THE GOD OF THE DESERT
Jerusalem and the Ecology of Monotheism
By Richard Rodriguez

EVERYONE’S GONE NUTS
The Exaggerated Threat of Food Allergies
By Meredith Broussard

A FAILURE OF CONCERN
A story by Ben Marcus

Also: William H. Gass, John Edgar Wideman
On the flight from London I sit opposite a rumble seat where the stewardess places herself during takeoff. The stewardess is an Asian woman with a faraway look. I ask how often she makes this flight. Once or twice a month. Does she enjoy Israel? Not much. She stays in a hotel in Tel Aviv. She goes to the beach. She flies back. What about Jerusalem? She has not been there. What is in Jerusalem?

The illustrated guidebook shows a medieval map of the world. The map is round. The sun has a beard of fire. All the rivers of the world spew from the mouth of the moon. At the center of the world is Jerusalem.

Just inside the main doors of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, tourists seem unsure how to respond to a rectangular slab of marble resting upon the floor. Lamps and censers and trinkets hang suspended above the stone. We watch as an old woman approaches. With some effort, she gets down on her knees. I flip through my book: This marble represents the Stone of Unction where Jesus’s body was anointed. This is not original; this stone dates from 1810. The old woman bends forward to kiss the pale stone.

I have come to the Holy Land because the God of the Jews, the God of the Christians, the God of the Muslims—a common God—revealed Himself in the desert. My curiosity about an ecology that joins three desert religions dates from September 11, 2001, from prayers enunciated in the sky over America on that day.

Most occidental Christians are unmindful of the orientalism of Christianity. Over two millennia, the locus of Christianity shifted westward—to Antioch, to Rome, to Geneva, to the pale foreheads of Thomistic philosophers, to Renaissance paintings, to glitter among the frosts of English Christmas cards. Islam, too, in the middle centuries, swept into Europe with the Ottoman carpet, but then receded. Only to reflux. Amsterdam, Paris are becoming Islamic cities.

After centuries of Diaspora, after the calamity of the Holocaust in Europe, Jews turned once more toward the desert. Zionists did not romanticize the desolate landscape. Rather, they defined nationhood as an act of planting. The impulse of the kibbutz movement remains the boast of urban Israel: to make the desert bloom.

The theme of Jerusalem is division. Friday. Saturday. Sunday. The city has been conquered, destroyed, rebuilt, garrisoned, halved, quartered, martyred, and exalted—always the object of spiritual desire; always the prize; always the corrupt model of the eventual city of God. Recently, the government of Ariel Sharon constructed a wall...
that separates Jerusalem from the desert, Jerusalem from Bethlehem, Easter from Christmas.

Jerusalem was the spiritual center of the Judean wilderness. It was Jerusalem the desert thought about. It was Jerusalem the prophets addressed. Jerusalem was where Solomon built a temple for the Lord and where God promised to dwell with His people. Jerusalem was where Jesus died and was resurrected. It was from Jerusalem Muhammad ascended to heaven during his night journey.

My first impression of the city is my own loneliness: oil stains on the road, rubble from broken traffic barriers, exhaust from buses, the drift of cellophane bags. At the Damascus Gate an old woman sits on the pavement, sorting grape leaves into piles—some kind of leaves. It is hot. Already it is hot. Late spring. It is early morning.

There is a stench of uncollected garbage, and the cats, light and limp as empty purses, slink along the blackened stone walls. Shopkeepers are unrolling their shops.

I turn into the courtyard of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the site of Christ's burial and resurrection. A few paces away, within the church, is Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified. Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, is also, according to Jerusalem tradition, the grave of Adam. Jerusalem is as condensed, as self-referential, as Rubik's Cube.

I wait in line to enter the Sepulcher, a freestanding chapel in the rotunda of the basilica. A mountain was chipped away from the burial cave, leaving the cave. Later the cave was destroyed. What remains is the interior of the cave, which is nothing. The line advances slowly until, after two thousand years, it is my turn. I must lower my shoulders and bend my head; I must almost crawl to pass under the low opening.

I am inside the idea of the tomb of Christ.

I return many times to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and form in my mind an accommodation to its clamorous hush, to the musk of male asceticism—indeed, I form a love for it that was not my first feeling, though my first impression remains my last: emptiness.

I wait for Haim Berger in the lobby of a hotel in Ein Boker, one among an oasis of resorts near the Dead Sea. The lobby is a desert of sand-colored marble. The lobby's temperature is oppressively beige—it would be impossible to cool this useless atrium. My cell phone rings. It is Maya, the director of the agency attached to my hotel in Jerusalem. Haim will be late one hour. Look for him at ten o'clock.

I watch a parade of elderly men and women crossing the lobby in bathing suits to catch a shuttle to the sulfur baths. They are so unself-conscious about their bodies, they seem to walk in paradise.

I believe I am waiting for someone in shorts and boots and aviator glasses, driving a Jeep. A Volkswagen pulls up and parks haphazardly. A man bolts from the car. He is willowy of figure, dressed all in white; sandals; dark curly hair. He disappears into the hotel; reemerges. We wait side by side.

I cannot go to the desert alone. I am unfit for it. The desert requires a Jeep. It requires a hat and sunglasses and plastic liters of warm water it is no pleasure to drink. It requires a guide. It requires a cell phone.

Just now the man dressed in white begins patting his pockets, searching for his chiming cell. "Ken... Shalom, Maya," I hear him say. Then, turning toward me, "Ah."

Haim Berger is full of apology. He has taken his wife to an emergency room. Yes, everything is all right. Just a precaution. There is an Evian bottle for me in the car. We will switch to the Jeep later.

Within ten minutes, I am standing with Haim on the side of a highway. We look out over a plain, over what once was Sodom and Gomorrah. Haim asks if I know the story. Of course I know the story. Which nevertheless does not stop him from telling it. We might be standing near where Abraham stood when "Abraham saw dense smoke over the land, rising like fumes from a furnace."

I ask Haim if he is religious. He is not.

All three desert religions claim Abraham as father. A recurrent question in my mind concerns the desert: Did Abraham happen on God or did God happen on Abraham? The same question: Which is the desert, or whom? I came upon a passage in 2 Maccabees. The passage pertains to the holiness of Jerusalem: The Lord, however, had not chosen the people for the sake of the Place, but the Place for the sake of the people. So God happened on Abraham. Abraham is the desert.

An old man sits at the door of his tent in the heat of the day.

Between that sentence and this—within the drum of the hare's heart, within the dilation of the
lizard's eye, God enters His creation. The old man, who is Abraham, sits at the door of his tent and becomes aware of three strangers standing nearby. They arrive without the preamble of distance. The nominative grammar of Genesis surpasses itself to reveal that one of these travelers is God or perhaps all three are God, like a song in three octaves. Abraham invites the Three to rest and to refresh themselves. In return, God promises that in a year's time Abraham's wife, who is long past childbearing, will hold in her arms a son.

Abraham's wife, Sarah, in the recesses of the tent, snorts upon hearing the prognostication; says, not quite to herself: Oh, sure!

God immediately turns to Abraham: Why does Sarah laugh? Is anything too marvelous for God?

Sarah says: I am not laughing.

God says: Yes you are.

In 1947 a Bedouin goatherd lost a goat and climbed the side of a mountain to look for it. The boy entered a cave—today the cave is known worldwide among archaeologists as Cave Number One. What the boy found in the cave—probably stumbled upon in the dark—were broken clay jars that contained five sheepskin scrolls. Four of the scrolls were written in Hebrew; one in Aramaic. More scrolls were subsequently found by other Bedouin and by scholars in caves nearby. The discovered scrolls—including a complete copy of the Book of Isaiah—are the oldest known manuscript copies of books of the Bible.

No one remembers whether the goatherd found his goat.

Haim is not religious, but he offers to tell me a curious story: Last year he took a group of students into a mountainous part of the desert. He had been there many times. He had previously discovered markings on rocks that seemed to indicate religious observance; he believes the markings are ancient.

On the particular day he describes—it was the winter solstice—as the group approached a mountain, they saw what appeared to be a semicircle of flame emanating from the rock face, rather
like the flame from a hoop in the circus. Haim knew it was a trick of the light, or perhaps gases escaping from a fissure in the rock. He walked before the mountain in an arc to observe the phenomenon from every angle. He repeats: he was not alone. They all saw it. He has photographs. He will show me the photographs.

Haim's love for the desert dates from his military service. His Jeep broke down. He cursed the engine. He slammed the hood. He took a memory of the distance; he has become intimate with the distance; he has an honorable regard of the distance. Since that day, he has tied a white kerchief over his hair.

Haim says: Bedouin know a lot. Bedouin have lived in the desert thousands of years. They will lead you to water.

Haim stops to speak with admiration of a bush with dry, gray-green leaves. "These leaves are edible." (Now I must sample them.) "They are salty, like potato chips." (They are salty.)

Of another bush: "These have water. If you crush them, you will get water. These could save your life." He crushes a fistful of leaves and tears spill from his hand.

The child of Abraham and Sarah is named Isaac, which means He Laughs. Sarah proclaims an earthy Magnificat: God has made laughter for me, and all who hear of it will laugh for me. From the loins of these two desert—Abraham, Sarah—God yanks a wet, an iridescent cauldrenumberous as the stars. From the line of Sarah, royal David. From King David's line will come Jesus.

One's sense of elision begins with the map. Many tourist maps include the perimeters of the city at the time of Herod's temple, the time of Christ. This once was. Built over the site. All that remains. This site resembles. This is not the room of the Last Supper; this is a Crusader structure built over the room, later converted to a mosque—note the mihrab, the niche in the wall.

The empty room is white, not white, golden. Is the air really golden? As a child in Omaha, my friend Ahuva was ravished by the thought—told to her by an old man in a black hat—that the light of Jerusalem is golden. An ultra-Orthodox boy wanders into the room (a few paces from this room is the Tomb of King David, the anteroom to which is dense with the smell of men at prayer; upstairs is a minaret); the boy is eating something, some kind of bun; he appears transfixed by a small group of evangelical Christian pilgrims who have begun to sing a song, what in America we would call an old song.

I am kneeling in the early morning at St. Anne's, a Romanesque church built in the twelfth century. The original church was damaged by the Persians; restored in the time of Charlemagne; destroyed, probably by the Caliph Hakim, in 1010. The present church was built by the Crusaders. Sultan Salah-ed-Din captured the city in 1192 and converted the church to a madrasa. The Ottoman Turks neglected the structure; it fell to ruin. The Turks offered the church to France. The French order of White Fathers now administers St. Anne's. Desert sun pours through a window over the altar.

Not only is the light golden, Ahuva, but I must mention a specific grace. Each afternoon around four o'clock, without fail, the most delightful breeze comes upon Jerusalem, I suppose from the Mediterranean, miles away. It begins at the tops of the tallest trees, the date-palm trees; shakes them like feather dusters; rides under the bellies of the lazy red hawks; snaps the flags on the consulate roofs; lifts the curtains of the tall windows of my room at the hotel—sheer curtains embroidered with an arabesque design—lifts them until they are suspended perpendicularly in midair like the veil of a bride tormented by a playful page, who then lets them fall. And then lifts. And then again.

I walk around the wall of the city to the Mount of Olives, to a Christian sensibility the most evocative remnant of Jerusalem, for it matches—even including the garbage—one's imagination of Christ's regard for the city he approached from Bethany, which was from the desert. The desert begins immediately to the east of Jerusalem.

All the empty spaces of the Holy City—all courts, tabernacles, tombs, and reliquaries—are resemblances and references to the emptiness of the desert. All the silences of women and men who proclaim the desert God are references and resemblances to this—to the Holy City, to the hope of a Holy City. Jerusalem is the Bride of the Desert.

The desert prowls like a lion. I am fatigued from the heat, and I look about for some shade and a bottle of water. Having procured both at an outdoor stand (from a young man whose father kneels in prayer), I grow curious about an entrance I can...
see from the courtyard where I rest. Perhaps it is a chapel. An old man is sitting on the steps near the entrance. I approach him. What is this place?

The Tomb of Mary, he answers.

Inside the door I perceive there are steps from wall to wall, leading downward. I can discern only the flickering of red lamps below, as it at the bottom of a well. When I reach the level of the tomb, an Orthodox priest throws a switch and the tomb is illuminated. It is a shelf of rock. The legend of the Dormition of Mary and the Catholic doctrine of the Assumption—neither of which I understand very well—lead me to wonder whether this is a spurious site. I decide I will accept all sites in this junk room of faith as true sites. I kneel.

A couple of years ago the bone box of James, the brother of Jesus, was raised from the shady world of the antiquities market. I believe the box has been discredited (dust nor of the proper age within the incising of the letters). Authenticity is not my point. The stone box is my point. For it creates emptiness. Jerusalem is just such a box—within its anachronistic walls—a city of ossuaries, buried, reburied, hallowed, smashed, reconstructed, then called spurious or probable in guidebooks.

I have brought five guidebooks to Jerusalem, my Pentateuch: The Archaeological. The Historical. The Illustrated. The Practical. The Self-Absorbed. Each afternoon, when I return to my hotel, I convene a colloquy among them—the chatter of guidebooks. I read one and men another. The closed nature of the city frustrates my interest. My mind is oppressed by the inaccessibility of the hive of empty chambers, empty churches, empty tombs. The city that exists is superimposed in some meaty way over the bone city I long to enter. The streets are choked and impassible with life; the air stifling, the merchandise appalling. I feel feverish, but I think it is only the heat. I make the rounds of all the gates to the Temple Mount until at last I find the entrance that Israeli security will let me through—the passageway for infidels.

The sun is blazing on the courtyard. Even the faithful have gone away. Elsewhere the city is vertiginously sunken—resentments and miracles parfaited. Here there is a horizontal prospect.

The Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock have been closed to non-Muslims since my last visit. I stand outside the shrine and try to reconstruct the interior from memory—the pillars, tiles, meadows of carpet. The vast Muslim space is what I remember. Islamic architecture attempts the sublime feat of emptiness. It is the sense of emptiness enclosed that is marvelous. The dome is the sky that is made. The sky is nothing—the real sky—and beggars have more of it than others.

Muslims own Jerusalem sky. This gold-leafed dome identifies Jerusalem on any postcard. The conspicuous jewel. Jews own the ground. The enshrined rock was likely the foundation for the Holy of Holies of Solomon's temple, the room that enclosed the Ark of the Covenant. The Rock is also the traditional site of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham. God commanded Moses to commission Bezalel the artisan to make the Ark. The Book of Exodus describes two golden cherubim whose wings were to form above the Ark a Seat of Mercy—a space reserved for the presence of the Lord. The architecture for the presence of G_d has been conceptualized ever after as emptiness.

The paradox of monotheism is that the desert God, refuting all other gods, demands acknowledgment within emptiness. The paradox of monotheism is that there is no paradox—only unfathomable singularity.

May I explain to you some features of the shrine?

A man has approached as I stand gazing toward the dome. He looks to be in his sixties; he is neatly dressed in a worn suit. The formality of syntax extends to his demeanor. Obviously he is one of the hundreds of men, conversant in three faiths, who haunt the shrines of Jerusalem, hoping to earn something as informal guides.

No thank you.

This is the Dome of the Rock, he continues.

No thank you.

Why are you so afraid to speak to a guide? (The perfected, implicating question.)

I am not afraid. I don't have much time.

He lowers his eyes. Perhaps another time. He withdraws.

My diffidence is purely reflexive. One cannot pause for a moment on one's path through any of the crowded streets or souks without a young man—the son, the nephew, the son-in-law of some shopkeeper—asking, often with the courtliness of a prince, often with the stridency of a suitor: May I show you my shop?
Emptiness clings to these young men as well—the mermen of green-lit grottoes piled with cheap treasure—men with nothing to do but fiddle with their cell phones or yawn in their unconscious beauty and only occasionally swim up to someone caught in the unending tide of humanity that passes before them.

May I show you my shop?

No thank you.

Behind the wall of my hotel in East Jerusalem are a gasoline station and a small mosque. The tower of the mosque—it is barely a tower—is outfitted with tubes of green neon. Five times in twenty-four hours the tubes of neon flicker and sizzle; the muezzin begins his cry. Our crier has the voice of an old man, a voice that gnaws on its beard. I ask everyone I meet if the voice is recorded or live. Some say recorded and some say real.

I believe God is great. I believe God is greatest.

The God of the Jews penetrated time. The Christian and the Muslim celebrated that fact ever after with noise. In the medieval town, Christian bells sounded the hours. Bells called the dawn and the noon and the coming night.

In the secular West, church bells have been stilled by discretion and by ordinance. In my neighborhood of San Francisco the announcement of dawn comes from the groaning belly of a garbage truck.

No one at the hotel seems to pay the voice any mind. The waiters serve. Cocktails are shaken and poured. People in the courtyard and in the restaurant continue their conversations. The proprietress of the place turns a page of the book she is reading.

At four o'clock in the morning, the swimming pool is black. The hotel is asleep and dreaming. The neon ig-
The old man picks up his microphone to rend our dream asunder.

It is better to pray than to sleep.

The voice is not hectoring, it is simply oblivious. It is not like one's father, up early and dressing in the dark; it is like a selfish old man who can't sleep. The voice takes its permission from the desert—from the distance—but it is the modern city it wakes with enforced intimacy.

The old man's chant follows a tune; it is always the same tune, like a path worn through a carpet. And each day the old man becomes confused by the ornamental line—his voice is not agile enough to assay it. His voice turns ruminative, then puzzled. Finally, a nasal moan:

Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.

River Jordan water runs between my toes—a breathtakingly comfortable sensation. I have taken a bus tour of Galilee; the bus has stopped at the Yardenit Baptism Site, which resembles a state picnic grounds. I watch a procession of Protestant pilgrims in rented white smocks descend some steps into the comfortable brown water.

Protestantism is the least oriental of the desert faiths. Protestants own little real estate within the walls of Jerusalem. They own nothing of ancient squabbles between the Holy Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire. Protestants are free to memorialize sacred events without any compulsion to stand guard over mythical ground.

For example, the traditionally venerated site of Christ's baptism is near Jericho. After the Six-Day War in 1967 that location was declared off-limits to tourists. And so this place—Yardenit—of no historical or religious significance, was developed as a place to which Christians might come for baptism ceremonies. The faith of evangelical pilgrims at Yardenit overrides the commercialism that attaches to the enterprise (Your Baptism videotaped by a professional). One bank or the other, it is the same river, and pilgrims at Yardenit step confidently into the Bible.

Distance enters Abraham's seed with God's intimacy. A birth precedes the birth of Isaac. There is domestic strife of God's manufacture. For God also arranges that Sarah's Egyptian servant, Hagar, will bear Abraham a son. That son is Ishmael; the name means He Listens. Sarah soon demands that Abraham send Hagar and her son away. I cannot abide that woman. She mocks me.

So Hagar and Ishmael are cast into the desert of Beersheba as Abraham and Sarah and the camels and tents and servants and flocks flow slowly away from them like a receding lake of dust.

Abruptly Haim tells me to stop. Listen! The desert has a silence like no other, he says. Do you hear a ringing in your ear? It is the bell of existence.

Not far from here, in Gaza, missiles are pitched through a blue sky. People who will be identified in news reports this evening as terrorists will shortly be killed or the innocent will be killed, people who even now are stirring pots with favored spoons or folding the last page of the morning paper to line the bird's cage.

I hear. What do I hear? I hear a truck shifting gears on a highway, miles away.

God hears the cry of Ishmael: God finds Hagar in the desert and rescues her dying child by tapping a spring of water—a green silk scarf pulled from a snake hole. God promises Hagar that Ishmael, too, will be a nation. From Ishmael's line will come the Arab tribes, and from the Arab tribes the Prophet Muhammad.

Mahdi, my Palestinian guide, pulls off the main road so I can see the Monastery of the Temptation in the distance. (Mahdi has been telling me about the years he lived in Riverside, California.) The monastery was built upon the mountain where Christ was tempted by Satan to consider the Kingdoms of the World. And here are we, tourists from the Kingdoms of the World, two thousand years later, regarding the mountain.

A figure approaches from the distance, surrounded by a nimbus of moisture. The figure is a Bedouin man on foot. A young man but not a boy, as I first thought. He is very handsome, very thin, very small, very dusty, utterly humorless. He extends, with his two hands, a skein of perhaps twenty-five bead necklaces. He speaks English—a few words like beads. Camel, he says. For your wife, your girlfriend.

This is camel, he says again, fingering some elongated beads. I ask him who made the necklaces. His mother.

There is no sentimentality to this encounter. Sentimentality is an expenditure of moisture. The Bedouin's beseeching eyes are dry; they are the practice of centuries. He sits down a short dis-
ness away from us while we contemplate the monastery. He looks into the distance, and, as he does so, he becomes the desert.

Moses, Jesus, Muhammad—each ran afoul of cities: Moses of the Court of Egypt, Jesus of Jerusalem, Muhammad of Mecca. The desert hid them, came to represent a period of trial before they emerged as vessels of revelation. Did they, any of them, experience the desert as habitable—I mean in the manner of Haim, in the manner of the Bedouin?

After he fled Egypt, Moses took a wife; he took the nomadic life of his wife's people as a disguise. Moses led his father-in-law's flock across the desert to Mount Horeb, where God waited for him.

As a boy, Muhammad crossed the desert in Meccan caravans with his uncle, Abu Talib. Muhammad acquired the language of the Bedouin and Bedouin ways. As a middle-aged man, Muhammad was accustomed to retire with his family to a cave in the desert to meditate. During one such retreat Muhammad was addressed by God.

The Jews became a people by the will of God, for He drove them through the desert for forty years. God fed the people Israel with manna. Ravens fed Elijah during his forty days in the desert. After his ordeal of forty days, Jesus accepted the ministrations of angels. Such supernatural nourishments of the body suggest a reliance on God rather than an embrace of the desert.

In *The Desert Fathers*, Helen Waddell writes that the early Christian monks of the desert gave a single intellectual concept to Europe—eternity. The desert monks saw the life of the body as "most brief and poor." But the life of the spirit lies beyond the light of day. The light of day conceals "a star-lit darkness into which a man steps and becomes suddenly aware of a whole universe, except that part of it which is beneath his feet."

There are people in every age who come early or late to a sense of the futility of the world. Some people, such as the monks of the desert, flee the entanglements of the world to rush toward eternity. But even for those who remain in the world, the approach of eternity is inescapable. The glacier knocks in the cupboard. The desert sighs in the bed, was W. H. Auden's prophetic forecast. He meant the desert is inescapable; the monkish conceit, to describe the desert as a city.

I am driving with Mahdi through Bethlehem, then several Bedouin settlements to the east, leading into the desert. The road narrows, climbs, eventually runs out at the gates of Mar Saba, a Greek Orthodox monastery.

A monk opens the gate. Mahdi asks in Arabic if we may see the monastery. The monk asks where we are from. The monk then takes up a metal bar, which he clangs within a cast-iron triangle. Waiting in the courtyard below is another monk. He greets us in English. Obviously four bangs, or however many, on the contraption upstairs summons English. The monk's accent is American. He, too, asks where I am from. He is from St. Louis.

We are first shown the main church. The church is dark, complexly vaulted, vividly painted. We are told something of the life of St. Saba, or Sabas, the founder of the monastery. Saba died in 532 A.D. "He is here," the monk then says, ushering us to a glass case in a dark alcove, where the saint lies in repose. "The remains are uncorrupted."

The monk carries a pocket flashlight that he shines on the corpse of the saint. The thin beam of light travels up and down the body; the movement of the light suggests sanctification by censoring. The figure is small, leathern, clothed in vestments. This showing takes place slowly, silently—as someone would show you something of great importance in a dream.

We ask about another case, the one filled with skulls. They are the skulls of monks killed by Persians in 614 A.D. One has the impression...
the young monk considers himself to be brother to these skulls, that they remain a part of the community of Mar Saba, though no longer in the flesh. One has the impression of grievance endures.

The monk next leads us to the visitors' parlor. No women are allowed in the monastery. In this room the masculine sensibility of the place has unconsciously re-created a mother's kitchen. The monk disappears into a galley; he returns with a repast that might have been dreamed up by ravens: tall glasses of lemonade, small glasses of ouzo, a plate of chocolates. The lemonade is very cool and we ask how this can be without electricity. Butane, the monk answers. For cooking and refrigeration.

The monk's patience is for the time when we will leave. Until this: "What has brought you to the Holy Land?"

I have come to write about the desert religions, I reply. I am interested in the fact that three great monotheistic religions were experienced within this ecology.

"Desert religions, desert religions," the monk repeats.

Then he says: "You must be very careful when you use such an expression. It seems to equate these religions."

I do mean to imply a common link through the desert.

"Islam is a perversion," he says.

A few minutes later, the monk once more escorts us through the courtyard and to the stone steps. He shakes my hand and says what I remember as conciliatory, though it may not have been: "The desert creates warriors."

Haim makes his living conducting tours of the desert. He is, as well, a student and an instructor at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, where we stop briefly to exchange vehicles.

Haim invites me into his house; he must get some things. Haim's wife is also a graduate student at the university. There are some pleasant drawings of dancers on the walls. The curtains are closed against the desert. Mrs. Berger returns while I am waiting. She is attractive, blonde, pregnant, calm. "You turned on the air-conditioning," she says to Haim—not accusatorily but as a state-
ment of (I assume unusual) fact. "I have to gather some things," he replies. I ask if I may see the photograph of the mountain.

"Ah, Haim's mountain." Mrs. Berger conveys affection, indulgence.

Haim goes to his computer, pulls up the images: the mountain from the distance. Closer. Closer. The suggestion of a rectangular shape, I hesitate to say the shape of tablets; nevertheless that is how it appears. It is difficult to ascertain the scale.

Yes, I can see—along the top and side of the rectangular shape there are what appear to be flames.

Haim carries several filled grocery bags out to the Jeep. We leave Mrs. Berger standing in the dark kitchen. Goodbye.

Stephen Pfann looks to be in his forties. His hair is white; he wears a beard. He has large, pale eyes of the sort one sees in Victorian photographs. It is because of his resemblance, in my imagination, to a Victorian photograph that I attribute to him the broad spirit of Victorian inquiry. Stephen's discourse has a dense thread-count, weaving archaeology, geology, history, theology, also botany, biology. Stephen's teenage children seem adept at reining him in when he is kiting too high. Stephen and his wife, Claire, administer the University of the Holy Land, a postgraduate biblical institute in Jerusalem. Stephen says he would be willing to take me to Qumran. He suggests an early-morning expedition and promises, as well, an Essene liturgy at sunrise.

My imagination runs away: prayers within a cave. Clay lamps, shadows. Some esotericism in the liturgy and a sun like the sound of a gong.

On the appointed morning, Stephen picks me up at my hotel. As it is already bone-light, I presume we have missed the sunrise. But, in fact, we are reciting psalms on a level plain beneath Cave Number One as the sun comes up over Arabia, over Jordan, over the Dead Sea. The light is diffuse, though golden enough. The texts remark the immensity of creation. (I am thinking about a movie I saw. An old man—Omar Sharif—whispers as he dies: "I join the immensity.")

We have been joined here by several others, two Pfann children, a forensic pathologist connected with the University of the Holy Land.

Stephen mentions "the umbilicus," by which term he means the concentration of God's intention on this landscape. Underfoot is a large anthill—a megalopolis—then a satellite colony, then another, then another, the pattern extending across the desert floor.

The old woman leans forward to kiss the pale stone.

We begin our climb to Cave Number One. The air has warmed. Pfann, in his stride, points at minute flora; his daughter nods and photographs them. Pfann and his children are as nimble as goats. "Is everyone all right?" Pfann calls backward.

I am not all right. I am relegated at several junctures to using both hands and feet. The good-natured pathologist climbing ahead of me is watchful and discreet with his helping hand, all the while recounting the religious conversion that brought him to the Holy Land.

The cave is not cool, by the way. A smell of bat dung. I hear Stephen saying something about the rapidity of the transfer of heat molecules from one substance to another. (The dryness of the cave preserved the scrolls.) I am perspiring. I am making toe marks in the dust.

Hundreds of thousands of years ago, water receded from this cave. Two thousand years ago, an Essene—probably an Essene—filled a basket with grating clay jars and climbed to this cave to hide the holy scrolls against some intimation of destruction. Sixty years ago, a Bedouin goatherd, muttering goat curses—an old man now if he lives—came upon five clay vats spilling revelation.

The community of Qumran was destroyed by Roman legions in 68 A.D.

The desert resembles dogma: it is dry, it is immovable. Truth does not change. Is there something in the revelation of God that retains—because it has passed through—properties of desert or maleness or Semitic tongue? Does the desert, in short, make warriors? That is the question I bring to the desert from the twenty-first century.

The Semitic God is God who enters history. Humans examine every event that pertains to us for meaning. The motive of God who has penetrated time tempts us to imperfect conjecture. When armies are victorious, when armies are trodden in the dust, when crops fail, when volcanoes erupt, when seas drink multitudes, it must mean God intends it so. What did we do to deserve this? King David psalmed for the vanquishing of his enemies, did he not? There is something in the leveling jealousy of the desert God that summons a possessive response in us. We are His people becomes He is our God. The blasphemy that attaches to monotheism is the
blasphemy of certainty. If God is on our side, we must be right. We are right because we believe in God. We must defend God against the godless. Certitude clears a way for violence. And so the monk’s dictum—the desert creates warriors—can represent centuries of holy war and sordid prayer and an umbilicus that whips like a whirlwind.

In Afghanistan’s central plateau, there were two mountain-high Buddhas. For centuries, caravans traveling the Silk Route would mark them from miles away. The Bamiyan Buddhas were destroyed by the Taliban in 2001; their faces are now anvils, erasures. An inscription from the Koran was painted beside the alcove of the larger Buddha: *The just replaces the unjust. Just so do men destroy what belief has built and they do it in the name of God, the God who revealed Himself in the desert, the desert that cherishes no monuments, wants none. There is no God but God.*

On July 16, 1945, the first nuclear weapon was tested in the American desert. The ape in our hearts stood still. Wow.

The desert creates warriors, by which construction St. Sabas meant (for it was his construction) that the monk discerns his true nature in the desert—his true nature in relation to God—and the discernment entails learning to confront and to overcome the temptations of human nature. In that sense a warrior.

The desert creates lovers. St. Sabas desired the taste of an apple. The craving was sweeter to him than the thought of God. From that moment Sabas forswore apples. The desire for apples was the taste of God.

Desert is the fossil of water. (Haim has been at great pains to point this out—striations in mesas and the caverns water has bored through mountains of salt, and salt is itself a memory of water.) Is dogma a fossil of the living God—the shell of God’s passage—but God is otherwise or opposite? Perhaps it is that the Semitic tongues are themselves deserts—dry records of some ancient fluency, of something feminine that has withdrawn. The Semitic tongues descend from Shem, son of Noah, survivor of the Flood. Abraham was of Shem’s line. Perhaps the Semitic tongues, inflected in the throat, recall water, are themselves oases?

I have often heard it observed by critics of the desert religions that monotheism would have encouraged in humankind a different relationship to nature if the Abrahamic God had revealed Himself from within a cloak of green. The desert encourages a sense of rebuff and contest with the natural world. Jesus cursed the recalcitrant fig tree right down to firewood.

Consider Las Vegas and Dubai—two modern desert cities constructed upon an intention to distract. Las Vegas casinos banish clocks, admit neither night nor day. Dubai has wagered its financial future on a time zone that lies conveniently between the markets of Asia and Europe. Both cities defy the desert through exertions of fantasy; both cities pour cooled air. Fountains of electric light tumble and splash in reassuring displays of human will. For thousands of years humans have flaunted their will over nature. What we call global warming now leaves many in the world anticipating a nostalgia for ice, for zero. The ecology least threatened by the work of man is desert, the flowing desert.

The desert’s uninhabitability convinces Jew and Christian and Muslim that we are meant for another place. Within the deserts of the Bible and the Koran, descriptions of Eden, descriptions of the Promised Land, resemble oases. For Jews, Eden was pre-desert. For Christians and Muslims, paradise—a reconciliation with God—is post-desert.

In the Koran, paradise is likened to *gardens underneath which rivers flow.* For Christians, paradise is an urban idea, a communion, a city of God. The commendation of the body in the ancient rite of Christian burial prays that angels may come to lead the soul of the departed to the gates of the holy city Jerusalem.

I purchase for five shekels a postcard scene of Jerusalem in the snow—black and white—the sky is dark but Jerusalem shines swan, a royal city. I will show you the photograph.

I follow Haim a quarter of a mile to a grove of untrimmed date-palm trees. I have seen their like only in ancient mosaics, the muted colors, the golden dust. In their undressed exuberance these palms resemble fountains. But they are dry; they prick and rattle as we thread our way among them. We could just as easily have walked around, couldn’t we? I suspect Haim of concocting an oasis experience. But his glance
is upward, into the branches of some taller trees. Haim is hoping for what he calls a lucky day. If it is Haim’s lucky day, we will see a leopard. Recently, a leopard entered the town of Beer-Sheva. Haim suspects the creature may be lurking here.

But it is not Haim’s lucky day. We continue up an incline, alongside a muddy riverbed. Winged insects bedevil my ears. We walk around a screen of acacia trees, at which Haim steps aside to reveal: a waterfall, a crater filled with green water! There are several Israeli teenagers swimming, screaming with delight as they splash one another. A tall African youth stands poised at the edge of the pool.

This Ethiopian Jew (we later learn) has come to this desert from another. He has come because the Abrahamic faith traveled like particles of desert over mountains and seas, blew under the gates of ancient cities, and caught in the leaves of books. Laughter, as spontaneous as that of his ancestress Sarah, echoes through the canyon as the boy plunges into the stone bowl of water. Displaced water leaps like a javelin.

John the Baptist wrapped himself in camel hide. He wandered the desert and ate the desert—honey and locusts and Haim’s gray leaves. John preached hellfire and he performed dunking ceremonies in the River Jordan. People came from far and wide to be addressed by the interesting wild man as “Brood of Vipers.” When watery Jesus approached flaming John and asked for baptism, John recognized Jesus as greater than he. It was as though the desert bowed to the sea. But, in fact, their meeting was an inversion of elements. John said: I baptize only with water. The one who comes after me will baptize with Spirit and fire.

Desert is, literally, emptiness—its synonymous desolation, wasteland. To travel to the desert “in order to see it,” in order to experience it, is paradoxical. The desert remains an absence: the desert is this place I stand multiplied by infinite numbers—not this place particularly. So I come away each night convinced I have been to the holy desert (and have been humiliated by it) and that I have not been to the desert at all.

Just beyond the ravine is a kibbutz, a banana plantation, a university, a nuclear power plant. But, you see, I wouldn’t know that. The lonely paths Haim knows are not roads. They are scrapings of the earth. Perhaps they are tracks that Abraham knew, or Jesus. Some boulders have been removed and laid aside. From the air-conditioned van or from the tossing Jeep or through binoculars, I see the desert in every direction. The colors of the desert are white, fawn, tawny gold, rust, rust-red, blue. When the ignition is turned off and the Jeep rolls to a stop, I pull the cord that replaces the door handle; the furnace opens; my foot finds the desert floor. But the desert is distance. Nothing touches me.

Many nights, I return to my hotel with the desert on my shoes. There is a burnt, mineral scent in my clothing. The scent is difficult to wash out in the bathroom basin, as is the stain of the desert, an umber stain.

Standing, scrubbing my T-shirt, is the closest I get to the desert. The water turns yellow.

I tell myself I am not looking for God. I am looking for an elision that is nevertheless a contour. The last great emptiness in Jerusalem is the first. What remains to be venerated is the Western Wall, the ancient restraining wall of the destroyed Second Temple.

After the Six-Day War, the Israeli government bulldozed an Arab neighborhood to create “Western Wall Plaza,” an emptiness to facilitate devotion within emptiness—a desert that is also a well.

I stand at the edge of the plaza with Magen Broshi, a distinguished archaeologist. Magen is a man made entirely of Jerusalem. You can’t tell him anything. Last night at dinner in the hotel garden, I tried out a few assertions I thought dazzling, only to be met with Magen’s peremptory Of course.

Piety, ache, jubilation, many, many classes of ardor pass us by. Magen says he is not a believer. I tell Magen about my recent cancer. If I asked him, would he pray for me here, even though he does not believe? Of course.

Western Wall Plaza levels sorrow, ecstasy, cancer, belief. Here, emptiness rises to proclaim its unlikeness to God, who allows for no comparison. This is His incomparable Temple. It does not resemble. It is all that remains.

No writing! You cannot write here. A woman standing nearby has noticed I carry a notebook. I have a pen in my hand. The woman means on the Sabbath. I think. Or can one never write here? It is the Sabbath.

“He is not writing anything,” Magen mutters irritably, waving the woman away.