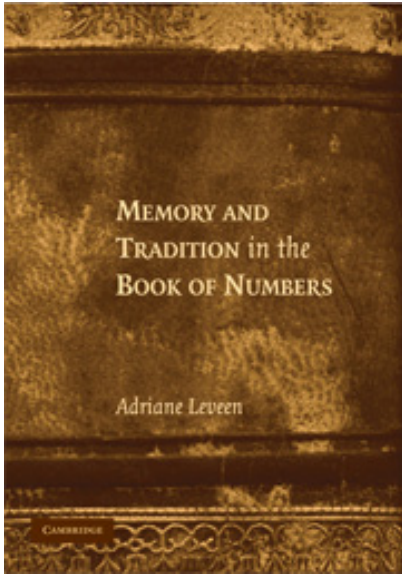


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Leveen, Adriane B.

Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers

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This book is a revision of a doctoral dissertation written for the University of California at Berkeley. The central theme of the volume is the role of memory in the book of Numbers as a rhetorical device that is used for political purposes by priestly editors to shape their contemporary society and future tradition. The theme is developed through seven chapters. The first three chapters establish the methodological and hermeneutical orientation of the volume; the final four provide more focused readings of specific texts in the book of Numbers.

Chapter 1, "Desert Bound," probes the rich literature on memory and tradition to provide a theoretical perspective for reading the book of Numbers. Numbers is about the death of the first generation in the wilderness, according to Leveen. The threat of death and the grim setting of extinction in the wilderness are selected themes, which when transmitted from the past to the present create tradition, as it is defined by Edward Shils, *Tradition*. The selection of particular stories and customs as a resource for tradition is aimed at legitimizing current institutions, hierarchies, and status relations, according to Maurice Halwachs, *On Collective Memory*, which means that the formation of tradition is necessarily entangled with politics and social power. These theoretical positions provide the starting point for Leveen to probe the relationship of memory and death in the book of Numbers (see Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*). The political aim of

the priestly editors is to fashion a collective memory that links the dead ancestors of the wilderness journey with the living that read the story as authoritative tradition.

Chapter 2, “Weaving by Design,” explores the literary character of the book of Numbers. Leveen reviews the research on the history of composition, including the identification of nonpriestly and priestly literature, as well as recent debates on the separation of “priestly” and “holiness” literature. Leveen is more interested, however, in the editorial process that has woven disparate literature together without harmonizing competing traditions and stories. To this end, she reviews a variety of literary techniques that are evident in the present form of Numbers, including framing (e.g., the nonpriestly literature in Num 11–14 with priestly literature in Num 1–10, 16ff. and the repetition of the census in Num 1 and 26), the literary design of Num 1–4, the distribution of motifs (e.g., “as YHWH commanded Moses”), and the role of Num 33 as a bridge between Num 32 and 34.

Chapter 3, “Priestly Purposes,” identifies the author/redactor of the present form of the book of Numbers. Leveen reviews the scholarship on dating the priestly material and settles for an exilic or postexilic date to the editorial activity. Although the book of Numbers contains a rich resource of nonpriestly material, Leveen detects an anti-prophetic point of view in the present shaping of the book, especially in the presentation of Moses as a prophet. Examples of the bias include the need for Moses to have a priest to execute actions when he functions as a prophet (Num 11–14); the distribution of the land follows the priestly vision; the prophetic authority of Moses is curtailed by priestly calendars and priestly leaders; and even Balaam functions as a critique of Moses when his praise of Israel (Num 22–24) is compared with Moses’ anger (Num 20). One wonders, however, whether the function of Moses in the book of Numbers can be limited to a prophetic role, since he also plays a prominent role next to Aaron within the priestly literature.

Chapter 4, “Variations on a Theme: Shaping Memory in the Wilderness,” explores two kinds of memory in the book of Numbers. The priestly literature presents memory as a stabilizing force in Num 1–10 through patterned literary forms, formulaic language, and the technique of repetition. The orderliness of the priestly construction of tradition reaches a climax in the ritual of the blowing of the trumpets in Num 10, which function as a regulated source of memory. The nonpriestly stories in Num 11–14 provide a counternarrative. The speeches in the stories of complaint are subversive weapons of a competing collective memory, which undercuts the ordered world of Num 1–10. Leveen concludes that the editors of Numbers use the nonpriestly countertradition to complicate the utopian world of the priestly literature. The two traditions work in tandem to qualify an overly idealistic view of the wilderness in the priestly writing of Num 1–10.

Chapter 5, “Crisis and Commemoration: The Use of Ritual Object,” turns to the function of icons as memorial objects. The tassels on the edge of garments (15:37–41), the incense pans (17:1–5), and Aaron’s staff (17:16–26) are meant to reinforce the priestly agenda that the people must show deference to the priests. The priestly editors use the conflict from the spy story (Num 13–14) and the rebellion by Korah (Num 16) to resolve the tensions between priestly authority and the power of the Israelite people. The competing views of authority are structured into a social drama in which oppositions are resolved through the four-part process of breach, crisis, redressive action, and reintegration. The use of ritual objects raises the additional question of sacraments and divine memory, which plays a crucial role in priestly literature but is absent from the study.

Chapter 6, “Falling in the Wilderness: The Politics of Death,” probes the central role of the death of the first generation in the structure of the book of Numbers. Death, according to Leveen, is used for political purposes. The story of death is anchored in Num 11 and never leaves the extended narrative of the book. The grim death of the first generation, who are eaten in the wilderness and lack a burial place, is a story of warning with political implications for readers in the postexilic period. The lack of a burial site for the entire generation provides the springboard for the priestly authors to mythologize the setting of the wilderness as a place of death. The absence of an interpretation of Num 19 in this chapter is surprising, since the story of the red heifer presents the most extended treatment of death in the Hebrew Bible. One wonders how the inclusion of this chapter might alter Leveen’s interpretation of the politics of death.

The counterpart to death in the wilderness is life in the land of promise, which is the topic of chapter 7, “Inheriting the Land.” Leveen notes that the end of the book of Numbers returns to the orderly presentation of memory that dominated in Num 1–10, only this time the focus is on a new generation, who are preparing for the future life in the land. Of particular interest to Leveen is the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, which frames the closing section of the book of Numbers, occurring in Num 27 and 36. The function of the repetition of a law (Num 27) that is revised (Num 36) is to demonstrate a social setting in the land of promise that is controlled by law yet open to revision. Through this controlling repetition, the book of Numbers concludes with the vision of a flexible legal culture.

The themes of memory and tradition are crucial for interpreting the Torah in general and the book of Numbers in particular. Leveen provides an excellent roadmap for anyone interested in this important topic.