

## Review of Herschel Shosteck's

### **JOURNEY THROUGH THE NEGEV: AN EXPLORATION OF THE DESERT, GOD, AND MIND OF THE MIDDLE EAST**

**By Hendrick Serrie, Ph.D.**

Herschel Shosteck has written an absorbing account of his trek through the Negev Desert of southern Israel. Setting out with a guide, two camels, and two milk goats, he describes a harsh landscape of sun and heat in which scarcity of water and unrelenting desiccation make life precarious.

This is a landscape of absolutes. Following a rain or coming upon an oasis, life appears in surprise. Like a leopard springing upon an ibex, Death also appears in surprise. A trekker can lose his footing on a cliff or fall through a rock crevasse as unfathomable as that on a glacier. Death may not be sudden, but slow, as a scratch from a thorny bush becomes infected, leading to sudden fever, or one finds oneself lost in the labyrinth of abandoned grazing trails.

The specter of dehydration is constant, and desert explorers must rely on ancient customs as well as modern re-supply at strategic points along the route. The *kafiah* and *burnoose* shield all parts of the body from the implacable sun. Camels carry the travelers, their equipment, provisions, and water and, themselves do not need to be watered for days. The goats forage for themselves along the way and provide milk.

This tiny caravan is bound to each other in a symbiosis of millennia. The camels sometimes bellow in protest at their loads and in anger or exhaustion try to bite. Yet they are obedient to command and will not run away. The goats bleat in terror when accidentally separated from the group. Wild dogs attack, intending to take the goats, which are only saved when shielded by their human protectors.

In undertaking this journey, Shosteck asks why monotheism, the gift of the ancient Hebrews to the world, emerged in the Negev. He is also a pilgrim, seeking a relationship with God that eludes him in the cities of the West. He finds his answers in the Negev's absolutes of life and death, and the terrible penalties exacted by the Bedouin, its people, for any failure to observe the life-preserving customs that they have followed from the times of the Bible and Koran to present.

After sundown, the desert moderates. The scorching sun is gone, the terrible heat of day abates, and the night sky, with the obscuring glow from any city, is filled with brilliant stars. The work of the caravan is done. The animals and humans feed and rest. Life becomes peaceful and gentle.

Though the God of the Bible rises in anger and rains a terrible justice on a humankind lost in depravity, so also He is compassionate and generous with those who repent.

Joseph Campbell has discerned that many of the most important myths from around the world share a basic structure. The hero feels called to adventure, embarks on a perilous quest, finds that which he has been seeking, returns to everyday life, and offers his hard-won gift for the betterment of humankind.

Most everyday men participate vicariously in such quests. In contrast, Shosteck has undertaken one of his own. His book provides us with the riveting experience of an ordinary man's extraordinary venture with a narrative that is vivid and thoughtful indeed.

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