



## Crunching Numbers: the Uppity Lady Letters



By Liz Andersson and Helen Trent

Introduction –

In April, Liz lost her wallet, couldn't sleep and decided a good way to keep calm was to read the Bible. The place to start: the Book of Numbers, since she had never read it before. Numbers turned out to be a lot more interesting than she had thought, so she wrote to Helen about it and Helen started reading Numbers, too

After a few weeks, Liz forgot about the wallet and began to focus on how to relate to the old writings. She chose to withhold judgment and read with an open mind.

Helen has a Jewish relative in her family and wanted to know more about the writings of the Jewish faith as well as using the writings to comment on her own life.

Liz has belonged to the Christian faith for 30 years and Helen for even longer. Liz is a lay-person while Helen has her Master of Divinity degree and has pastored a few churches. Both can be regarded as seniors.

The letters that follow present six weeks of communication between Liz and Helen. Uppity positions are taken by each on different occasions – perhaps this will be appreciated by other women of a similar spirit as well as to uppity men.

April 14

Hi Helen

I was keeping to my armchair and being such a good convalescent, reading books and in the process of ordering a new one when I discovered me and my wallet had parted company.

I haven't felt such a swirl of emotion for a long time. It felt like a blast from a bomb.

Liz

April 18

Hi Helen -

I just spent some time reading and studying the Bible and praying. I used to do that and experienced great calmness but it's been a while since last time.

I decided to read the Book of Numbers and read the first half of the first chapter. I found it interesting and stimulating although I felt a yawn coming on when preparations for war were being made.

Liz

Hello,

I have just finished a novel by Elizabeth Cunningham called, *The Passion of Mary Magdalene*. Mary is raised as a Celtic priestess and falls in love with Esus and runs a temple whore house. What a great antidote to the male gospels.

Numbers, how boring my dear. I don't even think I could do *Lectio Divina* with that material as I couldn't with Leviticus or a shopping list.

I am ready for a new chapter in my life. My heart is steadier with centering prayer and loving God. I am preaching my first mainstream Christian service, and I am excited about doing the service. It is part of the circle of being rejected by mainstream Christianity, running to MCC as a lesbian clergy, and now returning after so long... life is a healing journey.

Love

Helen

April 19

Hi Helen -

I have a routine of centering myself by writing letters and that's what I was doing today when I was reminded that I have started centering myself by reading the Bible and praying for half an hour.

I started feeling better after doing the same yesterday - and then immediately forgot.

I'm so glad your letter reminded me!

So instead of writing to you right away, I sat down with Numbers and a Bible dictionary and a chapter by chapter commentary.

My reading the past few weeks has otherwise been about the religious community my grandfather grew up in, in Jerusalem.

Each book I find about this community goes into painstaking detail about the Turks, the Jews, the Arabs and many other aspects of life in the area such as Herzl's contribution to the upstart of Zionism.

It is incredibly boring to read. Even more boring than preparations for war. But I read, because it's tangentially connected to something of essence in my life, namely the people I come from on my mother's side.

When I picked up the Bible yesterday it was from remembering the last time I had a routine with Bible study. That was via a delightful pamphlet called "The Upper Room" ordered for me by a friend. Every day a verse was presented, a lay-person wrote something personal about it and the organization provided a prayer connecting to all of that. I was often amazed at how much goodness I received from these simple readings.

Another experience I was reminded of is that if left to my own intelligence rather than someone else's, any contact of any kind with any part of the Bible has not been dreary but like a fresh breath of mountain air.

When I sat down yesterday, I had no clear plan for how I would start so I just let the Bible fall open and it fell open to Numbers and I thought, well, why not. That's one of the books I've never taken a close look at.

I'm into chapter three now and these are the things that strike me:

First, there is a tremendous amount of repetition. Instead of being bored by that, I read the repetitious parts out loud. I feel respect for the hands that have written these words over and over again - it would be so much faster to write them once and then use a symbol that says "please look above for what I'm not bothering to write for the fiftieth time".

Second, I'm trying to learn the names of the tribes of Israel.

Third, I had no idea there were so many people!

Fourth, the math has caught my interest so I check things out with my calculator from time to time and there's absolute consistency and accuracy and then all of a sudden one of the sums differs by 100 with no explanation although I find if I look for long enough, the explanation usually turns up

Fifth, only men are mentioned until I turn to the chapter by chapter commentary and this guy (Ellicott – a bit annoying but all I've got) points out that the community is arranged in terms of people closest in terms of their relation to a woman like Leah or Rachel

Sixth, from the dictionary, I got a bird's eye view of how the five first books relate and this one is supposed to be about service and fellowship. (Not war, as I assumed!)

That's all I can tell you for now.

Liz

April 24

Hi Helen –

What I read today was chapter 8 in Numbers. The Levites bathe, wash their clothes and have a ceremony where the firstborn, who used to have that function, hand over their priestly duties to the Levites. As far as I can make out, every Levite is included, not just the men.

The Levites were supposedly more attuned, of all the tribes, to the truth of their God when they were out there with the golden calf and all, but they are also the tribe connected through Leah to Moses and Aaron and after him Joshua, says my Bible Dictionary and that's supposedly why they are chosen to carry the religious duties single handedly.

The dictionary makes mention of the offerer putting his hand on the sacrifice as part of the ritual.

Much is made of hands and special things happening through them in this chapter. The one I like most of all is where all half a million of the other tribes are supposedly actually touching the relatively few Levites – a physical impossibility unless they lined up and passed by like modern soccer teams, one going one direction, one going the other. I thought it would have been neat to see how they did it.

And then what was supposed to happen at this point was that the old way of doing

things was ended and a new way had begun - that the males of one tribe now had priestly duties instead of the first males of each household. You can see why town council had a meeting, if the whole point was to follow God and the firstborn had the role of ensuring it and they all got caught up in campaigning for another guy – or not even a guy – a cow – or not even a cow – a statue of a cow.

It's interesting maintaining the "open mind" approach. The way it works is like a pendulum in my open mindedness, sometime further, sometime closer and that's ok with me – very much my walk with God and with Christ.

The first time women are mentioned in the Book of Numbers is when the law is being laid down about how to deal with people who have sex with other people in the wrong way. The second time women are mentioned is when laying down the rules for vowing to live for God in a special way, like Samuel and John the Baptist.

Before the portable church set off through the desert, many animals gave their lives. I always have to let God know, this is a problem for me – even if the lives of those, and all lives, belong to God.

There's so much repetition in chapter 7 that I've spent more time appreciating the scribes in making copies of the Torah.

I always thought the Torah=the Old Testament. One commentary says the Torah and Pentateuch are one and the same and the rest of the Old Testament is called something else which I've already forgotten.

I always thought a *Nazarite* was a person from Nazareth. It's not; that's a *NazarENE*.

I am often reminded of Hamurabi's Code and Hamurabi's Pillar while reading Numbers.

The Nazarite tradition was established long before the march through the desert and so was the practice of letting ones hair grow to show a life vowed to God, i.e. Samson.

Liz

April 26

Hi Liz,

Thank you for your insights into the scriptures.

I need a hermitage day to allow the creative energy to come through. It is the first time I have done a service in a mainstream church and it is a possibility of reconciliation between me as a lesbian and the church which struggles to be true to the sacred spirit.

I want you to know that I am beginning to be hooked on Numbers. This comes of intellectual arrogance, curiosity (if Liz can struggle with this stuff, so can I) and a

deepening attachment to the Jewish faith.

I worked for a therapy company owned by two Jewish men and for a goodbye present, they bought me a Torah which I have treasured.

Yes, it was my child's partner who is Jewish and my attachment to her was part of my difficulty with fundamentalist Christianity and an exclusive faith. My grandson is being raised Jewish and I am dipping my toe into the rituals.

Marcia Prager has written a great book, *The Path of Blessing*. As a dance leader novitiate, I am tiptoeing into Sufi tradition as well.

It struck me this morning while reading the introduction to Numbers that you and I are also telling our own history looking backward.

Helen

April 28

Hi Helen -

What did you learn from reading an introduction to Numbers?

I read chapters 9 and 10 and liked the details about the beat gold on the flowers on the candles sticks and the trumpets and how they were supposed to be made from one single piece of silver and then all the super cool ways for using them – they could be used like a radio, blasting signals to tell a few million people what to do. I also liked the way the cloud could stay over the tabernacle for as long as a year or as short as a day.

At times the details in Numbers astonish me.

I also read that while the Torah originally referred to the first five books of the Old Testament it came later to include more than that.

I'm glad to have someone to write to about Numbers.

I can understand your interest in the Jewish faith from having a Jewish relative.

I had the privilege of seeing a friend's brother on a television series about faith. He became a Muslim when he was 21. A stranger with car trouble knocked on his door. This visitor eventually showed him how to pray (Sufi style) and he walked out with the guy the next day and went and studied in Pakistan. Now he heads a mosque.

You could tell on the documentary how he got contact with something when he was praying. He married a woman from India and eats on the floor along with his family which now involves daughters in law and grandchildren. I met him once. I really liked him. The TV reporter didn't have to cover her head in the mosque – the imam said he

wanted everyone to feel welcome in his mosque just they were they are.

Yes, I'm learning things about your life that I didn't know.

Yesterday I sang for a Jewish woman from New York who helped me register for the last American election. We both knew some of the same songs like "Tis a Gift to Be Simple" and "Happiness Runs". I don't think I ever met a person who knew both of them. It was hard though. I don't have the energy for singing and certainly not for playing guitar and singing at the same time but I just decided to do it.

I'm watching *War of the Worlds* with Tom Cruise as I write. It's the second time so I'm only looking up now and then. It fits strangely in with the unfamiliar world of the Old Testament.

Blessings on your day of withdrawing to be with yourself.  
Liz

April 28

Hi Liz -

What have I learned about Numbers?

It was six hundred thousand people hanging out in the desert and they needed to be organized. A translator has questioned the number as possibly a twentieth but it still sounds amazing. How do you transform a faithful people into a nation?

I'm curious about the radio so I will read another chapter.

Why does the Torah go backward? Do you know?

What I observe with my Jewish family is that ritual and marking the time is an important part of the faith, and it is one of the experiences which I miss away from the church. Life is truly a journey when you are mindful of the festivals. I use the solstices and seasons for the same reason but holy week is still holy for me.

Helen

April 30

Hi Helen -

Today I read chapters 11 and 12 from Numbers and was astonished.

I ask, "How long were they in Egypt?" and the answer is more than 400 hundred years.

That's older than the country I was born in.

That's older than the world's greatest power.

The problem in chapter 11 is the food. It's not good enough. I say, who could possibly have a problem understanding that? After 400 hundred years, people get used to the food!

And what about being removed from Egypt by some very startling events? Didn't frogs fall from the skies and the rivers turn to blood??? Didn't the armies of Egypt chase them and didn't all millions of them make it over the Red Sea while the armies perished????? Startling events are upsetting. A person tends to go into shock when frogs are falling from the skies.

The millions that left Egypt were suffering post-traumatic stress.

That is basically the population of a modern major city picking up and setting down again.

One commentary says no matter what the numbers were, they were too great to be sustained by the sparse offerings of the desert environment and ceaseless miracles were required to get them from one place to the next. I don't know what I think of that. If nothing, it's an interesting statement.

Who could fail to understand the relief of having a Rave Party Weekend in Sinai, complete with wild dancing, strong drinks and something to dance around?

Where are the counselors and therapists to help the people out of their freaked-out minds?

And why do I keep wishing for a crash helmet as I continue to read the Book of Numbers?

God sounds like a petulant child in these chapters and yet at the same time, I feel a warning hush and a pointing finger from within to dare to criticize the presentation of God in these writings.

I have to remind myself in this way, that I will not be struck with a lightning bolt: that there was a day long ago at my home in the forest where I felt overcome with the impossibilities of my life and was of a mind to blame my parents for this feeling when God seemed to say, "These are matters for me, not for them," and I said, "Okay".

I was splitting wood and it seemed good to continue the conversation without an axe so I went indoors and fell on my knees and pounded my thighs and said, "I would wring your Holy Neck, if I could find it!"

And this God, my God, heard me out, and it was as if He held me close when I had

finished speaking. Didn't agree with me. Didn't disagree with me. It was very democratic, I thought. We even laughed it seemed, over not being able to find his neck. He had compassion for my point of view, I thought. He didn't strike me dead on the spot.

Surely I did more, far more, than complain about the food. We parted friends, my God and I. I didn't need to be right. I needed to have my say and be respected, and I felt that's what happened.

It's hard to read these chapters. They are like a violent ride at the local carnival. I have often fallen out of those rides after they stop, fearing for my sanity and wanting to throw up.

They've only been gone from the land that was their home for a year, for crying out loud.

Why's God so upset?!

As if chapter 11 wasn't enough with the flood of quail to poison the tummies of the complainers, Miriam is struck with leprosy.

A woman finally appears as a prominent figure, only to be presented as the worst possible Jezebel who is thrown out for a time but allowed to come back and live out her life, demoted I suppose from her exalted position among women.

I have a new commentary that looks at the texts as they stand. I looked for a commentary on the flowers of the beaten gold candlesticks and there was none. There were comments on the silver trumpets and I wondered why.

Why the trumpets and not the flowers?

Another commentator took a stab on why the adulteress woman is punished and not the man she adulterated with. He pointed out that according to Leviticus, both the woman and man are to be stoned to death. So he thought maybe they couldn't find the man and that's why no mention is made of him.

That don't impress me much.

The open mind approach was rocked and assaulted during these two chapters, and I think it's gonna get worse. But what a ride! I had no idea there could be such explosive themes in these chapters!

I hope you keep on journeying in these writings as it is excellent to have someone to write to.

To help me in creating a frame of mind for these readings, I have Karen Armstrong and Jonas Gardell. Karen treats six thousand years of history in a commendable way, helping me remember what that amount of time means. It is a really lot of time. Jonas

uses her writings to do his own historical survey of things surrounding Bible writings.

In my Bible dictionary, the history of Egypt goes back to 5000 BC.

This means stories of culture-long periods of time before the wandering the Hebrews. I like to remind myself that such cultures existed. As did my God. That the pathos of an individual life was no less gripping then, than now. That for some reason, present humans of the western world, act as though there is no culture and no importance beyond certain selected time frames. This is something that seemed especially true at church. I don't know why other time frames are simply left out.

It was a Swedish author, Marianne Fredriksson who first made this apparent to me in the book about Eve and all her books with Biblical themes. Some of them have been translated. She was my favourite author, along with Annie Dillard.

Liz

May1

Hi Helen -

Today, my reading was chapters 13 and 14. After numbering the soldiers, Canaan is checked out in advance. They are too tall and too fierce thought the people when they heard – let's stay right where we are.

God, the one who to me seems petulant, got his knickers in a royal twist.

[Is it time for a crash helmet?]

The serious question is and has always been, in what way shall I read these writings?

I gave up on the Old Testament decades ago because I could never know how to get meaning out of writings referring to things thousands of years removed. I would always be dependent on commentaries to help me get the culture, the lay of the land, the names, not to mention any number of ways of understanding a key word like "eleph" which is necessary to getting a grip on God's way of interacting with the community in the desert. The most scholarly say the word means thousands, units or clan.

Which makes me want to bang my head against a wall.

Until I remember my new resolve to read with an open mind.

Today, chapters 13 and 14 have me reflecting over another community that is only from one hundred years ago. So it's closer to my time. They even used English, my language. And my grandfather grew up there, so it's closer to me in people – they even read from up to down and from left to right, so it's closer to me in terms of how to get from the start to the end of a page.

But does that help?  
Not really.

I still don't know if my great grandfather was Bedouin or Lebanese.

My grampa says a Swiss missionary came to the Jordanian desert in the 1880's. A Bedouin chief saw advantages with the Christian connection and married his daughter to the missionary. The daughter bore a child, my great grandfather, and his dad was killed shortly after.

That was the only story I had to go by. A distant relative wrote and said that he and his relatives had never heard this story. They had heard another story.

The second story originated from the journal of my great grandfather's sister. Her story was one she had learned from her mother which was that her grandmother was born in a village in Lebanon. Both the parents were killed in a tribal war and the girl grew up in a missionary school where she was eventually given away in marriage to a Lebanese missionary who was widowed with children.

She raised the missionary's children and then moved to the community in Jerusalem with her own two children, the eldest of which was my great grandfather. She bore two more children, one of whom was my newly discovered relative's mother.

Thus was a story explaining how my relatives came to this community of faith.

My thoughts after reading chapters 13 and 14 turn to grampa's community and the many stories I have read about it.

There's the story, for example, of the family who provided leadership. Their story alone is enough to make the head swim and the reader to fall into a faint, since it includes drowning at sea, the fires of Chicago, typhoid and death and parental loss at an early age.

Also, there's the story of how different groups of Swedes made it to Jerusalem. Some came from Sweden and some came from the States and many are the details not to mention the woes and the fates of individuals therein.

But that is not the whole story either. There are others from other countries. There is a missionary who left his wife and brought two of their sons to the colony. His wife stayed in Russia or Africa, being not convinced of the importance of this new attempt at community. My new relative comes from that family.

And still all the stories of all the people who came to live in a very different and very colourful way for half a century, are not all known or told.

If I go into the details of human fates in this community I easily see a travesty, not

worthy of mention of the God I know. I see many points of view, many of which are steered by anger, jealousy and resentment not to mention a certain amount of shame and the defense mechanisms therein.

The truth will not be told about the story of my grandfather's childhood I fear, but I can't stop looking for it.

I think of Piaget and developmental psychology where a maturing child comes to appreciate that a mountain can be seen from many points of view.

I think of God as the God of many mountains.

In any given moment that God seems to want to walk with me. I don't know why but I do want to stick around to see what happens next. I believe I'm in good company (although if Numbers were my world view I'd have reason to doubt it).

And thus ends my reading for the day and now we're off to the rites of May First which include the march of the Communists and singing of *The International* followed by a two and a half hour long parade of motorcycles and cars, many of which are of American make and which parade celebrates, as far as I can tell, the fruits of capitalism!

Liz

May 2

Hi Liz -

This will be short as I am determined to catch up to you. My Torah starts at the back and goes to the front and I have never understood why, maybe a question for my Jewish relative.

I was amused with all of those sacrifices of the Nazarites. I was thinking, what did they do with all of those goblets and the flour and water, goats, bulls and chicken – maybe a great barbecue in the wilderness? Can you eat a sacrifice to God?

I was also pondering the value of a sacrifice and maybe that spirituality is too easy now, except my twenty minute centering prayer is hard work.

Now on to the grumbling and hopefully some women.

At the end of every chapter I have midrashic comments which are fun.

Helen

May 3

Hi Helen-

Reading in Numbers was different yesterday. The wonderful open-mindedness that made everything I read seem bright and new, interesting and without judgment was hard to access. Instead, I felt resentful at all the rules and regulations and sorry for the guy gathering sticks on the Sabbath.

At least this change made me pray for help to retain open mindedness – praying felt good.

I felt the need for instruction on how to read the Old Testament and picked up *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* by B. Ramm. There I found it is assumed that God is the author of the Old and New Testaments, that one reads with one eye to the God of Law and another to the God of the Gospels. Also, that one should apply what one is reading to oneself and to more closeness with God.

Although I started by accepting God as the Bible's author 30 years ago, I found to my surprise, on reading Ramm's words, that I no longer can use such words. It's not that I believe God is not the author. It's that I'm not satisfied with using these kinds of words.

I want to use words that remind me, there are so many things I don't know. I want to encourage myself to say what I mean. I see the Bible as a book that has been around for a long time and its writings have a lot to do with western culture and western law and I should be familiar with that book out of solidarity with my culture and wanting to know more about it and out of a need to feel a sense of belonging. If I lived somewhere else I would get familiar with other books. The Bible is not the only collection that's been around for a long time but it's the only one connected to my life and to where I live and to the people I come from.

There is something special about this collection of writings. The specialness is in the writings and is something that emanates. Maybe it's also got something to do with how people feel about them – the writings are charged with collective reverence.

The Old Testament is such a long story about a group of people having a relationship with a God – the God I've been taught is my God. I often don't recognize this God though. B. Ramm says I'm to think of the two different Gods – the God of the Law and the God of the Gospels. That sounds do-able but I don't find a way to do it. It also seems a pity after going through such trouble to say God is One – tricky footwork is making Him into Two again.

I can't, it just struck me, say that my God has revealed himself to me as the God of the Old Testament. I do feel God revealed himself to me and that I was given a measure of faith about Christ at that time.

And while I think using all scripture to draw close to God is a good idea, it's no different from the use to make of a moment or a meeting or a meal. Drawing close to God is the essence of having anything to do with God.

The wisdom of the scripture writings isn't exclusive either in my world of experience. To my surprise, writings for Twelve Step Fellowships such as those in Alcoholics Anonymous (the book), Emotions Anonymous and Adult Children of Dysfunctional Families are also special and emanate. In fact, when I'm done here, I'm going to go look for the major book of Adult Children on Internet since it's been a while and a friend was reading to me from it a couple of nights ago.

But the Old Testament is a long story about a group having a relationship with God. That's one of the summaries I heard in some church somewhere and I think it's serviceable. And it's one of the most attractive reasons for reading these writings. I want to turn the page and see how it goes.

I ask the God I know to help me while I read this story. Reading with an open mind is new and I'm finding out I need help to keep doing it.

Maybe it's possible for me to have a God I don't recognize in stories from 2500 years ago. The Jesus with the whip in the temple is not a Jesus I recognize. I'm uncomfortable about the experience of not recognizing someone familiar, but it happens, so probably I've got to just deal with it.

After I prayed and read in Ramm's book, I visited my chaplain and asked what her advice was and she said make what you read important to your own life with God. She said that three times and added that the trauma in the desert community was something I could see in myself. (She also said she felt like picking up her Bible and reading the book of Numbers.)

I think it is so great that you are reading in Numbers. You seemed to have the open mindedness as you read about the details in the sacrifices of the Nazarites. I loved the way your thoughts moved around from wondering what they do to imagining a great barbecue in the desert to a more theological question, can you eat a sacrifice?

Now I have to see what the dictionary says about sacrifices.

Yep - they 'cued 'em and et 'em - right there in the holy place or in some other clean place or just took 'em home in a doggy bag.

I can understand Oriental influences lending themselves to the first copies of the Torah - but why would it persist in the present I wonder? Is it like, don't change anything because then you change something that is holy?

Jewish commentary sounds great. My commentary to chapter 15 said the present colour of blue in the flag of Israel is chosen because of that chapter - has to do with blue threads in the tassels!

Ushering out the winter and marshaling in the spring at the May Day festivities here was invigorating. The bonfire was better than ever. The yearly balloon got away. I was so excited when I spotted it that I pounded on the guy standing next to me. The

Syndicalists were out in full glory (tons of red flags and banners) and the one Communist member of parliament gave a rousing speech about taking better care of children, the elderly and single mothers and raising wages for women. There were times I felt I was at a Pentecostal rally! There was an unusually strong police presence. The Syndicalists got a police van, a police car and five marching police men and women added to their parade.

The next day it snowed.

Liz

May 4

Hello Liz,

Wow, God is some stern judge, turning that poor woman white for whining and then the translation I have is, "You will not go into the promised land until all of your carcasses are on the ground." Wow, that word "carcass" struck me as horrible. If Jewish people are raised with this image and so are Christians, no wonder we have to do so much unlearning to find the loving God.

I was interested in the reference to "black is beautiful" in reference to Moses' second wife and wondered why he could not go into the promised land either. How do you not long for the slavery of your previous life when the freedom offered is filled with unknowns?

Tomorrow I am reading further, looking for hope and a more loving God, thank you very much. I will be faithful and obedient but only with a loving God who supports my potential rather than judging me for whining when life gets tough.

Canada has just had its election in the middle of Bin Laden's death. Our leftist party is now the opposition, and it received the highest number of seats ever in its history, but the conservatives have a majority so there's a swing to the left and the right with the middle going to pieces. Does it matter? I am not sure, but it feels like all the leftist hippies came out of the closets so to speak.

The wedding of William and Kate was lovely but what a life for these young people. May they have the maturity to get control of their lives before they are destroyed.

Will talk soon,  
Helen

May 4

Hello Liz,

I have moved through the carcass trauma and am heading into the rebellion. It was an

interesting commentary that they had to die because they challenged faith in God when they said they would not win. The gospel also says that the greatest sin is to take on the spirit of God... sort of like, you cannot take on the central point of the faith without consequences because all the other laws are structured around that one.

I love the colour blue, and the dye comes from snails according to my midrash, how could you get dye from snails? And the stole in the Christian tradition is from the tzellis. What does it mean to a community to wear the identification, like a cross which I cannot identify with anymore, and then be forbidden to wear it? There is something exciting and attractive about being part of a forbidden community which is also part of our heritage in MCC and as gay and lesbians, and how much do we lose when our faith, orientation, political allegiance is accepted as the status quo.

This is an amazing journey for me, and I thank you. Don't know where it is leading or why it is important but it is. I am now on [Velveteen Rabbi](#), which I really enjoy, and [Tikkun](#)... recommend both to you. Also really enjoyed Rabbi Marcia Prager, *Path to Blessing* but now want to learn the words and the music to the blessings. I am always careful about asking my Jewish relatives but will ask about the backward of the Torah.

Love,  
Helen.

May4

Hi Helen -

Yeah, Numbers seems not for the faint of heart...

One of my commentaries points out that Moses was around 80 years old at the time of this new marriage. He wonders if maybe Miriam was worried that her position as the most important female would be threatened by Moses' new wife.

You don't have to look far to wonder where the TV soaps get their material from.

In my view of our western world, Jews and Catholics have heavy baggage a lot of the time. I have no idea how a Jewish person bears up under the weight of this kind of text.

I do wonder why practicing Jews no longer sacrifice.

In reading the history of the community my grandfather grew up in, I learn a lot about Jews and one insight offered was that Jews were hated because they threatened nationalism in every country they came to.

I heard about the Canadian election earlier today while talking with a Canadian friend. How does one interpret the dissolution of the political middle ground? Here in Sweden, all the parties seem to be falling all over one another to step into the middle.

I don't know what difference it all makes. I suppose someone has to lead, that's all. Humans without leadership seem to flounder for some reason. I was just reading about the history of Adult Children of Alcoholics and learned that the group floundered after seven months for lack of structure, another element that politics gives a country I suppose.

Liz

May 5

Hi Helen -

There are teeny bits of Numbers that I've remembered from here and there, since the age of ten and on. As a ten year old, I spent a year attending a Baptist church. The golden calf, the rod, the smiting of the rock....all images that seem indelible. The Doxology, which I learned chords and a melody for in a United Methodist Church 25 years ago and later sang in Swedish for Serenity Services here is also a Biblical thread.

I didn't know there were 12 sticks. I've seen symbols of the one with leaves sprouting from it. I've seen seemingly dead wood sprout leaves so what gets me is the part about the ripe almonds. I don't get the point that 11 sticks are for the tribes and one is for Levi with Aaron's name on it - the whole point was to show that Aaron was the high priest chosen by God. But on the other hand, this book seems like a public school classroom where first the teacher tells you and then the teacher shows you – and maybe the teacher tells you what she showed you at the end – all in the hopes that the learning will adhere.

The last verse of chapter 17 shocked me since the response of the people was “Oh no, we're surely gonna die now! We didn't think Aaron was the true high priest, and looka that stick! He is, and we're all gonna die!”

It shocks me because I've just gotten used to the idea from chapter 14 that God says, “Go possess the land,” and the people say, “We can't do that, for we will surely die,” and God says, “Okay, stay in the wilderness,” at which point they say, “We'll go into the land,” and they do – and they die.

This time, they didn't do what they did before. Maybe this is progress.

Chapter 18 is another study in detail. Getting the details right seems important. I want Moses to get a stenographer so he doesn't get stressed from worrying that he won't remember everything before he can find his chisel and something to write on, or was it a pointy straw and a wet clay tablet?

Numbers makes me constantly think about the act of writing. My chaplain was taught that many people wrote the original Numbers, and then the results were gathered and became one collection. I would have liked to picture that better, but we went on to talk of other things.

One of my commentators likes to guess what the intentions of the author are and I find that intriguing as my attitude is the author or authors have no system that I would recognize.

One opinion I am solidifying is that commentators take gigantic privileges to themselves in the act of commenting – privileges which I don't offer them – at least not more than I offer them to myself.

Chapter 19 is another piece of writing about how to get clean after being around dead people.

I reflect, as I do each time I read one of these sections, on holding the hand of a dying woman. I was looking for comfort as I found it scary. I felt it was wrong, and I had no background for the thought – it was the experience that felt wrong. Naturally, I should have wanted to give her comfort as she died, but I couldn't be so calm and strong. I was scared and stunned, and I regret holding her hand – not because I wasn't strong enough to help her but because the moment of life passing from her body shouldn't have been intruded on by me – or something like that. I wouldn't have minded a Jewish cleansing afterwards.

Chapter 20 probably has those old Jews pulling on their beards even now since the reason neither Moses nor Aaron are allowed to enter into Canaan isn't clear. The commentators jump through hoops to show how God was so clever in leaving this part out. I say give me a break. Maybe a desert reptile ate the parchment, and the reason was lost forever. It'll be interesting to see if you feel you got the answer to your question.

Today, I'm more peaceful and accepting of what I'm reading. I don't know if what you're saying is that the carcasses were traumatic for you because you pictured it. It seems so brutal to describe people for whom so much trouble has been taken in that way – like butchered meat or carrion kill. But by now you've read my traumatized response which sent me running to my chaplain and to God in prayer so if you were traumatized, you're not alone.

Like you, although I lost my wallet and did Bible study as a way to calm down, once I calmed down I needed to review my reasons for doing this and without being able to nail it right down, I find it good and want to continue.

Today I looked for a Midrash on Internet. I wanted a commentary that doesn't keep referring to the New Testament. I didn't find one.

The calmer feeling is accompanied by more reflections on the Code of Hammurabi. All I know about that, really, is that I've seen the stone pillar that it is chiseled out on. It made a big impression on me that it's been kept through millennia. And I understand that the code was the attempt of one leader too “civilize” the people he had charge over. That makes an impression on me too.

So now, this calmer feeling is from beginning to accept that the theme is like a sculptor, and his material is these millions of people. He is throwing the material on the wheel over and over, and it's not coming out right. And they are dying by the thousands, and he is throwing and throwing. I can't say the end is that it comes out right, as in the Shaker song. But the sense of struggle to form a community is a theme that keeps my interest while maintaining a sense of balance while reading. That's gotta be good for something!

Thanks for sharing where the blue dye came from. I was wondering.

I have Mom's cross hanging on my wall above my bed. I love it. Some crosses make a difference to me. That one does. It's elegant - and empty, which a lot of Catholic crosses aren't. It hangs next to a photo of a shaft of sunlight in the forest and speaks to me every time I look at it.

Liz

May 5

Hello Liz -

I remember the rod striking the rock, and a rod being the sceptre in the bishop's hand. (I always wanted to be a bishop.) But I had never heard about the rod blooming with full almonds. The commentary that I read said that the Jews were connected with pomegranates and not almonds. There was a wonderful contrast between the beauty of the blooming rod with flowers, almonds and leaves... a maternal picture of God, and then the earth separating, and all of those people disappearing instantly... thought of the Japanese tsunami.

So as a result of the rebellion, there are more rules and structure. One of the questions which has haunted me for several years is, "Is it inevitable that grass roots movements end up as structured institutions?" And – how do you manage leadership in a faith community? There was an inevitable shift in MCC toward structure and rules even in the fourteen years that I was involved. How can we create faith communities where we are all ministers or leaders walking the path together?

I think my difficulty with the cross is the idea that Jesus died to save me/us and that he had to atone for my sins, but I have several crosses which are meaningful to me and they speak to me of going the extra mile, giving up your life so that you can save it, and powerlessness in the face of evil or power.

Will continue reading and writing. Have a great weekend.

Helen

May 6

Hi Helen-

Dad grew up in Jewish neighborhoods in New York. Down the street from me lives a Jewish woman born and raised in New York, and I love to sit with her and drink up the atmospheres that are so like the ones passed on to me from Dad. She has that Jewish New York way of talking. The pomegranate is related to this sense of atmosphere, and maybe your commentary explains why. I do notice that hardly anyone else I've ever met has the patience, or even the desire, to tangle with a pomegranate. Do you eat pomegranates? I've got to the point where I just cut them in four and wrestle out the fruit meat in messy bites. I know of no unmessy way to eat a pomegranate. I found a place that sells the juice of the pomegranate in the form of syrup. It's a flavour explosion and good on yogurt. I'm not Jewish but pomegranates maybe got passed on from the Jewish neighborhoods of my Dad's childhood.

I was reflecting yesterday how I like the structure of an AA meeting. I feel secure in the structure. I know the order in which things are going to happen. If I don't feel like being social, I can sit down late and leave early and not have to say a word to another person. You get a chance at most meetings to say what's on your heart, and no one argues with you, although there are rules for being told to stop talking. I've been stopped. I took it well, I thought. The woman apologized to me later but I was way over it already which is pretty cool. I just submitted to the will of the meeting and whatever personal thing the woman had going on didn't bother me. Another guy was dressed down for what he had to say in a meeting and his response was to go out and start a new AA group, and today it's one of the booming meetings in town.

Your quandary seems to be that you'd prefer not to have to be a leader over people who need rules and structure, and so the making of such things will feel unnatural to you. (It would be interesting to BE that kind of bishop!) One solution to that is not to bother taking on leadership. Just contribute in groups in ways that feel natural to you. Another is to research the kinds of rules and structure that give long life and vitality to groups but feel more natural to you.

I did try to start a 12-step group here based on spiritual growth rather than freedom from alcohol, but it didn't last. We eked out our existence through a two year period before ending. Our identity as a group was too vague to attract people, although we did have a nice structure. We based our identity on the Recovery movement started by J. Keith Miller.

Social justice is one of the threads, for sure, in your writing this past while. I like reading about it while considering myself a part-time dropout. By that I mean, I seem to return to start a new group only to find something's missing, and I dropout again. This has been going on over a decade.

14 years involved with MCC. Wow.

After reading Karen Armstrong and Jonas Gardell, in the spirit of honesty I could no longer say I know for sure an individual lived the life presented as Christ's in the New Testament. So I say something happened, and it has to do with Jesus. I believe something happened that gives hope where there might be despair, strength and a tendency toward cohesion and inner balance, a standard and power by which to become a better person. I no longer insist one thing or the other. In letting go of the terminology and much of the theology I feel more humbled than before. I wanted to be able to believe the way the Bible said and preachers said but I found it not to be possible without compromising honesty, so I'm back to where I started, with my original experience which included getting the name of Jesus and faith.

Off I go to order my two new books.

Liz

May 6

Hi Liz,

I'm having a day off from land duty and am at the office with a fast computer but have not read about the purification of the cow which is my next chapter. I went on the Internet and am exploring Mishnah and Talmud. There is something called the Responsa Project, and Kabbalah.com.

I think I could be a perpetual researcher and maybe a teacher. This does seem an amazing world I have entered, and you are travelling in. I love the sense that Jewish faith is perpetual, all day and all year, with rituals to hang onto. I want to learn the blessings and start saying them. There is a blessing at three in the afternoon!

You are right about groups and communities feeling safe with structure and rules which are inclusive but firm. The AA community has always impressed me with its simplicity, inclusiveness and the sameness throughout the world. I love dances for peace because I don't have to be sociable, and I love the music with the movement. Probably a choir is the same for me. I used to love being the holy mother in MCC, and it was inspiring, to say the least, but I don't have that compassionate energy anymore – maybe that is aging. Yes, I am still a social activist but sit on the sidelines and root for the revolution, maybe getting old and tired.

I'm heading to the hardware store, and then home to read about the cows.

Love.  
Helen

May 7

Hi Helen -

I successfully ordered two books yesterday which were suggestions of the man I most respect in his fair treatment of these old writings. He used to be a pastor but now leans toward Buddhism.

After my first decade or so of being a believer, I began to be able to hang out with people I love and respect but whose faith isn't mine. It was a nice freedom and I've even enjoyed more peace and compassion with some of these people than I do with many who share my faith. Anyway, when he said these two books are good that was good enough for me.

*The New Interpreter's Bible* (with commentaries in the margins like your Torah!) will be arriving soon I hope.

I intend to keep reading after Numbers ends. There are so many other books of the OT mentioned like Exodus and Deuteronomy but also Kings and others that I thought, why not, it's about time I paid attention to these books.

Not that I'm able to understand them! That's why I stopped putting energy into the Old Testament I think. It's hard to remember but when I read passages that I haven't a chance of understanding I get a familiar feeling - like, what's the point?

So, today I wanted to tell you of this new thing I learned years ago.

My previous partner was exceptionally bright. I've never met anyone with more pure brain power than she has (although I mistook it for an ability to be emotionally present). She worked as a lowly clerk in the library until we met. When I started going to university, she got interested in computers, and out of boredom and a need to be stimulated, she started buying computer magazines every now and then. She would read them from cover to cover and occasionally remark, "I don't understand a word of what I'm reading." When I asked her what made her keep on reading she said it was a belief that by exposing herself to the words, the sense of them would eventually come to her.

I was amazed.

The sense of them did come to her and she eventually studied for three years and was later head-hunted by a major computer company.

So I often find myself thinking, just because I don't understand what I'm reading doesn't mean it's not worth reading. The sense of it may very well come to me after a time.

This was the spirit in which I read all of Karen Armstrong's books about the name of God, Jerusalem, and myths. She's way beyond me in knowledge and research, but I just kept reading, and some of it came to make sense.

This experience of reading was one of the most powerful ones in my life in the end, as it came to change my convictions about the type of author God was or wasn't in the establishment of the Bible and impressed on me the lack of purely historical evidence of the person of Christ. I couldn't deny it once she had presented it.

So, even though this all started with me losing my wallet and seeking comfort from distress, it's evolving into a long awaited pursuit of the stories of the Bible.

One of the biggest things that happened inside me today was a fessing up with an insistence I've had about the Old Testament that just won't hold anymore. The insistence is that it has to be one book after another and each book complete in itself. Reading the commentaries shows that making sense of Numbers has to do with seeing what the other books have to say. So I see that now.

Today, I wanted to know more about the ages of the writings of the Old Testament and the method of writing, why there is such strong insistence that Moses wrote the first five books, and when the people of that time had access to the writings that already existed did the people in the desert get to hear the stories from Genesis? Did they know about how it went for Noah?

Today I found myself wondering what was going on in Sweden in 1400 BC. It seems like many countries have rich and long history but not northern Europe, unless it is the history of the Sami people (“Laplanders”).

I was on an island in Greece, Santorini, and learned there was a volcanic island explosion around the time of the Biblical desert wandering. There were houses and pots and all manner of remains from a community kept intact by 50 meters of volcanic ash that had buried it. This gave me a way of picturing what was there in 1500 BC. It's one of the clearest pictures I have of life that went on 3500 years ago.

Another date I like to think of is the eruption of Vesuvius. I was on the Sorrento peninsula and could see the volcano from my window. It erupted in 79 AD – nine years after the temple in Jerusalem was sacked – and Pompeii was laid to ashes.

I wish I could learn a way of holding history in my mind, of multi-viewing things that were going on around the same time. As I read Numbers, I feel the limitations of my memory – just keeping the names of Balak and Balaam straight is a challenge – and I kept mixing them up until I made Balaam into Lamb, which is soft sounding, and Balak into Lak which is hard sounding. A girl does what a girl has to do.

I don't think I'll get really proficient at multi-viewing history, but there are pieces of viewing in that way I can do, and it seems helpful in reading these passages.

One of my commentaries informs that Balaam was a real historical person and that Balaam's prophecies were discovered in a text during your and my time; not the prophecies of the OT but other prophecies.

I was shocked. I was reading merrily along, giving myself permission to see the whole kit and caboodle as myth when along comes this historical evidence. I pulled back on my idea about reading as if it is a myth. I have to reserve judgment on that and on thinking that I can separate what might have been real from what might not have been real.

Reading the story of Balaam had me riveted. As a story, with or without commentary, it is riveting.

I fell in love with his darling ass.

There are names for God that strike me as being introduced for the first time in these chapters. It's the name we call Jehovah. Balaam uses it. My Bible dictionary says the assumed fatality of pronouncing YHWH's name is derived from a faulty translation or inscribing in Leviticus. That's the first time I ever heard of such a discovery! I've heard all my life that the Jews have believed, with never any reason for doubt, that to say the name would be to court death. (Not that it's hard to understand such a belief, given the events of Numbers!)

You and I and Numbers: I shared my activities, and you also began to read. We each read in our own way. I came to think of AA meetings when I thought about our sharings – you in your way; me in mine. There are differences some of which come from my having more available reading time, and I just want you to know how thankful I am to have someone to address my ponderings to, as it's very helpful.

Your seekings in things Jewish are interesting to read about.

A blessing at 3 PM! I like reading about your sensitivity to and longing for the rituals that are enjoyed by the Jews.

Did you know the first Jewish ghetto was in Venice? The word itself is Venetian. It was formed in the 15th century, if I remember right, which I think was the time of the play, "The Merchant of Venice". The Venetians locked in the Jews at night but came around in the daytime to borrow money.

An imam explained a prayer as breathing out the things of the world (throwing back the head - "there is no god") and breathing in the things of God (rolling the head forward again - "there is only god"). He looked high on something after he did this in front of the TV camera. I had no trouble imagining that he gets through the day by doing this five times a day!

Something chemical happens to me in most AA meetings I attend.

I worshipped for a time with a Baptist group that followed the Jewish rules for keeping the Sabbath, so they started the Sabbath on Friday at sundown and ended Saturday at sundown. I used to stay with them over the weekends and got to really feel the rest connected with the Jewish faith. I haven't known that feeling in any other setting.

I tried to worship with a group in Stockholm for a period. They were inspired by a rabbi and his teaching about the Sabbath. We met on Saturdays. They were inspired by the idea of rest but they ran like rabbits through everything they did. They were a fellowship of people who seemed confused about the difference between words and life.

Next week we are travelling by train to Dusseldorf where a Europe-wide song contest is being held. It is a yearly event that I have observed since I arrived in Sweden.

How'd it go with the cows?

Liz

Hello Liz,

It's spring at the acreage so I am now an email behind but not sweating.

I also was interested in the wars of the Lord book, and not interested in the colour of the serpent. The serpent has been such a symbol of wisdom, evil, and in this context healing and blessing. I so enjoyed the story of Balaam especially when the donkey confronts this dude for beating him three times and not seeing the angel of the Lord: "Pay attention Dumbo, and stop being aggressive to your animals", I say. This is a story of repentance and obedience but the faithfulness included a lot of animals for sacrifice, and the king did not give up easily. What made a heathen Balaam bless Israel other than his relationship with God.

I read a commentary by W. Plaut which resonated with my life experience as a lesbian – offered as a gift to you:

"The Jew will be what he was. For his anchor point is the awesome, hidden other One who also dwells alone. Aloneness is the existential burden of the Jew. He is, as traditions and meaning convey, kadosh, holy and separate at once.

"Separateness is the yoke of the Jew. It demands a heavy price; it demands it of all and of each. It tears the soul with longing for the embracing friendship of the nations and it drives us back to the lonely post of waiting. It aims its beam into the heart of every Jew, searing some and illuminating others. Our psyche is burned by desire and rejection, by forgetting and remembering, by openness and withdrawal." W.G Plaut

The vulnerability of AA is what attracted me to MCC, where we are all wounded together and I needed to be in that community to be healed. As I nurture the land, I am deeply thankful for the country which has healed me in many ways.

I'm moving on to the Promised Land. I hope there is tea and cookies for these folks; they have travelled far.

Helen

May 8

Hi Helen

It's nice to think of you being at the lake this weekend.

I took a break from reading the Bible today. I often overdo stuff that is fun to the point where I lose interest so why not take a break in case it helps.

So I read a chapter from my latest book about my grandfather's community instead. A few years ago my cousin showed me a photo my grampa used to own. It showed a guy in a fez and some foot soldiers and kids. My response was disappointment – I'd rather see old photos of people from my family.

Since that time I've seen the same photo in two books about Jerusalem. It's a worldwide famous photo of the actual capitulation of Jerusalem to the Brits in 1917. Apparently my grandfather had kept a copy of it all these years. I'd still rather see old photos of people connected to me, but the photo is a curiosity in that it tells the story of the vanity of military leaders and the lengths people with power will go to look good.

The photo shows an event lacking in sensation. A guy in a fez is standing there smoking a cigarillo flanked by kids and two foot soldiers. General Allenby ordered a re-take two days later where soldiers from all the countries in that battle were present and worldwide photographers similarly in place and all the citizens of Jerusalem. Those are the photos that were carried by world media – the ones of the real capitulation were forbidden by the army.

This act of re-making history so it would fit better into a General's vision of pride speaks to me. For an ordinary person to know what really happened when Jerusalem capitulated isn't impossible but very difficult. This is one small event, but it was still an important one since the power over Jerusalem changed from a Turkish/Muslim state to a British/Christian state for the first time since Saladin invaded in 1000. Personally, I prefer such an event to be presented as it happened, not with a Hollywood touch that changes the date and names of those involved along with making it more glorious than it was.

A friend writes that he was taught thus about the book of Numbers at pastor-school: the book was compiled in 600-500 BC. (I have yet to come across suggestions for the date for the original although I'm aware it's popular to say Moses wrote in the 1400's BC - that's one of the topics I'm looking forward to reading more about sometime). The compiling was thus long after the desert wandering and long after the people had settled in their new place. He was taught that the writings were written as an object lesson AFTER THE FACT, lest they forget, that the Hebrews have to be obedient to God, or look what could happen to you.

This really disturbs me. Not because it might be true. I'll never know if it's true. But that it was taught to someone who then taught from the pulpit. It's neither more nor less

than a guess and as such, I prefer "no one knows the purpose of these writings much less when they were written". That statement tells me God may be present. I wish I was seeing that statement more often.

Balaam was an historical figure. One of my commentaries refers to Balaam's prophecies being found in the 1970's. He was a major figure of his times and when he cursed an entire army, says the commentary, it worked. His type of spiritualism, according to commentators, was, among other things to "read" the entrails of gutted animals and make prophecies based on what he saw there.

He is presented by commentators as I would present a New Age spiritualist of today, of which I've met a few.

One of them went to AA. I thought about her when I read about Balaam. I thought God had thrown her together with me so I could show her the one and only Jesus Christ whom she said she had met in a vision. My instant reaction was that wasn't Christ, and for the next two years I did what I could to show her the true one. Her New Age spirituality bugged heck out of me but I put up with it (which I thought was big of me). Finally I searched the scriptures to assure myself that the Christ she said she met in her New Age vision wasn't Christ. I was positive I was going to find something. When I didn't, I was stunned.

My response was to back off. My AA friend has something. Somehow she mixes Christ in with it. Even though I've written to you that not knowing if Christ was an historical figure or not makes me back down and say "Something hopeful happened and it has something to do with something I call Christ", I still want to stick with that spirit and not some other. I thought I would be the one showing her something. In the end, I concluded she was in my life to show something to me.

Balaam had something. I don't know what it was. He wasn't a Jew.

It strikes me that he is more established as an historical figure than Christ is.

One part I loved about Balaam and his ass is that the ass said Balaam ought to know him better since they've been together all these years. That's exactly what I would have said in that situation.

Why aren't we all followers of the donkey??? He was a good person!

I've often thought my cat sees things I don't see and that animals see as self-evident spiritual things that humans don't see.

It's fun sharing things with you, like our similarity in not caring about the serpent's colour and instead wanting to know more about the book of the wars of the Lord. It's very pleasant having a fellow wanderer in these readings.

Plaut writes so lyrically. Thank you for quoting his passage and for sharing that it speaks

to you about the groaning of the homosexual soul.

Liz

May 8

Hi Helen

I get up these days and take care of the cat then read the chapter for the day out loud to myself. For some reason, the cat likes this and comes and sits on my lap. I read the commentary from a book and another I downloaded. Sometimes I read from a Bible dictionary and then I write to you, and there is something satisfying about all of this.

Yesterday, I went to an AA meeting and as happens so often, I soak up peace, and it is pleasurable, and there is nothing more I want than that. The sharings were not full of peace so it's strange sounding to feel it but it makes sense to me. I think the peace at AA meetings comes from my certainty that people are gathered there out of an experience of weakness. That is very calming for me. I found the in-house strivings for first place and most-holy-medal-of-the-week distressingly confusing in churches. Although people do try to be more noticeable than anyone else, at AA it's not confusing. It's obvious there's nothing to compete for when the original thing that brought you to AA was complete defeat to a cheap chemical.

Today I read chapter 21. I expected the commentaries to go on about how this is the first time "Israel" makes a vow – it's always Moses or Aaron vowing on their behalf – and God hears "the voice of Israel". They're not usually called Israel, and they're not usually speaking with one voice, but God is usually hearing Moses or Aaron. The commentaries had nothing to say. I was expecting to be told about a huge change between God and this group and was told nothing.

I was very curious about the book of the wars of the Lord. One commentary said nothing was known about it.

A friend used to work in a church that met on Saturdays, so there was loads of knowledge about the Old Testament there. He said Numbers wasn't collected into one book until 600-500 BC which is close to a thousand years after the wandering years.

I enjoy thinking about the wandering of the writings themselves – they've taken on something like a life of their own. When the part about why Moses didn't get to go into Canaan was missing, I felt free to say "a desert reptile ate those pages and they were lost to us forever," for example, which was fun. My friend also suggested a Bible with helpful comments - *The New Interpreter's Study Bible* which is based on the New Revised Standard - and also *Understanding the Old Testament* by Bernard Andersson, both of which I'm going to order from Amazon.

My plan is to continue my journey with these OT books. I can see from the commentaries that Exodus and Deuteronomy go hand in hand with Numbers so it's just

as well to take a closer look at them sometime.

Chapter 21 finally shows the motley crew going in, picking some fights and winning. The commentator suggests that King Arad remembered the time 38 years previously when the Hebrews took it on themselves to enter the land without God's direction and they lost. That's why he might have thought, "This is no contest," and took the initiative to go after them. When I read that, it made me think of poker since I play a lot of poker. You see a person bluff once and next time you think they're bluffing and bet everything, and it turns out this time they weren't bluffing.

I do definitely find living a daily life attuned to something called the will of God is fraught with defeat (=assault on the ego), like the wanderings of this people. Like once at AA, I observed the actions of a man who wiled away women into false promises of marriage whilst himself being married. Finally, after meeting five of the women and hearing their upset stories, he tried a number on me, and that made me do my best to warn everyone about him. I was treated like I was libelous, which in turn made me question if indeed God had called me to this righteous thing, and I had to conclude: He hadn't. I was right in my observations, but warning others wasn't my job so I stopped. I felt foolish for a while but then it was all right.

The commentators often don't comment on the things I'm interested in. That interests me.

One of my commentators is falling all over himself to explain the colour of the brazen serpent. I just shake my head and don't get it. I don't care about the colour of the brazen serpent. I want to know more about the song and hear people sing, "Spring up, o well" - actually, come to think of it, one of the churches I attended did sing a short song with these words, "Spring up, o well, and fill my soul" - in a canon. The churches I went to did know how to sing. I want to know more about the book of the wars of the Lords and wouldn't mind hearing something about what seems a new use of the word "Israel" and who are they that speak in proverbs and why does a proverb sound more like a prophecy.

My own wandering is the act of reading these writings – the writings are my desert. Whether it's viable to apply such writings personally or not, I find this image satisfying.

Liz

May 8

Hello again.

Your email has sparked my energy and curiosity. I am nurturing my land, which means getting up early, but who cares.

Why was the cow red – just did not get that.

I am reading Karen Armstrong's *The Case For God*.

Loved your story about your ex and, yes, Karen sends my brain into limited smallness, but I want to soak her up as well.

Biblical study is also about the purpose of writing, and there are two strands J and E, and they have different theologies but are combined somehow. When I did my M.Div., we took apart the story of Noah and there are five different stories all woven together. Maybe I would like to return to that study and question the purpose and how we can read them intelligently now. I am also reading the gnostic gospels as part of my practice and they are so much more mystical than the regular gospels. The Dead Sea scrolls are also on my list, and so the journey continues.

Love,  
Helen

May 9

Hi Helen -

This chapter is hard to stomach.

I learned from the commentary that Balaam, in Exodus, encourages the weakening of the wandering Hebrews by having them get invited to Baal worship. So Exodus is one of the accounts that show Balaam was in counsel with the God of the Hebrews, but also not limited to that source for his spiritual works among the kings of that time.

The Midianites, explains the commentary, were the tribe that protected Moses after he murdered the Egyptian soldier, and Moses' wife (I think her name was Zipporah) was Midianite.

The commentary pointed out that the horrible death of the Israelite man and Midianite woman was because they were worshipping Baal in the holy place of the tabernacle. It also suggests that any further worship in the Jewish sanctuary would have been impossible without the action of Phineas. The commentary also points out that these things took place in the presence of Moses.

Reading Numbers is not for the faint of heart, and I am reduced today to repeating the words of my commentator, as I myself am speechless.

Liz

May 9

Hello Liz,

Today is a day for physical recovery and a chance to write to you before I tackle the amazing Numbers and catch up to you. The land has to be raked of pine needles, death,

leaves, twigs, and I have fifteen paper bags in the garage because the garbage dump is closed. The next challenge is mowing the lawn. It is an overwhelming property, but it is a love which is intense and I am blessed. There are also two dog bodies in the land, and I mourn them. I have friends who live in the country, and we stack and split wood so my arms are done.

My son was the first born and he had to struggle with an ill sister at fifteen months. He was a bright little boy who disappeared into Narnia, Star Wars, and never fit in. His father left when his son was four and he never recovered from that. His previous partner told me that he and I were identical. He never calls but has sent me a map to the wedding which is how he says, "Please come".

The Karen Armstrong book is *The Case For God* and is her latest – 2009. Wouldn't it be wonderful to go on a Karen Armstrong sabbatical? I find her so much more useful than traditional biblical studies which for me were a challenge to my faith rather than helpful. Pull the literature apart, and then there is nothing. So I read scripture now for what God is trying to teach me today. There is a promised land but you have to suck it up through the wilderness to get there .

I am going on amazon.ca because it is time for a treat and there is a women's Torah commentary and another one which looks interesting. I am going to buy them because I do think this journey is about connecting to my relative's Jewish heritage. I still see it as a holy mystery which I don't need to understand.

Will now go to Numbers and catch up to the promised land...

Love  
Helen

May 10

Good Morning, Helen -

I have just finished reading chapter 26 and am still sore from the killing in the sanctuary read yesterday. (God forbid that I should call it murder?).

It's comforting to read your letter today before I go to the commentary on chapter 26.

I wanted to remember more of what struck me after chapter 25. The commentary again made an effort to deal with the absence of women in the Jewish Bible by saying that women were often connected to the religions of the day through holy prostitution and that maybe this is why they were kept away from being priestesses.

Nice of him to bring up the subject anyway.

It was Annie Dillard who wrote that people should take crash helmets with them into

church every Sunday.

I forgot my crash helmet yesterday – which is praying before I read and praying after I read. I figure if the reading is going to serve any part of me and my life, my conscious request for help is a given. But yesterday I forgot and today, on waking up, I thought, boy, don't let me forget again.

Another thing that struck me previously was from the commentary on the chapters about Balaam – that when he climbed those mountains and viewed the wandering Hebrews they stretched as far as his eye could see from all three mountains, and that is another way of getting the feeling of how many people were in those camps. They do sound like a lot of people.

Although, the above is only if the three mountains were real and not a literary device where people are constantly doing three of everything.

And how would I know?

Wow – you raked fifteen garbage bags and split wood? Are you crazy, woman?

If that isn't love...

The two dog bodies get to me...

The amazing Numbers – who would have ever thought they deserve a name like that? I feel scorched from reading.

Reading what you have to say about Karen Armstrong is lovely. Have you read about her life? A friend sent me the book of her years in the convent and her break with the convent and then with her faith, her years of struggle, and then her career in comparative religions. I read that book first – *The Spiral Staircase* - it made a terrific background for the books on comparative religion I read afterwards. I still feel drawn to get another book by her.

How amazing it is that you feel strong enough about getting more commentaries.

I just looked up the Jewish Study Bible on amazon and since they have a feature where you can read parts of the book without buying it, I read some of the pages of that book last night on my computer and was it ever good. Lots of humbleness in the introductory pages and with that I mean remembering to say that it's hard to know stuff, but the people who have worked hard at it are in the pages of this book - the 70 faces of the Bible meaning the 70 points of view from which to read it.

“You have to suck up the promised land through the wilderness.” Quite a phrase!

For the moment, I'm withholding the part about deriving personal message and doing my best to read the way my ex read computer magazines and also still wishing to read

with an open mind although that is hard to do.

But if I try to put words to my experience via Numbers up to this point, it is that there is something, and the something is compelling - despite the awfulness which at times takes Twin Peaks proportions of horror and darkness.

The compelling quality has, in part, to do with reflecting over the faithfulness that must have gone into preserving the text.

And the impact of the pillar of stone with the Hammurabic code hasn't worn off either.

Now off to the commentary on chapter 26.

Liz

May 10

Hello Liz,

You're right this book is not for anyone who takes research seriously. I think chapter 18 is three parts glued together. King Josiah is said to have found fragments and then used the material to drum it into his people to shape up or ship out.

I have just come back from drum camp with women and my brain only wanted to come home after all the noise and hoopla. I'm getting old, I think.

It is interesting that the Levites get no inheritance or allotment, which seems to mean land. They are to be travelers without attachment except to their god. The Levites came from Aaron's lineage without qualifications or training but set apart from the community. They were on top with reference to ritual which continues in the power of the clergy. There have always been battles for control right back to Peter and Paul in the Christian tradition. Maybe that is inevitable but I continue to hope not.

Helen

May 11

Hi Helen -

Just as I'm settling into the idea of all the texts being written long after the fact of the events, I read that "Moses wrote" - not that Moses wrote everything, but that he wrote the camping sites of the wanderers throughout the 40 year period which was an impressively long list - and unless this statement is an outright lie, at the very least, one thing was already written before the wanderers settled in Canaan.

Once again, I'm left without a sweeping generalization with which to view these writings. I don't mind. Somewhere inside myself, I'm prepared to not have a place to

settle.

I wanted to share with you a story that is similar for me to read as the story of the wanderers and all their defeats, and it is the story of Bill Wilson.

If you ever have a chance to read it, it is a story that says basically, "And he got up and swore never to drink again, and his wife believed him, and he went out and drank again and did not come home, and when he did he swore never again to take a drink, and when he did he ended up at the hospital, and when he came out from there he swore never again to take a drink, and everyone believed him because he suffered great sufferings, and no man would ever risk such sufferings again, but he came home and drank again, and he was gone many days and many nights...." and I'm afraid the story doesn't end there. It goes on and on and on and on – until AA is founded.

What is so special about this story is my reaction as I'm reading it. I'm an alcoholic and ought to have no trouble reading it. My reaction is disbelief that insanity can repeat itself without insight and change for as long as it does, despite having the same insanity myself.

It just struck me yesterday how similar, as a reading experience, these wanderings through the desert are. The repetition of bad choices feels exactly the same to read.

I am leaving for Germany today, and my usual behavior is to put off packing for as long as possible. Today, I could put it off by reading to the last chapter, which seems very fitting.

A friend joked with me yesterday and said the rapture is supposed to take place on May 21 so I wouldn't have much time to finish reading the book of Numbers. I thought that was very funny. But he said, according to the prediction, if I wasn't raptured on May 21, I'd have until October 21 before the entire world is destroyed. So that was comforting.

Somehow, these sayings of May 21 and October 21 seem in keeping with the amazing book of Numbers.

My friend is speaking tongue-in-cheek, but when the tongue isn't there I hear his rage and pain at certain aspects of being a believer and having teachings about the Bible to contend with. My own tongue and cheek have been like a city of refuge as I travel from murder to murder in the Bible.

So these chapters which I read in a sweep, from 26 through 36, say that men who have no sons must give their estate to the daughters. Yay! These same daughters mustn't marry men from different tribes though or their inheritance will change hands into the new tribe. So they end up marrying their own cousins, as far as I can see.

Then there's another laundry list of animals to sacrifice, seeming like a list of recipes when it doesn't seem like a laundry list. I find myself trying to grasp the administration required to enact the instructions for sacrifice and appreciating that the priests and their

families never had to wonder what they would be doing. Theirs was a filled dance card from birth. Me, I wouldn't have belonged to this tribe, as I'm notoriously poor at following instructions, as one unsuspecting partner said, "You said you were making spaghetti. This isn't spaghetti, it's stew."

Two tribes come up with the idea that they shouldn't enter the land of Canaan and live there, and this is accepted, which seems strange after everything they have been through in order to enter the land and live there.

Aaron was a hundred and twenty three years old when he died.

People who have killed can escape vengeful deaths by going to a special city.

Did you notice that Balaam was killed in the war against the Midianites?

The Midianites were the tribe that sheltered Moses after he murdered an Egyptian soldier and ran away into the desert. And it's the tribe from which Moses' first wife, Zipporah, came. Balaam is the guy who refused to curse the armies of Hebrew wanderers, and it turns out he dies by the hand of the armies that he actually ended up blessing. I bet he was trying to go figure.

I wonder if Balaam's donkey felt strange about hearing the words coming out of his own mouth.

The paragraphs about binding your soul with a vow were powerful and hold today in contract law. I just had a talk with my brother about promises he made while in a relationship, and now he's not in a relationship and feels maybe he should keep those promises. Personally, I wish he'd give himself a break but he says maybe he needs to learn to not make promises he may not be able to keep. Well. Sure. But humans tend not to know which is which. Still, the paragraphs which may be the grounds for present day contract law and the paragraphs about what to do with suspected murderers stood out. I wonder if law needs something in the misty past to ground itself on, otherwise men will jump out of bushes and rape women as they pass by, and people will slay one another and never stand due process, and if they didn't stand due process the cycle of killing by revenge would keep on going forever and ever.

I haven't read my commentary on the last ten chapters. I'm saving that for May 22.

Where will you be on May 21?

Love  
Liz

May 11

Hello,

I could not go to Toronto without getting to the promised land. What a comedown. This was a story where I kept hoping for a happy ending and there was none. I once went to a creative writing course and was told that there had to be a conflict, or a challenge and a resolution by the end of the book. Numbers fails. There is huge evidence of the two strands of writing with the repeat lists and rules. So I read it today like your ex - no more spiritual than that.

Where are we going from here, my friend?

Love,  
Helen

May 19

Hi Helen!

Despite the wonders of Germany and the song contest, I missed my mornings with cat and Bible.

I'm not wholly coherent after the trip, but I found I couldn't wait until May 22 to read my commentary on the last ten chapters of Numbers so I just finished reading them now..

Like you, he also reported on the importance of a happy ending - and he actually found one. He said the happy ending is that the women were faithful and were allotted their father's inheritance.

So it turns out, the Book of Numbers is not about entering the Promised Land.

It also turns out that the original Promised Land is the one promised Abraham and that this one is a lot smaller. The commentary says that's because the Hebrews weren't good enough at being obedient.

I dunno about that. How could I possibly know? How could anyone?

I appreciate the guessing done by all these experts but I don't think the jury is in on just what was meant by things written. For my part, I notice my ongoing internal debate about how to "take" God. In these writings.

When I was half out of my mind with grief and shock in the nineties I noticed a way of taking God that was more open-minded than usual, despite my unbalance. I saw myself as basically not knowing things. This made me like an empty vessel which was God's pleasure to fill. That impression has stayed with me despite the return of partner-love

and other good things, and I find it useful as I'm reading to suspend the a-ha moment of "knowing" something while at the same time seeking understanding. It's a type of seeking that accepts in advance not knowing.

I can't believe that losing my wallet has led to this.

I decided today to continue reading in the next book, Deuteronomy, which is also a book I've never looked at closely.

*The New Interpreter's Bible* arrived while I was gone. I just took it out of its wrapping. It's only the second new Bible I've ever owned. I'm going to look on Internet to see if Constable commented on Deuteronomy. Even though he saw Christian meaning in pre-Christian writings, I liked reading what he had to say and he also quotes other commentators.

The commentator spent quite a few words looking at Reuben and Gad who wanted land west of the Jordan. He called it an act of half-disobedience yet still points out that it was land belonging to what was promised. He points out that it was difficult to defend and that there are no accounts showing these tribes succeed in maintaining ownership of the land through history – rather, they keep on losing it.

The tribe of Gad is noted on a rock inscription made by a Moabite king in 850 BC - that a people named Gad had been known to live there since time immemorial.

People of Gad make an entry into the story of the community my grandfather was raised in. Shortly after this group of Americans arrived to await the coming of Christ, a large group of Israelites also arrived. They were Gadites, and after all this time they felt convinced that now was the time for them to get back to their roots. There was a snowstorm in Jerusalem, and one of the community members travelled on skis to the Gadites to bring them food!

I found myself doing quite a bit of thinking about how the males received inheritances. Males married women from other tribes, but the women moved to the new tribe, and the inheritance stayed thus in the tribe. The women didn't get inheritances except in special cases, and when they did, they had to marry within their tribe so the inheritance wouldn't end up going to a new tribe. If it had, that would confuse the lots portioned to each tribe making it harder to administrate.

The logic of it strikes me as I think in this way, and it makes me think of what is best for the collective whole, and how very little of my life has been lived with a sense of that whole.

There's one aspect of this where the logic doesn't hold though and that is, while the men keep the inheritance within the same tribe, the women lose the children that the women would bear. So if one tribe lost more women than another, it would grow smaller, while if one tribe gained more women than others, its population would increase beyond the lots given by tribal size, which could lead to problems of boundaries and administration.

Maybe they came up with inter-tribal rules where they tried to keep things balanced:  
"You get one of ours if we get one of yours..."

I'm happy to be back with my books.

Love  
Liz

May 19

Hello Liz,

My Torah commentaries have arrived, and I'm going to pick them up. Deuteronomy sounds wonderful. I like the chapter on "choose life". I will write soon. I missed my rituals which include you and the big book.

Love,  
Helen

May 20

Dear Helen!

Thank you for the lovely note you sent and for words that you want to continue also in this reading of the Torah.

I read in my commentary that while the English word "law" has heavy and punitive connotations, as in "the full force of the law will come down on you", the Hebrew word "torah" is more focused on instruction. That was interesting for me since I got to thinking about the possible learning circumstances of the 40 years as 40 years of preparation and learning rather than 40 years of punishment.

Just as I was cracking open my commentary on Numbers, the phone rang, and the guy said my wallet had been found at the swimming pool.

Losing my wallet was what got me started reading and studying the Bible.

I picked it up and it still had the money in it along with everything else.

I don't know what the meaning of the timing was, but I was struck by it, that's for sure.

My *New Interpreter's Bible* wants numerous judges, teachers and public officials to be the authors while another commentary sticks with Moses as the author (and doesn't bother saying who did the writing about Moses' death).

Who did the writing is important to me, but I accept I will never know for sure. It's just one more of the endless things I'll never know and to which I want to find some way of

relating. In this case, I'm reading with an open mind, keeping in mind the suggestions the experts have made as well as what they base their guesses on.

The name of the book, says one of my commentaries, is based on an incorrect translation. The commentator goes on to assure me this was all worked out by God so that the name ends up correctly describing the content of the book as a writing of the second law to the Israelites. The proper and Hebrew name is simply the first words which are, "These are the words".

One commentary goes into a detailed explanation of contracts made between lords and vassals at that period in history which start with "these are the words". There is also comment about the structure of Deuteronomy following the structure of such contracts or treaties. That fascinated me. I tried to imagine a time when no one had thought of looking for a similarity with other treaties from the 1400's BC. And then I tried to think of a Biblical student who came up with the comparison and then how it "went viral" as we say now about popular things on the Internet, and soon every Bible School in the land was proclaiming how Deuteronomy is like these Mid-Eastern treaties from 1400 BC and how this proves that Deuteronomy was written in 1400 BC and how that in turn proves that the author was Moses.

When I read the actual Bible passage, I still use the King James Version. It's so much fun to read out loud. I remarked to myself as I read, that I like the sound of the voice of the writing of the first chapter. I was ready for something dry and scratchy like law books can be. I just found it to be a very interesting story.

Personally, I like to follow a person's argument and I like to find it a good argument without needing to embrace the findings as a personal viewpoint by which I will stand or fall. The authorship of the Bible doesn't seem to be The Point even though I find it interesting to look into.

I'm so glad to know you feel like continuing this wonderful experience of the reading and commenting - makes us real Jews I guess.

Liz

May 20

Hi Liz:

First of all, congratulations on your wallet. The timing makes sense. Often when we let go and give up, it shows up. I lost my snow shovel by the house, and I was worked up by the notion that my paradise could contain someone who would steal my shovel. Then the shovel showed up in my porch. I thought it was weird and wonderful, and stuff like this keeps us on our toes.

The interpretation I have is from Rabbi Analia Bortz, and she points out that "nebo" is "enough", or the mountain where he stood and watched. It is the place of all our

disappointments. He is now a teacher, and Deuteronomy is his last five lectures to his people, and he says, "Much is yours, and you have achieved a lot and now you have to give way to other people".

She also points out that "over" also means "pregnant", so he is the mother delivering his people. Moses is completing his fortieth year in the desert; a pregnancy is forty weeks, fullness. He is like a true Yiddish mama saying, "I want to accompany you so that you can fulfill yourself and your goal and so that you don't leave me alone". And now Moses has delivery pains. Each contraction is a step ahead toward Mount Nebo.

So yes, let us wander through these passages and thank you for Constable and your *Interpreter's Bible*.

The Jewish disciple,  
Helen

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