Josef Forsling
Doctoral Student Åbo Akademi

Searching for the plot of Numbers
- How the Narratology of Bar-Efrat Might Help

2.2.1.1. Shimon Bar-Efrat – a presentation

Shimon Bar-Efrat is a former head of Biblical Studies at the Hebrew University Secondary School, Jerusalem, and has written an introduction to OT narratology called *Narrative Art in the Bible*,[1] which will be our way into the narratology of Bar-Efrat. A glance at Bar-Efrat's bibliography reveals the peculiarity of his study, namely, that he does not make use of studies in general narratology but works exclusively with biblically oriented studies. In his book he tries to establish and describe the art of narrating in the Hebrew Bible, rather than assuming narratology and apply it to the text. Consequently, examples abound in Bar-Efrat's book.[2] Still, he uses common narratological concepts like narrator, point of view, character etc. to describe what he sees. In line with this, Bar-Efrat is not much interested in defining narrative, or narratology, limiting himself to saying that he understands all narratives to share universal features, and that he will focus structural aspects (the latter showing a debt to structuralist or 'classical' narratology).[3] It should be noted that in the present paper we work almost exclusively with Bar-Efrat's narratology. This is not the intent of the research-project as a whole. We need to start somewhere in this larger project and Bar-Efrat seems representative enough to do this for us. However, as noted above Bar-Efrat also has his peculiarities. Positively, these mean that Bar-Efrat always tries to stay close to the text he wants to describe, something we find laudable.

In the analysis-section we have tried to apply what Bar-Efrat says about plot, equalling one chapter in his introduction. Bar-Efrat has two main sections in this chapter concerning the single narrative: "The Units of the Plot" and "The Stages of the Plot."

3. Analysis

3.1. Plot-Units in Num

In his treatment of the units of the plot, Bar-Efrat perceives three kinds of units that he characterises as components of plot. These are, from the smallest to the largest: 1) incidents and speech; 2) scenes; 3) and acts. There is no tension between these, but the smaller blocks become part of the larger ones.[4] In light of our attempt to address the larger structural problems of Num the highest level of the units, the acts, seems to be the most interesting for us. In short, what follows is an attempt to discern the acts of Num (3.1.1.) and analyse how they are interrelated (3.1.2.). The division is mostly a practical issue: both moves are

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[1] Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000, repr. of *Narrative Art in the Bible* (transl. Dorothea Shefer-Vanson, Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989); hebrew original published by Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1979, 2nd ed. 1984.
[2] Which also is the intent of the book, Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 7.
[3] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 10-11. Bar-Efrat says he is especially indebted to Meir Weiss, Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 7, and the bibliography lists Meir Weiss, "The Craft of Biblical Narrative," *Molad* (1962): 169-170 (in Hebrew); *idem.* "Einiges über die Bauformen des Erzählens in der Bibel," *VT* 13 (1963); *idem.* "Weiteres über die Bauformen des Erzählens in der Bibel," *Biblica* 46 (1965); *idem. The Story of Job's Beginning. Job 1-2, A Literary Analysis* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1963). For structuralist/classical narratology, see Herman, "Structuralist Narratology," *RENT*: 571-576; Herman and Vervaeck, "Postclassical Narratology," *RENT*: 450-451; and Lars-Åke Skalin, "Narratologi," in *Litteraturvetenskap* (ed. S. Bergsten, 2nd ed.; Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2002), 173-188.
[4] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93, 95-111.

necessary to perceive and understand a possible plot of Num, even though seeing relationships between the acts is dependent on the acts being established in the first place. Both moves also address the issue of the structural problem of Num in investigating the possibility of establishing a narrative structure for Num and discerning relationships within this.

3.1.1. Defining the acts of Num

Bar-Efrat defines acts in the following way: "In most of the narratives [of the OT] it is possible to discern different parts or blocks, which are somewhat similar to the acts in a play." These acts are "sometimes delimited by the location… sometimes by the time… In many instances… [by] the subject-matter…"[5] Applying this understanding of acts to Num we come up with seven different acts. The existence of them has to be argued in each instance, where the importance of the different delimiting aspects of location, time and subject are appreciated and weighed against each other. Bar-Efrat says that the three often come together to form an act,[6] but we have tried not to force them to converge, which, as we will see, becomes especially important when it comes to time. There is here a delicate balance between arguing convincingly for the existence of the acts, while not pressing the unity needed for the existence of it into every detail of the text – something which is not intended by the concept of act.

Below we first list the acts we have constructed for Num using Bar-Efrat's understanding, after which we will treat them one at a time to argue for their existence and integrity.

Acts in Num

Act 1: 1:1-10:10 (location: tent of meeting in the desert of Sinai, 1:1; subject: Yahweh organises and prepares Israel for march; time: the second month in the first year after release from Egypt, 1:1)[7]

Act 2: 10:11-12:16 (location: camps in the desert; subject: Israel wanders to the promised land and complainss; time: the second year, the 20th day of the second month and forward, at least 3 days, 10:11, 33).

Act 3: 13:1-14:45 (location: Kadesh in the desert of Paran, south of Canaan; subject: Israel's attempt and failure to conquer the promised land; time: between the 3 days march and before the 40 years wandering, at least 40 days).

Act 4: 15:1-19:22 (location: the tent of meeting in the desert, 15:1, 32; subject: a right relationship to Yahweh; time: the 40 years wandering, cf. 14:34; 20:1)

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[5] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 102-103. Bar-Efrat is idiosyncratic in labelling what he here describes as 'act'. The word in this meaning does not show up, for example, in the two standard dictionaries Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (rev.ed.; Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), and Chris Baldick, *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (2nd. ed; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). On the other hand, Bar-Efrat's definition comes close to Baldick's definition of scenes in drama in his dictionary, Baldick, *Literary Terms*, 229 (cf. Bar-Efrat's reference above to "acts in a play"). Thus we could say that Bar-Efrat's uses the term 'act' to talk about the concept of scenes in drama (which he sees as important for understanding plot in the OT). What Baldick does for us is to show the wider discussion of narrative terms and what they mean, but his naming of the concept does not undercut Bar-Efrat's reasoning – it is a matter of naming and not the understanding of the concept as such.

[6] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 103.

[7] This demarcation also conforms to the division of most commentators on this part of Num, cf. Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel's Migratory Campaign* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 73-100 for a summary treatment and arguments other than narratological for its unity.

Act 5: 20:1-22:1 (location: the desert, e.g. 20:1; subject: Israel wanders to the promised land and complains; time: the end of the 40 years wandering)

Act 6: 22:2-24:25 (location: wherever Balak and Balaam are; time: the beginning of Israel's stay at the plains of Moab; subject: Moab attempts to curse Israel but Yahweh protects them)

Act 7: 25:1-36:13 (location: plains of Moab; time: during this stay; subject: Yahweh prepares Israel for conquering/entering the promised land)

Act 1

A first conclusion concerning the delimitation of the first act is that subject and location seem to presuppose and support each other: Yahweh speaks his commands to Moses about the organisation of the camp for the wandering (subject) through the tent of meeting in the Sinai desert (location). This is stated in 1:1, emphasised through an express linking in 7:89, and characterised in 9:8-9 as commanding (צָוָה). No word for revelation is used, but the linking of subject matter and location seems to suggest a revelational context for 1:1-10:10. Now, the subject is repeatedly reinforced in the act through the short formula וידבר יהוה… [למאר].[8] At several times, the connection with the location is explicit (1:1; 3:14; 9:1; cf. 3:1), which seems to suggest that the formula can be said to presuppose subject and location throughout the act, becoming a shorthand formulation for them both even though they are not explicitly mentioned. Again, the formula works as the primary interconnecting device among its parts. Thus, we seem to have a quite technical structuration of the first act through the formula, which nevertheless indicate the subject and location for the act even when those are not stated.

Martin Noth among others, has seriously questioned the unity of this act, the following quotation being typical:

> In ch. 5-6 several ordinances of very varied scope and very varied contents have been juxtaposed, with no recognizably close relationships, as far as subject-matter is concerned, either with each other or with what precedes and follows. The result is the typical picture of additions joined together without any particular plan.[9]

It could be said that Noth deals with the pre-history of the text, while we are dealing with the final form and therefore his remarks do not affect us much. However, Noth actually says that the *result* of this history is "additions… without any particular plan." An assessment of the text in some respect depends on the level of unity one expects. If we are right in seeing the formula וידבר יהוה as a condensed way of indicating subject and location, on the formal level, chaps. 5-6 are integrated and united with its context since the different parts of the chapters feature the formula as well as the surrounding chapters – those specific laws were commanded from the tent of meeting in the desert of Sinai to prepare Israel for the march.

However, is there any unity in subject-matter on a more detailed level under the umbrella of preparations? In a broad sense, the commands in chaps. 5-6 all have to do with purity and holiness, and can be seen as a preparation for the journey in commanding cleansing of the camp and its individuals for the sake of the march with a holy god represented by his tabernacle in its midst, as well as in containing an understood promise that Israel will get to

[8] 21 occurrences: 1:1; 1:48; 2:1; 3:5; 3:11; 3:14; 3:44; 4:1; 4:17; 4:21; 5:1; 5:5; 5:11; 6:1; 6:22; 8:1; 8:5; 8:23; 9:1; 9:9; 10:1.

[9] Martin Noth, *Numbers – A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 44.

the land, since flour (5:15) and grapes (6:3) are spoken of (presupposing agricultural possibilities).[10] So there would be a connection in content between 1-4 and 5-6 (the people organised needs cleansing to march with Yahweh and his tabernacle), and not a radical brake. However, how can the Nazirite law and the priestly benediction in turn follow on these, and is there some logic to chapters 5-6 (and forward), more than this still general categorisation?

If we compare the different parts of chaps. 5-6 one solution is that they give contrasting answers to the question of uncleanness threatening the tabernacle in their midst. The first three commands (5:1-31) deal with different possible impurities of the people and how to deal with them (the first, 5:1-4, is general, the second, 5:5-10, concerns hidden impurities which are confessed, the third, 5:11-31, impurities that are hidden but not confessed). As a counterpart to these, the following instructions on the naziriteship (6:1-21) offer a possibility for the individual Israelite to remain and enhance purity and holiness, similar to the priests (vv. 5, 8).[11] The Aaronitic blessing then fills several functions at this place. First, it broadens the scope from specific questions on un/cleanness to introduce the overall protection of Yahweh over his people. Second, it shows that even though an ordinary Israelite may achieve purity similar to the priest, the priests still have certain prerogatives, e.g. pronouncing the blessing. Third, the offerings envisioned in chaps. 5-6 are all performed in the tabernacle and probably accompanied by the blessing, why it is not strange for it to come here.[12] However, the blessing also suggests the broader context of the temple-service, and not only the specific sacrifices. This service is made possible in the flashback of 7:1-88. Thus, the blessing can be seen as a culmination to chaps. 5-6 and a bridge to what follows.

Coming back to the formula וידבר יהוה as a uniting device, presupposing subject and location, there are some passages in the act that lacks it – do they then deconstruct the integrity of the act? The first example is the already mentioned 7:1-88, containing an enumeration of the gifts for the tabernacle. The gifts can be understood as part of the preparations (below), but more important, time, which also delimits acts, changes, reversing to a point before the beginning of Num (the day when Moses finished setting up the tabernacle, Ex. 40). This does not deconstruct the act, however, but the changing time-reference indicates that we are dealing with a flashback, a device that for its integrity assumes a larger framework.[13] Admittedly, we do not return explicitly to the time of 1:1 at the end of the passage as we should to really mark off the flashback, but the following short section (7:89) resumes the revelational theme fundamental for the preparation and organising of the camp, and thus we can assume that we are back in about the same time as well.[14]

In the passage's description of the gifts for the tabernacle, the responsibility and allegiance of the tribes are also depicted.[15] According to Bar-Efrat, flashbacks in biblical narrative are used to introduce characters, to contrast, to explain, and to invite parallels and comparison with other parts.[16] What this flashback then does is to parallel Yahweh's commandments and

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[10] Gordon Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 78.
[11] Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 87-88.
[12] Cf. Noth, *Numbers*, 57-59; and Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 89-91.
[13] Cf. Prince, *Dictionary*, 5-6, 31.
[14] Time is used in Num to highlight important sections in the book rather than to give us a secure guidance through it, Wenham, *Numbers*, OTG, 15-16; Sean E. McEvenue, *The Narrative Style of the Priestly Writer* (Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971), 56-59. This is done through quite exact references. Since this is not the case with the present time-reference the conclusion to be drawn is that we have a flashback, but that its limits are only roughly marked. Time being used in this way in Num should defuse the worry about time not being resumed by the end of the passage.
[15] Cf. Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 104.
[16] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 175-179. Probably more things can be done with flashbacks as seen from our treatment of 9:1-14 below. Exactly what has to be argued from the observed relationship between the flashback and the surrounding context.

preparations with a clear statement of the acceptance of them by the tribes in that they freely participate in the dedication of the tabernacle. Which in turn also becomes a preparation for the march, and thus naturally falls into the subject of the act. If the latter part of Exodus described how the tabernacle was to be built, the beginning of Num deals with how the camp is to be organised and move. However, how do the camp react to Yahweh's gift of tabernacle? With dedication, it turns out in this passage. The sequence described is not told in chronological order, but our passage is not out of place in terms of subject or location, and thus preserves the integrity of the act. The absence of the formula and the resumption of the revelational theme bracket the section off in a flashback, which is not alien to the theme of preparation for the march.

The second example of a lack of the formula comes in 9:15-23. It is a long description of the function of the cloud in guiding Israel through its wandering. The introduction is similar to 7:1, but lacks the direct force of ויהי, even though both are descriptive. Again we have a flashback, which, however, turns out to be a description of what usually happened during the wandering from the day of the erection of the tabernacle and forward. This makes it rather timeless. The passage starts retrospectively, but in describing Yahweh's guidance it is also anticipatory of the march in such a way that the present act is both included and overtaken by the description. 10:1 with the formula וידבר יהוה and its depictions of the hands-on preparations with the trumpets takes us back to the ordinary time-frame. There is no sharp break here, however. Both 9:15-23 and 10:1-10 deals explicitly with the very practical movement of the camp. The former describes the divine side of it while the latter describes the practical human side. Thus, the flashback/anticipation is used to explain the movement and parallels what follows from the all-knowing perspective of the narrator.[17]

Summing things up, we can say that 9:15-23 as other sub-units in act 1 differ somewhat in terms of subject-matter, but can still be sorted under the heading of preparations for the march, in describing how Yahweh is to lead his people during this particular march – being the *sine qua non* for it. This has already been described in stories presupposed by Num (Ex.13:21-22, 40:36-38) but is here coupled with an emphasis on the complete obedience of Israel to Yahweh, the latter being another recurring theme of the act (cf. e.g. 1:54; 2:34; 5:4; 8:20, 22). Placing the description here, just before the march, also makes an interesting contrast with the complaints of the people that soon follows. Finally, it should also be noted that location does not change. Not that Yahweh makes this description from the tent of meeting (it is the narrator that makes it), but the guiding cloud is seen over the tent/tabernacle. Thus, the passage is part of the act despite the missing formula.

Another possibly problematic passage is 9:1-22. It features the formula, but changes location and date, thus making it in fact another flashback. A close reading shows that the flashback really indirectly depicts what happens at the time of the act: obedience to the answer of Yahweh (vv. 9-22) should be enacted about this time in the story (cf. 9:1, 11 with 1:1 and 10:11). About a month has passed since the second Passover, making the present time of preparations for the march also the time for the belated Passover-celebration.

In sum, there is arguably a unity of subject, location, and time for act 1, where subject and location presuppose each other, while time is not very important. The act surely consists of different parts, but there is also a 'higher unity' through these three things, even though a too tight structure should not be expected.

Act 2

Most commentators treat 10:11-14:45 as one unit. Why divide it into two acts?

[17] The latter being a characteristic of anticipations, Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 179.

The main argument for the division turns on subject-matter, but time and location are tightly bound to these. The subject for 10:11-12:16 is easily spotted on the larger level: Israel now sets out for the march to the promised land and starts their wandering, in contrast to the preparations of act 1, we have a travelogue to use an apt term from Wenham.[18] This is presented in two parts: the positive departure (10:10-36) and the ensuing negative complaints (11:1-12:16). Despite the deep contrast between the two, 'wandering' can still be seen to be the subject for the section.[19] The different parts rather serve to reinforce each other on how to characterise the wandering – no sooner have the people left than they start complaining! From 13:1 onwards, however, the people are pictured as being stationed at Kadesh in the desert of Paran (cf. 12:16; 13:26), attempting to conquer the promised land from the south.

The time-references do not say much and still different periods seem to be envisioned. We start with a clear indication in 10:11, which sets the act off from the preceding one, but then only three disparate indications follow in 10:11-14:45: 10:33 (3 days into the desert after decampment), 13:26 (the spies tour of 40 days in the land), and 14:32-34 (the sentence of 40 years – which marks the section off from what follows). One has the feeling of being left after the first 3 days, after which the sense of time is left to the reader. Generally speaking, time is seldom noted very exact in narratives. Few narratives are diaries and as indicated by act 1 such exactness should not be expected for Num.[20] More specifically, after the exact notice of the 3 days journey (10:33), we still are presented with a people on the move, encountering obstacles on the way. How long that may take we cannot say for sure. However, when the wandering stops in chapter 13, we also move into a different time frame and act.

Location, as time, is not very specific either, simply because we are dealing with a people on the move. Rather, as Lee has shown, we can expect the verbs נסא and חנה to be typical, describing the decampment and encampment of the Israelites.[21] Thus, the location cannot be more specific than that they move through the desert. Interestingly, for this act, the verbs occur together only at its beginning (10:10-35) and end (12:16), producing a neat enclosure and pointing us to the wandering as determinative for the location. More than this, we can see that the enclosure unites all three aspects that mark off the act: subject, time, and location all concerns the wandering in the desert that begins at Sinai and ends at Kadesh in the desert of Paran. Those things marks 10:11-12:16 off from what precedes and follows, with a focus on subject.

Act 3

Most of the arguments for the limits of this act have been presented above when discussing act 2. The wandering comes to a stop and the people settle in the desert of Paran (12:16; cf. 13:27), for about 40 days – even though it surely is not intended as an exact figure (13:26). What is more, however, is that the subject turns to spying out and conquering the land, instead of wandering and complaint. The act is also clearly marked off from what follows. The order to turn back to the desert (14:25) and the failure in war (14:39-45) inaugurates the 40-year wandering (14:34). Moreover, 15:1 chops off the narrative thread in issuing law-text again.

A possible challenge to the integrity in terms of subject is the fact that chaps. 13-14 also deal with complaint and Yahweh's punishment of this, as do chaps 11-12. However, the complaint in 13-14 is of another quality in that it questions the rationale for the march and Yahweh's doings with his people, rather than being complaints along the way. This does not prevent chaps. 13-14 to be a culmination of what precedes, but we deal with different acts.

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[18] Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 14-18, 103. Wenham, however, divides the material in a different way.
[19] Cf. Noth, *Numbers*, 3, 83.
[20] See footnote 14.
[21] Cf. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness*, 94-100, who makes an argument for structuring the whole of Num from these words semantically. See also Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 14-18, 54, for these specific chapters.

Another challenge to the integrity of the act is that Noth understands the desert of Paran (13:2) and Kadesh (13:26) to be wholly different locations.[22] However, the creators of Num seem to have understood the sites to be interrelated somehow (cf. "the wilderness of Paran at Kadesh," 13:26), rather than being mutually exclusive. This understanding rules how we interpret their resulting narrative.[23] In this act then, subject, location and time all come together neatly to build it up.

Act 4

The limits of the fourth act are perhaps not too hard to perceive whereas its inner cohesion is more difficult to understand. There is a clear beginning in 15:1, where subject, most markedly, but also time and location change, and the same pertains to 20:1 – the beginning of the next act. Let us have a look at location and time first.

The formula וידבר יהוה from act 1 is used again in this act (15:1, 17, 37, 17:16, 18:1, 8, 20, 19:1), suggesting that its presupposed location reappear (the tent of meeting, cf. 16:18-19; 17:7-8, 15). In the first act, however, the tent was stationed in the desert of Sinai, while act 2 and 3 has taken us a bit into the desert, signalled explicitly in act 4 in 15:32 (cf. 16:13). Even though the people by the end of the preceding act are commanded to return to wandering in the desert (14:25, 33), there is no movement depicted in our ensuing act –contrasted by the return of the words נסא and חנה in the following act (20:22) – while on the other hand it is not really stationary either as act 3 (where a specific place is mentioned). In terms of location the Hebrew title of the book is apt: 'in the desert,' with a focus in the tent of meeting.

If we look at time, we find that 20:1 is important in that it marks off act 5 from act 4, bringing act 4 effectively to a close. Act 5 presupposes quite a stretch of time being passed in recording the death of Miriam, and why not most of the 40 years, whose beginning is signalled by the end of act 3? Act 4 would thus approximately cover these years. However, those conclusions are only established by the surrounding context and not by the act itself.

What can then be said about subject? On the one hand, subject changes decisively as with time and location at the outer limits 15:1 and 20:1, marking chaps. 15-19 off. However, subordinating all material in 15:1-19:22 under one subject is not easily made. The middle part is the easiest to understand: the rebellion of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram gives rise to several actions from Yahweh to confirm the leaders he has chosen (16-17), which in turn leads over into the duties and privileges of the priests (18). But how can chap. 16 follow on 15 and 19 on 18?

Chap. 15 seems to deal with fostering a right relationship between the people and Yahweh, with a focus on the land to be theirs, and against the background of the preceding rebellion. Thus, the first section deals with stipulations concerning fulfilling a vow or giving a freewill offering to Yahweh, in thankfulness for things he has done we may assume (15:1-16, contrast the unbelief of 14:3); the first bread in the land is to be given in gratitude to Yahweh who has given the land (15:17-21); unintentional sins also offends Yahweh, but can be redeemed for by offering (15:22-31), while intentional sins are to be punished severely (15:32-36, cf. the rebellions); lastly, certain clothing is supposed to remind the people of the law (15:37-41, "and not follow the lust of your own heart and your own eyes… [but] be holy to your God," v. 39). In this light, chapter 15 sets a standard for a right relationship with Yahweh, with a promise of land implicit in the offerings prescribed, and virtually explicit in 15:2, in contrast to its surrounding chapters of rebellion. Chapter 16 functions as an extended example on the

[22] Noth, *Numbers*, 101, 103.

[23] It can also be noted that Paran is notoriously difficult to locate, so too much should not be made of a contrast between the two places, even literary-critically, cf. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness*, 248, n. 242; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), 76; and Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 104, 125, and the historical-geographical works they cite.

topic of sins similar to that in 15:32-36, but focus questions on the right leaders, which then are deepened in the following chapters. That focus is not foreign to the theme of chap. 15 since the leaders have a special task in managing the relationship between the people and Yahweh.

Chap. 19 is not so strange after chap. 18 dealing as it does with issues on cleanness. While it is the prime task of the Levites to "bear responsibility for offences" (18:1, 23), chapter 19 offers an easier way out from uncleanness than intricate and expensive offerings through purifying water.[24] Thus, things come together in the act. Korah etc. died because they were not the chosen holy ones to offer incense (16:4-7, 37), this is instead the task of the priests and Levites (18:3-5), but can also in some cases happen through ordinary people with the right means (the cleansing water, 19:11-12). All in all, this concerns a right relationship of the people to Yahweh, which happens to be the tenor of chapter 15 – and thus the reason for our designation of the act's subject. In sum, time and location serve to establish the outer limits of the act, while it is in subject that we need to look if we want to analyse its integrity.

Act 5

The fifth act contains a wealth of material that all concerns a time when Israel wanders in the desert, and in contrast to the former act things move on a bit faster in summary fashion. The 40 years comes to a close and places along the way from Kadesh[25] to the plains of Moab are now named. We seem to have another travelogue.[26] Because of the movement we cannot specify the location more than to 'the desert' again as in act 3, but the movement also separates the act in terms of location from the preceding one. None of the places named is determinative for the whole act. Rather, the verbs נסא and חנה reappear to characterise the section (20:22; 21:4, 10-13; 22:1), which after the last occurrence cease to have importance for the plot.[27] Accordingly, Num do not contain another travelogue either.[28]

נסא and חנה do not occur until 20:22, however. Can the act still be said to be characterised by wandering? 20:1 clearly starts with verbs of movement (בוא, ישׁב) in the narrative mood of waw consecutive with Israel as subject, which means that action is depicted rather than description.[29] We have to go back to the first travelogue and 12:15-16 to find such a grammatical construction in Num.[30] Thus, even though the act does not begin with נסא and

[24] Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 146.

[25] That Kadesh is mentioned here again is not a problem if we understand Israel to have been wandering around for about 40 years and now draws close to the land again.

[26] Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 14-18, 148. In this instance our partition of the material and Wenham's agree.

[27] *Contra* Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness*, 94-100. Lee's argument is not easy to understand. He seems to say that the verbs are typical of Num 10:11-36:13, even though they are not always used to describe the movement. This is because of their "infratextual conceptuality" (p. 97) and on another page he says that the verbs address the whole movement in Num semantically (p. 95). Exactly what this means remains unclear to us, specifically what the connection between word and narrative look like. On the face of the text of Num the verbs occur in chaps. 31 and 33 after act 5, but they are limited to these passages and the connection to the overall act is made through the formula וידבר יהוה (31) and a flashback (33). Even though one would say that we describe Num 10:11-36:13 conceptually as a narrative of encampment-decampment, this does not seem to apply to 22:1-36:13 where Israel stay still at Moab.

[28] The itinerary of chap. 33. is of another character, cf. Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 309.

[29] For the waw consecutive as bearer of the narrative thread, see Mats Eskhult, *Studies in Verbal Aspect and Narrative Technique in the Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksells International, 1990); A. Nicacci, "Basic facts and the Biblical Hebrew verb system," (ed. E. van Wolde; Leiden: Brill, 1997): 167-202; H. S. Nyberg, *Hebreisk Grammatik* (Uppsala: Almkvist & Wiksells, 1952), 256-280.

[30] We said that act 4 concerns the 40-year wandering in the desert, but perhaps we could say that in contrast to act 4, act 5 narrates this movement, using the verbs noted. The movement in act 4 is understood implicitly from such notices as 14:25.

חנה, it is still characterised by movement, in contrast to the two preceding ones (as well as the two following).

It is also hard to be specific about time in this act. The 40 years comes to a close because of the death of Miriam and Aaron (20:1, 23-29) and since we through the wandering draw near the promised land again. Admittedly, it is not said that Miriam and Aaron died from old age, but the old generation of which Miriam and Aaron are a part is condemned to die away during the 40 years and one can assume that they are representatives of it.[31] Moreover, the handing over of the high-priest office to Eleazar also signals the end to an era.

As already noted the content of the act is quite variegated. One reason for this 'incoherence' is that the incidents are not related so much causally as temporally (contrast Act 4 for instance).[32] Nevertheless, the incidents are all things that Israel encounters *during* their wandering towards the promised land, which then can serve as a headline for the act. This is not the case in the following two acts for example (22:2-36:13), where Israel is encamped at Moab.

In sum, time and location marks off the act from the preceding ones in degrees noted in a few details, while subject have to be quite generally stated within that frame.

Act 6

Subject, time and location are easily identified in this act, which is a short story in its own right. The subject turns on the possibility to curse Israel (22:6), and the time is clearly set after the previous act (which is alluded to in 22:2-4), when Israel just have finished setting up the camp at Moab. The locations change but are clearly noted or understood throughout (22:2, 5, 22, 36, 41; 23:14, 28), the changes depending of the characters Balak and Balaam and their doings. Those are as important as subject, time and location for the integrity of the story and act. They are introduced and the story begins (22:2, 5-6), they depart and the story ends (24:25).[33]

Despite this, two objections to the unity of the act have been made, which, it should be noted, only touch tangentially on questions of location, time, or subject. The first is that 22:21-39 is an insertion in the story, meant to mock Balaam, but clearly inserted,[34] the other that the oracles of Balaam are much earlier than (and hence not really part of) the narrative.[35] A short answer for our purposes is that there may be some tension in the story (due to its prehistory) without separating it into several acts as defined by Bar-Efrat. Some of the preceding acts are more disintegrated than this one. Those who see unbridgeable tension between 22:21-35, the oracles, and the rest of the story, nevertheless, often see a function for them in the resulting story in terms of the dethronement of Balaam. Important for us, though, is that there are no tensions in terms of location, subject, or time, great enough for us to infer the existence of more acts.

Act 7

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[31] Cf. Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 226, 233.

[32] Some narratologists like E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1927), would then understand act 5 to lack plot, but this is only one voice among many on the distinguishing character of plot, cf. Hilary P. Dannenberg, "Plot," *RENT*: 435-439.

[33] Which is a common way of ending narratives in the OT according to Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 130-132.

[34] Cf. e.g. Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 255, 261-262; Baruch Levine, *Numbers 21-36* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 139, 154-155; David Marcus, *From Balaam to Jonah: Anti-prophetic Satire in the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1995); and Milgrom, *Numbers*, 468-469.

[35] William F. Albright, "The Oracles of Balaam," *JBL* 63 (1944): 207-233; Dieter Vetter, *Seherspruch und Segensschilderung: Ausdrucksabsichten und sprachlichen Verwirklichungen in die Bileam-Sprüchen von Numerie 23 u. 24* (Stuttgart: Calwar Verlag, 1974); Levine, *Numbers 21-36*, 209-234; Milgrom, *Numbers*, 467-468.

The last act of the book is a quite extensive block of approximately ten chapters, containing diverse kinds of material, not unlike the first act. Despite the length, there are good arguments for not dividing it further.

Looking at location, the background of the former act, where Israel is stationed at the plains of Moab, is here pushed to the foreground (25:1) when Balak and Balaam are left on their way home. The place is specified to Shittim, which is opposite Jericho,[36] the latter designation being repeated in the rest of the act (26:3, 63; 31:12; 33:49, 50; 35:1; 36:13). This more specific location forms an inclusio to the whole act (25:1 and 36:13). However, there are a few passages that seem to diverge from this (27-30; 32, 34; 35:9-34).

Most of these passages (27-29; 33:50-56; 34; 35:9-34) have one thing in common: they contain and are often headed by the formula וידבר יהוה. As in act 1 and 4 we take this formula to indicate the tent of meeting. Since the tent has moved with Israel, the plains of Moab would be presupposed as location. This connection between the tent and Moab is made explicit twice in the act (33:50 and 35:1).

Chapter 30, 32 and 33 however, does not have the formula. Nevertheless, the content of chap. 30 is given as a command of Yahweh (30:2, 17), which most naturally occurs in the tent of meeting. Chapter 32 on the other hand, depicts the Reubenites and Gadites wanting the area east of Jordan. This area is close to the plains of Moab, but more important is that the setting that the request presupposes is the plains of Moab, since it is the place from which the Reubenites and the Gadites observe the wanted area, and where Moses is approached. Chapter 33 turns out to be a flashback that recounts the places of the desert-wandering that ends in the plains of Moab, and works to prepare the way for the following exhortations. In sum, location is stated clearly in the act, and not hard to presuppose when needed.

Time, on the other hand, is not. We have very few references, and those we have are unspecified or irrelevant for demarcation. To illustrate, we have the general preposition אחר in 25:19 and 31:2. The first time, the word is used in a unique way in Num, binding together two passages (see below), but not demarcating the act. The second time, it is used to reach beyond the limits of Num to point to the time of the death of Moses, and then only very generally.

Another example is the three very specific, but irrelevant time-references in 33:3, 8 and 38. They relate the dates for the departure from Egypt, the 3-days march into the desert, and the point for Aaron's death when the wandering is recapitulated, thus not saying much about the present time of the act. We also have a lot of time-references in chapters 28-29, concerning the daily offerings; offerings during Sabbath, festivals etc., but these are schedules rather than dates. Mary Douglas, however, have come to see Num as presented from, and hence structured upon the festival calendar year in chapters 28-29.[37] Unfortunately, Douglas resulting ring-structure builds on a dubious definition on the genres of law, where law in narrative mood is not counted as law, and further, the structure is not very well balanced to give the impression of an actual ring-composition.[38]

In sum, the sense of time in the act relies on a general feeling created by the events – what happens took place *during* the stay on the plains of Moab.

Turning then to subject, we suggest that preparations for conquering/entering the promised land would be a proper title. 25:1-36:13 treats a lot of different things as the first act, but we believe that there is logic in terms of subject in this division.

We have a problem from the outset, in that chapters 25 and 26 do not seem to have much in common – a story of apostasy and the second census. However, here the preposition אחר

[36] Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 229.
[37] Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness. The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).
[38] Cf. Gordon Wenham, *Numbers* OTG (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 21-23.

noted above, comes into play. The term bridges the chapters probably to suggest that all of the old wicked generation now have passed away.[39] The final apostasy with its judgement is passed, and a new generation can be counted. 26:64 substantiates this conclusion as it looks back at the 40 years and comments that no-one in the old generation was enlisted in the new census. Thus, a backward looking trait is introduced in the act. What is more, this backward glance builds on the purpose of the census to apportion the promised land to the people (26:53), and thus introduces a forward looking trait in the act. To prepare for entrance means to leave the wandering and its sins behind on the one hand, but also to meet some (practical) requirements looking ahead on the other. From this double focus of leaving behind and practically looking forward comes a logic that can explain the presence of most of the material in the act in terms of subject:

- problems of the daughters of Zelophehad concerning land and inheritance that must be dealt with (27:1-11; 36);
- a successors to Moses that need to be appointed (27:12-23);
- Midian is avenged for the incited apostasy in chap. 25, which also gives rise to rules on how booty and captives are to be treated, something that Israel are to deal with regularly during the conquest (31);
- the Reubenites and Gadites ask for a different allotment of land (32);
- a flashback on the itinerary of Israel through the desert, that reviews the history to issue exhortations concerning the conquest (33);[40]
- the limits of the land and the allotment of Levitical towns and cities of refuge as well as the rules surrounding the latter that is given (34-35).

The problems of the daughters of Zelophehad forms an inclusion to chaps. 27-36, which suggests that 25-26 really is an introduction of the subject and its double focus, formally separated as they are from what follows, but united in content (and location). What do not seem to fit the focus, however, are chapters 28-29, and 30, on the offerings for festivals etc. and laws on the vows of women. Chap. 30 seems to be associated to 28-29 through the mention of votive offerings in 29:39. The votive offerings are not enumerated here but have been dealt with in 15:1-16. Introducing them again, the chance is taken to explain the rationale for women-vows (which have not been mentioned so far). Wenham also suggests two connections in that the most opportune time to make offerings for vows would be during the festivals, and that since only men went to war, and this is what Israel also is preparing for, the question of vomen-vows in their husbands absence arose.[41] Chapter 30 should then really be treated together with chaps. 28-29.

The connection of chap. 30 with chap. 15 may, however, provide a clue to the placement of chapters 28-30. In chap. 15 the relationship to Yahweh was treated with a focus on the land to be Israel's. A good relationship to Yahweh is fundamental for getting the land and keeping it and part of such a good relationship is the function of the cult. While chap. 25 deals with clearing up the past, and 26 and 27 with the necessary actions to prepare the entrance, 28-30 concerns the cultic relationship with Yahweh, necessary for wandering through the desert, necessary to conquer the land, and necessary for living in it. So 29-30 nevertheless, can also be said to fit the scenario of preparations for entering the land since the schedule for the services to be are given. The connections with chap. 15 and future-oriented air also align it to the backward – forward trait. To this we can also add the fundamental fact that the offerings envisioned presuppose settlement in the land – as all laws on offerings in Num have done. Therefore, it is not strange for them to come here.

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[39] Cf. Milgrom, *Numbers*, 218; Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1985), 83-124. This does not necessarily entails that everything is coloured by doom in chaps. 1-25 as Olson suggests, but simply that the old generation now finally has died away. Cf. Wenham, *Numbers*, OTG, 20-21.
[40] Cf. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 175-179 and p. 4 above.
[41] Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 206-207.

In sum, location and subject seem to be more important in establishing chaps. 25-36 as one act than time, which rather follows the others. On the whole, subject seem to be the most important feature in establishing acts in Num (possibly excluding act 2, 4, 5), which then confirms Bar-Efrat's understanding that subject-matter in most cases is used to divide narratives into acts.[42]

3.1.2. Relating the acts

Having the acts defined, we have already started to unearth a narrative structure of Num, i.e. plot. There is more to say, however, and now we move on to the possible relationships between these acts. To make things clearer, we will first list the techniques of interrelating acts that Bar-Efrat treats, and then see in what measure they apply to the acts of Num. Bar-Efrat's treatment is spread out over several pages in conjunction with the examples he gives, and what follows is our summary of these. Moreover, some of the techniques Bar-Efrat treats under the title of "Collections of Narratives." Bar-Efrat here treats shorter narratives set into larger passages and books. Since we have delineated the acts for a comparatively large narrative, we take these techniques to apply also to acts, and Bar-Efrat says at another place that some narratives are only made up of one act[43] – thus giving us freedom to see several narratives in the larger narrative of Num, some of which we have termed acts, and can analyse with the techniques Bar-Efrat enumerates in dealing with collections of shorter narratives.

The simplest technique of interrelating acts Bar-Efrat sees in external connections, like וַ and וַיהִי, for example. However, these are so common that they say little about a more in depth analysis, something that Bar-Efrat also concedes,[44] why we leave them out here.

Looking at internal connections, Bar-Efrat treats a host of techniques: relationships of cause and effect; loose chronology; keywords; beginning a new act with the same subject/word as the previous; sharing the same principal character; thematic parallels, possibly intensificatory or contrastive e.g.; literary style; same world-outlook; duplications/inconsistencies consciously dealt with in parallel acts; and lastly threads and layers extending through the narrative and its different acts.[45] Bar-Efrat's treatment of techniques are probably not meant to be exhaustive even if long, but we will stay with him for a while, and broaden our discussion later on by means of other OT narratologists and general narratologists.

We have not yet been able to look at sharing the same principal character, thematic parallels, literary style, and same world-outlook, which will have to await further analysis. One seems to not apply: duplications/inconsistencies consciously dealt with. Another we find too unspecific to know how to apply: threads and layers. Bar-Efrat does not define what he means by threads and layer, and do not give any example on how to find them. With this said, let us look at the other techniques.

First, in analysing Num, cause and effect mainly seem to resonate with the subject of the different acts, at least when it comes to causes. It is hard to see how location and time of themselves would cause subject, location, or time in the following acts.

The prime cause for things happening in Num is act 3, effecting acts 4, 5, and 7 (the last two in decreasing measure).[46] The rebellion before the first entrance into the land in act 3

[42] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 103.
[43] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93.
[44] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 132.
[45] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 93, 102-111, 132-140.
[46] Cf. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness*, 104, 213-279, 284, who says that the reason for the macrostructure of Num 10:11-36:13 is "the failure to conquer the promised land from the south."

gives rise to the laws, rebellions and leader-questions in act 4, the wanderings in act 5, and the preparations for the new entrance in act 7. A special case is the story of Balaam in act 6, which is not caused by act 3, but by what happens by the end of act 5. In reaction to act 5, a twist is created in the plot, which jeopardises the entrance of Israel to the land, although Yahweh's blessing over Israel is reaffirmed in the end. The patriarchal promises that are alluded to in the act are not so much the cause of what happens, as a theme treated in the act.

However, acts 1 and 2 do not fit this analysis, since they simply happen before the rebellion. They cannot be said to be the cause for the rebellion. Act 2 leads up to it, but does not cause it. Their causes in turn have to be sought outside Num (the patriarchal promises mainly, but also the covenant at Sinai).[47] In Num, their position depends rather on what Bar-Efrat describes as loose chronology[48] – i.e. they happen rather consecutively.

Secondly, Bar-Efrat does not define what he means by keyword, so what follows is a discussion of words that connect two or several acts in some way or another, some of which are words that provide a key into understanding the act as a whole, or larger parts of it, some that seem important anyway. Thus, the two first examples we will take are formulas, rather than single keywords.

As we have seen, the formula וידבר יהוה plays a crucial role in defining the acts in terms of location. But seeing that the formula is prefaced to most laws, while always embedded in the narratives, it often singles out law from narrative and thereby creates the peculiar rhythm of Num. This characterising quality of the formula makes it easy to see that we have three acts dominated by law (act 1, 4, 7), which are intervened by four acts dominated by narrative material (act 2, 3 and 5, 6). The different use of the formula in conjunction with law and narrative gives an interfiling character to the acts of Num.

This structure by formula, however, are underlined by the cult-keywords כִּפֶּר, תָּהֵר/תָּהוֹר and תָּמֵא. They are used only in acts 1, 4, and 7, where offerings are envisioned/commanded or priests more generally act to counter sin (17:11; 25:13), or designating some of the problems that the priests are dealing with (chaps. 5-6, 8, 18-19, 31, 35). The exclusivity of these words in their acts enhances the difference between their acts and the rest.[49]

The other formula is set at a very broad level in Num, in that the acts are united in by an inclusio in the form of a fulfilment formula. Thus, Num both begin and end by relating Yahweh's command and the obedience of the people (1:19, 54; 36:10, 13), with the words כאשׁר צוה יהוה.

Moving over to more clear keywords, two obvious candidates for Num as a whole are מדבר and ארץ. They are very common and seem to summarise what Num is all about: Israel wanders in the desert towards the promised land. The first word also occurs in the Hebrew title of the book. Looking first at מדבר, we can see that it occurs in all acts describing the setting of the laws and narratives (e.g. 1:1; 10:31; 14:2; 16:32; 20:1; 24:1; 26:64-65), it is several times specified to certain spots or areas but on the whole gives a general impression of being in the desert. Seeing that the word features in the Hebrew title for Num, it can be contrasted with words like נסע and פקד that are associated with the censuses thereby with the Greek (and English) title. Thoses words exclusively occur in chapters 1-4 and 26.[50]

ארץ also occurs in all acts (1:1; 10:30; 13:2; 15:2; 20:12; 22:5-6; 26:53), from the beginning referring mostly to Egypt, but later on also to Canaan (the first reference to Canaan

[47] Cf. Wenham, *Numbers*, TOTC, 15-17.
[48] Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art*, 136, *contra* Forster, *Aspects*.
[49] In view of Douglas suggestion that the issue of defilement is the determinative one for the whole of Num, seems to be undercut by the restriction on these keywords, see Douglas, *In the Wilderness*.
[50] Cf. Olson, *The Death of the Old*, 83, who sees the Greek title as indicative of the main structure of the book.

comes in the 3rd act, 13:2). ארץ is where they come from, are going to, and what they do not have, while מדבר designates their present location and situation. There are some exceptions to this use, however. To begin with, ארץ means 'earth' or 'the earth' rather than 'land' in 11:31, 14:21, 16:32-34, and 26:10, which is not an important theme in Num. Moreover, in act 5, ארץ means land but mostly designates the home of other nations than Israel, at best forming an indirect contrast to the longings of Israel. This is also the case in act 2 and 6, where exclusively other 'lands' than Israel's are in view (Hobab's home, 10:31, and king Balak's land, chaps. 22-24). Thus, מדבר is a more important keyword than ארץ, summing up more of the features of Num, while ארץ come in as a keyword in certain acts (primarily 1, 3-5, 7) to contrast מדבר. Perhaps this also characterises the acts somewhat: the question of land is more important in acts 1, 3-5 and 7, the first and last depicting preparations for entrance, the middle ones negating it but slowly turning towards it again, while in act 2 the land is distant (and the march questioned), while act 6 concerns Israel as a landless military threat to the already settled ones. And all the time, the desert forms the side-scene to what happens.

There is also a movement described in Num in that Israel *wanders* in the desert towards the promised land. Words for movement like בוא and הלך are too common to be keywords, however. More interesting is that the word ענן comes into play in several acts in Num. Tracking its narrative history in the Pentateuch, the word is used from the Exodus and the theophany on Sinai to depict Yahweh's guidance and revelation (Ex. 13:21; 14:19, 24; 19:9, 16 etc.). Lev. drops it (except for Lev. 16), while Num do not pick it up until chap. 9 (Yahweh instead reveals himself through speaking to Moses through the tent of meeting). Chap. 9 describes the guidance of Yahweh through the wanderings in the desert (the pillar of cloud), and the ensuing narratives depict the guidance thusly, as well as indicating Yahweh's revelation (10:11-12, 34; 11:25; 12:5, 10, 14:14; 17:7). After act 4, however, the word again disappears (in this double function) for the rest of the Pentateuch,[51] and the mere speaking of Yahweh transmits his revelations. Possibly the concept should be presupposed for the travelogue of act 5 (chap. 9 being anticipatory), but act 6 depicts special means of revelation for Balaam,[52] while Israel is standing still at Moab, and act 7 revert to the revelational mode of Lev. 1 – Num 8, while Israel again stays waiting.

However, it is only in 17:7 that the word is used for the revelation of Yahweh in Num. The rest concerns his guidance of the people. In contrast to Exodus, Num then (almost) reserves the word for the guidance of Yahweh, which separates acts 1-3, 5 from the more 'stationary' acts 4, 6-7. This means that characteristics of the acts are underlined through the word: act 1 is clearly preparatory since no movement is depicted but rather what usually happened in a 'time-less' description, and the guidance retold lies in the future, while the strange tension in act 4, of presupposing the 40 years wandering in the desert while no movement is conceived is underlined through the use exclusive use of the word for Yahweh's revelation and not guidance.

Finally, Milgrom has observed a contrast of words between act 3 and 4 (and not merely thematic as above): in 15:37-41 Israel is commanded to wear fringes on their garments to "not follow the lust of your own heart" (v. 39) but obey the commandments of Yahweh.[53] The words follow (תור), and lust (זנה), occurs almost only here and in chapters 13 and 14 in Num, which suggests that act 4 clearly addresses the mission of the scouts and its ensuing rebellion by taking up the same vocabulary and commanding a practice that is meant to forestall it. This

[51] The occurences in Deut. are all retrospective.
[52] Josef Forsling, "The Story of Balaam – Its Coherence and Character" (MTh. diss., International Baptist Theological Seminary, Prague, 2005; Moore, *The Balaam Traditions*.
[53] Milgrom, *Numbers*, xiv.

contrasting relationship of the end of act 3 and beginning of act 4 is also underscored by the use of the word עדה. Chap. 14 tells us that "all the congregation" rebelled against Yahweh (14:1, 10, 27, 35), while chap. 15, reveals how the congregation should treat unintentional sins (15:22-26), as well as intentional ones (15:32-36). Chap. 15 thus seems to be practical answer to the problems of chap. 14.

In a similar manner, and touching on the technique of beginning an act with the same word/subject that ended the previous, the end of act 4 concerns the cleansing water from the red heifer and the word מים occurs extensively until the end (19:21). Act 5 on the other hand, begins by stating the lack of water in the desert, which gives rise to another complaint against Yahweh (20:2). While the end of act 4 looks forward to settlement in the land, where water is not supposed to be a problem, the beginning of act 5 takes us back to the reality of the desert.

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