

## Book Review

***Sonorous Desert: What Deep Listening Taught Early Christian Monks—and What It Can Teach Us.* By Kim Haines-Eitzen. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2022. xx + 145 pp. ISBN: 9780691232898. \$20.95 (cloth); \$19.95 (eBook); \$19.95 (audio).**



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In *Sonorous Desert: What Deep Listening Taught Early Christian Monks—and What It Can Teach Us*, Kim Haines-Eitzen combines descriptive prose, thoughtfully edited sound recordings, and profound lessons from early Christian history to lead her reader through desert landscapes and their historical significance to the Christian monks that made their spiritual home there. Rather than remaining solely in the past, Haines-Eitzen draws the narrative forward to encompass the changing soundscapes in the era of the Anthropocene, as well as the ever-present tension we experience when we attempt to seek quietness and stillness in our busy lives.

The text reads much like a journey with a trusted friend—that is, a friend that is incredibly passionate about sound and silence, religion, and deserts. We begin with a story from Haines-Eitzen about her life growing up in Jordan and vacationing on the shores of the Red Sea and the desert spaces her family traversed to get there—the Wadi Qilt and the Sinai Desert, as well as the Christian monasteries these places call home. Her own habit of making sound recordings of the spaces she visited—particularly deserts—as a kind of souvenir led her to seek answers to questions of how listening to the world around us can transform our engagement with modern life.

Haines-Eitzen then covers a brief history of desert monasticism beginning with St. Antony, a desert hermit. Through the story of St. Antony, Haines-Eitzen reveals a pivotal theme for the text: paradox. She explains that early Christian monks sought the desert as “a place of profound paradox that sparked the imagination: a place of hot and cold, deathly dry but also home to violent floods, dangerous and yet potent with revelation and salvation, seemingly empty but with abundant evidence of humans and other animals, and surprisingly noisy and silent” (6). Haines-Eitzen aptly summarizes the spiritual paradoxes within the desert by using the title of a nature book she picked up at a visitor’s center: *God’s Country or Devil’s Playground* (59). She supplements the information she provides on early Christian monasticism with a glossary on related terms and a guide to monastic texts in the appendices of her book.

The ensuing chapters, titled “A Way of Silence in a Noisy World,” “Monastic Desert Soundscapes,” “Echoes in Sacred Canyons,” “Ascent at Sonorous Sinai,” and “Finding Home in the Desert” draw the reader from an academic consideration of the topic toward a tangible

means of engagement with the lessons learned. Even the way they are named and positioned within the text brings the reader from confusion to familiarity in the desert landscape. I believe that what Haines-Eitzen seeks to communicate most clearly through her book is that listening acts as a bridge between knowledge, sensation, and action: “[t]hrough listening we cross the threshold of time, place, and practice to embrace a rich and sonorous life” (xx).

The clear strength of this book is Haines-Eitzen’s extraordinary effort to invite the reader to listen *with* her. Her beautiful writing does much toward this end, but it is the “coda” at the end of every chapter that fully realizes this goal. Accompanied by a scannable QR code, the codas link the reader to brief recordings (usually around two to three minutes) of the desert spaces which Haines-Eitzen studied and in which she reflected. A list at the very end of the book reveals the locations of these recordings: they range from the Negev to the American Southwest. A paragraph is included with each coda artfully describing what a listener will hear in each recording. In her introductory note to “readers and listeners,” Haines-Eitzen also includes a URL to the recordings as an alternative means of access.

Despite the obvious difficulties involved in the combination of soundscapes and academic texts, Haines-Eitzen capably brings these together as seamlessly as possible. Because of her work to this end, as well as the quality of her writing, the book feels easily accessible to non-academic audiences. Its title may suggest something akin to personal development (by way of early Christianity and desert landscapes); but rather than provide straightforward answers to questions of silence and stillness in modern life, the book leaves its reader with intricate paradoxes to ponder—and for this, it is all the better.

For readers interested in ecotheology, desert monasticism, creating a balanced relationship between quietude and busyness in their lives, this book comes at my highest recommendation. Even for readers who are unfamiliar or uninterested by such topics, this book is excellent for its invitational questions and experiences it provides for the reader.

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