, “Born to be Wild”

When the heavy metal thunder of Steppenwolf’s “Born to be Wild” kick started *Easy Rider*’s journey across the U.S., it left an imprint on American filmmaking as indelible as a biker’s tattoo. Despite its ham-fisted symbolism, unevenness, and amateurish excess—or maybe because of it—*Easy Rider* is a film that documents, embodies and, in the end, eulogizes the sixties. In a sense, the performances of Peter Fonda (Wyatt) and Dennis Hopper (Billy) form a chronicle of the era. While the significance of this period may still be disputed, the sixties stand as a cultural watershed for American identity. Though the implications of the decade may be debated, it can be agreed that a defining characteristic of the sixties was that it was overtly *countercultural*. The emergent youth culture was a *counter culture* in its rejection of mainstream ways of self-definition and in its search for its own identity. Considered by many to be the first *modern* road movie, *Easy Rider* self-consciously explores these themes through a new breed of road movie and, in many ways, defined the genre for subsequent filmmakers.¹⁶ Like the development in Westerns after WWII, the road genre began to feature flawed, morally questionable, or ambiguous heroes. Such protagonists question the status of society by their very nature.

As such, Wyatt’s and Billy’s journey signified a society in transition. The very direction of their travel, from West to East, against the established narrative of manifest destiny, reinforced their countercultural symbolism. A significant portion of their time on screen is spent traveling through the welcoming, wide-open and liminal spaces of the desert Southwest. It is primarily when they enter the Deep South (a region associated with slavery and hostility towards the civil rights movement at the time) and continue toward the East (associated with tradition) that they experience hostility, prejudice, and violence which lead to their deaths.

Nevertheless, like the sixties counterculture itself, *Easy Rider* paradoxically mixes revolution and reform. Themes of agrarianism, populism, and self-re-

liance are prominent throughout as Wyatt (Wyatt Earp/Captain America) and Billy (Billy The Kid) update and embody the American mythology of the cowboy Western. An early scene in the film explicitly communicates this message. When Wyatt's bike breaks down and the traveling duo seek help from a rancher, the film draws visual parallels between the ranch hands shoeing a horse in the foreground and Wyatt and Billy removing a tire from Wyatt's motorcycle in the background. "Their portrayals of themselves—not as the outsiders of the 1960s counterculture but as modern-day cowboys traveling across America on iron steeds—is an attempt to place themselves within the traditional American national narrative. 'We are just as American as John Wayne or Gary Cooper,' they seem to be saying."¹⁷

Like many trailblazers in the sixties, *Easy Rider* generated an extreme range of responses because it tapped into a deep-seated, cultural narrative in a way that questioned contemporary society. Reminiscent of the sixties themselves, *Easy Rider* explores larger cultural questions by reexamining and re-embodiment fundamental images and archetypes of America's heritage. By overtly representing its symbolism, *Easy Rider* invites viewers to reconsider the state of society to which the national narrative has led. It invites questions concerning the original purpose of the journey through the frontier.

In *Easy Rider*, the desert setting plays a prominent role in this process, occupying more than half of the film's screen time. Like many road movies, *Easy Rider* draws from the iconic images of previous Westerns rather than from actual historic sites of the West. Though Monument Valley is ubiquitous in Westerns and American road films, nothing historic ever took place there; yet because of its prominence in Westerns, it has come to uniquely distill the essence of the wilderness. This reflects the self-perpetuating, intertextual, and allusive nature of the genre. Accordingly, Wyatt and Billy memorably ride through Monument Valley against the backdrop of a stunning sunset to situate them properly on America's symbolic map.

It is not without significance that it is only in the desert scenes that Wyatt and Billy encounter people who reflect the ideals of the sixties' counterculture. In various ways, the desert scenes speak of the possibilities and optimism of the journey before they encounter threats and hostility in the South. The early scenes communicate a celebration of the road and the freedom of the journey because it is in the wilderness, that space that exists outside of social conven-

tions, that freedom and new beginnings are discovered. With heavy-handed symbolism, Wyatt actually throws his watch away at the outset of the journey, signifying the freeing and liminal nature of the journey.¹⁸

Easy Rider is a film of relatively few words and relies heavily on music to carry the weight of the narrative. Like other road movies, it employs highly symbolic music, both as a commentary on the story and as a chronicle of the times. The music signifies the journey itself as well as the state of mind and internal mood of the protagonists.¹⁹ Throughout the wilderness the music is expansive and euphoric. At the very outset, the lyrics to “Born to Be Wild” crystallize the symbolism of the wilderness and the ecstatic nature of the journey.

Like a true nature's child
We were born
Born to be wild
We can climb so high
I never wanna die
Born to be wild
Born to be wild

For a movie that can at times seem uncomfortably dated, the music, words, and cinematography in these scenes are timeless and iconic. The music for *Easy Rider* came directly from Hopper’s and Fonda’s collection and was one of the first films to draw from contemporary songs for its score. It was also the first film to explicitly connect rock music with the road. This contributes to the film’s documentary quality and creates an even closer connection between the journey and the this revolutionary era.²⁰

The following song, “Wasn’t Born to Follow,” performed by *The Byrds*, conjures mystical qualities of the wilderness, a sense of pilgrimage, and an appreciation of the journey as a quasi spiritual quest. It also underscores the theme of “taking one’s own path,”—reinforcing a sense of the desert as a countercultural space. Superimposed on the iconic location and iconic outfits of Billy’s fringed buckskins and Wyatt/Captain America’s star spangled bike, helmet, and jacket, the music helped enshrine the duo among the many previous “self-styled traditionalists, and self-styled iconoclasts who have sought to explore the questions and tensions that contribute to the make-up of the American character.”²¹ As

such, *Easy Rider* encourages reflection on the nature of our national pilgrimage and the American journey. By focusing on its iconic and iconoclastic protagonists in this setting, the film cranks up the conversation about new beginnings for society. This too is part of the American story.

Born to Be Wild: John and Jesus from Birth to Wilderness

In Luke, as in *Easy Rider*, the wilderness is heavily invested with symbolism, not as an end in itself, but rather as a place of preparation and transition (1:76; 3:4). This was how the community at Qumran saw themselves as well—located in the desert, ostensibly in an oppositional posture over against Jerusalem. Yet, “the desert is a passage... not the goal itself.”²²

First, let us briefly consider how the birth narratives in Luke 1-2 lay a foundation for this kind of thematic investment in the wilderness as a preparatory setting. By the end of his first two chapters, Luke has already introduced a narrative tension between the polarities of the wilderness and the Jerusalem temple. Scholarship attending closely to Luke’s narrative dynamics has underscored how the birth narratives form an integral part of Luke’s narrative, providing interpretive cues for comprehending the whole of Luke-Acts. In numerous ways, these chapters function as an overture to the entire Gospel. In terms of its composition, the most salient feature of the birth narratives is the parallel development of the story lines of John the Baptist and Jesus. The interplay between these households and story lines provides the structure for Luke to initially sound essential themes of his overture.²⁴ Note, for example, how Joel B. Green renders this development.²⁵

John		Jesus
1:5-7	(A) The Introduction of Parents	1:26-27
1:8-23	(B) The Annunciation	1:28-38
1:24-25	(C) The Mother’s Response	1:39-56
1:57-58	(D) The Birth	2:1-20
1:59-66	(E) Circumcision and Naming	2:21-24
1:67-79	(F) Prophetic Response	2:25-39
1:80	(G) Growth of the Child	2:40-52

The interdependent nature of these two story lines is underscored by the fact that the episodes are not related serially but are interwoven; the preparation for births in each household is related first and only then stories of the birth and growth of each. Three prophetic hymns also provide additional interpretive interweaving of these stories.

This structure takes on further significance when one notes the prominence of religious space in these chapters. Nearly half of the narrative takes place in the temple precincts. More significantly, there is a transposition in terms of symbolic space that takes place between the beginning and end points of John's and Jesus' story lines. Each narrative begins and ends at antithetical poles on Israel's symbolic map. John's plot line is introduced in the Holy Place of the Jerusalem Temple (1:8-23), but ends on the periphery, in the wilderness (1:80). Conversely, Jesus' story begins in Nazareth, a town not mentioned in the Old Testament, of marginal reputation, without lineage (1:28-38), yet culminates at the temple (2:40-52).²⁶ As each plot line develops counter to cultural expectation, Luke's readers may begin to ponder what all might be suggested by these unexpected transpositions.

Moreover, by framing his opening in meaningful spaces that symbolize chaos and cosmos, Luke implies that the sacred polarities of temple and wilderness are not merely fringe elements, but an essential part of the fabric of his narrative. Such an opening movement encourages reflection on the very essence of these settings.²⁷ In reading the Gospel of Luke, then, the transition to the ministries of John and Jesus in the wilderness, Luke 3:1-4:13, is viewed by Luke's audience through the unexpected interpretive movements of Luke 1-2.

The wilderness is a surprising and disruptive locale for John. By every indication, he should have found his place at the temple, ministering before God like Zechariah (1:8). Nevertheless, John's development is in the wilderness, where he also conducts his ministry. This runs counter to preeminent cultural expectations of allegiance to father and household. It indicates how John has aligned himself with God's purposes over against all other competing expectations.

Although there has been much scholarly speculation, Luke does not explain why John sojourns in the wilderness.²⁸ Rather, the wilderness emerges in Luke as a space that merits its own focus; the wilderness takes on a figural meaning that foreshadows the character of his ministry. John's location resonates

with a line of communities that understood themselves in flux, as sojourners in a liminal space and time. “All three groups—the wilderness generation, the Babylonian exiles, the Qumranians—were or saw themselves to be societies in transition, not settled in time or space, but on the move and awaiting the fulfillment of divine promises.”²⁹ This outlook shapes the context in which we next find John and Jesus. That is, in the wilderness, practicing a baptism that calls people to an exodus from social structures to a liminal place to undergo a rite of passage and then to be reintegrated into new structures.³⁰ John’s preaching in the wilderness epitomizes the prophetic tradition of repentance and social justice.³¹ He is in line with a stream of prophetic understanding that emphasized the wilderness as a positive locale in Israel’s history (Isa 63:11-14; Jer 2:2-3; Hos 2:17) and made connections to the Exodus (e.g., Isa 43:16-19; 48:20-21; Jer 16:14-15; 23:7-8; 31-34; Hos 2:16-17).

As we have witnessed in the archetypal characterization of Billy and Wyatt, by engaging in this symbolism, Luke depicts characters recapitulating sacred history and invites readers to re-actualize the connection between the site of the people of God then and its existential relevance to the contemporary situation. In a sense, the wilderness is functioning again as it did at the Exodus, as symbol of freedom and transformation. Although it previously stood against the oppressive rule of Egypt and later Babylon, now it stands in tension with Jerusalem and the temple.

The movement out into the wilderness, then, is a statement to the institutional center, a threat to those in institutional authority, with Herod and the high-priesthood in particular being implicated in this context (Luke 3:2). This threat to the existing power structures is also intimated by Luke’s prolepsis to the imprisonment of John by Herod (3:19-20).³² In this sense, the wilderness retains its function in Israel’s symbolic universe as a dangerous realm that may threaten existing powers.³³

In *Easy Rider*, as in Luke, the wilderness is prominently featured early in the narrative and functions within the larger story as an oppositional space that, like its protagonists, is in tension with the existing societal structures. In both narratives, the wilderness is a location that sets the stage for the journey. However, in many American road movies, either California or the West Coast are traditionally the geographic or symbolic goal of the journey, a heavily invested symbol for aspects of the American Dream or (e.g., the Joads’ journey to

California, the Griswalds' trip to *Wally World* in *National Lampoons Vacation*, etc.). Many journeys entail the allure and illusion that is California or the West, while the journey itself examines the present state of the American Dream.

In *Easy Rider*, this critique is implicit in the direction of travel. Embarking on a journey against the grain of the cultural narrative—from East to West, from wilderness to civilization—heightens the provocative nature of the journey. Though there is traditionally a tension between urban and rural, these features intensify the opposition. In this way, it is a countercultural statement that explores the goals of the original pilgrimage. The journey itself takes on a figural dimension that calls into question social realities. What kind of dream were we pursuing? What kind of freedom were we seeking? How may society have fallen short? As was the case in Luke, so in *Easy Rider*, in some sense the journey into the wilderness poses these questions by a recapitulation of the nation's hallowed history, ostensibly seeking to recover its ideals. However, it is construed as a statement over against institutional powers. This kind of freedom is a threat to conventional authority.

Wilderness Communities

Finally, we may note that the setting of the wilderness fosters new, egalitarian communities in both Luke and *Easy Rider*. In Luke, because people are journeying from civilization to the liminal space of the wilderness and undergoing baptism, John's ministry reflects the symbolism of its wilderness setting. His socio-ethical preaching continues a prophetic tradition emphasizing repentance and transformed social practices that prepare people for reintegration within the structures of a renewed society.³⁴ A central aspect of John's teaching is that participation in this new community is not based on ethnicity or ascription. In a society that defined community status by such canons, John's teaching undercuts any understanding of relation by mere descent: action and performance are underscored as the necessary characteristics of Abraham's offspring (3:7-14). In contrast to his father, Zechariah, who was largely characterized by his inherited priestly role in the temple (Luke 1:7-23), John and the forming community are defined by the socially ambiguous wilderness that effaces such distinctions.

The wilderness also plays an important role as the context where Jesus' story first intersects with that of the new community which God is forming. Jesus is

baptized in solidarity with this new community, anointed with the Spirit, and tested prior to beginning his ministry upon emerging from the desert.³⁵ As readers continue on in Luke, other features of the liminal, re-socializing character of the wilderness are prominent in Jesus' ministry. Cultural anthropologists have pointed out the phenomenological parallels between liminal settings, such as the wilderness, and pilgrimages or journeys.³⁶ In both, people leave normal society, along with the routines and influences that dominate everyday life, and become aware of and open to new experiences. In Luke, the lengthy journey Jesus takes to Jerusalem functions much like the wilderness itself as an alternative, socializing space.

The length and detail of Jesus' instruction on his journey to Jerusalem is greatly expanded compared to Matthew and Mark. Luke implies this is attributable to the imperception of the disciples concerning the character of Jesus' mission and the nature of discipleship. In Luke, discipleship, or becoming a follower of Jesus, is rigorously explored in the context of disciples *literally* following Jesus on his journey to Jerusalem. Beginning in 9:51, Jesus makes a decisive turn toward Israel's sacred center and for the next ten chapters the disciples receive intense instruction on discipleship.³⁷ Because of their imperception, Jesus must engage in further teaching along the way. In this sense, the journey itself plays the same re-socializing role that the wilderness does.

In Luke, the wilderness proves to be a place to birth and nurture a new community, even as it had in Israel's past. In *Easy Rider*, the wilderness also plays this role in regard to community. Curiously, even though Wyatt and Billy are depicted as outsiders, it is their engagement with communities in the wilderness that proves meaningful on their journey. Outsiders have always played a prominent part in classic American travel and road literature, such as Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* or Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* with Sal and Dean. Along their journey, Wyatt and Billy embody this role as well. At the end of their first day on the road, Wyatt and Billy are forced to camp in the desert because a motel manager refuses them rooms. Indeed, the only place they receive hospitality along their journey is at a ranch in the desert and a commune in the wilderness. Each community expresses ideals of the sixties that, paradoxically, sought the restoration of earlier values. When a rancher invites Wyatt and Billy to stay for a meal, Wyatt is genuinely appreciative as he admires the rancher's lifestyle. During the meal Wyatt says, "You got a nice spread here... I mean it.

You've got a nice spread. It's not everyone who can live off the land; you know, do your own thing in your own time, You should be proud."

Later the two men pick up a hitchhiker and accompany him to his commune. During their stay they witness the hardscrabble life of the new community attempting to grow crops in the arid desert. In both the ranch and commune settings, *Easy Rider* gestures toward the experience of hardship and a pilgrim-like faith. Both of these different communities are presented through the lens of early pioneers; each reflects both historic ideals of America and their strange, new expressions that were struggling to take root in the sixties. Although the rancher may frown upon the goings-on at the commune in reality, each of these groups embodies populist sentiments of a simple life in rural America in their own way. It is the ability of film to juxtapose these scenes of tradition and countercultural as a return to an idealized past. The movie suggests that for those who go looking for America, hope may be found in the paradoxical old/new traditions of these small, self-sufficient gatherings of common people in the wilderness.

Hence, the wilderness plays a recurrent role in road and journey stories as both a space in which a journey takes place and a symbol for how the journey is encountered. The journey itself shares the characteristics with the wilderness. As we have suggested previously, both signify liminal spaces that exist beyond society. Undertaking a pilgrimage and being on the road are experienced like being in the wilderness—that liminal, transformative space between departure and arrival.

Conclusion

Sometimes it is difficult to capture a complex and dynamic idea like the wilderness, just as it can be difficult to capture a complex and dynamic era like the sixties. At times, we need someone to come alongside and provide a different perspective; we need someone with whom to talk things through. Dialogue with film provides an exceptional opportunity to grasp cultural complexity in a meaningful way. Its invitation to enter into and inhabit an alternative world can provide the new vantage point we need to see and understand our own world better.

This is not a mode that is foreign to Scripture. Indeed, Jesus' genius for story is celebrated. Jesus told stories to crowds as an invitation to identify with him

and follow. He spoke in stories to his opponents, providing them opportunity to step out of their dogma and see what they could not otherwise (e.g., Luke 7: 36-50). Jesus told stories to his own disciples so that they might progress toward understanding, but also so that they might move toward commitment and conversion.

In Luke, Jesus' first resurrection appearance is to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, yet they do not recognize him. But as they journey together, something about the encounter with the stranger moves them toward understanding. Somehow the perspective of the stranger opens their eyes to the Scriptures. In due course, dialogue with the stranger brings clarity—in time, epiphany.

The dialog between Scripture and contemporary film is not something that is unfamiliar in our media saturated society, though being intentional about it sometimes is. Occasionally it is the encounter with the strange that provides us with fresh eyes to see the familiar in a new light. There is something attractive, even familiar in what it brings to our conversation; but perhaps it has not yet been fully recognized.

NOTES

- ¹ Donald Miller, *Through Painted Deserts: Light, God, and Beauty on The Open Road* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2005), 191.
- ² Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2003), xi.
- ³ *Ibid.*, xi.
- ⁴ Bren Ortega Murphy and Jeffrey Scott Harder, "1960s Counterculture and the Legacy of American Myth: A Study of Three Films," *Canadian Review of American Studies* 23/2 (1993): 57-79.
- ⁵ E.g., Erich Auerback, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask, (Princeton: Princeton University, 1953); Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1980); Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones, eds., *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1997).
- ⁶ In Luke 1-2, Mary's exemplary characterization largely takes place in the context of four journeys (1:39-56; 2:1-21, 22-40, 41-52).
- ⁷ Stephanie Watson, "From Riding to Driving: Once upon a Time in the West," in *Lost Highways: An Illustrated History of Road Movies*, ed. Jack Sargeant and Stephanie Watson, (London: Creation Books, 1999), 25. It is interesting to trace the transition from the Western into other genre. *The Grapes of Wrath*, directed by John Ford, the master of the Western, is essentially a Western in how it recapitulates the iconic westward movements of covered wagons, now in the form of loaded down jalopies on Route 66.
- ⁸ This is the thesis of Frederick Jackson Turner's essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *American Historical Association, Annual Report for the Year 1893*, Wash-

ington, DC, 1894. 199-227. According to Turner, the frontier is the safety valve for the city, but also, and most famously, what shapes Europeans into Americans. Not only the migration from Europe, but also the encounter with the American wilderness accomplishes this transformation. The frontier was something that shaped our identity and persists as a token of national character. It is often transposed to other contexts, such as John F. Kennedy's New Frontier speech or even Captain James T. Kirk's dramatic words at the beginning of each Star Trek episode. "Space, the final frontier."

- 9 Dennis Hopper, Director, *Easy Rider*, 1969.
- 10 Indeed, in an interview Peter Fonda compared Jack Nicholson's "helluva good country speech" to that of Tom Joad in John Ford's film *The Grapes of Wrath*—a role played by his Fonda's father, Henry. "He really is a patriot. He read that line . . . with an authority that only comes if you believe in it. . . . He read it like Henry. He's the Tom Joad, in a way, of our era." Patrick McGiligan, "The Ballad of Easy Rider (Or, How to Make a Drug Classic)," *Los Angeles Magazine* 39 (2004) 61.
- 11 Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible*, (Minneapolis/Chicago/New York: Winston, 1985), 23.
- 12 For Josephus, see, Ant. 20.5.1 §§97-98; 20.8.6, 10 §188; J.W. 2.13.4-5 §§258-63; 6.5.2 §§285-86; cf. Richard A. Horsley, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs*, (New York: Winston, 1985).
- 13 See, e.g., CD 8.12-15; 1QS 8:12b-16a; 1QS 9:17-20.
- 14 Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Wobbling Pivot," *The Journal of Religion* 52 (1972): 142.
- 15 See, e.g., Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space*, (Chico: Scholars, 1981); Sha'arei Talmon, "The 'Desert Motif' in the Bible and in Qumran Literature," in *Biblical Motifs: Origins and Transformations*, ed. Alexander Altmann, (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966), 31-63.
- 16 E.g., Mikita Brottman, "Tombstones in Their Eyes: Easy Rider and The Death of The American Dream," in Dennis Hopper: *Movie Top Ten*, ed. Jack Hunter, (London: Creation Books, 1999).
- 17 Brian Ireland, "American Highways: Recurring Images and Themes of the Road," *The Journal of American Culture* 26/4 (2003): 475.
- 18 "The desert is a zone that exists outside of quantifiable time, its temporality is more geological than anthropological . . . a kind of suspended eternity." Jack Sargeant and Stephanie Watson, eds. *Lost Highways: An Illustrated History of Road Movies*, (London: Creation Books, 1999), 25.
- 19 In *Easy Rider*, the transformation is gradual and expressed through the music and imagery rather than by its taciturn protagonists. However, a classic example of the transformative nature of the wilderness journey is verbalized in the film *Thelma and Louise*. After days of driving, while passing through the intensely beautiful Arizona desert, Thelma asks Louise, "You awake? . . . Me too. I feel awake. . . . Wide awake. I don't remember ever feelin' this awake. Everything looks different. You know what I mean. I know you know what I mean. Everything looks new. Do you feel like that? Like you've got something to look forward to?"
- 20 In Luke's birth narratives, prophetic songs, known as the Magnificat, Benedictus, and Nunc Dimittis, play an interpretive role, reinforcing themes and foreshadowing conflict in the story. Indeed, Mary's Magnificat (1:46-55) predisposes readers toward a negative assessment of rulers and those in authority in Luke's narrative world as God is bringing about the salvation by social transposition celebrated in her song: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly" (1:52). Simeon's song and words of warning to Mary also foreshadow this conflict in 2:29-35. This role of music is also found in *Easy Rider*, especially as the riders reach the Deep South. Within the American road genre, the crossing of geographical boundaries often stands for the crossing of social or cultural boundaries, and at times signifying the internal trans-

formation of characters. As the first scenes of the Deep South appear on screen, the tone of the music changes abruptly, right in the middle of another song. As the soundtrack strikes up Jimi Hendrix' "If Six Was Nine," people stare at the riders as they pass by. The tone of the song hints at the possibility of conflict, violence, and even death because of their outsider status. The use of Hendrix' lyrics and music makes overt the subtext of conflict that permeated the sixties.

- 21 Murphy and Harder, "1960s," 36.
- 22 Talmon, "Desert," 62-63.
- 23 E.g., "It is especially in 1:5-2:52 that Luke actually locates a suitable point to begin his work, a series of narrative events capable of intending the whole of what follows in Luke-Acts." Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 5. "[T]he importance of the birth stories is underscored when we recognize that the angelic announcements and prophetic hymns found their form one interconnected disclosure about Jesus which establishes a set of expectations about the course of the story." Robert C. Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts: A Literary Interpretation*, vol. 1, Foundations and Facets, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 8. "[T]hese chapters are . . . of particular importance in showing the reader how Luke intended his story to be understood." Luke Timothy Johnson, *Luke*, Sacra Pagina 3, (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1991), 34.
- 24 Indeed, the pairing of John and Jesus is a significant feature of the entire narrative of Luke-Acts (Luke 7:18-35; 11:1; 16:16; 20:4-6; Acts 1:5, 22; 10:37; 11:16; 13:24-25; 18:25; 19:3-4).
- 25 Green, *Luke*, 50.
- 26 The final episode of each storyline summarizes their development and foreshadows the future of each in terms of their culminating locus of ministry. The relative importance of Jesus is again signified by the disproportionate narrative space and expanded detail of the account. Unlike Matthew, Luke defers Jesus' genealogy until the wilderness setting of his baptism.
- 27 "Initial discourse segments lay out the ground rules, in a sense, providing an interpretive focus and constituting the initial context for the narrative that follows." Gillian Brown and George Yule *Discourse Analysis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1983), 125-26. The remaining discourse that follows is processed through the primary patterns and categories that are established in this inaugural discourse segment.
- 28 While it is true that in each Gospel John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness and, similar to Qumran, the Synoptics emphasize the ethical nature of this preaching; and while it is true that John and Qumran shared such common traits as asceticism, eschatological vision, and the importance attributed to bathing in water, it has become increasingly clear that what was unique and specific in John's ministry cannot be explained due to Qumran or Essene influence. See, e.g., Jerome Murphy-O'Connor, "John the Baptist and Jesus: History and Hypotheses," NTS 36 (1990): 359-374. However, see also, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, (AB28, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981), 388-89.
- 29 Cohn, *Shape*, 9.
- 30 John's locale and practice suggest the classical pattern of such rites that include separation, liminality and reintegration. See, e.g., Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1969).
- 31 On the wilderness as a place for instruction and law giving, see, Robert L. Cohn, *The Shape of Sacred Space*, (Chico: Scholars, 1981), 43-62.
- 32 Josephus *Ant* 18.116-19.
- 33 See, e.g., Ulrich W. Mauser, "Christ in the Wilderness: The Wilderness Theme in the Second Gospel and Its Basis in the Biblical Tradition," SBT 39 (London: SCM, 1963).

- ³⁴ Cf. Hans Schürmann, *Das Lukasevangelium*, vol. 1, (HTKNT 3, Freiburg: Herder, 1984). On the role of ascription in Judaism at this time, particularly concerning the power and privilege of John's priestly line, see, Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1990), 115-234. Luke's reference to both Annas and Caiaphas in 3:2 suggests this kind of dynastic ascription of power and status given that Annas was no longer officially functioning as High Priest at this time (Josephus Ant. 18.2.1-2; 18.4.3; 18.5.3; 20.9.1.). For a similar interrelationship between baptism, the breaking down of divisive social barriers, and becoming "Abraham's offspring" in Paul, cf. Gal 3:27-29 (e.g., Howard Clark Kee, *Knowing the Truth: A Sociological Approach to New Testament Interpretation*, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 89).
- ³⁵ Though, in a real sense, Jesus' ministry remains tethered to the wilderness throughout Luke's narrative. Luke repeatedly points back to events in the wilderness as the crisis that precipitated the opposition Jesus faces. One's response or lack of response to John's message serves as a dividing line for Israel. According to Luke 7:29-30 and 20:1-8, failure to respond to John's preaching of repentance in the wilderness prevents one from correctly perceiving God's saving actions through Jesus. It is only those who venture out into that socially ambiguous context of personal liminality and undergo a process of repentance and resocialization that are prepared to correctly perceive Jesus as God's messenger.
- ³⁶ E.g., David Carrasco, *Religions of Mesoamerica: Cosmivision and Ceremonial Centers*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1990); Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1969). Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*, (New York: Columbia University, 1978).
- ³⁷ Luke's journey from Galilee to Jerusalem is nearly five times longer than Mark's.