OTSEM Granavolden/Oslo 2008

Dr. Christoph Berner

Sinaitic Symmetry
Observations on the Compositional History of the Parallel Accounts in Exod 17 and Num 20

Summary

The present shape of Exod 17 and Num 20 is the result of a complex redactional process of mutual influence. In a first step, the short pre-priestly miracle story Exod 17:1b, 2a, 4aα*, 5aα, 6a*bα in a form already including the redactional additions 17:2b, 5b, 7 was given a post-priestly counterpart in Num 20:1aα(βb), 2, 3b*, 4, 6-8aαb, 9a*, 10a, 11, 13. In the same way, the story of the quails (Num 11) had previously received its narrative counterpart in Exod 16:1-15*. Both narratives, Exod 16:1-15* as well as Num 20:1-13*, bear witness to a post-priestly editorial tendency of arranging pairs of thematically related miracle stories around the imaginary axis of Mount Sinai. Thus, there is an obvious editorial interest in the phenomenon I have chosen to label 'Sinaitic Symmetry'. Later redactional additions intend to further strengthen the bonds between the parallel accounts: Num 20:3b was copied from Exod 17:2aαβ to serve as an intertextual link connecting the expositions of the two narratives. Conversely, the people's criticism of the Exodus (Exod 17:3) was influenced by Num 20:5. The fact that the author of Exod 17:3 adopted the topic from Num 20:5 while following the wording from Num 20:19aα shows that he obviously perceived Num 20:1-21 as a narrative unity consisting of stories related to water. This broadening of the perspective beyond the scope of the two miracle stories (Exod 17:1-7; Num 20:1-13) becomes ultimately clear in the late midrashic composition Exod 17:8-13. The text, apart from relating to the preceding verse (Exod 17:7), takes up the notion of conflict (Num 20:14-21) and the motif of Moses' and his two attendants' ascent to the mountain (20:22-29) and integrates them into one coherent narrative. On this macrocontextual level, Exod 17:8-13 provides the so far missing parallel to Num 20:14-29, a final contribution to the establishment of Sinaitic Symmetry between the two chapters.