

The Need for a Nomadic Theology (Part One)

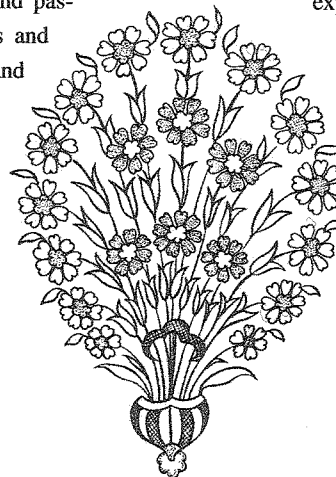
A nomadic theology is not a different message, but is an essential reinterpretation of our knowledge of the Bible by rediscovering the Bible's own emphases on being travelers and pastoralists, by seeing God as our Herdsman and Shepherd. It implies thinking like nomads and seeing the Bible from the traveling nomadic perspective which is totally biblical. It implies developing Bible study programs for nomadic peoples that is fully adaptable to their needs and challenges so that the Good News will be deeply relevant and have its full impact in their lives and culture.

by David J. Phillips

Christ's grace for nomadic peoples requires that we demonstrate both by our message and method that being a Christian is supremely compatible with the nomadic life. Christianity should enhance the nomadic life style and its values. A nomadic theology is not a different message, but means reinterpreting our knowledge of the Bible by rediscovering the Bible's own emphases on being travelers and pastoralists. It also implies putting into practice the lessons for ourselves and other non-nomadic Christians, as well as developing a doctrine and Bible study programs for use with nomadic peoples that is adaptable to the needs and challenges in terms of Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu contexts.

Why Do We Need a Nomadic Theology?

1. Working with nomads we rediscover an important strand in the Bible only patronized by abstract, institutionalized Western theology and preaching. We ignore the nomadic life and worldview to our spiritual peril.
2. It is essential for the nomad to overcome the implicit impression that Christianity is for urban or agricultural settled people, as they say "For 'em t'at live in 'ouses." The Bible is a Two-Thirds World Book that particularly speaks to and for nomads. The Old Testament is very relevant for them.
3. Biblical faith relates to basic features of the nomad's life. Nomadic life is living 'by faith' on the ecological edge, and means commitment to relationships not property. The concept of use of land not 'real estate' is relevant among nomads and prevalent in most of the Bible as is distinctiveness from surrounding society, radical limitation of possessions, and the ideal of self-sufficiency according to needs, not wants, using limited natural resources.
4. The contact point is God seen as Pastoralist leading in providence: God's provision, protection and a purpose in life. The nomad is fully preoccupied with guidance. God is nomadic in his transcendence and his immanence. The missionary should be a living demonstration of this biblical spiritual reality.



5. The Bible presents life as a journey and a story. The linear history of God's purpose from Abraham to the Parousia is introduced from the individual's experience of providence and is seen as a journey—and need to be told as a story.

6. Establishing the character of God with the traveler and pastoral metaphors leads to the other biblical themes of his involvement with mankind. The themes Covenant, Law, Sin, Sacrifice, Grace and Mercy, Salvation are introduced in the context of providence where the Bible places them.

Two qualifications must be seen: First, we cannot patronize the nomad as if he is only interested in sheep. Second, the overall understanding of the Bible is probably for the second stage of their faith development when we have serious readers of the Bible, with a nearly good and complete translation of Scripture, as well as a growing number of Christians. Prior to that 'live' religious issues and contact or conflict points have to be dealt with.

Two Kazak reactions are revealing: After hearing Psalm 23 and John. 10 some Kazaks ridiculed the idea of leading the sheep, for they allow the sheep to lead them to show which pasture is best. Comment: This is obviously not in migration but finding local pasture. Also, as the image moves to the metaphoric, then spiritual changes are indicated by startling the hearer with changes of practice. A more positive reaction was as follows: The Kazaks said, "What you are telling about the Bible shows it is closer to our lifestyle than yours. We should be teaching you, rather than you teaching us."

The Pastoral God of a People on the Move

What should be the Christian's response to the nomadic pastoralists and peripatetics? Are they just one more group of needy peoples, or are they special? In other words, does the Bible present the peoples of the world as undifferentiated, or does it distinguish between them in the task of reaching them with the gospel?

Christianity is perceived by most nomadic peoples to be a religion for settled people. Regrettably much of the missionary witness has tended to reinforce this misconception, especially where there

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have been well-intentioned attempts to introduce agricultural projects or institutional programs. Christianity is then perceived to be synonymous with settling down, involving buildings and property, and abandoning those values precious to nomads. But this misconception goes further because we ourselves have misunderstood the Bible and read it with the assumption that God's people are sedentary, and present its message as implicitly recommending the settled life.

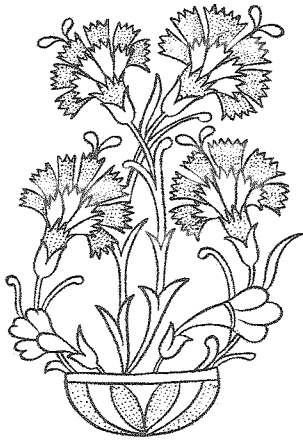
To reach nomads with the Christian message is far more than finding bridges or keys of common ground between them and the Bible. These have been found in many details and common concepts. For Muslim peoples a common ground are the many prophets accepted by both Christianity and Islam, and the Tuareg have a preoccupation of seeking forgiveness, even in the mundane activities of life. But it is crucial for us to enter into the nomad's way of thinking and to interpret the biblical message and contact points from their side. This is not only necessary for the evangelization of the nomad, but is also a necessary part of the very character of the body of believers. For the Bible's contact, and therefore Christianity's, with the nomadic life is more profound than merely a number of common points of contact.

Reading the Bible from a nomad's point of view leads us to see that God's people, both settled and nomadic, are to have the mentality of travelers being led by God, trusting him as their Herdsman. God's calling and leading of Israel demonstrates his desire to befriend traveling peoples and to use them to reach others. Also the early Christians considered themselves to be God's travelers, aliens and pilgrims in a unfriendly world, a people united by loyalty to each other and to their Shepherd Lord rather than by the ties of nation and property. We should see that God calls us to be much more 'nomadic' in our attitudes and understanding of the Christian life. Christian theology has concentrated on various Biblical themes such as covenant, law, people, kingdom of God, etc., as the key to understand the whole Bible, but has not given due value to the underlying theme of a traveling people in a pastoral relationship with God. When we examine the Biblical evidence, we are surprised to realize that God has a special place in His heart for nomadic peoples.

From this we can learn two things: first that faith in the God of the Bible is pre-eminently compatible with nomadic peoples, and second, that all God's people are intended to have the outlook of traveling peoples and that salvation should be understood in terms of the nomadic life. God is to be known as the Pastoralist Lord of history and environment leading his traveling people and providing for their needs, giving them his values as well as his redemption.

God's People—a Traveling People

Genesis is the beginning of God's revelation and shows in miniature the themes that influence the rest of the Bible.¹ It forms the basis for teaching much of God's character and purpose, of mankind being made in God's image as his representative, both as individuals and as a society, of man's disobedience and the promise of salvation. God's universal authority and accessibility is determined by his being the Creator. God is even-handed to all men, including both pastoralists and agriculturalists. The episode of Abel and Cain rejects the common assumption that hunter-gathering was the primitive evolutionary state of man, and the more 'advanced' farmer is condemned. The cultivator's attitude towards the pastoralist is the problem, rather than his sacrifice (Gen. 4:6-7).



Reading the Bible from a nomad's point of view leads us to see that God's people, both settled and nomadic, are people with the mentality of travelers who are led by God, trusting Him as their Great Herdsman. God's leading of Israel demonstrates His desire to befriend traveling people and to use them to reach others.

The Turkish designs on pages 25, 27, 29 and 31 are naturalistic floral designs from the "Rhodian" period circa 1550.

God's missionary purpose for the world begins immediately after the mankind's fall in Genesis 3:15 and then comes to clear expression with God's promise to Abraham (Gen. 12:3, cf. 17:4,5; 18:18, 22:18; Gal. 3:8; Heb. 11:8) and leads Abraham on a lifelong journey. God said to him "all peoples will be blessed in you."

This promise, actually an oath, is the 'motor' of history. It is a promise for the detailed mission task that each part of every lineage, kindred or clan (*mishpahah*) should receive God's blessing. It refers both to the ethnic diversity of the human race in general and each subdivision of the tribes and nations, and is a promise to the detailed mission task that each part of every people group should receive God's word. This is of particular significance to nomadic societies, who live and work in small scattered groups. This promise and the history that unfolds from it are God's solution for nomadic peoples as misunderstood minorities (today's clans or *mishpahah*) who are keen to maintain their identities.

Second this promise meant that Israel became a revelation of God to the nations as the first step in providing redemption from sin (Gen. 12:3; Mat. 10:6; Acts 4:10, 13:24; Rom. 1:8,16; 2:9,10; Gal. 3: 8). The impulse of the divine promise turned Abraham and his descendants into a small people of travelers, differentiated from all others, under the direction of the heavenly Headman who would 'show' them their route both geographically and spiritually. Abraham may not have been a nomad to start with, but God chose to use nomadism to call and mould a people for himself. It was through being travelers, supporting themselves as nomadic pastoralists at least for the first six centuries, that Abraham's descendants fulfilled this role.

Even after arrival in the promised land, Abraham and his family were no more than a traveling people, without settling or possessing it or belonging to its people. The only lasting sign of his passing were the altars he built where the promise was renewed (Gen. 12:7-8, 13:14-18; Heb. 11:8-9). But the fact that they did not own property or live in houses was of no importance (Gen. 17:8, 28:4, 36:7, 37:1); the land was theirs as far as the purpose of God was concerned and like latter day nomads they were 'at home', not homeless, even though they were without the legal trappings of land ownership (Gen. 13:17). The patriarchs also knew that four centuries of temporary residence in Egypt were predicted for their descendants to await God's time for possession of the promised land (Gen. 15:13).

Many nomadic peoples have traditions of long journeys to their present locations, contributing to their sense of ethnic identity. Abraham's initial migration from Haran and his and Israel's journeys into and out of Egypt each involved a distance of about 700 km. (400 mls.) The first journey and the journey to Sinai had spiritual destinations while the others were because of famine.

The Exodus and wilderness journeys were to leave an indelible lasting mark on Israel's spirituality, to be alluded to time and time again (Gen. 47:9; Ps. 39:12; 119:19, 54).² Israel's destination was God himself, not the land (Ex. 19:4-6). The purpose of this was that God might be known by all the nations of the world. Israel is to be God's special *segulla*, that is, a "property abstracted for special use" (Ex. 19:5). The goal of God's choice of Israel is given by the phrase "for all the earth is mine." This does not just make a comparison between Israel and the world, but makes Israel a model and means to bring God's knowledge to the nations and their recognition of his lordship.³ Israel as a paradigm of other peoples is founded on her continuity with the world, through creation, the genealogical structure of Genesis, and her declared missionary role in many texts (Ex. 34:10; Dt. 4:6-8, 32-

34; I Kg. 8:41; Ps. 22:27; 67; 86:9; 117; Is. 2:2; etc.)⁴ Israel was on a perpetual spiritual journey. Deuteronomy suggests, placing the foundation of the nation at Sinai with the law between Moses' narration of the wilderness journey (Dt. 1-11) and the threat of exile and return (Dt. 27-34).

Israel's literal geographical movement under the guidance of God was the means to bring her under his spiritual and moral guidance so as to demonstrate to the nations God's character and plan for mankind. To be a traveling people is the opposite of aimless wandering, but both for nomads and God's ancient people, it is to live in harmony with his moral and environmental standards. The moral challenge of loyalty to God's covenant and law for blessing and security is to be reiterated in each generation.⁵ Israel was a people on the move with God in a developing relationship in each stage

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of her history. The Israelites would be permanent spiritual nomads long after they had settled.

Destination as Fulfillment

One has to question whether either the patriarchs and Israel, and indeed many modern nomads, have a destination in the sense that their traveling is merely a necessary means to get there by the shortest route. Rather their traveling is all part of an on-going fulfillment of a relationship with their tradition and ideals as a people. For both Abraham and Israel, God's method to develop trust and the fear of the Lord was to take them on a journey as nomads (Gen. 15:6; Ex. 14:31). The exodus journey was not merely a political deliverance, but a moral lesson of trust and obedience in God's wisdom and provision. In Israel's case the promised land was an essential aspect, yet only a part of God's promise. Her ultimate destination was determined by the God of the promise.

The promise of the land was not so much the provision of a national territory, as giving a place in God's purpose and space for a relationship to develop and the nation to come to know him. To further this God's character revealed in the nomadic experience influenced the law's regulation of society (Ex. 20:2; 22:21f; Dt. 1-4, 5:15; 24:18; Lev. 11:45; 19:33f; Num. 15:41). Enjoying the responsibility and blessing of a divine allocation of natural resources depends on man's obedience to God. Israel's residence in the land depended on her response, and exile finally was her experience (Dt. 15:4-6; 26:14-15; 28:1-68).

The New Testament is clear that Israel never entered the promised rest and was driven into exile (Josh. 1:13; 2 Sam. 7:10; Heb. 4:8). The one person, who should have entered the Land, Moses was condemned to die outside it.⁶ Israel failed to fulfill God's role for her and was superseded by a believing missionary remnant, the multi-ethnic New Testament Church (2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9). 'Rest' meant not so much as ceasing to travel, especially in the metaphoric sense of advancing with God, but divinely given security from enemies (Dt. 25:19; Josh. 1:13f).

The New Testament understood within its Old Testament context, shows Christ to be the God-given means to fulfill Israel's role to the world's peoples by dealing with her spiritual, social and moral failure.⁷ The journey of God's people is now by faith in God's grace in Christ, who is the Way to be reconciled to God. The Christian believer continues to be a pilgrim—a nomad (Heb. 4; 1 Peter 1:1,17, 2:11)—constantly moving in obedience to God's final goal of history.

The Bible sees God's people as travelers, motivated by a trust in a 'traveling' God, ever ready to obey his will and purpose, unhindered by commitments and conventions of the surrounding society. The particular form of nomadic pastoralism had an influence that was definitive and lasting.

Pastoralism Forges the Fundamental Relationship

Travelers have particular subsistence strategies, as we have seen, and the particular method God chose to sustain his traveling people and reveal himself to the nations was nomadic pastoralism.

Some Biblical scholars suggest that the patriarchs were not nomads by arguing that true nomadism did not develop until the first millennium BC, that is centuries after Abraham.⁸ However, this is only true if one identifies nomadism too closely with that of the later Bedouin people using the camel. The camel was probably domesticated in the second millennium BC to facilitate the caravan trade between the various civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, especially for the incense trade from southern Arabia. In the biblical period camels were used for slow transport across the desert and the biblical Midianites may have had to dismount to fight (Jdg. 6:4-5). Later when the camel saddle had been developed, desert pastoralism was able to develop, but only as the pressure arose to do so.⁹ What concerns us is that at the beginning of the second millennium before Christ and throughout biblical times there were traveling peoples, including the ancestors of the later Bedouin, who supported themselves with cattle, sheep and goats on the steppe near to settled populations, and not living in the desert like the later Bedouin who would rely on camels.¹⁰

The patriarchs were called Arameans (Gen. 28:5; Dt. 26:5) and is not anachronistic, but implies that they may have already been pastoralists among the semi-nomadic peoples in Mesopotamia.¹¹ Certainly Abraham's relatives in Haran appear to be pastoralists, which in the environment probably required seasonal movement (Gen. 26:6, 10; 31:1, 19). Abraham's servant was impressed with Rebekah's generosity to water his camels because she would have had to lift a ton of water for ten camels (Gen 24:14).¹² Certainly Laban is not too successful until Jacob turns around his fortunes, which he could only do from his pastoral experience in Canaan (Gen. 30:30; 31:18 with v.1).

It is also suggested that Abraham was not a nomad because his flocks are not mentioned on the journey from Haran and he would have kept within a day's march from well-inhabited and watered localities. Abraham's many 'possessions' mentioned (see Gen. 12:5) must have included animals as the term used does refer to animals both earlier and later (Gen. 4:2, 20; 13:6; 15:14; 31:18; Job 1:3). But even if Abraham did not start out as a pastoralist, and perhaps leaving his family required him to leave behind his livestock, he soon became one on his journeys in order to obey God's call. This parallels the nomad's ability to adapt his life style according to need, and that his livestock represents his wealth.

Abraham gained much livestock in Egypt as well as silver and gold (Gen. 12:16; 13:2), and the terms used distinguish sheep and goats from cattle, and imply great wealth. In Canaan, the pastures proved to be inadequate for their increased livestock, compared to Egypt, so that Abraham and Lot separated (Gen. 13:5-12). Later Isaac's wealth 'on the hoof' provoked the envy of the Philistines (Gen. 26:13) and Jacob had both cattle and sheep (Gen. 33:13). There are various details of pastoralism that are recorded in the stories of the patriarchs (Gen. 11:9-13:1; 13:5-12, 21:22-34, 26:27-33, 29:1-10; 31:38-40, 37:12-17; Ex. 2:16-25, 22:10-13). There is sufficient evidence that the patriarchs were nomads, or became semi-nomads, living in tents, who confined their wandering to the settled lands and their fringes.¹³

It is clear that nomadic pastoralism was God's way of preserving the patriarchs' independence from the neighboring pagan powers of their day so that he could fulfill his purpose. God could have chosen to send Abraham as a merchant to live in the cities of Canaan, but God's method was to keep him and his people separate from these



baneful influences. We have only to remember the story of Lot and Abraham's experience with Abimelech and Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10ff, 19:ff, 20:1ff), as well as Israel's later entanglements with Canaanites, to realize how necessary nomadic pastoralism was to maintain the patriarchs' spiritual and material independence. When the method broke down through enforced contact with the surrounding societies by famine, God tested the patriarchs' faith regarding his ability to protect them (Gen. 12:10; 15:13; 20:2; 26:1; 41:1). Jacob's life is instructive as both a traveler and a pastoralist, showing God's persevering with him to continue his plan. Nomadic pastoralism was God's 'secret weapon' to fulfill his redemptive purpose in a hostile world.

Nomadic pastoralism continued to be God's method later when the Israelites were in Egypt. Joseph and his brothers could describe themselves as nothing else but shepherds to Pharaoh (Gen. 37:2, 12, 17, 47: 1-4) in spite of the prejudice the Egyptians had against such people (Gen. 46:34). In Egypt they continued in pastoralism as hired herdsmen for the livestock that passed into state ownership as a result of Joseph's policies (Gen. 47:1-6, 17-18).

After Joseph's era the land may have continued in state ownership and it is unlikely that many Israelites, treated as a powerful and suspect immigrant community, would have been able to own land or be cultivators in Goshen (Num. 11:5). During the four centuries in Egypt, they may have been allowed only to be specialist herdsmen. When the Israelites were forced into Pharaoh's building projects they can be compared to modern 'nomads in waiting' forced 'temporarily' to a settled life. Like such people today, the Israelites maintained a reputation of having a faith associated with the desert (Ex. 5:1; 8:25-28).

The Wilderness— A Definitive Experience

The next stage of God's revelation for mankind at Sinai is also given in a context of nomadic pastoralism. The purpose of this stage was to separate them to God from the corrupting influence of Egypt and make them a living message to the nations (Ex. 19:4; Lev. 20:26; Dt. 4:6-8). The exodus was not just an escape from slavery, but to learn faith in God and his law in a context that the Israelites thought they knew all about, for they were pastoralists with large herds of cattle and flocks of sheep (Ex. 10:26, 12:32, 38).

The forty years in the wilderness is described as the life of shepherds, not of urban or agricultural refugees (Num. 14:33), and 'wilderness' (*midbār*) does not mean just a hostile desert but a place for pasturing flocks that is steppe or grassland. It came to represent both a place of divine revelation and testing, as well spiritual danger.¹⁴ Moses insisted to Pharaoh that the desert wilderness was the appropriate place for Israel's God to be worshipped, and that their herds and flocks were an inseparable accompaniment of

the people (Ex. 7:16; 8:25,27; 10:9,26; 12:31f). With their animals they would be self-sufficient on the journey to Canaan (Ex. 34:3; Num. 3:41, 45, 15:3) and because the direct route was closed to them, it was crucial that they could sustain themselves by methods known to Moses and to them (Ex. 13:17).

At the conclusion of the migration the tribes of Reuben and Gad were criticized for making a typical pastoral decision by choosing the good pasture in Transjordan (Num. 32:1-15). A division may have developed between the Transjordan tribes and the others because they took their cattle along a different route in the wilderness, as they were more committed to cattle pastoralism.¹⁵ Like many pastoralists since, the Israelites had a detachment of pastoral coppersmiths traveling with them. These were Kenites (meaning smith), a branch of the Midianites, under the leadership of Jethro, who joined Israel and one of them became Israel's desert guide or scout (Gen. 15:19; Ex. 2:18, 3:1ff., 18:1-12; Num. 10:29, Jdg. 1:16). All this points to a people whose natural life-style was pastoralism even if they were not at home in the desert when they actually became travelers in it.

The management by Moses of such a vast migration, with the need for guidance about the route, the provision of water, the gathering of natural food, and the arrangement of the camps can be appreciated by a nomad much more than by a Western urbanite. For instance, just the numbers of people and their flocks would create enormous problems in such an arid landscape.¹⁶ The manna and quails would have been necessary to preserve the livestock as mobile assets, and Moses reacted with a typical pastoralist reluctance to any thought of slaughtering their livestock for the short term gain of feeding the people in the wilderness (Num. 11:22). The livestock would have been used only for sacrifice, that would involve a meal.

Even the rebellion of Israel against Moses 'headmanship', which is interpreted as petty moral weakness in many a sermon in the West, is better understood when we realize how modern nomads question their leaders, when faced with the stark probability of starvation and death. The headman of a herding group has to make decisions as to the route, decisions that can lead to rapid disaster if pasture or water is not found at the right times and places. Among most pastoralists the failure of the leadership in such a way results in a change of leadership for a man with greater proven experience. The Israelites were men of considerable experience, not just petulant urbanites. They had genuine reasons to complain, because their pastoral expertise told them such an undertaking was threatened with the probability of failure.¹⁷

Israel's faith failed when they refused to advance into the Promised Land. Why? Even though their experience indicated that they had taken the right route, they became very fearful of being such a large slow moving target in the constricted pastures of

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Canaan, without the freedom to move further into the wilderness away from danger. They opted rather for the more familiar trials of forty years of nomadic pastoralism. Israel's experience parallels the traditions that many modern nomads have, that their wandering life is punishment for some past moral failure (Num. 14:33). Israel was to fail repeatedly to understand that faith in the Divine Pastoralist was the essence of the fundamental relationship to being God's people.

The Nomadic Pastoralist God

The reason for traveling resides in the character of God himself. God himself is known as the Herdsman of the Patriarchs (Gen. 48:15) and this idea continues throughout the Old Testament, although sometimes this is obscured in English translations. Herdsman or pastoralist might be a better translation than shepherd, because it refers to leading and providing pasture for all domestic animals such as asses (Gen. 36:24) and cattle (Gen. 41:2) and not just sheep (Gen. 30:36). In biblical times, two goats were kept for every sheep. God leads, feeds, tends keeps, herds and provides for Israel as a pastoralist cares for his herds and flocks, both collectively and individually (Ps. 23; 28:9; Is. 40:11; Jer. 3:15; Hosea 4:16), and this relationship develops that of Israel's sonship.

Transcendence means the nature of God is supremely 'nomadic'. God has no need of creation, but is free to choose and make effective those commitments he purposes. This transcendence is emphasized by the prohibition on idolatry, that means that there are no 'handles' on God to be manipulated through special locations, people or ritual objects. Equally, similar to the nomad, God surmounts human and physical boundaries.

The degree of God's freedom to realize his will is demonstrated paradoxically by his involvement with creation in his leading the patriarchs and Israel. As Creator-Shepherd he has elected to have fellowship with a people traveling with him through time. God created and revealed himself to Israel, using the figure of a warrior and horseman riding the heavens to further His people's cause (Dt. 33:26; Ps. 104:3; Is. 19:1); he vindicates his servants (Ps. 18:10), enables them to ride with him (Dt. 32:13) and implements justice for the vulnerable (Ps 45:4; 68:4,33). The saddle is not inconsistent with the temple and throne as God's place of action.

God's providence, exercised freely over his creation in his transcendence and fulfilling his purpose in his immanence, is expressed in the metaphor of the divine Pastoralist. God's purpose results in a life, if not constantly on the move, at least being ready to move according to his direction. The Passover has brought home through the centuries the message of a people traveling in haste according to God's command (Ex. 12:11).

The character of God himself is demonstrated even to the world as transcendent over earthly limitations yet providing in detail for those who trust him (Num. 14:14). God's providence in the material aspects of life was made explicit in his direction of Israel in the wilderness with the fiery cloud (Num. 9:15-23). Only this Chief Herdsman knew the route, the weather, the pasture and water conditions, the endurance of the people and herds in a dangerous environment, for this was no arbitrary test of obedience like a military drill. Through God's provision in the material things trust

and obedience were learnt for the spiritual as well, and reveals the principles of the walk of faith (Mat. 6:25-35) and following Jesus (Mk. 8:34). The image of following turns faith into practical obedient trust, not mere belief. Still the privilege of Israel of being lead by God followed their disaster of the golden calf.¹⁸

These continual personal encounters with God gave the assurance that the transcendent God is invisibly present all along in their traveling journeys (Gen. 17:1, 22; 35:13; Ex. 13: 19-20). God gave detailed instruction on the route (Dt. 2:3,9, 15, 17, 24, 31, 37; 3:2) and chose campsites (Dt. 1:33). Even the details of hygiene were vital because God 'walks' in the camp as he did in Eden (Dt. 23:14). The special nature of God accompanying them in a special way was part of Israel's identity, compared to being led only by an angel (Ex. 23:20-23; 33:2-3, 15):

*Is it not in your going with us,
that we are distinct... I and your
people from all other peoples ?*

The reality of the transcendent God being immanent, walking and going before the patriarchs and before Israel in the wilderness is the basis for his requirement that the people should 'walk in his ways' in conforming their lives to his will. Because they travelled 'in his footsteps' in the wilderness, their conviction was that life is a journey with him, even after literal travel has ceased (Dt. 8:13-16; Ps 5:8; 23:3; 27:11; 31:3; 77:20; 80:1; 139:24; Neh. 5:9; 9:12-19; Is. 40:11; 63:11). Their relationship with God is repeatedly described as to walk in God's ways; and as the



way to blessing and to prayer being answered (Dt. 1:30f) as well as giving success in war (Dt. 20:4).

The Tent of Meeting

Appropriately enough God's place of worship was a tent, the tabernacle; God had 'no house' (Lev. 26:12; 2 Sam. 7:7). It represented the God who 'travelled' with his people, who is not only too big for permanent buildings, however grand, but too 'mobile'. His character is purposeful nomadism—a God on the move! This permanent institution of a tent as the focus of worship is strange when the journey from Egypt to Canaan was originally to have taken weeks, not forty years! If the aim was the temple, why not wait until arrival in the land?

The building of the temple appears to be a concession, related to the permission to have a king from the earlier ideal of God pasturing his people through judges (2. Sam. 7:2-29;). It was David's fear to go to the tabernacle after his disobedience that started the preparations for an alternative (1. Ch.

The life of faith is a journey with God, a story that is marked by God's actions rather than by dates, as much as nomads remember their lives not by dates but by migrations and environmental conditions.

21:28 - 22:5). Certainly there are a number of negative contrasts between the temple and the tabernacle. The temple was only built after the king's palace and a shorter time was given to it, while Moses and the people never built anything for themselves. The temple was built with forced labor while the tabernacle was built from the free love gifts of the people, by Spirit gifted craftsmen (Ex. 31:1-3; 35:20f; 36:3-5). These simpler materials of wanderings contrast with the gold and timber from foreign sources (1. Kg. 5:6). The temple and its treasure was a target for invaders, while the tabernacle was never attacked in its '480 years' history (1 Kg. 6:1). God seems to make a distinction calling the temple 'this house that you are building', while the tabernacle was built according to a heavenly pattern (reality) God gave (Ex. 25:8; 1. Kg. 6:12).¹⁹ At best the building of the temple was a human project, motivated by a sense of guilt derived from the prosperity of the king (2 Sam. 7:2-7).

Solomon reiterates that God could not dwell there, but only his 'name' and prayers directed there would be answered from heaven (1 Kings 8:27). We are distinctly told that the poles that carried the ark of the covenant, although easily removable, were left in place for centuries, even though they incongruously did not fit the design of the grand building, and were left protruding through the veil that only the high priest could pass through once a year (1 Kings 8:8; cf. Exodus 25:12-15). This was hardly because the builders forgot to measure the poles, for God himself gave the plans! The ark was placed with the poles pointing forward and backward as if being carried permanently on the march with the congregation following behind.

The prophets heaped scorn on the false confidence based on the sense of permanence that the magnificent building with its elaborate ritual gave. They predicted the temple's destruction with as much as Israel's exile from the land for disobedience. Israel had lost sight of God's transcendence within his purpose with her, to replace it with a mechanistic ritual relationship. Such a false confidence contradicted the complete trust in God that he had taught them as pastoralists in the wilderness. So God had to drive them out to travel once more so again to relearn the lesson.

God's 'nomadic' transcendence free of human and physical barriers leads to the people being holy, set apart from others. The patriarchs, the exodus generation and Israel throughout her history, were misunderstood minorities under constant cultural and military threat to undermine their distinctive identity, which has been and still is the lot of many nomadic peoples. Ancient Israel and the Jews for centuries had the ethos of a traveling people united by God's purpose, rather than by ties to a place or the surrounding society. Israel's actions towards other were to be determined by her relationship to the transcendent God who crosses all boundaries and ethnocentric limitations—and even allocates them.

Nomadism isolated Israel from others to be alone with God (Ex. 19:4; 33:15-16; Lev. 20:26). This formative experience was to make faith to be obedience depending on God's provision and protection to fulfill his plans the chief characteristic of the people of God (Dt. 4:6-8). They had to learn that after their experienced pastoral assessment that the situation could only be resolved by God's solution. The life of faith is a journey with God, a story that is marked by God's actions rather than by dates, as much as nomads remember their lives not by dates but by migrations and environmental conditions.

End Notes

1. E. A. Martens: *God's Design*, Grand Rapids: 1994 (2), p. 40.
2. Deryck Sheriffs: *The Friendship of the Lord*, Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996, see p.81 n.32 for a break down of allusions to the Exodus.
3. William J. Dumbrell: "The Prospect of Unconditionality in the Sinaitic Covenant" in *Israel's Apostasy and Restoration, Essays in Honor of Roland K. Harrison*, ed. Abraham Gileadi, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988, pp. 141-156.
4. Exodus 19:1-6 set between the exodus and the covenant and the law "gives to Israel an identity and role as a priestly and holy people in the midst of 'all the nations' in 'the whole earth' which is God's", "They were to be teacher, model and mediator for the nations" . . . "the law was given to Israel to enable Israel to live as a model, as a light to the nations", argues Chris Wright (C. H. J. Wright: "The Ethical Authority of the Old Testament: A Survey of Approaches" Part II, *Tyndale Bulletin*, 43.2, 1992, pp. 203-231, p. 227). The call of Israel creates a sample applicable to all "to make visible (God's) requirements on the rest of the nations." (C. J. H. Wright: *The Use of the Bible in Social Ethics*, Grove Booklet on Ethics No. 51, Bramcote: Grove Books 1983, p. 16.). The prophets disclose a centripetal mission for Israel with the law, and later a centrifugal mission to the nations at the coming of the Messiah (Vogels: *God's Universal Covenant: A Biblical Study*, Ottawa: University of Ottawa 1979, pp. 119, 147). Vogels suggests that the phrase "in the eyes of the nations" refers to them acting as legal witnesses and in other contexts there is a call for a moral decision on the part of the nations (Dt. 4:6). It is often found in Ezekiel (ibid p. 68). Ex. 7:20; 9:8; 11:3; 12:36; Lev. 26:45. The witness of nature includes the nations (Dt. 4:26; 30: 19; 31:28; 32:1).
5. J. Gary Millar: *Now Choose Life: Theology and Ethics in Deuteronomy*, Leicester: Apollos 1998, especially pp. 67-98.
6. Dt. 34:5. What did Israel make of the symbolism of Elijah reversing the priest's opening up of Jordan, in order to return to God, but that God was not to be found in the Land. Elisha not only established his credentials by returning in the same manner, but demonstrated the Promise of the land was not irrevocably achieved by Joshua, but is exclusively for those like Elijah and Elisha that walk with God (2 Kings 2:8).
7. See for example Chris Wright: *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament*, London: Marshall Pickering 1992.
8. D. J. Wiseman: "Abraham Reassessed" in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, A. R. Millard & D. J. Wiseman eds., Leicester: IVP, 1980, pp. 139ff. D. J. Wiseman "They lived in Tents", in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies* ed. Gary A. Tuttle, ed., Grand Rapids, W.B. Eerdmans, 1978, pp.195-200.
9. Barfield: *The Nomadic Alternative* p. 62; Michael Asher: *The Last of the Bedu-In Search of the Myth*, London: Penguin, 1996, pp. 64-5.
10. K. R. Veenhof in *The World of the Bible, Volume 1* A.S. van der Woude, gen. ed., Grand Rapids W. B. Eerdmans, 1986, pp. 234-239, see also pp. 264-267; John Bright: *A History of Israel*, London: SCM, 1972, p. 80.
11. Bright: *op. cit.*, p. 89 and K. A. Kitchen, *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Leicester: IVP p.88.
12. A camel, especially after a journey, can drink 100 to 120 litres of water in one watering (Thomas Barfield: *The Nomadic Alternative* p. 59). This could take hours of work, so that later Moses' help made a significant difference (Ex. 2:18).
13. Bright: *op. cit.*, pp. 80, 91. Cf. Gen. 25:20; 31:20; Dt. 26:5. Short descriptions of early Biblical pastoralism are in Ralph Gower: *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*, Chicago: Moody Press, 1987, pp. 24-27, 132-147 and John Bimson: *The World of the Old Testament*, London: SU, 1988, pp. 47-52.
14. D. Kidner: *Numbers*, Leicester: IVP 1981 p. 57; O Böcher in *The New International Dictionary of N. T. Theology*, Vol. 3, Carlisle: Paternoster 1992 p. 1004. It has been argued that the wilderness journey was a forced refugee migration and not that of those experienced in pastoralism. However, the Israelites had been forced also into all types of field work (Ex. 1:14) and 'field' (*sadeh*) is used of both cultivated and also the open country used for pasture, so that we have the phrase 'the beasts of the field' meaning wild animals (Gen. 2:5, 20; 3:14,18; Dt. 7:14. They also had large herds of livestock significant in events and not just a few family 'pets' (Ex. 9:4-7; 10:9,26; 11:7; 12:32, 38; 17:3). The sacrificial system envisaged every family contributing from self-reproducing herds and flocks, not from one or two animals.
15. Alistair I. MacKay: *Farming and Gardening in the Bible*, New Jersey: Spire Books, 1970, pp.233f.
16. History has seen other organized movements of peoples. The Mongol empire had a mobile court, a *tumen*, with the *gers* of Genghis Khan and his entourage drawn by dozens of oxen on wheeled platforms across the steppe, accompanied by thousands of cavalry and tens of thousands of livestock ('The Mongols', map of the *National Geographic*, December 1996).
17. Their complaints are those of any human group in a difficult environment, such as: i. the brackish water (Ex. 15:22), ii. hunger (Ex.16:3) iii. thirst (Ex. 17:3), iv. his absence (Ex. 32:1), v. more varied diet (Nu. 11:1), vi. his Cushite wife (Nu. 12:1), vii. military inferiority (Nu. 14:1ff), viii. his unique authority. Korah's challenge is of confidence to lead within the circumstances and the people's reaction (Nu. 16-17), ix. lack of water again (Nu. 20:2f). If they had been totally inexperienced farmers or town dwellers the complaints would have been on a vaster scale.
18. Ex. 40:34-38. See Gordon Wenham: *Numbers, Tyndale O.T. Commentaries*, Leicester: IVP, 1981, p. 100.
19. Malcolm Hunter: Article "The Nomadic Church."

[Editor's note: This article is an extract from David J. Phillips' new book entitled *Peoples on the Move*. The whole book deals with the challenge of the evangelization of nomadic peoples. The article also was presented in a Workshop of the Nomadic Peoples Network of the GC of WEF, at the Wycliffe Centre, England. Permission to reprint granted.]

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