

PRAISE FOR *HOPE IN THE WILDERNESS*

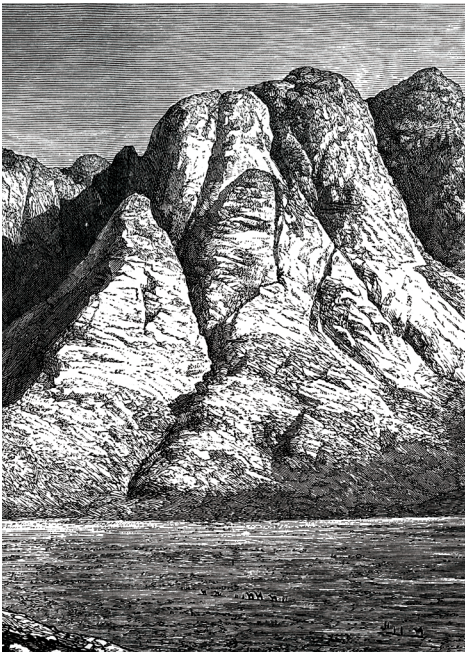
The book of Numbers is often described a bit like the American Midwest. Many people from the East and West Coasts think of it as “flyover country,” something without much real substance. However, just as the Midwest has its good (and bad) points, so, too, does the history of the people of Israel recorded in Numbers. R. Reed Lessing has produced a study that will show you how the book of Numbers is relevant to Christians and Christian living today. His book helps you see not only the point of the vivid stories of Israel’s sins in Numbers but even the relevance of the census chapters, Balaam and his prophecy-for-hire that did not turn out as Balak hoped, and the worship laws recorded in Numbers 28–29. Lessing’s devotional style makes this the ideal book for those who want to know the book of Numbers better while applying it to their daily walk of faith.

—**Andrew E. Steinmann**, distinguished professor emeritus of theology and Hebrew, Concordia University Chicago



HOPE IN THE WILDERNESS

Practical Insights from the Book of Numbers



R. REED LESSING

**FOR ASHER,
ONE OF THE TWELVE TRIBES OF ISRAEL,
AND ONE OF MY DEAR GRANDSONS.**



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The LORD give you peace. (Numbers 6:26 ESV)

Who likes numbers? Mathematicians, accountants, statisticians, and investment bankers. The rest of us? Not so much. That's why we prefer biblical books like Jeremiah, Jonah, John, and James. The book of Numbers? Are we really edified by knowing that the tribe of Reuben has 46,500 soldiers? How does that inspire our life of faith?

When was the last time you looked at Numbers? Maybe it was part of a Bible reading program. To get from Leviticus to Deuteronomy, you had to slog your way through Numbers. And now you're ready for a deeper dive?

Origen (ca. AD 185–253), an early church leader, compared Numbers to food. Did he use adjectives like delicious, delightful, and delectable? Not quite. Instead, Origen described Numbers as food that's "tasteless." He's not alone. Be honest. Your heart probably didn't leap for joy when your church announced, "The next Bible study is going to be on Numbers!"

While I was working on this book, a friend asked me what I was up to. With great enthusiasm, I cleared my throat and announced, "I'm writing a book on Numbers!" His response? "Ha! Good luck finding anyone who wants to read that!" But you're here! There's hope!

Numbers may begin and end with eye-glazing lists—much like telephone books of yesteryear. But Moses, the book's author, also traces Israel's journey from Mount Sinai to the cusp of the Promised Land—describing the nation's highs and lows with dramatic flair. To spice things up, he even throws in a talking donkey. And Numbers has tons of variety: stories, instructions for worship, legal disputes, census lists, a travel itinerary, and military battles.

That said, I need to be honest. There are sections in Numbers that are tough sledding. Have you ever been to a high school track meet?

I have, many times. My son Jonathan ran the 4 × 100-meter relay race (the first event in the morning) and pole-vaulted (the last event in the afternoon). Between the racing and the vaulting, I dutifully sat in the stands. It was like watching paint dry. But it was my son Jonathan, so it was worth it.

Numbers is worth it too. I promise. Why? Because the book paints a beautiful and captivating portrait of Jesus. The background for Christ's bread of life discourse in John 6 is Numbers 11—where Israelites complain about manna. And events in Numbers 21 foreshadow Christ's death on the cross (John 3:14–15), providing the backdrop for the Bible's most famous verse, John 3:16.

Then there's Balaam. His oracles contain remarkable references to Jesus. In his first oracle, Balaam alludes to God's promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Numbers 23:10; cf. Genesis 13:16; 28:24)—pointing to the greatness and grandeur of Christ's kingdom. Balaam's second oracle is about Israel's king (Numbers 23:21; cf. Genesis 17:6, 16; 35:11), who comes through the tribe of Judah (Numbers 23:24; cf. Genesis 49:9). This is Jesus, our Lord. In his third oracle, Balaam speaks of Christ's exalted status (Numbers 24:7) and connects the messianic lion of Judah (Numbers 24:9; cf. Genesis 12:3; 49:9; Amos 1:2) to Jesus, who triumphed over the grave (Revelation 5:5). Balaam's final oracle speaks of the Messiah as "not near" (Numbers 24:17). When Christ arrives, however, He will be the star from Jacob (cf. Matthew 2:2; Revelation 22:16) and wield a royal scepter (cf. Genesis 49:10). Jesus will then forever defeat all enemies—including devils, demons, darkness, and even death (cf. Genesis 49:9; Revelation 19:11–21).

In addition to these significant messianic predictions, Moses also composed Numbers to show us how to survive during in-between times.

In-between. It's a seminal idea in Numbers, describing Israel's journey to a tee. Moses and crew are bounded by Egypt to the south and Canaan to the north. They're straddling salvation accomplished (at the Red Sea) and salvation to come (crossing the Jordan River into the Promised Land).

Does this sound familiar? You and I also live between our past and our glorious future. In Holy Baptism, God began a good work in us. He will complete it on the day Christ returns (cf. Philippians 1:6).

If you're like me, during life's betwixt and between times, you chomp at the bit. "Something has to change!" In the meantime? You trudge from one day to the next. It's all so bland and boring—just more details and deadlines and disappointments. "I don't have time for this! Keep doing the same thing today I did yesterday? I want big things with big excitement! And what do I get? A screaming toddler at night; a spouse's morning breath the next morning; and a huge headache at work by noon."

There are a million ways to distance myself from life's dailiness. It's so easy to numb out the monotony and dullness of it all. Soon something BIG will come along and whisk me away. But today? Oh, I'll go through the motions. I'll hold on until this tedious season passes. But I refuse to be a happy camper!

What do I miss with this kind of attitude? Everything! I miss being present in the present. I fool myself into thinking that today is the warm-up so it's not *that* important. It's just spring training. The real games—those that count—they're almost within reach. But not today.

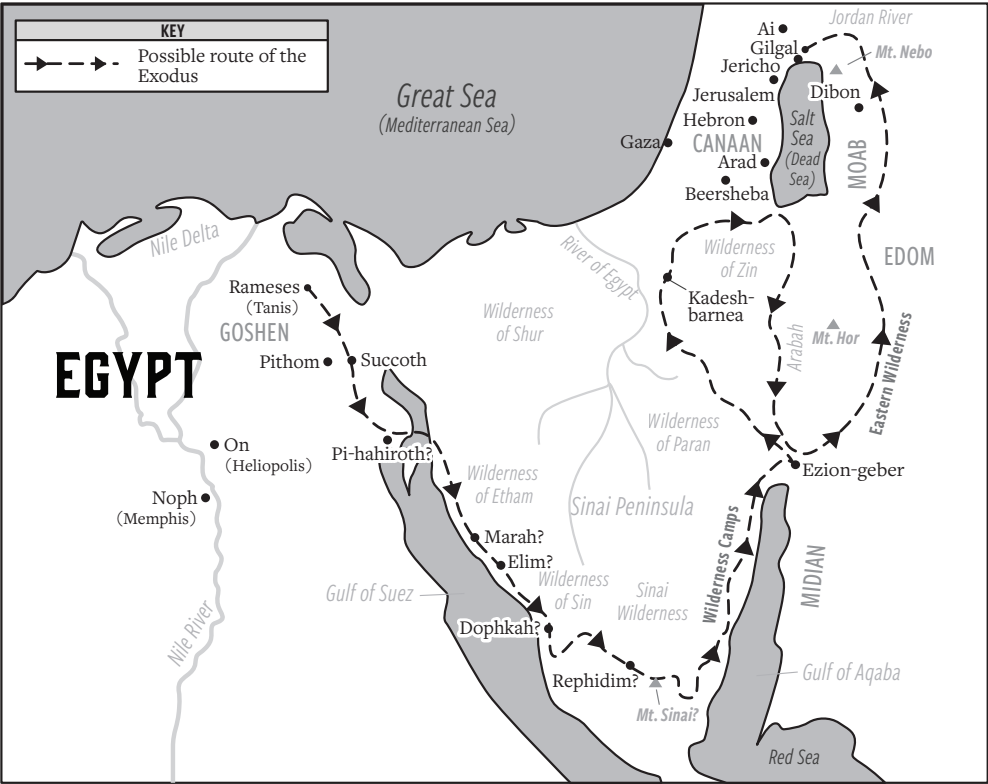
What do people think about me when I have this kind of attitude? "He's detached." "He's got his mind on other things." "He's in a big hurry to get somewhere." "Why, just look at that impatient look on his face!"

There's a better way. We find it in the book of Numbers. Moses teaches us what to avoid, what to do, and how to thrive during in-between times. He also points us to the mercy and might of Jesus, who empowers us to stay faithful when we're circling and stuck in the wilderness.

I invite you get your Bible and a pen. Numbers won't be a quick jog around the block or a short trip to the store. It will be a journey—but a journey worth taking. Let's get started!

A MAP OF ISRAEL’S ROUTE FROM SINAI TO CANAAN

ISRAEL’S EXODUS FROM EGYPT AND ENTRY INTO CANAAN



ISRAEL’S ITINERARY	
Geographical Location	Duration
<i>Rescue from Egypt</i> (Exodus 3:1–15:21)	Several months
<i>Travel to Sinai</i> (Exodus 15:22–18:27)	One month, fourteen days
<i>Camped at Sinai</i> (Exodus 19:1–Numbers 10:10)	Eleven months and nineteen days
<i>Travel to Kadesh</i> (Numbers 10:11–12:16)	Two to three months
<i>Camped In and Around Kadesh</i> (Numbers 13:1–20:21)	Thirty-seven years
<i>Kadesh to the Plains of Moab</i> (Numbers 20:22–22:1)	Several months
<i>Camped on the Plains of Moab</i> (Numbers 22:2–36:13)	Several months
<i>Total</i> (Numbers 32:13)	Forty years

Note: Kadesh and Kadesh Barnea are synonymous names for the same place located in the desert of Paran, which is in the wilderness of Zin.

NAVIGATING NUMBERS: AN OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.
(Philippians 1:6 ESV)

One afternoon, three men were walking on an ocean beach when they came across an old lamp. The first man picked it up and began to rub it. Out popped a genie. The genie said, “I’m here to give each of you one wish.” The first man didn’t hesitate. “I want a million dollars!” POOF! A million dollars appeared before him. The second man exclaimed, “I want a mansion right here on the beach!” POOF! A beautiful mansion appeared, and the genie handed him keys to his new home. The third guy? “Make me irresistible to women!” POOF! The genie turned him into a box of chocolates!

Suppose you had three wishes; what would you wish for? Or maybe you’d take the high road and say, “Thanks, but no thanks. I already have everything I need.” What would happen next? The genie would faint and need to be revived with smelling salts!

Our world screams, “You need something bigger, brighter, and better!” Whether it’s the latest iPad, big-screen television, or smartwatch, advertisers incessantly tell us what we lack. They’re out to addict us to what? They entice us to adopt *when-and-then* thinking.

What does that look like? “When I get a new job, then I’ll be happy. When I get a new boss . . . When I get new car . . . When I get a new husband . . . When I get rid of my old husband . . . When I make 10K more a year, lose thirty pounds, move out on my own, get married, move to a different city, join a different church, go on cruise, win the lottery, pay off

my mortgage, then I'll be happy. When my wife quits bugging me, when my boss starts paying attention to me, when my mom quits griping at me, when my dad quits yelling at me, then—and only then—will I be happy.”

Welcome to the book of Numbers.

Before the Israelites place their feet on Canaan's soil, God commands a census be taken, has Moses organize the twelve tribes, dictates how Levites and priests will serve, and gives directives about vows, blessings, sacrifices, and worship. Everything goes like clockwork throughout Numbers 1–10. People appear to be patient, calm, and accommodating. However, once God's glory cloud lifts and begins leading Israel (Numbers 10:11), the nation shows its true colors. *When-and-then* thinking strikes with a vengeance.

After living as state slaves in Egypt, camping at Mount Sinai for almost a year, then saddling up for the journey to the Promised Land, the Israelites quickly become disgruntled. “When we cross the Jordan River, then we'll be happy. When we defeat Jericho, take Jerusalem, and settle in Joppa, then we'll be happy. But now? In the wilderness? Argh!”

Numbers 11–25 describes Israel's callous ingratitude, perpetual complaining, and blindness to God's ongoing mercies. Longing to go back to Egypt, people reject Moses' leadership, have little faith in divine promises, and even get caught up in worshiping other gods. At the root of it all? *When-and-then* thinking.

The Israelites weren't going to break camp at Sinai and defeat the Canaanites the next day. It was going to take time. What do we call that? Living in-between. Between the exodus and land inheritance; between deliverance and the grand goal: life in the Promised Land.

If God's people were going to make their goal, they needed to become satisfied with manna from the sky, water from the rock, and God's guidance through a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. How did the Israelites fair? They caved in to the when-and-then syndrome—time after time. They never found a genie in a bottle.

IN-BETWEEN

Did you know that trapeze artists become good friends? This doesn't surprise me. If I'm flying through the air, I wouldn't want the person catching me to have any lingering resentments toward me! When the flyer lets go of the trapeze, it's too late to reach back for the bar and too soon to be caught. The flyer's job is to be as still as possible and wait for the catcher to catch her. The flyer is where? In-between.

Moses also tells us about a journey that's in progress. Let's drill down into some of the book's details.

The Israelites celebrate the first Passover on the fourteenth day of the first month in 1446 BC. They leave Egypt the next day (Numbers 33:3; cf. Exodus 12:2, 6), arrive at Mount Sinai roughly a month later (Exodus 19:1), and then take a year to learn about God's laws as well as build the tabernacle (Exodus 40:2, 17). One month later, the nation begins preparing to leave Sinai for the Promised Land—the first day of the second month in 1445 BC (Numbers 1:1). On the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud goes up from over the tabernacle and the Israelites begin their journey from Sinai to Canaan (Numbers 10:11–12).

For the next forty years? Things were better than they were in Egypt, but not as good as they were going to be in Canaan. The Israelites lived between freedom from slavery and entry into the land flowing with milk and honey. They were bounded by the known and the unknown, the familiar and the scary, the past and the future. What's that like?

We know. In Christ, the new creation has broken into this present age (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Hebrews 6:5), yet we still experience setbacks, besetting sins, and crushing rejection. John puts it this way: "We are God's children *now*, and what we will be has *not yet* appeared" (1 John 3:2). Now. Not yet. We straddle the present evil age and the glorious age to come. We long for Jesus to return and transform this world into paradise. In the meantime, in the between time, like Israel, we stumble through the wilderness.

Oh, we happen upon an oasis every now and then. Thank God! But they're the exception, not the rule. The rule? Like Israelites in the book of Numbers, we're between the promise issued and the promise inherited. We know God can, but He hasn't yet—at least not finally and fully.

"I'm at the *midway* point of my project." "Welcome to *Intermediate Algebra*." "I'm *halfway* home." Oh, the thrill of starting! Oh, the ecstasy of finishing! But being in between? Ugh.

Interim seasons don't come for our comfort. God uses them to mold and shape us to become more like Christ. In-between days are God's invitation to learn how to wait and grow in faith. We don't need less of these times. We need more insight into how to mature from them.

No doubt about it!

I'm a lot like the grouching and griping Israelites. During between times, my attitude can become sour. I can protest and pout with the best of them. I get depressed and down in the mouth. This outlook even impacted Moses. He became so despondent in the wilderness that at one point he prayed to die (Numbers 11:10–15). The more the winds howl and the sand blows, the more vulnerable we become to when-and-then sinking thinking. At that point, we're tempted to make bad decisions and hook up with bad actors. We end up in bad places. Why? We want the Promised Land right *now*.

HURRY UP AND WAIT

None of us likes to wait. We scowl at the person who dares, *who dares*, to take eleven items into the ten-item express line. We weave through traffic like we're in the Daytona 500, looking for the fastest lane. We sit at red lights, inching our car ever closer to the one in front of us, saying under our breath, "Come on! Come on!" None of us likes to wait. Not on the doctor. Not on the traffic. Not on the pepperoni pizza.

The teenager? Waiting to make the team. The young couple? Waiting to get pregnant. The man with the depressed look? Waiting for a second chance. The elderly woman with the cane? Waiting for one painless day.

Adam waits for Eve. Noah waits for flood waters to subside. Abraham waits for a son. Jacob waits to marry Rachel. Hannah waits for a child. Jesus spends forty days in the wilderness as He waits to begin His public ministry. The point?

Change is slow. It takes time. Don't believe me? Look out your window and you'll probably see some trees. Trees play the long game. Trees, by their very nature, refuse instant gratification. So does most of creation—that is, with one exception. People.

Delays? Postponements? Not now!

Transitional times are defining—for nations and for individuals. They define our character and chart the course for our future. The decisions we make during these seasons are pivotal—a truth we repeatedly encounter in the book of Numbers.

THE MIDDLE INNINGS

Baseball fans! How much glitz and glamour is there in being a middle relief pitcher? None! Who gets the spotlight, as well as the money? Starting pitchers and closers. Taking the mound in the sixth inning and pitching through the bottom of the eighth doesn't win you a lot of fans.

How often do we find ourselves in the middle innings? Driving from work to home. Mediating between two upset children or two angry adults. Waiting for a new job, a new relationship, or a new school. How do we respond? We moan and groan and pick a bone.

The highlight reel of our lives includes events like finishing college, getting married, having children. It might also feature promotions, breakthroughs, advances, and dream vacations. Our response? “Hip, hip, hooray, and hallelujah! Life is great and oh so grand!”

Then there's the rest of life: losses, heartaches, hospital stays, good-byes, breakups, funerals, and rock-bottoms. Hopeless knocks on the door. We let him in. And it goes downhill from there. It feels like our hurt will never leave. We give up, give in, and go down with the ship. “Why is this taking so much time?”

All we see is regimen and routine. The ordinary, the mundane, the dull, and the predictable. SSDD. Same stuff, different day. “Give me a mountain to climb, a project to tackle. I’m ready!” But in between, time grinds to a halt. Ticktock. Ticktock. Ticktock.

In-between doesn’t have a lot of glitz and glamor. It’s raising toddlers. Waiting in line at the gas station. Staring out the window wondering what’s next. Wouldn’t it be great if we could get in a Formula 1 race car and speed past these days? Cut in line and get to the front? Skip it all and get on with getting on?

No, it wouldn’t. Why? We’d miss life. Sunrises and sunsets. Building relationships. Getting on our knees repeatedly and crying out to God for help and forgiveness and love.

The more we let impatience call the shots, the less we enjoy the now. In our longing for the extraordinary, we miss the ordinary. These moments and these days. This season. If we want to live life to the glory of God, we must embrace the present reality. Yes, it can be agonizing. And frustrating. Waiting is never a walk in the park.

What if we never learn how to embrace our in-between seasons? What if we succumb to when-and-then thinking? What if (God forbid!) we become like Israelites in the book of Numbers? Much of life will be wasted. Is that putting it too strongly? I don’t think so.

SMARTPHONE ADDICTIONS

What occupies us during in-between times? When we’re waiting and waiting and waiting? That’s easy. It’s our smartphone. Do you check your phone regularly for some form of message (Facebook, Instagram, text, email, and so on) even when you don’t get a notification? Do you always keep your phone with you or in close proximity? Do you sleep with your phone? Do you feel your phone vibrating or hear it ringing when it isn’t? If you answer yes to any of these questions, you may have what psychologists call “nomophobia”—the fear of not having access to a mobile phone or mobile phone services. “I can’t believe it! There’s no cell-phone service here!”

The reason we check our phones so often is because of dopamine, the hormone of happiness. Every time we get a notification, our dopamine level rises because we believe something new and interesting is happening. Our phone becomes our slot machine—we may win big or lose it all. Is there something better to do with my in-between times than be obsessed with my phone? How about this? Study the book of Numbers.

THE BOOK OF NUMBERS IN 1 CORINTHIANS AND HEBREWS

We're learning that, far from being musty, dusty, irrelevant accounting of Israelite history, Numbers is a book for today, for Christians, for our times, for our lives. That's also what we find in the books of 1 Corinthians and Hebrews.

Paul reminds the cantankerous Corinthians that the journey to the heavenly promised land begins just like Israel's did—through water and God's Word. "All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Corinthians 10:2 ESV). Paul uses the word *all* five times in 1 Corinthians 10:1–4. God was rich in mercy to every Israelite. They all passed through the sea. They all were baptized. They all ate the same spiritual food. They all drank from the Rock. Men and women. Rich and poor. Young and old. God loved them all.

Next, Paul teaches Christians in Corinth that Christ is the Rock that sustained God's people during their in-between times (1 Corinthians 10:4). Just as Israel's Red Sea deliverance points to Christian Baptism and its spiritual food and drink prefigure God's gifts in the Holy Supper, so also the Rock that followed the Israelites foreshadows Jesus.

Despite these Gospel gifts bestowed upon the Israelites, Paul says that "with most of them God was not pleased" (1 Corinthians 10:5 ESV). What a massive understatement! The fact of the matter is that two—just *two*—Israelites from the cohort of adults that left Egypt made it to Canaan: Joshua and Caleb. Why? The others grew tired and succumbed to impatience. "If we can't be in Canaan in less than two weeks, forget it!"

Paul further reminds the Corinthians about Israel's sins. These include worshiping the golden calf (1 Corinthians 10:7; cf. Exodus 32),

engaging in sexual immorality (1 Corinthians 10:8; cf. Numbers 25), testing God (1 Corinthians 10:9; e.g., Numbers 21), and grumbling against Moses (1 Corinthians 10:10; e.g., Numbers 11, 12, 16). Paul's point? These Israelites were a tough group! Don't become like them!

The New Testament book of Hebrews provides another Christian application of Numbers. The author warns us about becoming rebellious and unbelieving like the Israelites (Hebrews 3:16–19). Yet that book's chief way of interpreting Numbers is through Psalm 95:7–11. “*Today*, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers put Me to the test and put Me to the proof, though they had seen My work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, ‘They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known My ways.’ Therefore I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest’” (ESV). Hebrews 3:7–11 quotes these verses almost word for word.

In his application of Psalm 95, the writer of Hebrews emphasizes the word “today.” It appears in Hebrews 3:7, 13, 15; 4:7 (two times). By highlighting the present moment, “today,” the Hebrews author places us into the narrative of Numbers—just like Paul does in 1 Corinthians 10. You and I are traveling in the wilderness now, *today*!

The author of Hebrews further points out that, like God's people in Numbers, his audience had experienced God's saving gifts but may end up rejecting Him (Hebrews 6:4–6; 10:29; 12:25). Sluggishness (Hebrews 6:12) could lead to something far worse—apostasy (Hebrews 10:26). Take heed, God says to the recipients of Hebrews. Don't be like the Israelites, who failed to spiritually mature (Hebrews 5:11–6:2).

Those who left Egypt as adults, who fizzled so miserably throughout Numbers 11–25, provide further impetus for the clarion call in Hebrews not to neglect God's Word (Hebrews 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:8). Neglect may turn into contempt, and contempt may turn into hardened revolt. Those who “turn away from the living God” (Hebrews 3:12) reject the sacrifice for sins provided by Christ and therefore negate His saving power (Hebrews 6:6; 10:29). This leads to life's ultimate tragedies: the