

Thematic Questions: Wilfred Thesiger, *Arabian Sands* (pp. 319-330)

1. Thesiger contends that the bedouin choose to live under “appalling conditions” (p. 327). What does Thesiger’s belief that “choice” has brought to the Bedouin to the desert say about his own motivation for travelling through the Empty Quarter? How might we relate this statement to the sentiment expressed in the “Prologue” (p. 15) of *Arabian Sands*?

2. Thesiger explains his reasons for visiting the Empty Quarter as follows:

“For me, exploration was a personal venture. I did not go to the Arabian Desert to collect plants nor to make a map; such things were incidental. At heart I knew that to write or even to talk of my travels was to tarnish the achievement. I went there to find peace in the hardship of desert travel and the company of desert peoples. I set myself a goal on these journeys, and, although the goal itself was unimportant, its attainment had to be worth every effort and sacrifice. Scott had gone to the South Pole in order to stand for a few minutes on one particular and almost inaccessible spot on the earth’s surface. He and his companions died on their way back, but even as they were dying he never doubted that the journey had been worthwhile” (p. 278).

What do you make of this statement? Do you find his motives justifiable or even laudable?

3. Looking at the last two pages of *Arabian Sands* (pp. 329-330), what social, political, and economic developments foretell the end of “traditional” Bedouin life? Where else have we seen these developments described?

4. Re-read the “Preface to the 1991 Reprint” (p. 10) of *Arabian Sands*. Based on your reading of the final chapter of *Arabian Sands* (“The Closing Door”), how expected or unexpected are the sentiments expressed therein?

5. *Cage Match*: Which of the following authors – T.E. Lawrence, Amin al-Rihani, Frey Stark or Wilfred Thesiger – offers the “best” account of his/her experience on the Arabian Peninsula. You may define “best” however you wish: literary style, adherence to or deviation from orientalist tropes, how compelling the narrative is, personal motivation for travel, etc. Be prepared to argue on behalf of one of them.