The Wilderness Narratives in the Hebrew Bible

In this volume, Angela Erisman offers a new way to think about the Pentateuch/Torah and its relationship to history. She returns to the seventeenth-century origins of modern biblical scholarship and charts a new course – not through Julius Wellhausen and the Documentary Hypothesis, but through Hermann Gunkel. Erisman reimagines his vision of a literary history grounded in communal experience as a history of responses to political threat before, during, and after the demise of Judah in 586 BCE. She explores creative transformations of genre and offers groundbreaking new readings of key episodes in the wilderness narratives. Offering new answers to old questions about the nature of the exodus, the identity of Moses, and his death in the wilderness, Erisman's study draws from literary and historical criticism. Her synthesis of approaches enables us to situate the wilderness narratives historically and to understand how and why they continue to be meaningful for readers today.

Angela Roskop Erisman is a scholar of the Hebrew Bible and author of *The Wilderness Itineraries: Genre, Geography, and the Growth of Torah*, which won the Manfred Lautenschläger Award for Theological Promise in 2014.

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Religion, Politics, and Biblical Interpretation

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05-06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

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education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781108499750

DOI: 10.1017/9781108589826

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781108589826

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

A Cataloging-in-Publication data record for this book is available from the Library of Congress

ISBN 978-1-108-49975-0 Hardback

for David Joseph

Not all those who wander are lost.
—J. R. R. Tolkien

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Preface

One of the treasures of my adopted hometown is a daguerrotype panorama of Cincinnati, Ohio, taken in September 1848 from a rooftop in Newport, Kentucky – an image of a nation not yet divided, the river in the foreground not yet a boundary between the Union and the Confederacy. (You can see it here: https://1848.cincinnatilibrary.org.) This image is remarkable for its innovative use of technology barely over a decade old to capture antebellum America, steamboats and river traffic where bridges and highways now stand, the city more or less as it looked when a twenty-year-old Samuel Clemens worked in a print shop on Walnut Street and spent his off-time honing his writing skills. It is also a portrait of a disaster in the making. If you look carefully in just the right spot, you can see a channel running from the buildings down to the riverfront, where two men stand on a dock. When it rained, this channel and others like it carried raw sewage from outdoor latrines and slaughterhouses along with the water runoff straight into the river.

December 1848 brought to Cincinnati one of the worst cholera epidemics in the history of the United States, the details of which are laid out in Matthew D. Smith, "The Specter of Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Cincinnati," *Ohio Valley History* 16, no. 2 (2016): 21–40. Water may be the source of life, but, poorly managed, it can bring horrific death. Some Cincinnatians died within as little as forty-eight hours because they could no longer remain hydrated. There was no sanitation system to keep the water clean and the sewage off the streets, despite the idea having been floated as early as 1811. Wells were often contaminated. And river traffic brought disease from ports on the East Coast, carried it along the Ohio

River, and spread it throughout America. More than 5 percent of Cincinnati's population perished.

Prior to the advent of germ theory, no one knew why. The seemingly arbitrary and imminent threat caused panic, and people did all the things people do when they are gripped by fear. They fled. They blamed others – in this case, immigrants, who became even more of a scapegoat as word of their alleged culpability was spread in the newspapers. They ignored or sought to suppress the influence of people who had differing ideas about treatment or cause. Perhaps most striking is the effort of one clever and industrious man to map the epidemic from one house to the next across the city, which enabled him to link infection to water supply. If his recommendation to boil the water had been widely adopted, thousands of lives might have been saved.

The book you are about to read is about the management of water, both literal and symbolic. The wilderness narrative, at the heart of the Torah, started as a story about how the timely handling of water supply by a courageous and politically astute leader ensured his people's survival in a crisis. The story was elaborated upon again and again, but its versions all treat the question of what enables us to endure crisis and what can cause us to falter. I wrote the bulk of the manuscript during yet another global epidemic that found its way to Cincinnati, this time spread through the air, leaving me struck yet again by the wisdom of Qohelet – there truly is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Fear, blame, incompetence, self-interest, and exploitation threaten our survival. The trust and solidarity that enable forward movement are easily eroded and difficult to rebuild. Good leadership is essential not just from those in charge but from each one of us if we are to endure, never mind flourish. We are replaying the same old script, making the same old mistakes. Yet we need not suffer the same consequences, because we can decide at any moment to rewrite the story, especially if we turn to the creative efforts of those who came before us and learn from what they might have to teach.

We do not write books alone any more than we endure the crises of life alone. A range of fellow travelers have shared ideas and bibliography, read drafts, and offered support, encouragement, and sometimes much-needed nudging. I wish to thank Phoebe Acheson, Brennan Breed, Marc Brettler, Ajay Singh Chaudhary, Jeffrey Cooley, Jessie DeGrado, Philip DeVaul, Cynthia Edenburg, Yedida Eisenstat, Eve Levavi Feinstein, Kristine Henriksen Garroway, Anselm Hagedorn, Charles Halton, Sarah Cullinan Herring, Jason Kalman, Bruce King, Reinhard Kratz, Timothy Michael Law, Laura Lieber, Peter Machinist, Sara Milstein,

Madhavi Nevader, Christine Palmer, Thomas Römer, Sarah Shectman, Michal Bar-Asher Siegal, Mark Smith, Jacqueline Vayntrub, and James Watts. Nathan MacDonald had a significant impact on how this book turned out because of several conversations that happened, probably unbeknownst to either of us, at just the right time; this is the fruit of sustained and loyal friendship, for which I am grateful. The Klau Library at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in Cincinnati is a global cultural treasure, and the graciousness of its librarians has made my work possible for two decades and counting. I am also grateful to the staff at the Eugene H. Maly Library at the Athenaeum of Ohio. The most profound debt of gratitude goes to my beloved John Erisman, who makes sure the pursuit of wisdom is balanced with enjoyment so the days we are granted together under the sun may be richly blessed (Ecclesiastes 8:15).

This book is dedicated to my son, who has had a profound sense of story from very early on. I read him a version of *The Iliad* for the first time when he was five years old. Somewhere in the middle, he looked up at me and said, "Patrolcus is going to die, isn't he, mommy." He is as expert at navigating landscape as he is literature, and we frequently hike through wild places that are populated in his imagination by great kings and wizards, children with swords, and Ewoks. The story of the real world looks much bleaker from our vantage point *in medias res*, among its plot points not only an epidemic but also a climate emergency, rising authoritarianism, and, once again, a crisis of citizenship with the potential to split us in two. We have not yet written our ending, though, and his curiosity, joy, and love remind me daily that there is still hope of a good one.