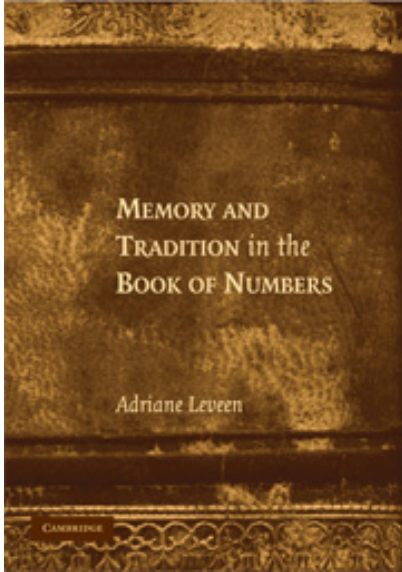


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Leveen, Adriane B.

Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers

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Adrienne Leveen explains how the literary shape and contents of Numbers serve a priestly rhetorical agenda. With careful attention to the role of narrative in communal memory, she argues that priestly editors shaped the story of the generation that died in the wilderness to provide “a most dramatic and highly useful deterrent” (2). The book therefore “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” (3).

The priestly interests at work in the book of Numbers have, of course, been widely recognized by critical scholars, who generally assign much of the book to the Priestly source. Leveen’s contribution lies in working out the coherence of the book’s rhetorical and, especially, narrative strategies. Though Numbers can look like an amalgam of genres and materials, she argues that the book has been organized carefully to advance the priests’ religious and political agendas. She does not deploy redactional analysis of the development of the text, though she acknowledges evidence for multiple layers of editing in the book, nor does she engage the debates over the dating of the priestly materials except to place it somewhere between the seventh and fifth centuries B.C.E. She rather analyzes the rhetorical function of the arrangement of materials in Numbers as it stands. She observes that, “Even in its final form, the text almost longingly envisions a future time

when the rites and symbols it commands will be widely practiced, familiar parts of daily life. The repeated insistence that those laws are binding on Israel for all time reflects an assessment that acceptance of those laws as a given has yet to be accomplished” (12).

Leveen employs insights from the field of cultural memory studies to highlight Numbers’ vested interest in the subject of memory. She points out that the careful census of the opening chapters reviews the families of the wilderness generation in detail, but the book then emphasizes their ignominious deaths in the wilderness and replacement by their children with another detailed census report of the new generation in chapter 26. The story of the exodus provides the larger narrative framework that Numbers recalls at the start (1:1) and returns to repeatedly. But unlike other Hebrew Bible books that emphasize communal memory (Leveen reviews Exodus and Deuteronomy in particular), memory in the stories of Numbers does not just reinforce the dominant priestly ideology. It proves also to be a source of conflict, and these conflicts allocate social power. The memory of Egypt, in particular, instigates rebellions against Moses and Aaron that dominate the narratives of Num 11–17. A “counter-memory” of rich and plentiful Egyptian food thus contradicts the story of redemption from forced labor and leads to political challenges against Mosaic and Aaronide leadership.

Leveen traces how the priestly editors arranged these stories of different rebellions to produce a sequence of social dramas (citing Victor Taylor) in which rituals and ritualized objects (tassels, fire pans turned into altar plating, Aaron’s budding rod) reinforce the leadership of Moses and Aaron. Chapters 11–17 therefore admit that the priestly claims are contentious but use that admission to create cautionary tales to dissuade others from following the rebels’ example. The ritualized objects become “sites of memory” that invite later generations to remember these stories and learn their lesson.

In Numbers [the priests] set out to be the sole guardians of the past in their editing of the tales of crisis and commemoration. The objects formed at the end of each tale contribute mightily to that priestly guardianship of the past. ... Hovering in the shadows of words of warning and reproof is the reminder of all those who failed and perished along the way: the scouts, Korah and his band, and, ultimately, the entire generation that left Egypt only to be discarded in the obscurity of the wilderness, leaving behind them the tassels, plating, and staff. Poignantly, these mnemonic objects are almost all that remain of an entire generation. (137–39)

Conflict and rebellion continue beyond chapter 17, however, and the theme of death and burial reinforces the priestly hierarchy once again. Numbers mentions the burials only of legitimate leaders, Miriam and Aaron, and of people who died in 11:34 prior to the leadership challenges and condemnation of the entire generation. Leveen finds in the

omission of burial information for the rebellious generation a scathing judgment on them and, perhaps, the implication that they received no burial at all. By contrast, the site of Aaron's death gets mentioned four times in rapid succession (Num 20:22, 23, 25, 27), and public mourning for him lasted one month. Also emphasized here is the legitimate transfer of high-priestly authority to Eleazar and therefore the legitimacy of the Aaronide dynasty. "The people must see that they have no choice but to choose life in the land under the political and religious authority of the priests" (165).

To this end, Leveen suggests that the regulations in the closing chapters of Numbers, far from being an anticlimax, instead present Israel with a positive vision of life in the land regulated by priestly rituals and laws. The death of the wilderness generation raises the threat of extinction, which is answered by inheritance regulations for the daughters of Zelophehad in both chapter 27 (immediately after the census of the new generation) and chapter 36 (the end of the book). "Not only is the name of Zelophehad preserved, but so are those of his daughters. In so doing, the narrator personifies the core concern of Numbers—the preservation and transmission of tradition and memory—and the ultimate resolution of that concern in the new generation through the way in which the narrative ends" (181).

Leveen does a very good job of demonstrating her thesis that the priestly editors of Numbers use the motif of memory to construct a polemical object lesson. Her application of insights from cultural-memory studies to the book of Numbers is an especially good match of method to material. Particularly striking is her demonstration of how the rebellion stories of chapters 11–17 reinforce the priestly teachings with mnemonic ritual objects to be worn by every Israelite man (the tassels), visible on the sanctuary altar (plates), and enshrined before the ark of the covenant (Aaron's rod). Numbers, then, does not just depend on the narration of these stories to teach its lessons of priestly authority. It mandates that they be ritualized in everyday clothing and the sanctuary's furnishings as constant reminders of the fate of the generation that rebelled against Mosaic and priestly authority in the wilderness.

Leveen is less convincing in explaining how Numbers' presentation of Moses' supreme authority accords with the priestly agenda. Since his oracular authority establishes the priestly hierarchy and not only overshadows Aaron but is declared supreme in a direct contest for authority (Num 12), she can do little more than suggest that the Balaam account qualifies the reputation of prophets. In the end, however, the prophetic "tradition has too much authority for the priestly editors to excise from their account" (152; also 49–51). I think the figure of Moses in P, and in the Pentateuch as a whole, needs to be reconsidered apart from simple dichotomies of priest and prophet. That agenda, however, clearly lies beyond the scope of Leveen's work.

Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers would have benefited from interacting with some recent German scholarship that has emphasized the role of the editors of Numbers in shaping the final forms of the Pentateuch to serve priestly interests in the Second Temple period. Her vague historical contextualizing of the priestly agenda does not allow her to specify its targets very clearly. Her caution in engaging speculative arguments about historical context and redactional history are, however, commendable. The argument of the book does not suffer for their absence.

This book joins several other recent works (including a 2007 book by this reviewer) that emphasize the priestly political agenda behind the composition of P, especially in Leviticus and Numbers. Future study needs to take up the interesting problem of how scripture that was shaped to enhance priests' religious (and, at least by implication, political) authority survived and flourished long after Aaronide priests were displaced by rabbis.