

INTO THE DESERT

By JOHN L. McKENZIE

JERUSALEM has become a large city, and in spite of the medieval quaintness of the walled town, a modern city. Yet, for all the devastations Jerusalem has suffered in its thirty-five hundred years of recorded history, the roots of its past impress themselves upon the observer with a sharpness which he experiences in few other places where man dwells. The impression does not come from the ruins of ancient Jerusalem, for they are few and poor and entirely without the magic of the Acropolis of Athens or the colonnades of Palmyra; it comes from the situation of Jerusalem in a landscape which has changed less with the passage of years than the city has changed, a landscape which at once seems familiar to any one who has read his Bible with assiduity. When one ascends to the top of Jerusalem's towers or to the summit of its neighbouring hills, one is within sight of the desert, and one knows why the desert is mentioned so many times in the Bible. The Israelites could never forget that they had been a desert people, and indeed many of them remained desert people; did one see nomads less frequently near the Israelite cities of Solomon and Ahaz than one sees them in the neighbourhood of the Jerusalem of Hussein? One need not travel many miles from Jerusalem to lose oneself 'in a desert land, in a howling wilderness waste'.¹ But this is only the fringe of the desert wastes of Syria and Arabia, which seem to stretch into infinity. To stand at the threshold of these wastes sobers one's thoughts.

Ernest Renan said that monotheism was born between the twin vastnesses of the desert floor and the desert sky. Between these two vastnesses man sees nothing but himself, and he becomes aware of the 'Thou' voicelessly making its presence felt to his own 'I'. Historians of religion have generally and wisely decided that this theory is nonsense. Man is no more perceptive of the divine reality in the desert than he is in other vast empty spaces, which Renan would have done well to explore, at least by voyaging in books. The desert impresses one no more with its cosmic emptiness than do the Arctic wastes; but the Eskimo has not been an evangelist of monotheism to the world. The experience of the desert is no more mystical than

¹ Deut 31,10.

the experience of the dark grey terror of the North Atlantic, or of a windswept mountain peak buried in its perennial snow, or even of the broad sky seen from 30,000 feet in the air from the cabin of a modern aeroplane. All these elemental scenes have something in common, and that something is not an awareness that God is near; it is an awareness that death is near, which is not quite the same thing. One realises that these vast empty spaces are empty because they reject man; they are actively, murderously hostile. The desert will kill you unless you have the skill and the determination to outfight it and outwit it. It is always something of a shock in a country which is well-equipped with the conveniences which sustain and protect the traveller, when one reads annually of some unwary tourists in, say, the western states of the U.S.A., who perish in the desert as people perished a hundred years ago when they crossed the desert in prairie schooners. These unfortunate people do not realise that when they explore the desert they flirt with death.

This is the fatal charm of the desert, its challenge. In the desert the complexity of civilisation vanishes as if it had never existed; one realises how little of the surface of the globe is available for human life, and one feels that one is an intruder. Life is reduced to a very few simple decisions, and a wrong decision may be fatal. One cannot allow oneself to be distracted from the single purpose, which is survival; and unless one accepts the fact that survival in the desert is totally demanding, one will not survive. The desert, like the Arctic waste, the mountain peaks, the ocean, and the wild blue yonder of the air, is home only to those few who have mastered the highly specialised skills which survival in these elements demands, and who have the will to live to an unusual degree.

Reflection, I think, shows that the desert does not produce the awareness of God as much as it produces the awareness of evil. Those who survive in the desert do so because they know that they are never out of the grip of a malignant force which seeks their lives. They do not pretend that they live in a world where all is right. Where water is very properly and literally life, water ranks among the destructive agents which maintain the desert in its hideous ragged erosion. Rainfall is an event which may happen no more than half a dozen times in a year, and one cannot watch a thunderstorm approaching without knowing why Psalm 28 is written as it is.¹ It is not the gentle friendly rainfall for which the

¹ The voice of the Lord flashes like flames of fire. The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness, the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh'. Ps 28, 7-8.

Church prays and for which the farmer thanks God, and it would never be compared by the desert poet to mercy. The desert dweller runs for shelter, not because he is afraid of getting wet nor because he knows anything of positive and negative charges, but because he has learned that in that empty landscape a man is easily the tallest projection in sight, and he is a sure target for what all desert people call the bolt, the hammer, or the arrow of God. The rain falls in torrents and tears through the ground like a giant harrow, leaving ugly barren furrows where the rock crops to the surface. No, even the forces which man thinks are friendly turn against him in the desert. But while the rare desert thunderstorm is more terrifying, is it any more menacing than the incredibly hot wind which blows from the very heart of the desert, dehydrating and debilitating the desert dweller or, at its worst, blinding him in a whirlwind of sand and obliterating tracks and traces? Then even the nomad whose element is the desert may be lost; and one who is lost in the desert is usually lost forever. The desert is not the place which breeds optimism; the nomad knows, and all who share his life must learn, that there are genuine evil forces which can be mastered only by decision and persistence; one who refuses to admit their reality or discounts their power has already lost the battle with them.

No one can do anything but fear the desert once he has sensed its raw violence. This is perhaps another feature of its fascination, its candour; it is honestly what it is and pretends to be nothing else. It is murderous and unforgiving, but it does not deceive. There is a certain attraction in its naked and undisguised malignancy, which is present even when for a few minutes during early morning and late afternoon hours it is transformed into a paradise of flashing colour. It can mantle itself after the rains in lovely patterns of wild flowers, which it seems to delight in withering: 'the flower of the field which blossoms today and tomorrow is cast into the oven'. For the desert is death, and it will not tolerate life.

Surely if man were to form his idea of God from his desert experience the god so conceived would be created in the image and likeness of the desert. He would be an unforgiving enemy, harsh and cruel. He would in fact be not unlike the Mesopotamian Nergal, who seems to exhibit the character of the murderous burning sun, or of the Syrian Hadad, a stormy warrior who flings his thunderbolts with awesome abandon. The God of Israel was not a reflection of the desert; yet the desert was the scene where man in the Old

Testament encountered God. No one who is at all familiar with the Old Testament can think that the God whom Israel encountered in the desert derived His character from the desert; if He had, no Israelite poet could ever have said that His covenant of love is above all His works. Such a God could have claimed only that terrified submission which man must pay to superior irrational force. The desert imposes a code of life, but it is not the code which Israel attributed to Yahweh. Israel's encounter with Yahweh in the desert introduces us to the desert as a way of life; for it is a way of life and not merely a phenomenon of nature.

The civilisation of Mesopotamia and Canaan of the second millennium B.C. was advanced in more ways than we can easily realise. Its cities were rich and prosperous, its commerce flourished, its agriculture supported large populations. The nomad looks at civilisation with a mixture of envy and contempt: envy for its riches in comparison with his own existence on the margin of starvation, contempt for the toil and the loss of liberty which is the price civilised man pays for his security. More than this, ancient civilised man in Egypt and Mesopotamia and Canaan worshipped the gods which gave him the goods which he most anxiously desired; the civilisation was frankly and grossly materialistic, and its gods were modelled to suit its own ideals. To the Israelite these were false gods which promised spurious goods. Civilised man could never find God in his cities because he never sought God there. To find God man must leave the petty avarice of the cities behind him and go into the desert where the issues, as we have observed, were reduced to a few simple decisions on which life and death depended. In the desert one could see much more clearly what the basic values are; one could not afford to neglect the difference between what is vital and what is not.

I do not mean to suggest by these reflections that I am proposing in a more subtle form the discredited theory of Renan. It is true, nevertheless, that even a revealed religion is conceived by any people in the dominant ideas of its own cultures. There were differences between Greek and Latin Christianity in the early centuries of the Church, just as there are differences slowly emerging at the present time between European Christianity and the Christianity of the Far East. Members of what is a single family of nations in Europe think they detect differences between the churches of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Latin countries. It is extremely difficult to imagine anything like the Neapolitan festival of San

Gennaro being celebrated in Brompton Oratory, London. When Israel encountered Yahweh it was not a settled people, and its thoughts and ways were those of the desert. After Israel became a settled people in Canaan, their conception of their God was enlarged; after all, civilised man must find God too, and he has neither then nor now decided that he must choose between God and civilisation. Israel always knew which choice it would have to make if the choice were put in these ultimate terms. This is the hard choice of the desert which reduces everything to the rigid alternatives of life and death; it is not a place of compromise. The desert encounter with Yahweh left a lasting impression on the religious belief of Israel long after Israel had become a settled people. But as we have noticed, in the land of Israel one is never far from the desert.

The first and classic encounter of God and man in the desert occurs in the vision of Moses.¹ Through the dialogue of this story runs a single theme: the imperious will of Yahweh to deliver His people. The theme is heightened by contrast with the reluctance of Moses to accept the saving will of Yahweh, which is not hard to understand; the deliverance of Israel meant a challenge to the Egypt of the Nineteenth Dynasty, a powerful kingdom. But in the desert there is no room for compromise; one makes the necessary decision to live, or one dies, and Israel could live only by the saving will of Yahweh.

Israel, led by Moses, must journey into the desert to find the God in whose name Moses spoke. Moses encountered Him in the burning bush, and Israel encountered Him at Sinai.² The desert, we have noticed, reveals nature in its harsh cruelty; the Sinai traditions of Israel show a deep awareness of the harshness of the scene. An old tradition, but not nearly as old as Israel, has placed this unique meeting in the Sinai peninsula, which is raw and harsh enough to suit anyone's taste; whether this location is correct or not is of little importance, for any number of desert sites are just as harsh. We are not here attempting to derive Israel's awareness of God from its awareness of the desert; but it is again worth our notice that in an atmosphere such as that of Sinai, Israel could not run and hide from Yahweh as it could do in the fields of Egypt and the cities of Canaan. In the desert there is no place to which one can run; Israel was, once again, brought face to face with a decision to live or to die, and there was no way to evade it. Yahweh, the lord of the

¹ Exod 3. ² Exod 19.

desert, could leave them to perish if they did not accept His saving will. Their deliverance and their survival could be achieved only through the means which He placed before them: a total submission to His will. Yahweh is a desert God in the sense that Israel must accept Him on His own terms if it is to live. The covenant which was its life was formed in the desert.

The desert in Israelite tradition was a place of testing. Modern novelists and playwrights are fond of situations in which the civilised man, suddenly snatched from his artificial climate, his police and fire protection, his easy transportation and the security of his regular routine, must vanquish raw nature with nothing but his bare hands and his wits. In the minds of most of our writers of fiction this is perhaps the only true test of the quality of a man; and many of them seem convinced that the men who succeed best in the forum and the market would fail most miserably in a test with the elements. There is some truth in the conception of The Admirable Crichton. The qualities which keep the Eskimo alive in the Arctic and the Bedawi alive in the desert are not the qualities which would protect him in the streets of London or New York; and the bright young men of Madison Avenue would starve in the desert. The Bedawi, as we have observed, can never forget that survival demands a total dedication; the citizen of New York or London does not conceive his existence in these terms. Whether one test proves more than another is not at the moment relevant nor need it be decided; but it is of interest to note that the Old Testament view of the desert as a place where a man or a people is tested is by no means peculiarly biblical.

It is, however, peculiarly biblical to think of the desert as a place where God is tested; we read this each day in Psalm 94, which stands at the beginning of the divine office.¹ The Israelites explained the old name Massah which stood in their desert traditions as a place where Israel tested Yahweh.² But the desert was also a place where Yahweh tested Israel.³ Anyone who has travelled in a group knows that nothing tests the members of the group like this shared experience; and it is an even more searching test when travel becomes a race with Death. So Yahweh and Israel journeyed through the desert, Yahweh testing Israel's fidelity to the promise

¹ 'Harden not your hearts, as at Meriba, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, When your fathers tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work'. Ps 94,8-9.

² Exod 17,7. ³ Exod 15,25, Deut 8,2.

which it had given and Israel testing Yahweh by stretching His patience, so to speak, to the limit. Israel failed the test, both in obedience and in faith in the power of Yahweh to execute His will to save; and the second failure was more fundamental than the first. Obedience must rest ultimately upon faith in the leadership of him who leads.

Yet while the desert is unforgiving, Yahweh is not. When faith fails and hope is shattered, He alone endures; and Israel recognised that it survived its desert experience because He had carried it in His arms as a man carries his child.¹ The speaker could have added that He carried a wilful and rebellious child. This was the test of Yahweh which revealed His character more clearly than anything else in the experience of Israel. He is proved not only lord of nature, lord of history, king of Israel, but he is proved superior to the mere human level of feeling and decision. When a prophet wished to remind Israel of the fidelity of Yahweh to His word, he appealed to the passage of Israel through the desert.² God, as well as man, is proved in human tribulation.

There is a story of Elijah, who, fortified by heavenly bread, walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God, Horeb, as the mountain is called in some traditions.³ It is obvious that when this story was told its tellers had no idea of where Horeb might be, except that it was a great distance. But it was the place where Israel had met Yahweh, and it was the place where Elijah went to search for Him; for Elijah was sure that He could no longer be found in Israel, where all faith in Him seemed to have disappeared. Israel had surrendered to Canaanite civilisation; it aped the manners and ways of Canaan, and now it worshipped the gods of Canaan. So Elijah thought; and he hoped to find Yahweh where Yahweh had first revealed Himself to Israel and there lay down his life, because Yahweh and Israel had parted. He found Yahweh; but his discovery seems to be a deliberate inversion of the theophany of Sinai. For the elements are in convulsion, as they were in the story of Sinai; but Yahweh was not in the wind nor the earthquake nor the lightning. He is present in a barely perceptible movement of the air; and He assures Elijah that He is still the God of Israel, even when He does not manifest Himself in the convulsions of nature.

Elijah was only the first in a long line of men who have returned

¹ Deut 1,31. ² Jer 2,6. ³ I Kg 19.

to the desert in hope of a new vision of God by which they might restore their faith and their courage. God was no more in Horeb than in Israel, but Elijah had to return to the desert in order to learn this. There, with the complexity of civilisation far behind him, the basic truths came more clearly into view. The desert where the religion of Israel was born is the source whence it draws its strength for renewal.

It was perhaps a hundred years or so after Elijah that another prophet looked at his people Israel and saw that they were still unfaithful to Yahweh. Hosea's conception of Israel, in the opinion of almost all exegetes, was formed in the light of a searing personal experience: the infidelity of his own wife. He is the first to perceive and to express in the relations of man and God the theme of rejected love. Israel sells its heart for wool and flax, grain and wine and oil, gold and silver. These she finds more desirable than the love of Yahweh, and she gives her love to the gods who promise her these things. She has become candidly mercenary. How does one reach the heart of such a person, when there seems to be no heart to reach?

Hosea sees only one possibility for the spiritual regeneration of Israel, and that is a return to the desert.¹ He idealises the traditions of the exodus and the wandering and represents them as a time of Israel's youthful affection and loyalty to Yahweh. Then history was more complicated than this, but the Old Testament takes a simple view of things; in the period of the desert Israel was still a people of the desert and had not yet been seduced by the worldliness of Canaan. Perhaps, if Israel is taken back to the harsh reality of the desert and deprived of the wealth and the luxuries of Canaan, she will recognize once again the spouse of her youth. For the desert is a place where life is reduced to a few vital decisions. It can be for Israel, as it was for Elijah, a place where faith and courage are restored. Israel met Yahweh there for the first time, and she will see Him more clearly if she returns to the desert. With no other noise to distract the attention, Yahweh can 'speak to her heart'. The desert is hideous and cruel, with death stalking those who enter it; but for one in Israel's desperate condition it can be a door of hope.²

It is, then, not surprising that the Gospel begins with 'the word of the Lord which came to John the son of Zachary in the desert'.³ John came not only in the spirit and power of Elijah,⁴ but also in

¹ Hos 2,14.

² Hos 2,15.

³ Lk 3,2; Mt 3,1.

⁴ Lk 1,13.

Elijah's garments and way of life. Elijah of Tishbe in Gilead, wherever this may have been, never appears in the stories of the books of Kings as man with a fixed abode; and John dwells 'in the desert' subsisting on the meagre diet which the desert offers. The kingdom of God is announced from the desert by a man whose life and manner affirm the austere rigour of the desert. His person, like his message, is an antithesis to the ideals of his contemporaries. John announced the greatest crisis in the history of Israel, and he recalled the desert origins of Israel's faith when he announced it. Unless the Jews left their homes and business and went out into the desert to hear the announcement, they probably would not hear it at all.

We have learned in recent years that John was not the only Jew of his time who returned to the desert to discern more clearly the present activity of God. In the same desert region, not far from the place where John preached and baptised, an entire community of Jews resided at Qumran. They withdrew from the world and its business and devoted themselves to an austere life in common and the study of the Law. They too expected the deliverance of Israel, and they felt that they could not prepare for it unless they returned to the desert. Only there, they believed, could they live as God intended them to live; it is evident from their writings that they regarded themselves as the one true Israel, the people of the covenant. The Judaism of the cities and villages, in their opinion, had betrayed its destiny.

Jesus Himself, the new Moses and the new Israel, first went to the desert before He began to announce the Gospel of the kingdom. The forty years of Israel's wandering in the desert are echoed in the forty days of the sojourn of Jesus in the desert. He experienced the full harshness of the desert, for He fasted the entire forty days. The story of the desert sojourn does not tell us that, like Moses and Israel and Elijah, he there found God, for the early Church knew that Jesus did not have to seek God as other men did. The story resumes the theme of the desert as a place of testing, for it is in the desert that Jesus, like Israel, was tempted. Here He proves Himself the new and genuine Israel, for He is superior to the seductions of the tempter. He does not betray God for gain or honour or power, as Israel had done. When He emerges from the desert He has demonstrated His claim to fulfil the destiny of Israel. He emerges charged with that strength which in Israelite tradition is acquired from the struggle of man against the desert. A later New Testament

writer draws comfort from this episode; for we have here a high priest who is not without feeling for our weakness, since He was tested in all ways like us without yielding.¹ We can approach Him with the assurance that He is acquainted with the weakness which makes it necessary for us to ask forgiveness.

Finally, we read that St. Paul did not immediately after his conversion at Damascus take up the apostolate among the Gentiles which Jesus had committed to him, nor did he take counsel with any man, not even with the apostles in Jerusalem; instead he retired for three years to Arabia.² Arabia here can scarcely mean anything except the desert; with the desert background which we have sketched above there can be no doubt that Paul felt the need of the desert experience before he could begin the mission. Paul had found God, or rather God had found him, in an entirely unique vocation; nevertheless, the full meaning of the vocation could not be penetrated unless Paul retired to the traditional source of spiritual strength, the place where man meets God. There he could determine whether he fully accepted the vocation and all that it implied, and there he could reflect upon what its execution demanded. We usually think of Paul as a man of the Hellenistic city which he knew so well, the cosmopolitan traveller who was at home in so many urban centres; we do not think of him as another Elijah or John the Baptist. But before Paul plunged into the crowded bustling cities he had steeled himself by three years of rugged desert life; he does not explain why he spent three years in the desert nor what he did there. To those who knew Israelite traditions no explanation was necessary, and to those who did not no explanation was possible. The New Testament contains a number of allusions to the desert experience and the desert testing of Israel, both from Paul himself and from others;³ the desert history of Israel is a type of the Christian spiritual experience, from which Christians may learn the meaning of what happens to them.

Across the Nile from the city of Aswan in Egypt and a mile or two downstream is an impressive ruin which, unlike most of the ruins of Egypt, is not a relic of the work of the Pharaohs. It was once the monastery of St. Simeon, and it is one of the larger remnants of the great movement into the desert of the fourth and fifth centuries of our era. Although the site is only a short distance from the city, the division between the irrigated land and the desert in Egypt is

¹ Heb 4,15. ² Gal 1,16-17. ³ 1 Cor 10,5; Heb 3,7-19; Acts 3,17.

so sharp that a short walk takes one out of this world. The monastery lies in an entirely dead wilderness of sand and rock, and the silence is palpable. Here we are near the origins of the monastic life, which left buildings like this in the Thebaid, and in the desert near Antioch and Aleppo in Syria, and at the desert ruin of Mar Saba in Palestine not far from Qumran. Abandoned now, these ruins attest the weariness of the world which was so general in the late years of the Roman Empire and drove many men into the desert to see if perchance they could find there what the world did not offer. Quite often, it seems, they were merely in flight from a world which had grown intolerable; one cannot compare such flights to the desert with the sojourn of Jesus and Paul. The sad history of many of these monasteries attests the barrenness of a life which was as barren as the desert life. Seeking God in the desert demands more than a geographical change.

On the first Sunday of Lent the Church reads to us the Gospel of Matthew 4,1-11, which tells of the temptation of Jesus in the desert. Traditionally the season of Lent has been called a return to the desert for the Christian. I have set forth the biblical background of this allusion in the hope that the spiritual experience of the desert may be better understood. For a spiritual experience of the desert does emerge from the passages which are cited; the elements of this experience have already been mentioned, and we have only to bring them together.

We are not, of course, speaking of the desert as a geographical phenomenon; we are venturing into the somewhat insecure field of typology, where it is easy to find glittering generalities and lose light of what the Bible says. But if there is a genuine typology here at all, it seems to lie not in the geographical features of the desert, but in the spiritual atmosphere of the desert as the Bible reveals it. The spiritual atmosphere is not divorced from the geographical features. Man is not a pure form; his moods and his thinking and his decisions do not exist in a world of beautiful and objective abstractions unaffected by sense perceptions and emotional disturbances. They are deeply affected by what he eats and drinks and how well he likes it, by the weather, by the scenery; our response to such environmental factors may not be deliberate, but it is no less real. The spiritual atmosphere of the desert is man's response to its gaunt and hostile face. It makes man aware, as we have noticed, that the universe is not simply his friend; it makes him aware that evil is real and active. It reminds him that he is never far from death.

Against its threat the ideals and ambitions of the world beyond the desert look insignificant; and he learns that the one basic good which he must preserve at all costs is life. When he flees the desert to the security of civilisation where the naked menace of death is hidden, is he to think that he is returning to reality or fleeing from it? Which is reality, the desert or the world outside it? When the Church invites us to sojourn in the desert, she would have us face the reality of death and evil and stop pretending that it does not exist.

The desert, we have seen, reduces the complexity of life to a few simple and ultimate issues; in fact, it reduces these issues to one, which is whether one wishes to live or to die. If one wishes to live, one must take the necessary means. The desert does not forgive frivolity. The Church would have us breathe the spiritual atmosphere of the desert and enjoy the clarity of vision which the desert demands. In this atmosphere and with this vision we can see that our life is resolved into a few ultimate issues, and that a decision must be made. She would have us create spiritual atmosphere by the traditional austerities of Lent; through them we learn, as the desert dweller knows, that very little is needed to sustain life. If we can ever for a short period of time treat the world as if it did not exist, we shall learn that it is for practical purposes nonexistent, a sham reality. Against the threat of evil and death it is unable to protect us.

It is in the desert that Israel and her great men found God, and it is in this spiritual atmosphere that the Church would have us seek God. She would lead us into the desert, as Hosea describes Yahweh leading Israel into the desert, and there God can speak to our heart. Like Israel, we are entirely devoted to the acquisition of things like wool and flax, grain and wine and oil, silver and gold; if God is to speak to us, either we must go into the desert to hear Him or He will snatch us from the security of our little world and drop us into a vast silence where nothing but His voice can be heard. In an appalling vision Jeremiah saw the garden land blasted into desert by the fierce heat of God's anger;¹ if men will not return to the desert to find God, He will make their cities a desert where no sound drowns out His voice.

The Church wishes Lent to be a period of testing, as the desert experience was a testing. How, we may ask, are we tested? Surely the little abstinences by which we exhibit our penitential spirit

¹ Jer 4,26.

cannot be considered a serious test. Nor did the Church ever consider the mere flight into the desert, even the frightening austerities of the Lents of earlier centuries, as the true testing of Lent. The test of the Christian is whether he can withdraw from his habitual desires and interests sufficiently to meet God on God's terms. The abstinences of Lent in modern times are scarcely more than a ritual symbol of our readiness to follow God into the desert; but the symbol ought to symbolise something. The Gospel of the first Sunday of Lent places before us some fundamental issues on which the attitude of most of us is ambiguous: wealth, honour, and power. One need not desire much of these to desire them to excess; the world has suffered more from little Napoleons than it has suffered from big ones, and the greed of a million little men corrupts us far more than the occasional raids of a really great thief. The desert has no room for men of this stamp, and if we enter the spiritual atmosphere of the desert we are tested to see whether we are what we profess to be.

It appears, then, that the Bible and the Church tell us that we must go into the desert, the very embodiment of evil and death, in order to find life. And indeed they do. But is the paradox of this invitation any other than the paradox uttered by Jesus Himself, who tells us that he who wishes to save his life must lose it?