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God in the Desert

A Spiritual Theology of Wilderness in the Old Testament

April 14, 2026 | \$28.99, 208 pages, paperback | 978-1-5140-1030-3

Noel Forlini Burt (PhD, Drew University) teaches and lectures widely in the intersection of biblical studies and spiritual formation. She is the author of *Hope in the Wilderness: Spiritual Reflections for When God Feels Far Away* and *Encounters in the Dark: Identity Formation in the Jacob Story*. She is certified as a spiritual director (Truett Seminary) and in spiritual formation (Upper Room Academy for Spiritual Formation).

Dreams and Ladders: Jacob at Bethel

Jacob has a dream in the wilderness of Bethel, which means “house of God” in Hebrew. The Hebrew writer juxtaposes the isolation Jacob experiences in running away from home with Yahweh’s dream for Jacob’s life. Where previously Jacob’s world closed in around him, leaving him in a fearful and constricting darkness, at Bethel, God’s house, Jacob begins to see the possibilities of a larger world, a bigger life, one in which his own tiny earth connects to heaven.

Yair Zakovitch traces Jacob’s expanding vision through the three usages of *wehinneh*—“and behold” (twice in Gen 28:12 and once in Gen 28:13). In the first stage, Jacob witnesses the stairway that is set on the ground and reaching to the sky. In the second stage, Jacob sees that angels of God are ascending and descending on it. In the third and final stage, Jacob looks at the top of the staircase and sees God standing on it (Zakovitch, *Jacob: Unexpected Patriarch*). At each stage, Jacob’s world opens, becoming larger. Zakovitch puts it this way:

Whereas a moment previously Jacob’s world had suddenly been compressed by an all-encompassing darkness closing around his weary body, a vast world was now opened before him. Three axes become apparent: the vertical connection between earth and heaven; the horizontal dissemination of Jacob’s descendants in all four directions; and a temporal line embracing both past and future, reaching from Abraham and Isaac to Jacob and the generations that will issue from him (*Jacob*).

Until now, Jacob’s desires have been small, involving only himself. In a strange irony, it will take isolation for Jacob to realize that God’s dreams for him involve more than just him. Jacob will have to be alone to realize that God’s dreams for Jacob are not for Jacob alone. Like Abraham, Jacob will come to realize that the dreams of God involve blessing for the many and the whole, not only the one (Gen 12:1-3). As Madeleine L’Engle describes the scene, God invites Jacob (and by extension all of us) to move from independence to interdependence: “We need to remember that the house of God is not limited to a building that we visit for only a few hours on Sunday. The house of God is not a safe place. It is a cross where time and eternity meet, and we are—or should be—challenged to live more vulnerably, more interdependently” (*A Stone for a Pillow*).

Our spiritual formation cannot and does not begin and end with us. If our formation is to be something more than a hollow self-actualization, less therapeutic and more Christocentric, then it must involve *the all*. We are implicated in the good and the flourishing of *the all*, just as we take our place in God’s big world. We do not have to be good—Jacob, that wily heel-grabber, was not good. I’m not particularly good either. However

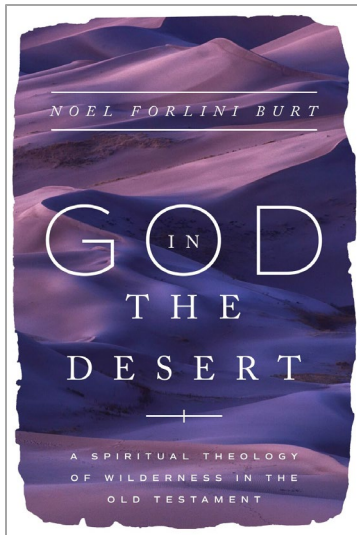
constricted, small, or self-involved our life might be, we need only look outward—*excurvatus ex se*, the self looking beyond the self—to see that we are part of the greater whole. It is that greater whole that invites us not to a rugged independence or fearful self-subsistence but to an interdependency in which we all have a place. The Christ of the poets and the Christ of the theologians and the Christ of the alcoholics and the Christ of the single mothers and the Christ of the fearful and antagonistic and the Christ of the babies rolling around on their tummies and the Christ of our political enemies is the same Christ that spins the planets round and round. That same Christ is Jacob’s Christ and my Christ and the Christ of us all. That same Christ invites us to move from the edges of our lives to the very center of his house, where in that risk we find our belonging.



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It's what Jesus said, isn't it? When we loosen our chubby-fingered grasp on our tiny little life and how we think that life ought to look, we find ourselves living a bigger and richer life than we could have imagined (Mt 16:25).

The house of God invites us into the possibility that we have not quite pinned God down, even at the eve of our life.

At the dawn of our life, we are so very sure of things. But somewhere at the noon of our life (I am forty-two as I write this, surely the noon of my life, when desert tradition soberly warns me that the proverbial noonday demon threatens to overtake me), we become less and less sure. Too much has happened to us and in us and for us and because of us and in spite of us for all the old ways to hang together quite as tightly as they once did. As we move from the dawning of our life, with its dark energy and vibrant force; to the noontime of our life, with its tired, disillusioned, and emerging, hard-earned wisdom, gray creeping into our temples; and surely to the dusk of our lives, we find that God also exceeds our grasp. L'Engle puts it with such forceful honesty:

The human being's attempt to understand the Creator can never be final, but dynamic, in motion, almost as though we were climbing that ladder of angels joining heaven and earth. Do we get dizzy on the ladder? Refuse to climb? Turn over and tell the vision to go away? . . . Our God becomes too small when we make God in our own image, instead of heeding the image of God in us. In us, not outside us, but in us, waiting to be recognized. Our call, no matter what our vocation, is to witness to the God within, the God who is One (*Stone for a Pillow*).

The Gospel writers envision this in a way Jacob never could. The Jesus of John's Gospel says it this way:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going. . . .

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. . . . I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. . . .

Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. (Jn 14:1-4, 16-18, 23 NIV)

In Jesus, Bethel is no longer a place—it is a person—every person, in fact, who loves Jesus and obeys his teachings.

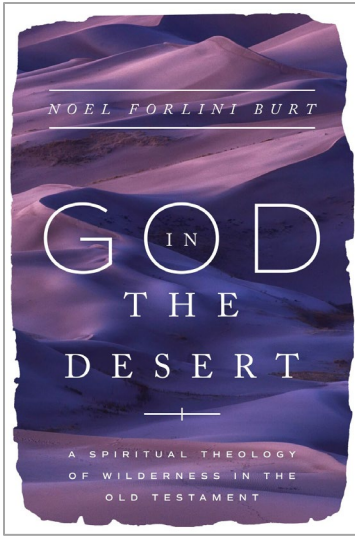
We are Bethel, the house of God. God has made it so. And so it is that in every moment and in every circumstance, we live and move and have our being in God's house—this great big world in which we are all interconnected and in which God's presence is ascending and descending invisible ladders all around us. As poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, our world is "shot through with the grandeur of God" (John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne, eds., *Mortal Beauty, God's Grace*). We only *think* we live in a secular age; the truth is, we live in a world much closer to that envisioned by the poets and the storytellers, with their enchanted wildernesses, mystical landscapes, and vibrant dreamscapes, than we dare imagine. From the first breathy *wayehi* ("And it was") brooding over the dark waters at creation, to Jesus' ascension and descension of the ladder of the cross, to the



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pouring out of God's breath at Pentecost, God has enchanted our world. It is shot through with God's own grandeur. It is God's good pleasure that the world be so. At Bethel, God shows Jacob a much bigger world than the one he imagined, one that, as Barbara Brown Taylor writes, is "so thick with divine possibility that it is a wonder we can walk anywhere without cracking our shins on altars" (*An Altar in the World*).

Because God's dream for Jacob and God's dream for the world is much bigger than Jacob envisioned, he will have to learn a new way to climb. To get in on what God is doing, I suspect we will too.

–Taken from chapter two, "Dreams and Ladders: Jacob at Bethel"



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