



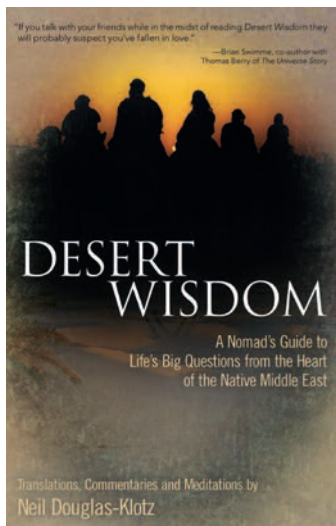
Desert Wisdom: Nomadic insights for modern life

Alan Heeks

Alan reflects on the extraordinary power of Desert Wisdom, especially 'when experienced whilst travelling through the desert in caravan style, on foot with camels and nomadic guides, as we do on our trips.'

Desert Wisdom is not a formal category, or a defined body of religious doctrine, but it is a useful name for a large, diverse body of teachings that share many qualities. The deserts of the Middle East have been the inspiration for many great spiritual teachings, notably Christian, Islamic, Jewish and Sufi. The culture of the desert and its nomads has infused the whole Middle East and its teachers for millennia. The Prophet Muhammad was a leader of camel caravans, Jesus, Moses and many others found their deepest communion with the divine in the desert.

Attempts to provide an overview of this huge and diverse terrain of texts and teachings are rare. One of the best guides to this largely uncharted zone is Dr Neil Douglas-Klotz, a leading international teacher and scholar, who has created superb extended translations of key texts in his book, *Desert Wisdom*. In this book, Neil explains why most translations lose much of the original power of the teachings, and offers a range of ways to experience desert wisdom directly through a range of traditional practices.



The original book *Desert Wisdom* was published in 1994. 2011 sees the publication of a much revised Second Edition, with many new texts, and updated translations of others. The contents of this book are extraordinarily rich and intense, and it can be hard to navigate. This has been well-addressed in the Second Edition, which offers numerous ways to access the material, such as the index of Source Threads, which groups texts by category, such as the Aramaic Christian

Gospels, Hebrew and Coptic text from the Dead Sea and Nag Hammadi sources, Persian Sufi threads and so on. There is now a Quick-Start Guide which offers a range of ways to use the book.

The new version is subtitled *A Nomad's Guide to Life's Big Questions*, and it is organised into three major sections based on key issues. Section 1 is about *Diversity: Why am I here? What is my purpose in life?* The theme of section 2 is *Interiority: Who am I? What is the "self"?* Third comes *Communion: How do I relate to other people, nature and my surroundings? How do I love and how do I die?*

The Importance of Language

Whilst desert wisdom teachings originated in many different languages, the key languages are mostly in the Semitic family, which have striking similarities to each other and differences from European languages. The Semitic languages include Hebrew, Arabic and Aramaic, in which the original texts of Judaism, Islam and Christianity are mostly found.

In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the word for peace is *shlama*, in Arabic it is *salaam*, and in Hebrew it is *shalom*. These languages share qualities which are different from English, or indeed Greek, the language through which many bible translations have come. In the Semitic texts, each word has several layers of meaning, so the word *lachma*, as in 'give us this day our daily bread' means not only physical bread, but also the food of wisdom and understanding.

Another special quality is that the sound often expresses the meaning. As Neil explains, the root sounds of *salaam* express an unfolding potential (*sa*) which creates health and wholeness (*lam*). Understandably, the sound of sacred texts is an important part of many spiritual practices in the Middle East. This can be through spoken prayer, song, repeating sound mantras, and by chants combined with devotional movement or body prayer. One of the special features of Neil's book *Desert Wisdom* is that many of the key texts are linked directly to specific practices like these, so that reading is a prelude to a deeper embodiment.

Traditionally in the Middle East, this wider range of devotional forms, which deepen connection with the divine through both more active-expressive and receptive-meditative approaches, would have been shared in groups, as well as being practised by individuals. The prostrations and other physical gestures in the Muslim daily prayers are a continuing example of this. The Sufi practice of *zikr* is another, and so are Dances of Universal Peace, where short prayers and devotional texts in the original language are sung with simple dance movements. Neil teaches these and other devotional forms on his workshops and retreats, and there are many regular DUP events and retreats around the UK: see www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org.uk.

Divinity

One of the central shared threads in the desert wisdom traditions is their view of divinity, which fits with the expansiveness of desert landscapes: the way they open to the sky, their vastness and the innumerable stars at night. If the consequences were not so tragic, it would simply be ironic that most Westerners completely misunderstand the word *Allah*, thinking it is the Muslim word for God. And most are stuck with the Western conditioning that God is a vengeful patriarch

high above us. So by a ghastly conflation, Allah becomes the vengeful God on 'their' side, at odds with Jehovah and God the Father on 'our' side.

In his book, Neil Douglas-Klotz is admirably clear and to the point: "The word *Allah* is not a proprietary name of the divinity invented by Muslims, but a continued use of the same root/word of power existing for at least 6000 years in the Middle East, beginning with the Old Canaanite *Elat* and extending through the Hebrew *Elohim* and *Eloha* to the Aramaic *Alaha*. All of these words point to the reality of Cosmic Unity and Oneness, the ultimate force behind being and nothingness, which includes the most mysterious concept: Holy Abstinence, "No" (LA) that balances the Holy Presence, "Yes" (AL)."

If one uses the practices in Desert Wisdom, this sense of divinity as a universal presence slowly grows, and using the name *Alaha* instead of God can help diminish Western patriarchal conditioning. In Arabic-speaking Christian congregations, as in Lebanon, the prayers are to Allah, as they are among their Muslim neighbours. It is tragic that the essential meaning, which is still central in Sufism, and in mystic paths, is usually buried by hierarchical dogma in the organised religions. If it could be recovered, peace and understanding would surely come closer.

On looking at key texts in the original language, one concept which stands out is *shem*: this features in the first lines of the Lord's Prayer, Genesis, and the Qur'an. *Shem* is a powerful, awe-inspiring concept, hard to sum up even in several words. In Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth', the word usually translated as heaven is *shamaim* in Hebrew. Douglas-Klotz translates this key word as:

*The ocean of light, sound
name and vibration –
all that shines in glorious space,
that rises in sublime time*

Crucially, *shamaim* is a quality which permeates the whole universe, including our earthly planet. It is heavenly, but not in the sense of a place separate and above us. In the Aramaic Lord's Prayer we have the word *Dbashmaya*, also translated

as heaven, but with the same shimmering, universal meaning as in the Genesis translation above. As Neil explains 'heaven' and 'earth' in their true sense across the Semitic texts mean much what we describe as wave and particle realities today.

In the Qur'an, the very first word, *bismillah*, contains *shem* in its Arabic form, *sm*. The common translation, 'we begin in the name of Allah', is correct, but is far more powerful when one affirms this statement embodying the full extent of *shem*: not only the sound, but also the light, atmosphere and full presence of divine unity.

A feature emerging from many of these extended translations is the deeper, inner, more personal meaning which is not visible in the normal renderings which seem to deal in more outward, material matters. These inner teachings sometimes anticipate much more recent understandings in science, psychology and other fields. Another example of this is the description in proverbs of Wisdom's dinner party. Neil's interpretation makes it clear that this is a deep teaching about the inner life, where wisdom is the guiding principle of consciousness and alignment with the divine, and the guests at the dinner party represent the *nepshesh*, the sub-conscious selves. *Desert Wisdom* devotes considerable space in its central section to texts around this theme, and processes to help us to hear and align these different inner voices.

Because words in Semitic languages have multiple layers of meaning, Neil uses extended translations to encompass the full significance. Because English and Greek do not have this characteristic, the usual word-for-word interpretations at best offer part of the meaning, and at worst distort it completely. The extended renderings of key texts in *Desert Wisdom* offer exciting and sometimes radically different understandings of the original meaning.

A striking example of this is the Creation story in Genesis. As Neil notes, the details as rendered in his extended translation resemble some scientific views of the process, for example *The Universe Story* by Swimme and Berry. Another transformative insight is that the Genesis story is also about the creation of each person's inner world. His translation of Genesis 1:20 relates the animals to the subconscious and the birds to instincts.





The same transformative power is found in Neil's re-translation of Jesus' "I Am" sayings. In sayings like, *I am the good shepherd* and many others, we seem to be told that Jesus is the sole provider of these qualities. However, that is not Jesus' message. Here is the King James version of John 8:12:

Then spoke Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

By contrast, here is the rendering of this passage in *Desert Wisdom*:

*Then Yeshua spoke again to them, saying:
The "I Am" in you, in me,
illuminates all the worlds of form.
It clarifies and reveals the force
behind creation's shining joy.
When you follow this inner light of the self,
conscious of the Only Self, the One Being,
you do not stumble blindly
but find your way through the darkness,
guided by the light of inner life energy.*

The Textual Notes of this book are actually a book in themselves, containing immense depth of wisdom and information. Here, for example, is part of the commentary on the passage above:



In the Aramaic subtext of Jesus' "I Am" statements, we have the Native Middle Eastern approach to the question of individuality. If everything is linked in communion with the Holy One, why do we have individuality and how does it serve the universe's unfolding? In the Aramaic expression Jesus uses here, 'ena' 'na', we have an intensification of the word for "I", literally the "I-I" or "the I of I". This is not an abstraction of the "I" but a distillation of its essence, as the alternate meanings of the roots show. As mentioned in textual note three in chapter one, the "wave reality" or **shem** of an individual is a bridge to her or his consciousness of the Only Individual ("God," so to speak). So in using "I-I" as he does here, Jesus is both including and pointing beyond his personal awareness of cosmic Unity. He is the bridge for those who attune to him in this way. A number of scholars have noted that speaking in this "I am" formula linked Jesus to the tradition of Holy Wisdom, who united various "voices", inner and outer into a greater unity. Here Jesus points out that a deep, evolving, sense of "I" or interiority illuminates and guides all primal matter. The source of this "I" is not personal egotism, but the Only Self – the Holy One. This sense of unfolding is built into every atom of the cosmos, not only the so-called "organic" life.

The desert wisdom teachings have special resonance for me, as I have been leading spiritual retreat groups to the Tunisian Sahara for ten years, often working with this material. There is extraordinary power to these texts when experienced whilst travelling through the desert in caravan style, on foot with camels and nomadic guides, as we do on these trips. However, the qualities of the desert can be evoked much nearer home, with these practices and good attunement. My original copy of *Desert Wisdom* is now yellowing and sandy from repeated trips to the Sahara, one of which was led by Neil himself. As he comments in the second edition, modern life is for nomads. They have a lot to teach us about living with impermanence, without control, finding roots in their sense of community, of divine unity, and oneness with nature.

The second edition of Desert Wisdom by Neil Douglas-Klotz, ISBN 978-1456516475 is available via www.abwoon.com, which also lists Neil's workshops, retreats and other publications: this is shipped from the US. It can be ordered and shipped from the UK via www.dancesofuniversalpeace.org.uk.

Alan Heeks leads weekend retreats in the UK on desert wisdom, and periodic groups in the Sahara: his next UK group is Sept.30-Oct.2. For more info see www.living-organically.com