

Thesis 1: In the book of Numbers, the wilderness is not merely a geographic location but a state of being in which God's people learn to trustingly follow the voice of Yahweh, their Good Shepherd.

Thesis 2: In the Bible, Egypt is portrayed as a watery grave—Sheol—ruled by Pharaoh, a dragon-like king empowered by demonic forces.

Thesis 3 (The Unifying Thesis): Egypt explains what God delivered Israel from, while the wilderness of Numbers explains how God intended Israel to live—as sheep who follow their Shepherd's voice. Israel's disobedience to Yahweh and their longing to return to Egypt are, therefore, treacherous acts by which God's people reject life in favor of death and enslavement to demonic forces.

Arguments in Support of Thesis 1¹

- The wordplay of “*bemidbar*” (in the wilderness)...
 - The Hebrew word for “wilderness,” *midbar*, shares the same root consonants as *dibbur* (*d-b-r*) which translates as “word” or “utterance”.
 - In Aramaic, this same root (*d-b-r*) may also be used of a shepherd leading sheep by his voice.
 - Midrashic commentators therefore understood the wilderness as the place of God's voice. “Wilderness (*midbar*) is, in essence, but utterance (*dibbur*)” (*Exod. Rab. 2:5*).
- “According to the Mouth of Yahweh”...
 - A phrase used repeatedly throughout Numbers to refer to Israel, Moses, and others responding obediently to God's voice.
 - Key examples in Numbers include: 3:16; 4:37, 41, 45; 9:18, 23; 10:13...
- Moses and Joshua as Shepherds Over Israel...
 - Num. 27:15-17
- Jesus, the Good Shepherd...
 - John 10:1-5: Jesus says that His sheep hear his voice and He leads them out.

¹ For a more thorough treatment of everything in my talk and on this handout, please see L. Michael Morales' commentary, *Numbers 1-19*.

Arguments in Support of Thesis 2

- Everyone's going down...to Egypt...
 - Egypt is referred to using “downward” orientation language many times throughout the Pentateuch.
 - This includes explicit references to “going down to Egypt” as well as implied when people “go up out of Egypt.”
 - Key examples in Genesis include:
Gen. 12:10; 26:2; 37:25; 42:2; 43:5, 7, 15, 20, 22; 44:23, 26; 45:9, 13.
- A Caravan to the Land of the Dead...
 - *Gen. 37:25*
 - Gum, balm, and myrrh (funerary supplies)
 - Traveling *down* to Egypt
- A Watery Grave...
 - Psalm 88:3-7 - Sheol is portrayed using imagery of deep, overwhelming waters.
 - “Bracketed by the waters of the Nile (Exodus 2) and the sea (Exodus 14), waters of death in both contexts, the literary place of Egypt between those bookends is pervaded by the symbolism of Sheol, the watery abode of the dead.”²
- A Dragon in the River...
 - Ezekiel describes Pharaoh as a dragon occupying the streams and rivers of Egypt. “Behold, I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his streams, that says, ‘My Nile is my own; I made it for myself’” (Ez. 29:3).
- Yahweh Judges Pharaoh and Egypt’s gods...
 - Exodus 12:12-13; 29-32 (judgment on Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt)
 - Exodus 15:11-15 (“Who is like you, O YHWH, *among the gods?*”)

² L. Michael Morales, *Exodus Old and New: A Biblical Theology of Redemption*, 51-52.