Presentation

My research project attempts to bring together at least three different areas: 1) observed problems of macrostructure and coherence in the book of Numbers; 2) biblical research trying to address these problems; and 3) narratology. It is my conviction that such an attempt at dialogue can be very fruitful for understanding Num.

As for the first, the following list of problems in Num captures the issue quite comprehensively: 1) The beginning and end of Num are not ultimate. Num as a text cannot stand on its own, but is dependent on what precedes and follows. 2) There are many sources (written and oral) and redactions involved. No original coherence could be assumed. 3) There is a wealth of genres (forms) in Num pointing us to nr 2, a diversity to the breaking point. Especially the mixture of law and narrative without mediating links (see 4) are problematic. The narrative is time and again interrupted by sections only very loosely connected to the story-line. 4) There are few explicit connections between different sections, both on a lower and higher level, leading from one to the other (prompting one to ask, why this now?!). Especially the sections represented by chaps. 5-6, 15-19 and 28-30 stand out as disconnected from their contexts. 5) Diversity of content. 6) Num depicts a journey through certain areas but this is not done in a consistent manner, meaning that geography cannot serve as a basis for structuring Num. 7) The same goes for chronology. 8) There is no single theme holding the book together, but rather several, competing ones. 9) No formal structure, like chiasm, palistrophe or ring-structure can be established for the book.

Some of these problems arises from the fact that scholars have attempted to structure the book according a certain principle, but failed to win universal acceptance. This brings us to the second area brought into the research project: research on Num. I will here leave source-, form, and redaction-critical research behind, although these will be important for characterising Num as a text and will be addressed in the analysis. However, I believe that to get a grasp of the discussion around structuring Num as a whole, it is better to review common ways of doing this, and show both their contributions and problems. I will here take up three important understandings.

The first common structure is to see geography as the backbone of the collection of texts making up Num. Important representatives here are G. B. Gray in his ICC commentary of 1903, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers*, and J. de Vaulx's commentary *Les Nombres*, 1972. Drawing on these, G. Wenham made an attractive suggestion in his 1981 commentary on Num: chaps. 1-10 centres around Sinai and law-giving, 15-19 around Kadesh and law-giving, and 22-36 around Moab and law-giving. These major sections are then connected through short travelogues (this structure was also connected to a larger structure of the three middle books of the Pentateuch). Helpful though it was in picking out some important structural features in Num, it breaks down at certain points: Kadesh is e.g. mentioned a few times in chaps. 15-19 but the section does not have the same focus on a certain area as do chaps. 1-10 and 22-36. There is also a question of where to draw the limits between the sections: chaps. 22-24 are clearly set in Moab, but has little to do with law-giving, as does chaps. 1-10.

The second common structure originated with D. T. Olson in his *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New* of 1985. Focusing on the two censuses in chaps. 1 and 26 he suggested that they together structure Num in two parts: chaps. 1-25 and 26-36, where the first section depicts a deprived and rebellious generation of Israel that must die in the desert, while the second depicts the promise of a future generation, living under the grace of God. The shift is signalled by the second census in chap. 26 who says: "To these the land must be divided as an

inheritance according to the number of the names...” (v. 53) but also that “there was not a man among these who had been among those numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest when they numbered the Israelites in the wilderness of Sinai” (v. 64). Num thus depicts the theme of generational shift, meant to guide future generations. However, Num is much more diverse than this scheme suggests. Reading chaps. 1-10 one hardly gets the impression that God is dealing with an especially rebellious generation, and chaps. 22-24 contain among the most positive material in Num, where Yahweh protects Israel from a foreign, religious attack. Rather, rebellion and obedience is much more intermingled in Num than what Olson suggests.

The third, and most recent, structure comes from Won W. Lee in his book *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel's Migratory Campaign*, 2003. Focusing on chaps. 10-36, he says that the one structural principle for these chapters is the failed attempt of Israel to conquer the promised land from the south. The event in chaps 13-14 thus explains the positioning of the material that follows. Adapting this by connecting it to chaps. 1-9, Rolf Knierim and George Coats in their FOTL commentary *The Book of Numbers* (2005) say that the whole of Num is really about a migratory campaign, the preparation depicted in chaps. 1-9 and the (failed) execution in chaps. 10-36. There is much to say for this understanding of Num. However, even though the failed attempt to conquer the land explains why Israel is out in the desert again after chap. 14 and why they arrive at Moab instead of (more naturally) somewhere south of the promised land, there is only a very loose connection between the failed attempt and that which follows in chaps. 26-36. All in all, there is more going on between the different parts in Num as shown by Wenham and Olson, and Lee does not reckon with these, but rather establish his own approach over against them.

My, not very astounding, conclusion is that there is probably some truth to all these structures. It is not clear however, how, or even if, they somehow interact, and define each other. Moreover, there is even more happening in Num that none of these structures take into account, like the theme of holy war in chaps. 1-10, and the chronological markings that nevertheless are there in the book and their function.

Finally then, the third area brought in for discussion is narratology. One reason for this is that we here have a genuine lacuna in research on Num, which has not attempted such a convergence. An exception is J. Ackerman's chapter ”Numbers,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermod), which, however, is very short.

The intention of the material in the short paper is to outline how narratology is to be used in discussing the coherence/macrostructure etc. in Num. Therefore, I will not say much about it here. Suffice it, perhaps, to again underline that the material represents my attempt to predict what I will do - and our discussion is perhaps best directed at investigating how good a prediction it is, and what could be done differently.

I would also like to underline that it is not my intention to “apply” narratology on Num. Rather, as I have said throughout this presentation, narratology is brought in, in discussing Num and its coherence for the light it may shed on the text. Thus I am concerned that the material is viewed to be a “light backpack,” which I believe, can illuminate features in Num, but never define these in advance. The research becomes more to outline and describe possible narrative meanings in Num, rather than finding *the* narrative meaning in Num. Narratology cannot overrule the fragmentary and compositional nature of Num.

With this said, I hope the proper context for the material is given, as well as my understanding of its place and character in the research.

Once again, looking forward to the coming discussion.
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