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978-0-521-87869-2 - Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers

Adriane Leveen

Excerpt

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ONE

*Desert Bound*

For league upon league no voice, no syllable breaks the stillness; oblivion has swallowed forever the victories of a bold generation. Whirlwinds have razed the footprints of the terrible warriors of the wasteland, sand has piled up around them, rocks thrust out through the dunes; the desert holds its breath for the brave sunk in endless sleep.¹

[H]e must unpack the concentrated focus of memory: he must “write” it as narration, description, reflective interpretation.²

Shortly after God denies him entry to the promised land, a fate Moses shares with an entire biblical generation, the prophet nonetheless proceeds to set a course there on behalf of the generation to follow. That course would take the people Israel across the territory of Edom. In seeking the permission of the king of Edom to cross his land, Moses can think of no better opening to his request than a brief recital of Israel’s past:

Thus says your brother Israel, you know all the hardship that has found us; our ancestors went down to Egypt and we dwelt in Egypt many days and Egypt caused us and our ancestors harm; And we cried out to YHWH and He heard our voice and sent a messenger and took us out from Egypt and behold we are in Kadesh, a town at the edge of your border. Please let us cross through your land. (Num. 20:14b–17a, translation mine unless otherwise noted)

Moses’ recourse to prior events as a prologue to present exigencies is a fine example of the persistent turn to the past in biblical narrative. What happens there, or, more precisely, what one remembers to have happened there, repeatedly impacts the present. Current actions and requests can be understood, so our example argues, only in a context provided by the past.

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Moses' attempt to persuade the king of Edom rests on that assumption. As will become clear, Moses hopes to persuade not only a foreign king of the worthiness of the journey and its destination, but even more so, his own people. His attempt reflects in microcosm what the editors of the fourth book of Moses – Numbers – attempt in broader, more ambitious fashion.³ Numbers presents its audience, the people Israel, a narrative of past events in order to explain present circumstances, opportunities, and dangers. It also attempts, just as crucially, to chart a course for the future. In the process, the editors of Numbers construct a unique and troubling version of the events of the wilderness journey that contributes to the stock of biblical traditions of that early period in Israel's history.⁴

Among the events to be remembered, Numbers singles out, and makes central to its account, the failure of the entire wilderness generation, so recently liberated from Egypt, to enter the land promised them by God. Every freed Israelite, so carefully “counted” at the beginning of Numbers, is held accountable for the people's later failure of will, sentenced to die in the wilderness, abandoned without trace. Why include this dismal punishment in a book meant to inspire later generations of Israelites on their many journeys to faith and covenant? I shall argue that its editors recognized in the tales of the wilderness rebellion and the fate suffered by an entire generation a most dramatic and highly useful deterrent. By the end of Numbers the children of that generation must come to realize that they cannot survive for long in a wilderness dominated by appetites, a wilderness in which law and God can be so disastrously defied. Indeed, they are last glimpsed readying themselves to enter the land under God's commandments and priestly leadership, obliged and guided by their tradition to build a certain type of nation. The editors insist that each subsequent generation, especially their own, make that same choice. The present work analyzes the sophisticated, and at times coercive, ways in which the editors of Numbers attempt to persuade the people of their particular vision. Such an analysis highlights the often neglected, but crucial, role of Numbers within the larger biblical corpus in forging the people Israel into a unified whole.

For the sake of convenience, I sometimes refer to this later editorial hand in the singular, but as I argue in a later chapter, the editing of Numbers should be considered a group, rather than an individual, project. Most likely originating in a priestly school, such a project took place in stages over a period of many decades sometime between the seventh and the fifth

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century B.C.E. The priestly editors organized the various stories of the wilderness period, some of which dated from much earlier times, into a coherent whole while creatively editing or adding other materials to the mix, including their own comments, in order to ensure the success of their endeavor.⁵ A variety of agendas powered this project. Explain the past. Shape collective memory. Ensure the means of transmission. Prevent recurrence of disaster.

And secure the proper leadership. As they shaped earlier priestly and non-priestly materials alike into a carefully redacted priestly account, the editors placed the priestly leadership exclusively in the hands of the sons of Aaron. In so doing, they supplied the priestly hierarchy of their time with an origin in the wilderness period, thus creating a powerful legitimization for that hierarchy. Only the sons of Aaron could ensure the proper functioning of the wilderness camp with its tabernacle, and, by extension, only the sons of Aaron could ensure the proper functioning of the nation and its Temple.

Thus Numbers provides a particularly rich example of how a select group asserts its version of tradition, using narrative to impose its will on a particular audience by controlling the process of retelling the past: “it is the recognized ability to expound the true memory of the group that constitutes the core of religious power.”⁶ I provide evidence of this priestly assertion of control by elucidating an editorial process that shapes various materials of varying dates into an overarching narrative of the journey, subtly does away with other sources of authority that compete with their own, goes on to examine the uses and abuses of collective memory during that long journey on behalf of a later time, preserves a record of the political battles in the wilderness camp and their resolution (again with an eye to a later time), reports on the death of a generation, and in concluding, secures a more promising future for the next generation. The culmination of these editorial strategies makes a highly specific construction of tradition compelling, authoritative, and, finally, binding on a later audience.

That vision is best conveyed via the dramatic narratives of the wilderness journey. The editors have other types of material at hand, including two censuses, ancient poetry, diverse laws, an inventory of tribal gifts, and a priestly calendar. They strategically place those materials within the larger work. But their creativity and persuasion appear most evident in their use of the tales of rebellion. Beginning with the moment of rupture that occurs in chapter 11 as the people first begin to complain, the editors highlight the

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repercussions of glorifying the Egyptian past. A single memory of Egyptian delicacies spreads throughout the camp like wildfire, triggering the downward cycle of the generation. Before the fire is extinguished – three chapters later – God condemns an entire generation to death. A generation temporarily bound for the desert on the way to the promised land ends its life bound by the desert. It is this image of the generation bound by the desert that the editors brilliantly exploit. The generation's fate pervades – even haunts – the rest of the book.

It also haunts readers of a later time. The modern Hebrew poet Hayyim Nahman Bialik beautifully captures that sense of hauntedness in his epic 1902 poem, “Metei Midbar,” or “The Dead of the Desert.” His poem first taught me to pay attention to the repercussions of such wholesale devastation and to reflect on its meaning in the biblical narrative. Bialik's resurrection of the ancient tale, itself an act of memory, provides a testament to the power of the biblical text and its tenacious hold on later readers. The poem especially invites contemplation of the desert as the setting for the unfolding tragedy. “Whirlwinds have razed the footprints of the terrible warriors of the wasteland, sand has piled up around them.”⁷ The poet imagines the burial grounds of the entire biblical generation as nearly unrecoverable, abandoned to a wilderness waste shrouded in the distant reaches of time. The eternal rhythms of nature, the movement of open, barren desert, the recurring silence serve notice in Bialik's view that those buried long ago will not easily be found again.

In a more recent work that also takes memory and death as its themes, *The Dominion of the Dead*, Robert Pogue Harrison evokes the power of the sea and in so doing unwittingly captures the terrible dilemma produced by the wilderness setting as it is expressed both in Bialik's poem and in the biblical text. Harrison's passage is worth quoting at length:

It is its [the sea's] passion for erasure that makes it inhuman. Erasure does not mean disappearance only; it means that the site of the disappearance remains unmarkable. There are no gravestones on the sea. History and memory ground themselves on inscription, *but this element is uninscribable*. It closes over rather than keeps the place of its dead, while its unbounded grave remains humanly unmarked.⁸ (emphasis added)

The same could be said of the desert setting of Numbers. It is conceivable that such a threat of erasure motivated Bialik. For he refused to leave the

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dead of the desert alone. The poet was compelled to disturb their obscure burial ground, to wake the dead by writing about them, inscribing them in his poem, fixing them in collective memory. Perhaps he was reacting to the sheer terror of the biblical text. For Numbers does nothing less than turn Harrison's image of an unbounded grave into the wilderness in its entirety. It is a site of disappearance. And it is unmarked.

But what triggers such a fate? According to Numbers, in spite of being witness to the greatest feats their God had performed on their behalf – liberation from slavery, a miraculous crossing of the Reed Sea, and, in a thunderous moment of divine revelation, the granting of a covenant – the people Israel failed nonetheless to grasp hold of the radical promise of nationhood in their own land. No doubt Bialik would be interested in such a failure considering the climate of Jewish nationalist stirrings in which he lived and wrote. Bialik's poem exemplifies how tradition may be used to ask questions about one's own time, a topic of great interest to the present work. At the same time, his poem and Harrison's meditations exemplify the way in which certain texts or images from the past unsettle us enough to compel a sustained reflection on the past.

And in fact the intense desire to understand what lay behind the failure of the generation liberated from Egypt fuels not only the interest of later readers such as Bialik but the earliest readers – the editors of Numbers themselves. How to account for the generation's frightened and feeble response to God's grand plans for them? Seemingly, the editors hoped that in understanding that tale, they could prevent a recurrence of failure in their own time and place. But how? In other words, how should the wilderness generation be remembered and to what end exactly? What meanings should be derived from its fate? How best determine and fix those meanings? What form should the generation's story finally take?⁹

In answering those questions, the priestly editors of Numbers rely on a primary function of narrative, its ability to make sense of breakdown and disorder. "In search of meaning, [a narrator may] narrate the unexpected or disturbing, creating a sense of order – a sense that things make sense after all – through the imposed order of narrative."¹⁰ In fact, Numbers' editors succeed in moving from the total breakdown of God's plan for one generation and the haunted arena in which they die to restored order and purpose in the next. They dare to narrate a path out of that unmarked wilderness into the promised land for all time.

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Yet the editors of Numbers face a daunting, even formidable, task. Engaged in a crucial struggle for the content and shape of Israel's identity as a certain type of nation guided by a certain type of priest, the editors simultaneously leave behind evidence of the difficulties and dynamics of that struggle. In consequence, the final form of Numbers comprises a set of reflections on the uses of the past *and* the limits of such use. The book vividly illustrates the results of imposing an authoritative, priestly version of tradition, intended to be binding, on a people who repeatedly threaten, much like the generation we first encounter in the shifting sands and unmarked territory of wilderness, to come undone. Along the way, it also illustrates the extent to which prior textual materials may have claims that the editors cannot ignore. Compelled to include in their final version older fragments of known texts or poetry associated with the journey in the wilderness, the editors preserve complaints and memories that become, perhaps inadvertently, a *de facto* resistance to the priestly attempt.¹¹ That resistance is not as easily overcome as Moses – or the editors – could have wished. Halbwach contends that religious memory is “highly conflictual . . . combining, as it always does, a plurality of collective memories in a state of tension one with another.”¹² As we shall see, in the end the editors' manipulation of the competing memories of that time does succeed, creating an unflinchingly critical tale of the wilderness generation. Yet that very criticism provides the means through which the priestly editors ultimately hope to redeem the people Israel.

In sum, the present work offers a rereading of Numbers that highlights the role of the editors in shaping a view of the wilderness period as a time not only of disaster but of renewed determination. That priestly determination shapes a vision for the future that is paradoxically placed in the distant past. Yet it is their contemporaries whom the priests most hope to sway through their editing of the tale. As the editors devise the means to transmit and impose their narrated version of the wilderness period, they leave behind a richly layered record of the process as well as a set of remarkable reflections on the uses of the past.

Before proceeding to a description of such editorial strategies and the results in subsequent chapters, let me first address a number of introductory matters. These include the placement of Numbers in the context of the rest of the Five Books of Moses, known as the Torah, and a consideration of the two terms, memory and tradition, that are key to the priestly uses of the

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past. Both contemporary and biblical conceptions of tradition and memory will aid such an analysis.

In the wilderness

After beginning with the story of the world's creation, Genesis narrates the tale of the founding family of Israel, headed by Abraham. The remainder of Genesis is concerned with this particular family and the often contentious relationships that exist among husbands and wives, parents and their children, and brothers and sisters. Genesis is equally concerned with the relationships of the members of Abraham's family to God. Exodus takes this interest further, moving from the story of a family to that of an entire people. Born into slavery in Egypt but liberated from the oppression and enslavement of the Pharaoh by God, the people Israel are headed back to the land God promised to Abraham and to a better future.

The primary interest of the book of Exodus is the relationship of the people with Moses and, above all, with God as they begin their journey to the promised land. What the people Israel witness at Mt. Sinai – God's presence, the granting of laws and the establishment of a covenant – is meant to cement their commitment to God. Subsequent chapters of Exodus and all of Leviticus focus on the details of that commitment – the rules of sacrifice and the priestly supervision of the people Israel, centered on the tabernacle. Thus the design and building of the tabernacle and the regulations involving the priests, the delimitation of their authority and the development of their expertise, dominate the rest of Exodus and Leviticus. These two books provide a blueprint of the tabernacle and a description of the cult under priestly authority meant to be precisely duplicated in the land of Israel.

Following what can best be described as a momentum toward promise and fulfillment, the events in Numbers force the people to halt in their tracks and nearly abandon their plans. But it is not immediately clear that such a crisis will occur. The first section of Numbers (described in more detail in subsequent chapters), continues to focus on the tabernacle and the various responsibilities that the priests, and a newly established subordinate class, the Levites, have for its functioning. We also observe the counting and placement of the entire people within the wilderness camp as they ready themselves to conquer the land. Suddenly, even abruptly, reality intrudes. Nothing prepares the reader for what happens next: an outpouring

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of Israelite complaints that disrupt the carefully orchestrated and ordered narrative until that point. Turning their thoughts back to Egypt, the people Israel allow memories of its delicacies to overcome them, weakening their resolve to follow God's lead and overwhelming them with doubt that they have the strength or ability to conquer the promised land. Furthermore, nothing prepares us for God's angry and lethal condemnation of the people. After all, they had complained about food earlier in their journey, way back in Exodus shortly after leaving Egypt. What stands between that moment and the present crisis of Numbers is Sinai, with the people's promise of fidelity to God. After Sinai everything is different. Deeply disappointed, certainly enraged, in Numbers God vows to destroy an entire population, including the children. Only Moses' skillful intercession and the actions of the high priest Aaron stand between the people and utter destruction. Moved by Moses' words, God relents and allows the members of the new generation to continue toward the promised land, but only after the deaths of their parents in the wilderness.

Numbers thus creates an atmosphere of crisis and near catastrophe in the wilderness camp that is distinct from what came before. Its emphasis on crisis sets up, in the starkest of terms, a choice that Israel must make between the order and control of priestly rule, abundantly represented at the beginning of Numbers, and the chaos and disaster that follows. It is the children of those killed off in the wilderness who must make that choice and, in so doing, leave their parents behind. It must be noted that the final chapters of Numbers conclude on a more hopeful note than we would have supposed in the midst of such devastation and destruction. That hopeful note is restored by an unlikely source, the non-Israelite prophet Balaam, who sees in the Israel encamped in the valley below a flourishing people – recipients of God's blessing – simply too vast to count. The optimism of Balaam's vision of Israel is justified in what follows in the concluding chapters of Numbers. Moses and the people become engaged in matters such as inheritance and a calendar of annual holidays that can only be implemented once Israel is settled in the land.

In some ways, Deuteronomy, the final book of the five, functions as a review of the books that precede it, recounting the events of the Exodus and the forty years of wandering that are narrated as an eyewitness account in Exodus-Numbers. Moses is the dominant figure of Deuteronomy, while the priests who play such significant roles in Exodus-Numbers retreat decidedly

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into the background.¹³ Among other things, Deuteronomy could be considered an inner biblical interpretation and elaboration of the laws given to the people in Exodus 21–23. Deuteronomy ends with the death of Moses. Thus concludes the Five Books.

We are now in a position to observe the larger trajectory in which Numbers takes its place. Each book interacts with the next as the action unfolds over hundreds of years but also retains its own discrete content and structure. Genesis focuses on the founding family and the descent into Egypt, Exodus on liberation from Egypt and the construction of the Tabernacle, Leviticus on the priests and their cult, and Numbers on the journey and its obstacles on the way to fulfillment. Because Deuteronomy functions more as a review of the wilderness journey as the people camp on the other side of the Jordan, just prior to crossing over, action largely ceases at the end of Numbers. The present work treats Numbers as a book that is an integral part of the larger Torah, referring to, and even at times replicating, earlier scenes or episodes and anticipating later ones, such as the death of Moses at the end of Deuteronomy. But I also treat Numbers as a work with its own internal structure and content that sets it apart from the other four works. Principally, Numbers must deal with the near extinction of a project that God first set before Abraham and then Moses. That project, whose success is presumed by Exodus and Leviticus, entails the successful settlement of Israel in the promised land. No other book of Torah has to grapple with the consequences of that divine threat of extinction so urgently and so immediately as Numbers.¹⁴

At the conclusion of Numbers the children of Israel have survived, encamped at the very edge of the promised land. It should be no surprise that issues of transmission and inheritance take on a poignant urgency at journey's end. The children of Israel, literally bereft of their parents, have little left but their traditions and memories as they prepare to enter the promised land.

Tradition and memory

As Harrison reminds us, the living are linked to the dead “in the modes of memory, genealogy, tradition, and history.”¹⁵ In a later chapter I briefly refer to the role of genealogy in categorizing the Israelites as families, clans, and tribes over several generations in the two censuses of Numbers. The

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actual historicity of the wilderness journey lies beyond the scope of this study, though I should mention in passing two important, recent archaeological finds that are of direct relevance to Numbers. These discoveries date from a period much later than the alleged journey through the wilderness. They are most likely to be contemporaneous with some of the written materials of Numbers, though earlier than its final editing. This external archaeological evidence has confirmed the accuracy of two of the texts or characters of Numbers – the priestly blessing found in Numbers 6 and the figure of Balaam in Numbers 22–24. I refer to texts found at Deir ‘Alla in the Jordan Valley from around the middle of the eighth century B.C.E. that describe the activities of Balaam the prophet and to silver amulets discovered at a site known as Ketef Hinnom, just outside Jerusalem that date approximately to the sixth century B.C.E. One of the silver amulets contains the priestly blessing recorded in Numbers 6. These examples suggest the extent to which the editors of Numbers may have had in their possession, and artfully drawn on, an array of preexisting materials that they could use to develop, and lend an air of verisimilitude to, their account of the wilderness period.¹⁶

Again, modes of genealogy, history, memory, and tradition link the living to the dead. The other two terms on Harrison’s list – memory and tradition – are indeed indispensable, as I have suggested above, in linking the living to the dead in Numbers. Therefore, they are indispensable to the present study. In consequence, I devote the rest of this introduction to a discussion of these terms as they are used both within contemporary theoretical literature and within biblical texts.

Let me begin with tradition and its discussion by Edward Shils. He offers the reader a simple and straightforward definition: “in its barest, most elementary sense, it means simply a traditum; it is anything which is transmitted or handed down from the past to the present.”¹⁷ But then Shils immediately challenges such a broad definition of tradition. So does the book of Numbers. “Anything” suggests an endless inventory of elements. But in Numbers, tradition quickly becomes specific laws, rituals, hierarchical arrangements, and stories. I am interested in how Numbers goes about determining its particular list – which customs, laws, and stories should be transmitted and why. Furthermore, in claiming that particular laws, customs, and stories originate during the wilderness journey, the editors defy a definition of tradition as an impersonal transference of past experience to the present independent of human agency or intervention. What becomes “tradition” is consciously