

FROM 'SCHOOL OF THE WILDERNESS' TO 'THEOLOGY OF THE WILDERNESS'

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Bogdan-Marius Negrea, *Teologia Pustiei. Implicațiile spirituale ale peregrinării poporului ales spre Țara Făgăduinței* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2026).

Mr. Bogdan-Marius Negrea's research is a significant contribution to biblical studies and modern biblical theology. Its originality lies in the unique perspective and integrative approach it presents. Beginning with the longstanding theme of the wandering of the chosen people and its spiritual meanings, the author provides a fresh, coherent synthesis that redefines the connections among history, sacred space, and spiritual growth. He transforms the concept of the 'wilderness' from merely a narrative element into a theological framework with broad, transdisciplinary relevance.

The volume's methodological innovation is its genuinely interdisciplinary approach, integrating philological exegesis with patristic interpretation, historical-geographical context, and hermeneutics of religious experience. While research on the Exodus and Sinai is extensive, the author emphasizes a conceptual unity and uses specific operational terms — such as 'House of Bondage', 'School of the Wilderness', and 'Theology of the Wilderness' — which facilitate an explanatory segmentation of the phenomenon. This segmentation distinguishes not only different historical moments but also pedagogical stages within a spiritual process of shaping collective identity. This systematization is a key strength of the work, as it creates a cohesive interpretative model from diverse textual and traditional testimonies, enabling an understanding of continuities and breaks in the biblical narrative and its later reception.

The clearly defined structure of the work underpins this conceptual innovation: it begins with a diagnosis of the research stage to justify the approach by highlighting gaps; uses semantic boundaries as analytical tools; employs historical and exegetical chapters to develop empirical material; and concludes with an evaluation that integrates all parts into a coherent theological framework. This architecture allows the author not only to synthesize critical debates but also to forge new connections between familiar

elements—such as shifting focus from simply 'crossing' the wilderness to emphasizing its teaching and soteriological roles, thereby establishing it as a paradigmatic example in the spiritual development of the chosen people.

The thesis makes a notable contribution to philology and semantics. Analysing the term *midbar* and the semantic theme of 'wilderness' reveals subtle distinctions often missed: the empty space is not merely a geographical gap but a symbol of testing, calling, and revelation. This clarification of terminology supports the development of the 'Wilderness School,' a site where the community shifts from slavery to forming a verbal identity through liturgical rituals, memory, and covenant. Consequently, the author offers a valuable conceptual framework for exegetes and theologians exploring the connections between place, ritual, and ethical development.

From a scholarly standpoint, the thesis offers a detailed yet balanced analysis of key passages from Exodus and Numbers. The author goes beyond a literal historical interpretation, reinterpreting the text through its formative role: episodes of doubt, the forty-year punishment, and the journey to the Promised Land serve as pedagogical tests that reveal how communities are strengthened. This approach shifts the view of 'wandering' to a 'process,' carrying significant theological meaning: the wilderness does not cancel the promise but tests and refines it, fostering the spiritual growth of the generation that will settle in the Land.

An original aspect is the analysis of Sinai's Mountain as more than just a site of the Law; it also functions as a geographical and symbolic landmark shaping Israel's theological framework. The author blends topographical information, textual sources, and patristic insights to illustrate how Sinai serves as a center for divine teaching: here, the covenant forms the basis of the collective will, and the Law functions as a tool for communal living, adapted to desert life. This interpretation offers new avenues for exploring the links between sacred geography and ritual ethics.

Another notable contribution is the clear and proven link between exodic vocabulary and Christian therapeutic or ascetic practices. By referencing the Church Fathers and rabbinic texts, the author provides a hermeneutic that reveals a model of spiritual growth relevant today: 'Desert Theology' is thus more than just a historical account; it offers a framework for retreats, ascetic exercises, and modern spiritual teachings. This connection is presented not merely as an analogy but as a potential typological continuity between biblical experiences and later Christian practices.

The research's practical contributions, grounded in theory, add significant novelty. The suggestions for integrating the 'Desert Theology' paradigm into modern spiritual formation activities—such as retreats, spirituality courses, and catechetical disciplines focused on contemplative experience—show that the work extends beyond academic theory. The author offers clear guidance for applying this knowledge practically within pastoral settings, making the thesis a useful resource for church and community life.

In conclusion, Mr. Bogdan-Marius Negrea's book stands out as an innovative addition to biblical and pastoral theology, thanks to its clear concepts, rich documentation, and ability to turn a traditional theme into a relevant modern explanatory framework. 'Theology of the Wilderness' not only gathers and systematizes diverse materials but also introduces a new interpretative approach — viewing the wilderness as a place of faith learning, spiritual experimentation, and identity development — with significant theological, historical, and pastoral importance. This work merits the interest of both academic and pastoral communities and opens new paths for research that can deepen the historical and practical understanding of this theological concept.

I strongly suggest reading this text, as it has the potential to reshape traditional views and inspire modern spiritual practices.

