

The Cauldron

THE LONELY PLACE AS THE VESSEL OF SPIRIT

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‘Let us visit their abodes, the places where they live like dead men in their graves. Let us gaze upon their bodies and ponder the fact that the only clothing or ornament they wear is their own hair. Let us see their drink, always mingled with their tears, and their tables with the wild herbs. Behold the stones they place beneath their heads’

St Ephraem Eulogy of the Solitaries of Mesopotamia

‘The Lonely Place’ is a concept located within the mystical strata of traditional witchcraft, used to indicate a remote and unfamiliar location where the solitary witch is taught by the spirits, or undergoes magical ‘ordeal’. Its parameters usually encompass geographical isolation and a sense of haunting; its trials may range from psychological alienation to near-death privation.

In my early years as a seeker upon the path, I made pilgrimages unto many such places, from desolate wastes where I wandered long in solitude, to remote communities of hermits whose existence was unknown but to a handful of seekers. In such hostile environments I learned a great deal which came to inform my magical path, but through the agency of no human teacher. Beyond the edifications derived from any monastic practice, I can firmly say that there is a marked character of tutelary power which emanates directly from such locales, even if one is unaware of it as it is happening. This emanant power, more than any aspect of physical dimension, is what defines The Lonely Place.

Perhaps the most obvious magical aspect of such loci is their exilic station, apart from the company of humankind. This informs a strand of Cainite Gnosis, a mystical by-way of the Sabbatic Traditions of witchcraft [1]. Implicit in its teachings is that exile from mankind incubates a state of magical and mystical knowledge, gained in part by wandering, but also in part from the deliberate turning away from all that is familiar and comfortable. The status of removal from the profane environments of worldly men also serves to prepare the way for the coming-forth of the spirit retinue.

This virtue was well-known to desert anchorites of early Christianity, whose spiritual praxes, being in close historical proximity to the magic of Old Egypt, resembled sorcery as often as religious piety. Ensclosed in tombs and caves, they fasted, prayed, battled demons, and received the counsel of angels [2]. A prolific corpus of lore has come down to us, specifically treating the visions, miracles, and temptations of the desert hermits, which may, in great measure, be viewed from a magical perspective as an ancient primer on the Lonely Place. Typical of these fantastic spirit-encounters is a passage from *The Coptic Apophthegms of Macarius the Elder*, wherein the hermit holds ghastly discourse with a dry human skull he encounters lying on the ground. The skull reports that he once belonged to a Greek heathen, but now endures the torments of Hell.

The seventeenth-century grimoire *The Book of the Sacred Magic of Abramelin the Mage*, considered by many Western occultists as a magical primer, also underscores the position of the Lonely Place as outcast from humanity. Perhaps not surprisingly, this corpus of magic also arises from the eremitic desert-sorcery of Egypt, though separated from the golden age of Christian monasticism by over a thousand years. The book delineates a series of magical austerities and devotions for attaining discourse with the familiar spirit

known as the Guardian Angel. Once the intercessor's favour is attained, strange and wondrous powers of the Art Magical become accessible to the magician.

With regard to this particular text, many practitioners focus on the devotional and purificatory content of its practices: the timely prayers, ablutions, and proper habiliments. However, the author's repeated emphasis on dwelling in the so-called Desert of Solitude – eighteen months in the more complete forms of the rite – is arguably a greater factor. In Book 2, chapter 10, Abraham the Jew remarks that ‘. . . the best counsel which I can give is that a man should go into retirement in some desert or solitude.’ This exhortation occurs throughout the text in various forms and is a maxim whose importance to mysticism and magical development Aleister Crowley emphasised:

‘What is there in common between Christ, Buddha, and Mohammed? ... Elaborate lives of each have been written by devotees, and there is one thing common to all three -- an omission. We hear nothing of Christ between the ages of twelve and thirty. Mohammed disappeared into a cave. Buddha left his palace, and went for a long while into the desert. Each of them, perfectly silent up to the time of the disappearance, came back and immediately began to preach a new law. [3]’

A modern exemplar of the Lonely Place, though arguably in a metaphysical form, may be found amongst the Shakers, Shouter Baptists, or Spiritual Baptists of the Windward Islands of St. Vincent, a syncretic Afro-Caribbean religion relying heavily on trance and dream revelation. The principal revelatory ritual, The Rite of Mourning, includes spirit-journeys to a place called ‘the Secret Room’. This sacred domain, existing apart from the familiar, serves as an operant field of magical gnosis[4].

Solitude-based asceticism has appeared in various forms of the Old Craft, in the form of the Vigil, the Hermitage, and the Pilgrimage, as well as specific teachings concerning the Mysteries of Place. A tutelary lineage of which I am an initiate preserves a custom dating back several generations, allegedly of older provenance. It is said that when great need arises, or a complex problem resists resolution, a holy pilgrimage is made to a specific location in Britain. Once there, certain rites are engaged, but these are only a formality – it is the location, together with the pilgrim's sacrifice of the journey that releases the reorienting power. Other teachings within this specific witchcraft-stream specifically relate to the dispensation of power from zones of spirit-confluence in the land, and to the magical value of isolate devotion.

Another peculiar form of the Lonely Place occurs in *1 Enoch*, chapter 22 - ‘the hollow places’ of the apocalyptic revelations of Enoch. The angel Raphael guides the prophet to a place wherein are observed various cavities in the rock, ‘deep, dark, and smooth’. Here the wailing spirit of Abel is observed making suit against Cain, that his descendants be exterminated from the earth. The angel explains that the hollow places were created as an habitation for the spirits of the dead, and that various chambers were designed to house the shades of the righteous and the wicked [5].

This presents the notion of the wilderness as the Vessel of Indwelling Spirits; a maxim of supreme importance to the Hermit, for this is the sacred arena in which the dialogue with the spirits, the Great Congress of the Witch, unfolds. Its importance lies in both its ‘desolation’ – usually used to indicate the absence of civilisation – and its unfamiliarity, which dually serve as a suitable backdrop or void-space for the impression of power. Removed from the usual array of comforts and familiarities, the practitioner is stripped of epistemology which underpins his ordinary existence.

The magical pattern is repeated in a number of religious histories. Indeed, in the canonical gospels of Christianity, Satan's temptation of Christ occurred during his fasting hermitage in the desert, and its biblical explication unfolds in a matter common to many spirit-dialogues. This passage is notable, not only for the appearance of the Devil, but also of angels in the wake of his departure. Both are profound spirit-manifestations appearing against a backdrop of isolation and adversity of environment. The tradition extends beyond Judaism and Christianity; Islamic folklore holds that the jinn, the ‘pre-Adamic’ race of

fire-spirits, make their dwelling in desolate and hostile places. The folk expression ‘to be hosted by a jinni’ refers to the act of visiting a barren or remote place [6]. Lest we forget, the desert, with its arid climate and caves, has also served as a literal magical vessel. Such conditions are ideal for the preservation of written texts, and have been revealed as a hidden storehouse of religious and magical texts which might otherwise have been lost due to their heretical nature [7].

Solitude and solitary praxis, engaged in the Place of Desolation, may rightly be considered a precious Jewel of our Arte. And yet I have observed that many so-called seekers, once faced with the reality of the ordeals of solitude, proceed forthwith to seek out their fellow men for comfort. Whilst it is true that the initial stages of isolate anchoritism may resemble insanity, this is a characteristic feature of separation from society, and a potent well of magical power. One does well to remember that Exile and Isolation are historical ciphers of the Craft itself, as powers set apart from the mundane world, the ‘Path of Blame and Scorn’ [8]. By increasing degree of alienation (darkness, isolation, ignorance of location, privation), the All-Possible is liberated, and that once constrained by familiarity gains the freedom to manifest.

For the Seeker-unto-Hermitage, one may reasonably ask where, precisely, the Lonely Place is to be found. As one of its chief distinguishing features is unfamiliarity, this presents a considerable challenge. Unlike a plot of working, where rites are exacted regularly and warded by coviners, places of Solitude are rarely visited, and are usually geographically inconvenient. This being so, the sincere should not be deterred. Here I relay a simple Spell of Hermitage, used on a number of occasions with different, but potent results.

As a solitary pilgrim, go forth to the edge of an unknown town, where the roads give way to fields and the habitations of men are replaced by forest, moor, desert, or plain. By simple entreaty, there petition the spirit-wardens of the place to be led to the Place of Power, there to abide in silence. At the summation of the entreaty give an offering upon the ground before you – wine, silver, and blood are traditional – and there place your first step, also in offering. From this place, go forth in silence upon the Path Unknown, until the Place of Power is revealed.

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Notes: [1] For further discussions of the cenobitic pathways of witchcraft see Andrew Chumbley’s ‘The Hermit’ and ‘Seven Shades of Solitude’ in *Opuscula Magica Vol. I & II*, Three Hands Press 2010 and 2011, as well as my own essay ‘Way and Waymark’, *The Cauldron* No.122 (November 2006). Some of these themes are also treated in my book *Lux Haeresis: The Light Heretical* Xoanon Publishing, 2011. [2] For an excellent survey of these see LeCarriere. Jacques. *The God-Possessed*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1963. [3] *Book 4*. Crowley was profoundly influenced by the Book of Abramelin. His own rite to attain conversation with the Holy Guardian Angel was Liber Samekh. [4] Keeney, Bradford (ed.). *The Shakers of St Vincent*. Ringing Rocks Foundation, 2002. [5] Consider also *I. Enoch 10:4* The wilderness of Dudael, into which the fallen angel Azazel was cast, there to await the Day of Judgment, meets many of our criteria. Described as a place of sharp and jagged stones, by decree the outcast dwelt there covered in darkness, the light forbidden to fall upon him. [6] El-Zein, Amira. *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2009, p. 41. [7] Although many thousands of such texts have been recovered from deserts, we may cite among their crown jewels the Greek Magical Papyri, the Gnostic corpora of Nag Hammadi, and the Manichaean texts from the Turfan Oasis of the Gobi Desert. [8] Chumbley Andrew D., *Qutub* (Xoanon Publishing).