

Sean Rice

Prof. Keith Bodner

BLST 610

January 7th, 2022

THE ENDGAME OF NUMBERS: THE BALAAM ACCOUNT (CH. 22-31),  
ITS FUNCTION IN THE STRUCTURE OF NUMBERS, AND MESSAGE TO THE EXILES

- I. Thesis: Numbers 22-31 Is a Distinct Unit With a Distinct Message for the Exiles
- II. Two Difficulties
  - A. The Structure of the Book of Numbers
  - B. Does Numbers Have a Unified Message?
- III. Proposal for the Structure of Numbers, With Numbers 22-31 As Its Climactic High Point
  - A. Signs of This Structure
  - B. Considering the Accounts of Zelophehad's Daughters (Num. 27 & 36)
  - C. Considering the Reveal of Balaam's Influence Between Num. 24 and 31
  - D. Other Signs That Numbers 22-31 is a Complete Literary Unit
  - E. Two Overlapping Literary Units: Which Is More Fundamental?
- IV. The Message of Numbers 22-31
  - A. Having Established That Numbers 22-31 Is a Unit, What Is Its Message?
  - B. Signs of the Exilic Audience That the Final Editor Had In Mind
  - C. Balaam's Oracles As Restatement of Promises to Israel
  - D. Balaam's Oracles As Forward-Looking Message of Messianic Hope
  - E. Numbers 25 As Warning Against Syncretism With Other Nations
  - F. Phinehas in Numbers 25 and 31 as Pattern for Exilic Zeal
  - G. The Syncretist as Traitor: Balaam's Character Arc In Numbers 22-24 and 31
  - H. Accounting for the Placement of Preparatory Material in Numbers 26-30
- V. Possible Applications of This Study to Evangelical Faith and Practice

What is the function of the Balaam narrative (Numbers 22-31) in the book of Numbers, and what is its intended message as a literary unit? These two questions drive this paper. We will argue that Numbers 22-31 is a complete and distinct unit within Numbers, and that it is intended by its final editor as an inspirational word to Jews living in the exilic or post-exilic era. This word consists of reaffirmed promises, examples of faithfulness and unfaithfulness, and -most importantly- an explanation of what the Jewish people must cultivate in themselves before Israel can be returned to its full restoration and to sovereign possession of the Promised Land.

The structure and message of the book of Numbers is not universally agreed upon. For example, regarding structure David Stubbs writes that “the structure of Numbers has been a matter of debate within recent scholarship” (Stubbs, 2009, p. 21) and Stephen Sherwood has said that “Apart from an outline of the book [of Numbers], I have not found any proposed structure convincing.” (Sherwood, p. 110) Dennis Olson, however, has been credited by many for proposing the most widely influential framework for understanding the structure of Numbers (see Stubbs, p.21; Pressler, p. 5) which sees the two censuses in chapters 1-4 and 26 as the major divisions of the book. Regarding the unified message of the contents of Numbers, there has been a similar debate. Gordon Wenham wonders aloud whether there is “any reason for the apparently random juxtaposition of law and narrative” in Numbers, before suggesting his own possible solution (Wenham, p. 16-18). A similar awareness of the seeming randomness of its material leads Philip Budd to anticipate his readers’ objections as to whether Numbers has “any individuality and integrity as a unit” (Budd, xix). This paper argues that Numbers *does* have a distinct structure and unified message, and that the account in chapters 22-31 serves a key role.

First, there have been many suggestions as to the intended structure of Numbers, though nearly all of these end up splitting the Balaam account in Numbers 22-24 from the death of Balaam in Numbers 31. Stubbs favors a “tripartite structure” which divides the book into three sections recording the hopeful beginnings of the first generation starting at 1:1, their increasing rebelliousness starting at 10:11, and a third section recording the acts of the second generation after 26:1 (Stubbs, pp. 22-26). For his part, Raymond Brown prefers a structure of “five unequal sections” which is the same as Stubbs’ except that it divides the middle section into rebelliousness *before* the spies enter Canaan, *during* the episode of the spies in Canaan, and after (Brown, p. 17). Budd also maintains a similar structure, though he begins the middle section at 9:15 rather than 10:11 (Budd, xx.). Uniquely, however, Pressler favors *two* overlapping structures, a dominant one which divides the book according to the two censuses in Numbers 1-4 and 26, and another which divides the book according to geographical references in the text at Numbers 1:1, 10:11, and 22:1 (Pressler, pp. 5-6). This last way of dividing the book maintains the unity of the Balaam material in Numbers 22-31, though it does not consider the clear transition in the narrative that appears in Numbers 32 after Israel’s vengeance on the Midianites and the killing of Balaam. This appears to be due to chalking up the differing material in her third section to “different sources” with “different contexts and agendas” (ibid., p. 283).

This paper argues, in part, for what appears to be a unique way of organizing the book of Numbers, taking the split-up Balaam material in chs. 22-24 and 31 -and the way that 31:8,16 makes clear Balaam has had a hidden influence within the intervening material- as a major clue to the structure of the book. This structure does not take geographical references to be the final editor’s primary way of dividing the material, though it agrees with Pressler that geographic references likely underlie an earlier redaction of Numbers (Pressler, p. 6). Instead this proposed structure places more emphasis on Israel’s progress in relation to the settling of the land of Canaan. The suggested structure would then be as follows: **First**, the “Getting ready” section is

only slightly altered from that proposed by the majority of the commentators noted above, and concludes with Israel setting out from Sinai at the end of in Numbers 1:1-10:35. **Second**, there is a “Fall of the first generation” section which details the grumbling of Israel leading up to Israel’s sentence to wander the wilderness, in Numbers 10:11-15:41.<sup>1</sup> **Third**, a “Wandering and death” section includes the rebellion of Korah, the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, and the account of the bronze serpent, but finishes up with Israel finally being permitted to send spies into the land of Jazer and capture it along with other land to the east of the Jordan, Numbers 16:1-21:35. **Fourth**, the Balaam section deals with the preparations that Israel must make before actually settling the land they have captured, Numbers 22-31. **Fifth**, the final section gives an account of Israel actually settling the land they had captured to the east of the Jordan in chapter 21, and setting up the boundaries of the promised land, in Numbers 32-36.

The most apparent sign of a distinct section in Numbers 22-31 is a double-split in the narrative where matters are left “hanging” only to be picked up later on. So we see that not only is Balaam mentioned in 22-24 and then brought back into the story when he is killed in 31, but the surrounding material -just on either side of these chapters- is *also* a split narrative in which Israel possesses the land of King Sihon and King Og in chapter 21, but must wait on the events of the Balaam narrative before they are permitted to actually settle it in chapter 32. Commentators generally recognize this kind of bookending in the case of the inheritance of Zelophehad’s daughters in Numbers 27 and 36. For example, Jacob Milgrom writes, “That these chapters constitute an organic literary block is indicated by the accounts concerning the daughters of Zelophehad that flank them at both ends” (Milgrom, p. xiii). That Numbers 22-31 similarly constitute “an organic literary block” may be seen in how Moses’ words in 31:8,16 peg Balaam as the mastermind behind the incident at Peor in Numbers 25, and in the way that Phinehas -the hero of Numbers 25- also reappears and is selected as the leader of those who take vengeance on the Midianites and Balaam in chapter 31, thus helping to further tie the material together as one unit. The census and other material in chapters 26-29 is anticipatory in that it organizes Israel and outlines precepts which will govern how they will live in the promised land, but it is not until *after* the events of chapter 31 that the Israelites actually build cities (32), recount their wilderness journey -implying it is over- and are warned to drive out the inhabitants of the land before them (33), and fix the actual boundaries of the promised land (34-36).<sup>2</sup>

The section regarding Zelophehad’s daughters (27-36) overlaps with the Balaam section (22-31), though—so which should take precedence? Here Pressler is very helpful in her suggestion that there may be two or more overlapping organizational principles which reflect the structure of Numbers. In her case she sees an overlap of divisions between the first and the second censuses and the geographical notices in Numbers (Pressler, p. 6). In our case we may see an overlap between the Balaam material, which separates the possession of the Transjordan in chapter 21 with its settling in chapter 32, and the account of Zelophehad’s daughters which bookends the material directly after the second census in chapter 27 with the end of the book in chapter 36. In this way the organization of the book may be viewed *both* as an account of Israel’s progress toward settling the promised land, *and* secondarily as a transition between the grumbling first generation and the obedient second generation. However, because the

---

<sup>1</sup> (1) The inclusion of content from chapter 15 in this section reflects the insight of Wenham that “in chapter 15... the demand to offer... sacrifice is an implicit pledge that one day Israel will enter Canaan despite the events described in the previous chapters 13-14” (Wenham, p. 17). (2) The break at the end of this section could also occur after 15:31.

<sup>2</sup> The material concerning the inheritance of Zelophehad’s daughters in 36 fits with the material in 34-35 in that the “heads” of the people of Manasseh come to Moses with a concern about maintaining the allotted boundaries.

Zelophehad material can be reasonably tied to the dying out of the first generation before chapter 27 and the portioning out of the land before chapter 36, whereas the Balaam account actually holds up the settling of the land between chapters 21 and 32, the Balaam account would seem to be the more fundamental division in the text.

If the Balaam account in Numbers 22-31 represents a distinct literary unit within the structure of the book of Numbers, then what is its purpose and message? Though space does not permit a large amount of detail, it can be broadly suggested that this material is organized in such a way as to show a new generation of Judean exiles what they must do in order to come into possession of the land after it has been lost due to the faithlessness of earlier generations. This works well with the comments of Baruch Levine and Carolyn Pressler, who regard at least parts of this narrative as post-exilic (Levine, p. 237, and Pressler, pp. 7-8). Accordingly, Balaam's first three oracles represent a reaffirmation of God's promises to Israel through Abraham (23-24). Then, the fourth oracle introduces the hope of Messianic expectation (24).<sup>3</sup> Moving on, we see that what stands between Israel and these promises is the danger of syncretism and intermarriage/sexual relations with the surrounding nations which inevitably leads to idolatry (25). This was certainly a central concern of the post-exilic community as recorded in the final sections of Ezra (see chapter 10, where they send away their foreign wives and the narrator laments that some of the foreign wives "had [even] given birth to children", Ezra 10:44) and Nehemiah (where in chapter 13 Nehemiah confronts, curses, beats, pulls out the hair of, and makes to swear an oath, those men he had found who had married foreign women and whose children could not speak the language of Judah). This exilic struggle is also evident from the records of Ahikam and his Babylonian wife Bunnannitu, and their son Nir-Yama (Hebrew for "Yahweh is my light"), in the Al-Yahudu Tablets (Pearce and Wunsch, pp. 9, 75, 142-144), as well as in several cases recorded throughout the Aramaic texts in the Elephantine Papyri (Porten, Fraber, Martin, and Vittmann et al., pp. 86-87). The zeal of Phinehas in response to this syncretizing faithlessness (Numbers 25, 31) would then be taken as the ideal attitude/response of a faithful Israelite (see Keener, pp. 3224-3225; also Kruse, p. 776). Meanwhile, the greedily persistent Balaam -who appears to be benign in Numbers 22-24 except for a curious insistence on continuing to seek more preferable omens after God has already answered him- becomes a pattern for the syncretistic Israelite in light of the "reveal" in Numbers 31:8,16. Just like the syncretistic Israelite, Balaam seems laudable at first but is eventually led by worldly desires to corrupt those who are faithful (see Origen, pp. 122-131). Beyond Numbers 25, the census then brings about the birth of a new generation (26), laws are given in anticipation of their entrance into the promised land (27-30), and the new generation takes hold of God's promises by literally following Phinehas in his example of zeal (31) before they can take possession of the land (32).

If this structure for Numbers and the corresponding message for the Balaam account holds true, it may have contemporary significance for the Evangelical Seminary setting in which this paper is written. First, although the final editor appears to have been exilic or post-exilic, this does not mean that a "previous edition" containing the bulk of the material could not be much older.<sup>4</sup> Second, Numbers 22-31 calls us to radical personal faithfulness to God despite outside pressure or temptations. Third, it also calls us to trust in the promises of God—just as it did for its first readers. In these ways and more, God still speaks through the book of Numbers.

---

<sup>3</sup> Whether or not this oracle refers primarily to David, -and Wenham sees signs here of significant antiquity in the oracle- Wenham points out that the introduction of this oracle as referring to "the latter days" (24:14) nudged its post-exilic readers to think of a still-future fulfillment. It may be that this was the intent. (Wenham, p. 200)

<sup>4</sup> Ex. Blessing from Num. 6 has been found in a manuscript dating to the 7th century BCE. See Barkay et al., 41-47.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Barkay, G., A.G. Vaughn, M.J. Lundberg and B. Zuckerman, "The Amulets from Ketef Hinnom: A New Edition and Evaluation," in *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*: 334 (2004): 41-71.

Brown, *The Message of Numbers* in The Bible Speaks Today series. InterVarsity Press, 2002.

Budd, Philip J., *Numbers* in the Word Biblical Commentary Series. Word Books, 1983.

Keener, Craig S., *Acts: An Exegetical Commentary*, Vol. 3. Baker Academic, 2014.

Kruse, Colin G., "Persecution" in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. InterVarsity Press, 2000.

Levine, Baruch A., *Numbers 21-36* in The Anchor Bible series. Doubleday, 2000.

Milgrom, Jacob, *Numbers* in the JPS Torah Commentary series. The Jewish Publication Society, 1989.

Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*. Trans. Thomas P. Scheck. InterVarsity Press, 2009.

Olson, Dennis T., *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch*. Scholars Press, 1985.

Pearce, Laurie E., and Wunsch, Cornelia, *Documents of Judean Exiles and West Semites in Babylonia in the Collection of David Sofer*, Vol. 28 in the Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology series. CDL Press, 2014.

Porten, Bezalel, J.J. Farber, C.J. Martin, G. Vittmann, et al., *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change*, 2nd Rev. Ed. Brill, 2011.

Pressler, Carolyn, *Numbers* in the Abingdon Old Testament Commentary series. Abingdon Press, 2017.

Sherwood, Stephen, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* in the Berit Olam series. Liturgical Press, 2002.

Stubbs, David L., *Numbers* in the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series. Brazos Press, 2009.

Wenham, Gordon J., *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*. InterVarsity Press, 1981.