UNDERSTANDING THE PENTATEUCH
BY STRUCTURING THE DESERT:
NUMBERS 21 AS A COMPOSITIONAL JOINT

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Since the declining of the sun of source criticism in the 20th century the book of Numbers has become a “sleeping beauty.” There are a lot of prejudices against this book, be it its legal content or the mostly misunderstood alternation of story and law. The Christian prejudices of the 19th century are still perceptible. Only one example of an influential judgment shall underline this, namely Bruno Baentsch’s comment on Numbers 1–10:

Übrigens gehört der ganze Abschnitt so ziemlich zu dem Ödente, das in der Literatur jemals produziert worden ist. Aber wie eine Perle in wertloser Schale liegt darin doch der herrliche Priestersegens 622–27 eingebettet, und die Eifersuchts-Tora in 311–33 gehört zu den in kulturhistorischer Beziehung interessantesten Dokumenten des Pentateuchs.¹

Numbers is interesting, but not relevant. The source critical model worked out well in Genesis. It worked less well in Exodus, but in Numbers only roughly, and sometimes with violence. Martin Noth has set a landmark with his exegesis of Joshua, in which he neglected the traditional sources and found the Deuteronomistic History instead.² In his commentary on Numbers on the one hand he held fast to the sources in this book, but on the other hand he recognized the pressure of the documentary hypothesis, which seeks to trace the lines starting in Genesis. Noth respected the bridge-building function of the book of Numbers and

¹ I am grateful to contribute with some compositional and diachronic remarks to the book of Numbers in the Festschrift in honor of a Joshua commentator. Ed Noort is an admired teacher and colleague who has introduced the author into the world of Levantine archaeology and the fascinating shape and history of the land of Israel by conducting the “Lehrkurs” of the “Deutsches Evangelisches Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heilig Landes/German Protestant Institute of Archaeology” in 1990.
² B. Baentsch, Exodus, Leviticus, Numeri (HK 1.2; Göttingen 1902), 444.
searched for Hexateuchal and Enneateuchal solutions. But in the meanwhile the source critical model as a base for Old Testament exegesis of the Pentateuch has been broken. The Yahwist is challenged just as the Priestly source. One of the few arising battlefields can be found in Numbers. To give just one example: if one asks for the end of the Priestly source (P'), the alternative between the Sinai pericope and the traditional end with the death of Moses in Deut 34:8 or 9 is not decided in Exodus, Leviticus, or Deuteronomy: the crucial point is the existence of a P-version of the spy story in Numbers. During the last decade the book of Numbers is re-evaluated in Pentateuchal discussions as well as in redactional criticism. This is due to the broad study Die Vollandung der Tora of Reinhard Achenbach, the studies of Oliver Artus and Ulrich Fistill, or the famous compositional analysis of Won Lee.

Certainly, the structure is a challenge to many and was often misunderstood as chaotic or "reichlich undurchsichtig" ("amply obscure"). Thomas C. Römer has characterized the situation felicitously: "Numbers is indeed the only book of the Pentateuch where commentators need several pages to justify their idea of the structure of the book and to refute others." Here I do not discuss the proposals of a twofold, threefold, or fivefold structure of Numbers in detail, but will focus on the significance of "space" and "land" in the book of Numbers, especially in its latter part. The starting point of my argumentation is the proposal of structuring Numbers in five parts: Num 1:1–10:10; 10:11–14:33; 15:1–20:28; 21:1–25:18; 25:19–36:13 predominantly overlaying the twofold structure of an old and a new generation (Num 1:1–25:18; 25:19 respectively 26:1–36:13).

In the first part I analyse the structure of the posterior parts of Numbers synchronically by taking the end of the book as the point of departure. This illustrates that the spatial dimension and the "land"-theme are crucial for the arrangement of Numbers in a Hexateuchal context: Numbers is a Hexateuchal not a Pentateuchal book. In the second part of this article Numbers 21 is considered as a transitional chapter and turning point of the composition of Numbers proceeding from failure to success or from refusal to realization. The argumentation brings about some dichronic aspects of Numbers 21. At the end of this article I draw some lines of the origins of the narrative material behind the text, respectively behind the redactional layers of the book of Numbers, by taking Numbers 21 as example. This sheds light on the interrelation between historical (diachronic) and compositional (synchronic) analysis.

1. The Book of Numbers as a Composition

There is no doubt that the book of Numbers is part of a larger literary unit. It is chronologically attached to the time frame of Exodus 40 and Leviticus 8–9 and continues the narrative threads of the Sinai narrative. It carries on this narrative not only chronologically, but spatially, too. It begins at the foot of the mountain thus underlining the centrumpower of the Sinai and its central theme, the reconciling nearness of God. Thus, it is looking back to Sinai. At the same time it ends at the border of
the land where the events described in Deuteronomy take place. Thus, the book of Numbers bridges the gap between Sinai and promised land by the transition from Sinai to Paran/Kadesh (Num 10:11–12:16) and from Kadesh to Moab (Num 20:22–21:20; 22:1) at the border of the land. In that way it continues the movement, which started with the Exodus and which was grounded in the promise to the fathers. In announcing and preparing the death of Moses in Numbers 20 and 27 the book of Numbers refers relatively early to Deuteronomy and to the end of the Pentateuch. With the division of the land of Canaan it points far beyond the death of Moses to its actualization in the book of Joshua. Already this simplification of the plot sheds light on the significance of the “land” theme in the book of Numbers. This is obvious in the topics of the last part of Numbers 25:19–36:13: the “new generation” which will come into the land, the appointment of Joshua as leader, and the announcement of the death of Moses as the last one of the Exodus generation, the allocation of the land east of the river Jordan, and the inheriting of the land by the daughters of Zelophehad. However, the significance of the land-theme is present from start to finish with gradually increasing impact. The book of Numbers has a Janus face looking back and ahead, and keeping in mind the importance of Sinai on the one hand and the land on the other hand. The shift from refusal of the land and resistance against God and his chosen leader in Num 11:1–14:33 to the beginning realization of inheritance in Num 25:19–36:13 presupposes the death of the old generation. It is important that this demographic decline in the middle parts Num 15:1–20:28 and Num 21:1–25:18 is affiliated with, first partly and then fully, preservation notwithstanding new sins, insurgencies, skepticism, and disbelief. While this development is gradual, Numbers 21 is a turning point in several respects. This will be unfolded below, but first we have to look at the spatial markers and the importance of Moab in Num 21:1–25:18.

2. Unfolding the Structure from the End: The Compositional Function of מסワークה מאוב ("in the Plains of Moab")

At the end of the book the legislation of some of the laws which were given before is located "in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho."

The spatial dimension of Num 36:13 is crucial. It is a structuring element in the last part of the book; besides that, it builds bridges to Num 21:1–25:18. As a kind of "cascade" Num 36:13 refers back to Num 22:1 via Num 35:1; 33:50; 33:48; 26:63; 26:3. In Num 22:1 Israel is said to encamp in the plains of Moab (דָּרוֹן נַחֲשׁ הַמַּכָּה לְשֵׁנָה יָבֹא) geographically spoken the gór el-belka are the lowlands of the Jordan estuary. The localization בֹּרֵכָא מיִתֶּן רֹאֵו in Num 36:13 takes up the introduction of the speech in Num 35:1. The last two divine speeches of the whole book are found in Numbers 35 (introduction formulae in Num 35:1, 9) mentioning the selection of the cities of refuge. Numbers 36 does not contain divine speeches in direct manner anymore. The selection of the cities of refuge and the Levitical cities refer explicitly to the territories of the East and West Jordan as well (Num 35:8, 14). Consequently, Num 35:14 recalls the actual position and refers to Canaan as the final destination. That is underlined by referring to the time after the Israelites will have crossed the Jordan. Numbers 35 deals with the Levitical cities and the cities of refuge and points therewith to its textual counterpart in Joshua 20–21. Thus, the expression בֹּרֵכָא מיִתֶּן רֹאֵו seems to be inappropriate to mark the closure of the book, because it strengthens the Hexateuchal dimension.

Before Num 35:1 the localization in this exact form is attested twice in Num 33:48 and 33:50. First, it is referring to the last stage of the Exodus from Rameses in Egypt in the itinerary v. 48. With this reference the current position in Moab at the end of Numbers is configured as conclusion of the events of the Exodus and the act of liberation. This fact indicates that the turning point in the book of Numbers from wrathful annihilation (Num 14:21–23) up to the blessing at the end (Num 22:12) has already been accomplished. This altered prospect becomes obvious in the Balaam story as well as in the division of the land in the east and it is underlined by the changed perspective in the "Landgabeformel." From Num 20:12 onwards the land which was promised to the fathers is given already on a text level, namely syntactically by the shift from בֹּרֵכָא מיִתֶּן to בֹּרֵכָא qatal. Whereas this is merely stated by God in Num 20:12, it is becoming to be accomplished from Num 21:1 onwards as will be seen below.

13 See for details Zenger and Frevel, "Die Bücher Levitikus und Numeri," 45–70.

We consider now the significance of the phrase בְּכַרְתָּה מַאוֹב עֶלֶּי רוּדִּי in Num 33:48 and 50. Although there are still three chapters of Numbers and the whole Deuteronomy to come, the localization "in the plains of Moab by the Jordan of Jericho" in the itineraries (Num 33:48) can be seen as a gravitational push towards the end of the book of Numbers. The second attestation of the phrase in the final divine speech in Num 33:50–56 establishes a significant link to the end of the book. Num 33:50 expands the introduction formula דְּרָכָה לְהוֹרַת הַיָּמָה לְפָּרָתָה מַאוֹב עֶלֶּי רוּדִּי and differs thereby from most of the speech-introductions in Numbers. The speech "in the plains of Moab by the Jordan of Jericho" in vv. 50–56 is clearly influenced by the late Deuteronomistic language and presents the classical late mixed style of the book of Numbers. It takes into account the conquest of Canaan and orders the distribution of the western part of the land, which is given already (v. 53). The short Yhwh-speech has its compositional counterpart in Numbers 32 in the allocation of the land east of the Jordan. It is very important with respect to the composition that the long itinerary in Numbers 33 stands between the distribution of Gilead (Numbers 32) and the instructions how to manage the distribution of Canaan (Num 33:50–34:29) which is narrated in Josh 14:1–19:51. We cannot neglect that the distribution in Numbers 32 is a hybrid between "already" and "not yet": the eastern tribes are confronted with the refusal of the land by the fathers (Num 32:8–15) and the threat of the continuation of the stay in the desert. Hence, they confess to join the whole of Israel in conquering Canaan. Thus, Numbers 33 is both a retrospect and the beginning of something new.

On the one hand Num 33:50–56 points to the book of Joshua and beyond, on the other hand it is connected with Num 36:13. There is no doubt that Num 36:13 signals a conclusion as well as an open end. That becomes quite clear, when one include the first instance of the localization in the book of Numbers. דְּרָכָה לְהוֹרַת הַיָּמָה is also found exactly in Num 26:3 and 63 as the location of the second census. By spanning Num 26:3 with 36:13 the phrase constitutes a main subdivision of the book of Numbers. Thus, Num 25:19–36:13 are configured as an independent part of the book supporting the suggestion of a two-part structure of Numbers by Dennis Olson and others.15

The second census in Numbers 26 is the clear signal that the already mentioned turning point in Numbers 21 reached its climax. The generation of the exodus that rebelled against the quality of the land and to whom the death in the desert had been announced (Num 14:20–23; beyond the last reduction narrative of Numbers 25), except Moses, already died out (Num 26:64–65). After the death of the old, the new raises. This is presented by the newly patterned Israel, and it is located at the border of the land, too. Towards this new generation the promise is to be realized. Only the death of Moses which is announced shortly after the census in Num 27:12–14 is still outstanding and it takes several chapters until the leader dies in Deut 34:5.16 The tension that the promise will not be fulfilled persists as long as Moses lives.

By the link between Num 26:3 and 36:13 a unit of the book of Numbers is created. However, this unit cannot stand alone. It even crosses the borders of the Pentateuch and thus evokes certain dynamics towards the land in the last part of Numbers.

The spatial connection overarches both sides of this part of the book. Although not the same words are used, the determination "in the plains of Moab" can be found across the borders of the last part of the book of Numbers, both before and after Num 25:19–36:13. The only occurrence of דְּרָכָה in the book of Numbers (except from the already mentioned) can be found in Num 22:1. Israel dwells in the "plains of Moab". By using the prepositional phrase דְּרָכָה לְפָּרָתָה the form differs from the already discussed form with the preposition ל. There is no difference in the local position, because from Num 22:1 to Josh 3:1 Israel dwells in Shittim. This site is mentioned explicitly in Num 25:1 at first, and from there Israel departs to cross the Jordan in Josh 2:1; 3:1. The local data strengthens the Hexateuchal frame as a presupposition to understand Numbers. Nonetheless, the slight difference in the formulation is quite important, because it is the presupposition for the constitution of Num 26:1–36:13 as an independent part of the book of Numbers. From Num 22:1 a literally overarching feature is present, not only loosely in the overall structure of the local data in Deut 1:1–5, but it is even more obvious at the end in Deuteronomy 34. The localization דְּרָכָה לְפָּרָתָה can be found in Deut 34:1 and 8 for the last time. Thus, the whole "plains of Moab"-section (Num 22:1–Deut 34:8, respectively Joshua 3) is considered the last stage of the wilderness period. The significant phrase "in the plains of Moab"

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15 See Olson, Death, 55–125; idem, Numbers (Interpretation; Louisville 1996), 3–6.

16 For the analysis of the death notices in Numbers and Deuteronomy see Frevel, Blick, 248–266.
can be further subdivided. While Moab plays a significant role in the Balaam story (Num 22:1–24:25),
the *nomen proprium* is attested 8 times before Numbers 22:21. Thus, the reality of Moab is present in the book of
Numbers before Num 22:21, first in the encamping notice of Num 21:11. However, Iye-Abirim is not located in proper Moab but in the desert
east of Moab (וֹיֵתְש בַּיִת עַמָּגַר אָרֶץ לְעֵילָמָּגַר מֹאֵב). The other references of Moab in Numbers 21 are geographically deviant
in a comparable way: in Num 21:13 Moab is used twice to distinguish the location of Israel from Moab. Num 21:15, 26, 28, 29 are poetical
references which do not denote the position of Israel. Only in Num 21:20, at the end of the fragmentary itinerary of Num 21:18b–20, the location is: “to the valley lying in the region of Moab, by the top of Pisgah, which overlooks the wasteland” (ומָא בַּיָּה יָמֹת יָקָם עֵילָמָּמֶשׁ אַרְיָמ מֹאֵב)19 Different from other itinerary notices in the book of
Numbers this itinerary lacks the verbs סָלַס and סָלֵס. Israel is not encamping explicitly in Moab. This is said only in Num 22:1 by the mentioned phrase בִּכְרִימ בַּת יָשָׁב לְדְרֵי רְיִשָׁה. Nearly every single phrase in Num 21:20 is significant in its textual reference, especially to the Balaam story (where Moab plays a significant role too), Num 22:1, and Deuteronomy 34.21 It is clear that Num 21:20 has a structuring function. This is, however, quite
different from the reference system described above. Thus, there is a clear distinction between the references to Moab in Numbers 21 and Num 22:1. Moab is spatially present, but not the “plains of Moab,” and Israel is
not encamping explicitly inside the borders of Moab. It is important that Num 22:1 locates Israel מַעְכֶר לוּדֶרְיִשָׁה. Numbers 21 is in some way “in-between.” We will look closer to the compositional function of
Numbers 21 below.

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17 In total 15 records: Num 22:1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 21, 26, 23:6, 7, 17; 24: 17. The only instances beside the Balaam story are the יָמֹת יָקָם in Num 25:1. They have their
own compositional significance which cannot be discussed here.
19 Translation P.J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC 5; Waco 1984), 237.
20 Fastil is missing this crucial point by characterizing Num 22:1 only as “überleitende und einleitende Ortsangabe, welche die nachfolgende Perikope in diesen Zusammenhang einreihet” (Israel), 322.
21 מַעְכֶר (the only reference of this lexeme in Numbers) is pointing to Deut 3:29; 4:46; 34:6; מַעְכֶר is pointing to Num 23:14; Deut 3:17; 27; 34:1; and מַעְכֶר N-stem with לְעֵילָמָּמֶשׁ is pointing clearly to Num 23:18.

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3. Between Kadesh and Moab: The Spatial Structure of the Centre

Let us summarize: our starting point was the last verse of Numbers (Num 36:13) and the intertextual references. This verse reveals the spatial
dimension of the last part of the book of Numbers. Taken together, the local data form several overarching structures, which shape the last
part of the book and bridge the central part of the book of Numbers. Moreover, the framework of the last chapters of Numbers points far
beyond Deuteronomy into a Hexateuchal context of understanding.

The spatial dimension is truly important for the composition of the
book of Numbers. Num 36:13 establishes and concludes the last part of
the book by its resumption of Num 26:3. Thus, it becomes a colophon.
This is not only so because of the spatial dimension of the verse, but also
because of the similarity with the last and concluding verse of Leviticus
(27:34). This cannot be unfolded in length here, but we can summarize
with Norbert Lohfink: “Man verbindet die Kolophone am besten mit der
Größe “Buch” ... Es sind Buchabschlüsse.”

Numbers 26–36 must be analysed within the scope of the Hexateuch,
since it is incomplete on its own and needs Joshua 13–22 to be
understood. No other passage in the Tetratauch necessitates the Hexateuch
more than Numbers 26–36. But first we look more closely at the central
part of Numbers.

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23 N. Lohfink, “Prologenema zu einer Rechtshermeneutik des Pentateuchs,” in *Studien zum Deuteronomium und zur deuteronomistischen Literatur* (ed. idem; SBAB 38; Stuttgart 2005), 5:184.
location of the book of Numbers is restricted to the middle three. The following will reveal the important transition area between Kadesh in Num 20:22 and the encamping of Israel in the lowlands of Moab Num 22:1.²⁵

In Exodus and in the first part of the book (Num 1:1, 19; 3:4, 14; 9:1, 5; 10:12) the desert as the location for the camp was fundamental; but in the following chapters the מָרָה, "desert," is even more important. Half of all the attestations of מָרָה in the book of Numbers (48 times) is found in the section from Num 10:11 through 21:23 respectively 21:35. This desert area is marked by an obvious system of three geographical connections: Kadesh, Red Sea, and Hormah. It symbolizes a situation between an endangering of life and the life giving promised land. Kadesh at the border of the cultivated land has, thus, a liminal function.

The spies in Numbers 13, who are to inspect the land of Canaan depart from Kadesh (Num 13:26). When they are back at Kadesh, their report provokes detraction and rejection of the divine gift, the promised land. The story is the crucial turning point of Numbers as well as the anti-climax. It evokes the wrath of Yhwh, which causes the delay of entering the land and the wilderness journey. Also from Kadesh as point of departure, Moses sends messengers to Edom (Num 20:14, 16, 22). This causes a detour again. Both stories are linked to the לָשׁוֹן הָעָדָה, "the way to the Sea of Reeds," phrase (Num 14:25; 21:4). In both instances—but especially in Num 21:4—the way to the Sea of Reeds is a textual cipher signalling a setback rather than a concrete geographical specification. In Num 14:45 the already failed conquest amounts to the "disaster of Hormah" (הָרֹמא). Like the לָשׁוֹן הָעָדָה there are only two attestations of this location in the book of Numbers, and it is again Numbers 21, where the term appears (Num 21:3). However, the situation has changed: In Numbers 14, Yhwh was not with Israel, so Israel was defeated (Num 14:42); in Numbers 21 Yhwh drives the Canaanites into the hands of the Israelites (Num 21:3).²⁶ It is not by chance that Numbers 21 is the turning point from destruction to blessing: (1) Num 21:4—9: the power of the copper serpent as a continual and thus lasting prevention; (2) Num 22:1—24:25: preservation of Israel by the failing curse of Balaam;

and, thus, the confirmation of the blessing of Israel; (3) Num 25:1—9: uncultic expiation and preservation through the act of Phinehas; (4) Num 25:19—26:65: attested preservation in the second census which signifies the minimal loss in quantity. The section from Numbers 21 to Numbers 26 is crucial for the development of the theological message of the book of Numbers, namely preservation and saving by Yhwh (due to his promise and his steadfast grace) in spite of disobedience of Israel in the past.²⁷ It is not accidental that this area, which is connected with "preservation," is especially marked by the encounter with the peoples of the lands the Israelites are crossing through (Edomites, Canaanites, Amorites, Moabites, and Midianites).

In contrast, the preceding part, which is enclosed by the mention of Kadesh (Num 13:26; 20:1), is marked by loss and rebellion. It seems to be intentional that the trespass of the leaders and the passing by of Miriam and Aaron are positioned at the end of this subsection, and that Kadesh is mentioned four times in Numbers 20. Numbers 21 forms a transitional area in compositional regards: it leads over from the wilderness period to the "conquest period" as Martin Noth already noted in a seminal article from 1941.²⁸

It is obvious that spatial tags with structuring functions characterize the central part of the book. The encampment and decampment itinerary notices that occur three times each at the beginning and the end of the Kadesh block (Num 10:11—12; 11:35; 12:16; and Num 20:22; 21:4, 10—13) makes this structuring function even clearer. The last notice in Num 22:1 is situated in the plains of Moab whose significance we have discussed already. Though it is impossible to reconstruct a route based on the itineraries geographically, it is obvious that the notices mark the transition and the in-between of the three poles Sinai—Kadesh—Moab.

²⁵ I will leave aside the parallels in Deuteronomy 1—3 which are—following the plot of the Pentateuch—not relevant in compositional respect here. I want to emphasize the fact that the diachronical relation between Numbers 13—14; 20—23; and Deuteronomy 1—3 is rather complex and would have needed a too lengthy argumentation here.

²⁶ Fistiř undertakes the significance of the turning point in Num 21:1—3 by characterizing the military success as "Zwischenfall" without compositional significance (Israel, 32).

²⁷ The citation of the grace formulae of Exod 34:6—7 in Num 14:8—19 is the only instance of חָנָן in the book of Numbers. Note the important ascertainment in v. 19 and the important ascertainment in v. 20, כְּעַל הָשִּׁבֵּית, referring to the citation of Exod 34:6—7 by Moses.

4. Numbers 21 as Transitional Area

If our observations concerning the spatial structure of the core of the book of Numbers are correct, the localization of Num 22:1 in the plains of Moab is not by chance. It opens the posterior part of the central part up to Numbers 26 as a new beginning. As we have already mentioned, in Numbers 26 the change is completed. The short statement "after the plague" in Num 25:19 signals that "it is over." Then Eleazar as successor of Aaron is addressed (יהואו יהוה אלהים) signaling: "it will go on." Numbers 26 is the keystone of the "new generation" which will enter the land. The section about the daughters of Zelophehad frames this last section in Num 27:1–11 and 36:1–12. Thus, Num 22:1–25:18 has the function of an interlude taking place in the wilderness, only a stone’s throw away from the promised land. It plays with the "already" and the "not yet."

However, one would expect the interlude to begin in chapter 21 because the most significant change of mood is to be found there. But it seems to be relevant that Israel enters the plains of Moab after Numbers 21. Ulrich Fistill has seen the tension between the geographically structuring function on the one hand (Num 22:1) and of Numbers 21 being a turning point on the other hand. Following Rolf Knierim in assuming a twofold structure of Numbers (Num 1:1–10:10 and 10:11–36:13) in general, Fistill wants to divide the second part of Numbers in two parts: Num 10:11–21:20 and 21:21–36:13: "Es spricht einsig dafür, den Beginn des zweiten Teilabschnittes bei Num 21,21 anzusetzen." But as we have seen already, the text seems to be aware of the remarkable difference between Num 21:20 and Num 22:1 in referring to Moab as place of sojourn. Furthermore, Num 21:20 is not part of the spatial reference system in the second part of Numbers. And third, Num 21:1–3 is the turning point from decimation to preservation after the death of Aaron which has already been mentioned. It seems quite clear

that Numbers 21 stands on its own in a somewhat intermediate position, being part of both Num 10:11–20:28 respectively 15:1–20:28 and of Num 22:1–26:55. Numbers 21 functions as a compositional hinge (see below): there seems to be a difference between the geographical area between the south and the north of the Arnon and the Moabite Plain. While the land of Moab south of the Arnon (Num 21:13) is neither conquered nor occupied, the land of the Amorites ranging from the Arnon to the Jabbok is conquered and settled (Num 21:25, 35). Thus, Numbers 21 is the transitional area between the desert existence and living in the land. From Num 21:35 onwards Moabites are neighbors and not only enemies in transition. This compositional arrangement seems plausible, but is in fact not compelling. It is rather obvious to presume that there is more than one compositional structure in Numbers or that the background of the inconsistencies in compositional respect is due to diachronic reasons. It is communis opinio that in diachronic respect, especially chapters 20–25 contain various older material which were blended together almost without order. We can take this position paradigmatically to comment rather scantily on some questions of literary artwork and diachrony, tradition, and oral transmission of the Pentateuchal traditions.

Focussing on Numbers 21 we have to struggle with the structure of the disparate material. With relative consensus we can roughly subdivide it into the following sections: Num 21:1–3; 4–9; 10–20; 21–31; 32–35 being aware that we have neglected therefore the structuring function of the back references and the poetical passages.
5. Neither Hexateuchal nor Pentateuchal: Numbers 21:1–3

Sebbass reminds us to be careful with the interpretation of the conquest of Hormah described in Num 21:1–3: “Die Erklärung dieser kurzen Notiz leidet unter Eisegesen.” 34 As already noted, Num 21:1–3 is the shift from failure to military success in conquering the land; and Num 21:4–9, the section about the bronze serpent, is the transition to preservation instead of obliteration (the story ends significantly with יד “and he survived”).

To understand this significant change, it is necessary to go back to the Kadesh chapter in Numbers 20. This chapter is the climax of the wilderness rebellion and the climax of the “death of the old.” Miriam’s death is unfounded—she dies as first of the leader trio, and it is explicitly stated that she died in Kadesh. The trespass story of the main leaders is in some way mysterious because it misses an explicit rationale for their being discharged from leadership in v. 12. The story ends with a likewise mysterious wordplay on the location Kadesh in Num 20:13(המה ממרד אפרים לבר נגדי אפרים אפרים והעשים מבא). Then Israel sets out from Kadesh in Num 20:22, but again by a deviuous route. The direction of the route is given by the refusal of the king of Edom to cross his area (Num 20:14–21). Not by chance, the negotiations with the King of Edom include a flashback to the Exodus story in vv. 16–17. It is the turning point of the wilderness journey. The אל ענבר סדבר by the king of Edom is thrown upon Israel as an almost unbearable obstacle on the journey to the land (ענבר בער נייחק). The refusal to let the Israelites pass causes them to proceed on the way to Mount Hor. The problems concerning the identification of this place are well known. It seems impossible to get a clear geographical orientation. 35 This fits in very well with the geographical chaos which is part of Numbers 20–21 concerning the geographical connection between Kadesh, Hor, the way of Atarim, the Jabbok as border of the Ammonites, and the itinerary in 21:21 etc. Anyway, in Num 21:1 the king of Arad or the מנהנים יזרעאל attack Israel and take prisoners (בשם י endwhile), and this is the reversal of the liberation of the exodus. Thus, there has to be a change if the promise of Yhwh shall go forth and be actualized. Israel makes a vow to ban (הנה) the cities of the Canaanites. This is a contradiction to the conquest narrative, but also a clear Hexateuchal link to the book of Joshua: on the one hand—as R. Achenbach has pointed out—it is the counterpart to the taking of the “land of the giants” in Numbers 13–14. 36 This becomes obvious by the explicit resumption of the already mentioned place name יזרעאל in v. 3. But as the reader knows, the vow to conquer the cities of Canaan is not fulfilled immediately, but has to wait until Joshua 6–11, where מנהנים יזרעאל is used frequently in the context of the conquest of the Canaanite cities (Josh 6:17, 18, 21; 7:1, 11, 12, 13, 15; 8:26; 10:1, 28, 35, 37, 39, 40; 11:11, 12, 20, 21). Contrarily, we read in Num 21:3–4 יזרעאל ידבר ובידיהם ואת האהבתかれ בנכילה. The elliptical formulation lacks י’h and יזרעאל, but it can only be understood as narrative of the conquest of the Canaanite cities. The text continues יזרעאל一览 and they banned them and their cities.” This is clearly anachronistic. If Yhwh has given the cities of Canaan to Israel, and if Israel has conquered the cities entirely, why does Israel accept a further delay in taking possession of Canaan, and why does Israel keep staying in the wilderness? The problems have led to different solutions in the history of research. The fathers of source criticism assigned the passage to the Yehowist or Yahwist 37 as Horst Sebbas and others recently do. 38 Other exegetes challenge any source affiliation and see an editorial construct. 39 Since the passage does not seem to fit in here, it was often opted in favor of a displacement. Martin Noth has written: “Seine jetzige Stelle gibt auch ihm den Charakter eines Nachtrages zur Wüstenüberlieferung; doch diese Stelle verdankt es erst anscheinend der redaktionellen Anordnung der Dinge.” 40 Because of the obvious and conflicting parallel to Judg 1:17, Achenbach sees the fingerprint of the Hexateuchredaktor and a reflection on the conflicts

34 Sebbass, Numeri, 306.
35 The proposal of Y. Aharoni was to locate Hor near Kadesh on the way to Arad (ed. A.E. Rainey, The Land of the Bible: A Historical Geography [Philadelphia 1979], 201–202; he mentions the hill "Imaret el-Hurrie/Amaret Hurrale." Since Josephus (Ant. 4.82–83; 4.161) Hor was located in the vicinity of Petra, since Byzantine times on the Gebel Harum (cf. Der Säulen vol. 2 of Orte und Landschaften der Bibel; ed. O. Keel and M. Küchler; Göttingen 1983), 176); W. Zwickel, “Der Durchzug der Israeliten durch das Ostjordanland,” UF 22 (1990) 475–495, 483–484. The proposal of a complete artificial denotation Sin or Abarim (cf. P. Weimar, "Der Tod Aarons und das Schicksals Israels: Num 20,22–29" in Biblische Theologie und gesellschaftlicher Wandel [ed. G. Braulik; Freiburg 1993], 354–355) is somehow sophisticated, because the sense of דרכו as artifice remains obscure.

36 Achenbach, Vollendung, 346.
37 See Budd, Numbers, 229–230.
39 See the reference in Achenbach, Vollendung, 345; C. Levin, Der Jahwist (FRLANT 157; Göttingen 1993), 379.
40 Noth, Das vierte Buch Mose: Numeri, 93; cf. idem, "Num 21," 180; attributing Num 21:1–3 to the Yahwist: "Woher sie stammt, ist nicht mehr festzustellen; sie könnte einmal an irgendeiner Stelle in der J-Erzählung gestanden haben und später redaktionell an den hiesigen Platz versetzt worden sein."
of possession regarding the southern Negev in post-exilic times. But it is not only the "south" or the "Negev" that is mentioned here; it is the whole land of Canaan and all the cities of the Canaanites; and that contradicts the Hexateuchal thread and perspective. Ludwig Schmidt has recently suggested the latest date: "Die kleine Erzählung ist jünger als die Pentateuchredaktion." The only background for this assumption is the attribution of Num 21:43 to the "Pentateuchredaktor" and the two acts of the poem in Judg 1:17. There is an obvious contradiction between the itinerary in v. 4, which mentions that Israel departed from the mountain Hor (יָם הָאָרֶץ המִרְדְּבֵי מִשְׁכָּב) which is the continuation of Num 20:23-29, and the itinerary in Num 21:1, which mentions that Israel is on the way of Atarim (אֵדי הָאָרֶץ). But in attributing vv. 1-3 to the very late redaction without any relation to a tradition, Schmidt makes the author responsible for the syntactical discordance between the single place name and the many cities. Would it not be more convincing to take the etiology as a later addition borrowing the phrase from Judg 1:17? The naming of the conquered place as יָם הָאָרֶץ in Judg 1:17 and יָם הָאָרֶץ in Num 21:3, thus, seems obvious that Num 21:3b is an editorial addition which aims to link the phrase up to Num 14:45 by consciously ignoring the tradition of Judg 1:17 and the geographical accuracy. The same holds probably true for the רֵדֶב יָם הָאָרֶץ in Num 21:4, which does not fit in with the geographical facts, wherever Hor is to be localized. The redactor wanted to link up the wilderness period from Numbers 14 up to Numbers 21: the unsuccessful attempt to conquer Canaan on Israel's own responsibility in Num 14:40-45, and the successful counterpart in Num 21:1-3. The disobedience of the people is replaced by obedience and therefore the story motivates to go beyond murmur and towards the successful conquest. Since this redactor uses Judg 1:17 without any need of harmonization, he, of course, did not have an Enneateuchal context in his mind. It is the "composition"-layer of the book of Numbers which organized the whole Hexateuchal material as one account. I do not want to call it "Hexateuchredaktion" as E. Otto and R. Achenbach do, because

my accents and dates are different, but it has a Hexateuchal background and it is indeed dated after the P-Tradition and the "Pentateuchredaktor." But who is responsible for the short narrative about the violent resistance of the king of Arad against Israel? On the one hand it reveals a Pentateuchal horizon, because it skips or in some way replaces the Joshua account of the conquest. Thus, it can fit the so-called "Pentateuchredaktor" who attests no conquest of the land in the book of Joshua. But, on the other hand, the story itself does not fit into the horizon of the so-called "Pentateuchredaktion" if we take the portrayal of the conquest of the Canaanites as revenge. The "Pentateuchredaktor" cannot be the author of this narrative. It seems to be associated with an older tradition. It is striking that the only four occurrences of the verb מָתַל can be found in Num 21:1, 23, 26, and Num 22:11. The story of Sihon is often claimed to belong to an older tradition. The same is true for the Balaam story. Maybe the Yahwist or the Yehowist is responsible, but that is by no means clear. Thus, it is likewise possible that the "older" tradition of Num 21:1-3 was part of the Yahwistic or Yehowistic account of the conquest of Cisjordan. But this assumption is rather due to the need of a link in the older tradition. However, it was picked up by the so-called "Pentateuchredaktor" and brought together with the P-source, to which we have attributed the preceding narrative of Aaron's death and the itinerary of Num 21:40; 22:1. Eventually, this can also explain why the incident is not mentioned in Deuteronomy 2.

In sum: not the "Hexateuchredaktor" picked up the older traditions (R. Achenbach) in this case, but—comparatively conventional—the so-called "Pentateuchredaktor" did. Certainly, Achenbach is right in demonstrating the Hexateuchal face of the last formative reduction of Numbers. This redaction took up the link between the end of Numbers 14 and Numbers 21 and strengthened it, neglecting the concrete contradiction between Joshua and Numbers 21:3a. The suggested sequence of the redactional layers in Numbers hints to the fact that there should be

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41 See Achenbach, Vollendung, 345, 347, with the assumption of a displacement in the background.  
42 Schmidt, Das vierte Buch Mose, 100.  
43 Presupposed is the identification of the Reed Sea with the Red Sea, the Gulf of Elat, which is by no means clear and depends on the date of every single attestation, see H. Lambert-Zielinsky, Das "Schiffmeer": Herkunft, Bedeutung und Funktion eines alttestamentlichen Exodusbegriffs (BBB 78; Frankfurt a.M. 1993), 201-202, 239-240.  
45 Or in a more elaborate manner: Num 21:4*, 10-11; 22:11; for discussion see Frevel, Blick, 356.
more than one Hexateuchal redaction. The one we have proposed in Num 21:3a and the one we hold responsible for the end-redaction of Numbers should be dated subsequent to the "Pentateuchredaktor."

6. Oozing Sources or Sources Oozing out of Numbers 21:4–9?

Interestingly enough the following tradition is similar in function and origin. The story of the bronze serpent (Num 21:4–9) is the last real murmuring story which is linked to Numbers 11–20 and especially to the beginning of the murmuring stories Numbers 11 in many ways:

(1) It begins with the faint-heartedness of the people, which is literally expressed as "the idaeos of the people became short on the way" (משה לבקד). The only incidence of the root קבר in Numbers is the question of Yhwh in Num 11:23 ריד והיה קבר, "is the hand of Yhwh too short?"

(2) הוהי, "to speak against" in v. 5 which is attested two times in Numbers 21 (cf. v. 7). This phrase is a clear link to the only other instances of this phrase in Num 12:1, 8, where Miriam and Aaron speak against Moses (v. 1), and in Numbers 21:23, חפרה מרס רומא משכש. But on the other hand, the difference in numbers, 11:1–3 which is the main point of reference, but preponderantly Num 11:4–11 and Numbers 12. The parallelization to Num 11:1–3 is rather of structural nature. However, the narrative in Num 21:4–9 seems to be intended as a closing parenthesis of the murmuring tradition. It is carefully composed and related to the other wilderness narratives. Whether we have to relate the narrative material to any late redaction is doubtful because there remain certain withstanding moments: (1) unlike the other murmuring stories, there is no remedy of the shortcomings of water and food, which is presented as the cause of the murmur. So there seems to be a break between vv. 5 and 6. (2) The different designations of the serpents as מלת אXmlNode in v. 6, מילת in v. 7, in v. 8, and again מלת in v. 9 remain puzzling. Deut 8:15 with its יתא ותא across one's mind. However, are the inconsistencies the work of a redactor alone? Several analyses in recent times have disproved the assumption of traditional sources in this text.

Already Martin Noth has written:

(5) The confession of the people נואים, "we have sinned," (Num 21:7) refers to the two other attestations of this form in the book of Numbers in Num 12:11; 14:40.

(6) הילס "to plea, to pray," is the next explicit link. We can find this verb in Numbers only in 11:2 and 21:7. The sentence יתא וליה והיה, "and Moses prayed to God," is divided into the request והיה, and the execution והיה מפתיה.

Taken altogether, there is no doubt that these relations are not by chance. Erik Aurelius has characterized the end-form of Num 21:4–9 rightly as "ziemlich schriftgelehrte[s] Murren." Ludwig Schmidt has pointed out that v. 5 summarizes different reasons which cause murmuring. But contrarily to E. Aurelius and R. Achenbach, it is not Num 11:1–3 which is the main point of reference, but preponderantly Num 11:4–11 and Numbers 12. The parallelization to Num 11:1–3 is rather of structural nature. However, the narrative in Num 21:4–9 seems to be intended as a closing parenthesis of the murmuring tradition. It is carefully composed and related to the other wilderness narratives. Whether we have to relate the narrative material to any late redaction is doubtful because there remain certain withstanding moments: (1) unlike the other murmuring stories, there is no remedy of the shortcomings of water and food, which is presented as the cause of the murmur. So there seems to be a break between vv. 5 and 6. (2) The different designations of the serpents as מלת אXmlNode in v. 6, מלת in v. 7, in v. 8, and again מלת in v. 9 remain puzzling. Deut 8:15 with its יתא ותא across one's mind. However, are the inconsistencies the work of a redactor alone? Several analyses in recent times have disproved the assumption of traditional sources in this text.

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40 E. Aurelius, Der Fürbitter Israels: Eine Studie zum Mosaiim im Alten Testament (ConBOT 27; Stockholm 1988), 147. Whether this has the post-R origin as the only consequence, as Aurelius, Fürbitter, 153, thinks, is an open question. Schmidt, Das vierte Buch Mose, 103, allocates the narrative to the "Pentateuchredaktor.

41 See Achenbach, Vollendung, 347. The parallels to Num 11:1–3 are mostly structural, but rightly Aurelius, Fürbitter, 141–160, and Schmidt, Das vierte Buch Mose, 102–103.

42 I cannot follow Achenbach, that Num 21:4–9 is related to Exod 15:22–26 and Exod 32:3–6 as "ein Gegenstück zur Murr- und Wandererzählung am Anfang des Wüstenzuges" (Vollendung, 349).

43 Recently Seebass opposed resistance and deployed the Yehowist again in vv. 4b, 5a, 6a–7, 9; see Seebass, Numeri, 315–319, with reference to A. Dillmann, J. Wellhausen, and A. Kuenen: "There is general acceptance of the view that this passage belongs to JE."
We cannot discuss the problems of Num 21:4–9 here in length, but there are reasons for troubling oneself with source material, tradition or at least oral history. The tradition was taken up by a late redaction which aimed to clamp the murmuring stories with a last and new one. The impeachment does not cease, but instead, the threat of the justified wrath of Yhwh ceases. Instead of doubts there is confidence that God will heal and preserve from death. The monotone pattern of murmuring is replaced by repentance and trust in the intercession of the leader. As in Numbers 12 and 14, the intercessional function of Moses is accentuated. The wrath of Yhwh, which was justified, ceases durably—not because of a vow like in Num 21:1–3a—but because of the penitential confession and the intercession of the mediator Moses. The older tradition concerning a snake plague (with or without the murmuring v. 57), which cannot be reconstructed in detail, has been completely integrated into this text.

How to locate this redaction? Deut 8:15 cannot provide an anchor, even though the notice is one of the stimuli for our artistic work. Taking into account the recent debate on the redactional layers in Numbers, we have certain possibilities: (1) the so-called "Hexateuchredaktion" of Reinhard Achenbach, which is dated post-P and post-D in the fifth century prior to the "Pentateuchredaktion" and described to the point as "réécriture." (2) If we follow the traditional older hypothesis, the "Pentateuchredaktion" shapes the book of Numbers in composing pre-P-material with the P-Source (in whatever extended stage). (3) The form-


54 See Seebass, Numeri, 313: "... deutet eher auf eine Bearbeitung als auf späte Entstehung." 55 Whether there was a second tradition narrating the murmuring of the people, is uncertain.

56 See correctly Seebass, Numeri, 316.

The next passage in Numbers 21, the itinerary of vv. 10–20, reveals a similar picture. It is full of unsolvable textual problems in the Masoretic Text which cannot be discussed here. Its importance in the history of research cannot be overestimated as Thomas Dozeman has shown in Abschied vom Jahwisten. The source critical exegesis has always rightly signed it a "hard nut to crack." The main problem is that this passage seems to be pivotal for the transition from wilderness to conquest and that it is part of the geographical linkage between the spy story and the Balaam story. However, it does not fit in with any of the sources. Again, Martin Noth has marked the limits clearly:

Denn zu den sicheren Feststellungen gehört die, dass in Num 21 mit der einfachen Zeilengabe des überliefernten Bestandes die vor allem aus Gen. und Ex. bekannten "Quellen" nicht dorthin zurückgelassen ist, dass hier vielmehr die redaktionelle Arbeit tiefer eingegriffen und spätere Ergänzungen einen breiteren Raum eingenommen haben, als man gewöhnlich


60 Noth, "Num 21," 170–171. It is not our concern to struggle with the continuation of the pre-Priestly Pentateuch here, see for instance Schmidt, Das vierte Buch Mose, 108: vv. 118", 138n1."
annimmt. Daraus musste sich notwendig eine Verkomplizierung des literarischen Tabestandes ergeben, die es uns unmöglich macht, alle Einzelheiten des literarischen Werdegangs noch einwandfrei und sicher zu klären und uns zwingt, notgedrungen auch mit Wahrscheinlichkeiten und Vermutungen zu arbeiten.

Or in one sentence: "Jede Quellenscheidung ist an diesem Stück vergebene Liebesmüh."

But let us have a look at the content: first we have in vv. 10–13 pieces of an itinerary which mentions two stations from Num 33:44 (Oboth and Iye-Abarim) and with the rivers Sered (Wādī El-Iḥṣā) and the Arnon (Wādī El-Māqīb) two stations which are attested in Deuteronomy 2 (Sered: Deut 2:13–14; Arnon: Deut 2:24). Besides, we find three other stations in vv. 18b–20 which are not attested elsewhere (Māttanah, Nahaliel, Bamoith). "Commentators and biblical cartographers have struggled with Num 21:10–20 for years on the mistaken assumption that it is supposed to make geographical sense. But it simply does not." The route is not exact in geographical respect, or to say it with J.M. Miller boldly though strictly to the point "a geographical hodgepodge." Nonetheless it describes the way to detour Edom. The way ends with three locations which are all linked to the setting of the following stories of Balaam (see above). The "valley in the field of Moab" is not mentioned in the Balaam story—comparable to Bamoith Num 21:19, 20 which associates Bamoith-Baal in Num 22:41—but it alludes to the region where the Balaam story takes place. The last two (oddly enough divided by a syntactic ḫaw) are mentioned explicitly in the Balaam story in Num 23:28.

64 Miller, "Journey," 585.
65 Ibid., 587.
66 For discussion see Dozeman, "Geography," 173; Seebass, "Edom," 255–262; idem, Numeri, 335–336 (with some unconventional solutions); MacDonald, East, 66–90; Zwickel, "Durchzug," 492, suggests an exact date for Numbers 21 in the 7th/6th century B.C. The presupposition of this proposal (ibid., 480), that Numbers 21 and Numbers 33 represent two phases of writing down the same oral tradition, is not convincing.

Thus, the itinerary is divided into two parts (Num 21:10–13, 18b–20) which are formulated in different styles and for different purposes. Between them, two short traditions are interwoven which are both linked to the itinerary in some way. The first is introduced as a citation of the הָעַרְבָּה הַמַּלְאָך (Num 21:14–15). It is framed by the mention of the borders of Moab (Num 21:13b, 15b). Later on, the itinerary proceeds with one station introduced by the unusual משׁה and marked by the he-locale. Beer, which is the textual anchor for the "song of the well" (Num 21:16b, 17, 18a). The introduction v. 13b resembles the song of the sea of Exod 15:1 very clearly. Thus, passing the Arnon is marked as a parallel to the liberation by passing the Red Sea. Again it is obvious, that Numbers 21 has an important function as compositional hinge between "desert" and "land."

The literary character of this piece is highly sophisticated and interwoven with Deuteronomy 2, Judges 11, and Numbers 33 on the one hand and the Balaam story on the other. Its compulsory character is widely accepted, following the basic study of Martin Noth from 1941. But whose hand has formed the interplay between poetry and geography? In Achenbach's analysis the passage is debriss-like and "nach-endredaktionell" by only attributing v. 12–13a to the "Hexateuchredaktion."

But beginning with משׁה these verses cannot stand alone. Aside from this less-than-ideal solution, it is not convincing, because it underestimates that this chapter is the main compositional link between the wilderness journey and the beginning of the conquest. We see basically the same tendency here: different material of various provenances, e.g. Oboth and Iye-Abarim, two place names which have been borrowed from a late compulsory text (Numbers 33), old poetic material in the two songs, partly invention in the itinerary, partly older material, partly linkage to the Balaam story. In short, a highly networked coupler which has the book of Numbers as a backbone.

67 E. Blum, Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch (BZAW 189; Berlin 1990), 126, points further to the connection between Num 21:14–15 and Num 21:26–30.
68 Because of the he-locale הָעַרְבָּה should be read as place-name, contra Seebass, Numeri, 332, 334.
69 See the history of research in Dozeman, "Geography," (for M. Noth, 179–182); Budd, Numbers, 236–240.
70 Achenbach, Vollendung, 357.
71 There is no connection to Num 20:22a, which is the last itinerary fragment attributed by Achenbach to HexRed, because according to Achenbach Num 21:1–3 is HexRed just like Num 21:4–9 (Vollendung, 345–352). The short itinerary deviation with the noticed death of Aaron in Deut 10:7 is not comparable and cannot support his view.
Again we can find a redactional layer, which is, on the one hand, depending on relatively late Deuteronomistic and post-Deuteronomistic traditions and, on the other hand, taking up old or at least older traditions which do not fit the context completely. As in the preceding passages, there are several links to the composition of Numbers. The blessing becomes visible here as well. While in Num 21:5 the people lamented that the lack of water and the plea was not fulfilled, now Yhwh gives water spontaneously. After the station which is called, "Beer," the aetiology says: יִהְוָה-מַבָּר אֶל מַעֲרֵי-אֵשֶׁר יָרָה-לָךְ יָרָה מָשָׁתָה מִים "that is the well of which Yhwh said to Moses, 'Gather the people together, and I will give them water'" (Num 21:16). Yhwh is supplying Israel with care, which is exceeding the needs to a durable preservation.

8. Conclusions

The diachronic reflection on the synchronic structure and diachronical relief of Numbers 21 has to come to an end. There would be much to say about Sihon, the song of Heshbon and the spy story of Jazer, and I am aware of the pitfalls in this part of Numbers 21 and of its relation to Deuteronomy 1–3 and Judges 11. Overlooking the recent history of research, the tendency seems to be the same. The transition area of Numbers 21 contains partly, but undisputable, old(er) material which was combined with redactional interest. The material is not integrated entirely into the context, and tensions remain. Its origin is not traceable, and there are by no means clear connections to traditional sources or source material. Composition and redaction are mutually dependent on each other. It is remarkable that it is even the transition area of composition between Num 15:1–20:28 and Num 22:1–26:38 where this technique is apparent. The younger redactional layers have not only integrated narratives from different older or maybe contemporary traditions but they also have had a very straight idea of the composition of the book of Numbers which was discussed above.

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72 See Blum, Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch, 126–137; "Ja, wahrscheinlich markiert sie ... bewußt so etwas wie einen ungetrübten, heilvollen Abschluß der Zeit in der Wüste."
