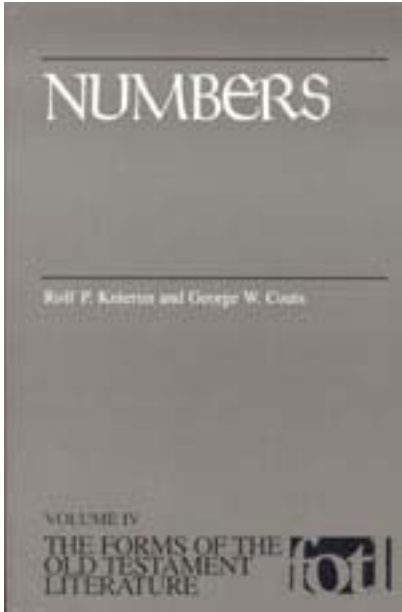


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Knierim, Rolf P., and George W. Coats

Numbers

Forms of the Old Testament Literature 4

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In the last years the book of Numbers has become a very important field of pentateuchal research. Therefore, each new commentary on this book is awaited with much interest. The commentary of Knierim and Coats, two eminent specialists in matters of the Pentateuch, is mainly devoted to a form-critical reading of the book, in compliance with the design of the FOTL project. The diachronic and redaction problems are not denied, but they do not play a major role in the presentation. In the introduction, the authors deal with the overall structure of Numbers. They recognize that the fourth book of the Torah “does not easily reveal a coherent and homogeneous literary work” (6). Nevertheless, the book in its “final” form should be understood as a “saga of the migratory campaign” with a twofold subdivision: “the legend of the organization of the sanctuary campaign” (1:1–10:10) and “the saga of the campaign itself” (10:11–36:13; in a recent work, Knierim’s student, W. Lee argues for the same division: Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel’s Migratory Campaign* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003]).

Knierim and Coats reject Olson’s suggestion that Numbers is organized through the twofold census in Num 1 and 26. This would suggest that the main theme of Numbers is the transition from the old generation to the new (Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* [BJS

71; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985]). True, there are some problems with Olson's theory, but there are also some very important observations that remain valid. In Knierim's structure, the function of the two censuses is not at all clear. The authors must acknowledge that Num 26 represents indeed "the beginning of a new generation" and that this chapter "appears to be one of the major subdivisions" (11). Unfortunately, the authors do not mention let alone discuss the important work of Olivier Artus, *Etudes sur le livre des Nombres: Récit, Histoire et Loi en Nombres 13,1–20,13* (OBO 157; Fribourg: Presses Universitaires; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1997), who argues quite convincingly for the classical threefold repartition of the book. Artus also addresses the question of the interaction between law and narrative in the book of Numbers, an issue that Knierim and Coats should have taken more into account.

Another important work missing in their bibliography is Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (Beihefte der Zeitschrift für altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003; see on this the review of Christophe Nihan in *RBL*). Achenbach's work underlines the importance of Numbers in relation to the new theories about the composition of the Pentateuch. Knierim and Coats seem to defend the traditional model of the Documentary Hypothesis. Nevertheless, they admit that "not all the text units can be explained in terms of sources." They also underline the importance of Priestly ideology and concerns in Numbers. They rightly observe that "P" in Numbers "refers much more to a history of ongoing priestly traditions rather than to a uni-level source" (7), but they do not address the question of the conclusion of the original P source, which is now often seen in Exod 40 or somewhere in the first part of Leviticus (see, e.g., Thomas Pola, *Die ursprüngliche Priesterschrift: Beobachtungen zur Literarkritik und Traditionsgeschichte von P^s* [WMANT 70; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1995]). Were that the case, the Priestly texts of Numbers would function as supplements to the first Priestly writing. According to Knierim and Coats, the book of Numbers reflects specifically the interests of the Aaronides (24). It would be interesting to ask how this theory accommodates the other Priestly texts of the Pentateuch. The pro-Aaronide ideology does not appear in all the narratives of Numbers. In Num 12, for instance, Aaron appears together with Miriam as an opponent of Moses. Besides, after Miriam is punished by Yhwh, Aaron cannot intercede for her but must refer to Moses, who has absolute authority over all members of the community (182).

The different units of the book as delimited by Coats and Knierim are commented according to the pattern of the FOTL series: text, structure, genre, setting, intention, and bibliography. After the main division into two parts, they delimitate the units as follows. For the first part: 1:1–54 (the report of the military conscription); 2:1–34 (the report of the mobilization of the militia: the outer camp); 3:1–4:49 (the report of the conscription

and mobilization of the sanctuary personnel: the inner camp); 5:1–4 (report of the exclusion of the unclean); 5:5–10 (legal instruction about restitution); 5:11–31 (legal instruction about the trial of jealousy); 6:1–21 (report about the law for the Nazirites); 6:22–27 (instruction about the Aaronide blessing); 7:1–89 (report of the gifts of the tribal leaders); 8:1–4 (report about the lamps of the lampstand); 8:5–22 (report about the installation of the Levites); 8:23–26 (legal instruction about the Levitical appointees); 9:1–14 (report about the Passover at Sinai); 9:15–23 (report about the theophanic march); 10:1–10 (instruction about the two trumpets). For the second part: 10:11–36 (legend of the ideal beginning of the epiphanic campaign); 11:1–3 (the Taberah story); 11:4–35 (the quail story); 12:1–16 (Aaron and Miriam rebellion story); 13:1–14:45 (murmuring story); 15:1–16 (ordinance speech); 15:17–31 (ordinance speech); 15:32–36 (anecdote: the wood gathering incident); 15:37–41 (ordinance speech for vestment); 16:1–17:5 (rebellion story: Dathan-Abiram-Korah); 17:6–15 (plague story); 17:16–26 (almond rod anecdote); 17:27–18:32 (collection of priestly ordinances); 19:1–22 (ordinance for protective cleaning); 20:1–13 (Meribah spring story); 20:14–21 (negotiations report); 20:22–29 (Aaron death report); 21:1–3 (Hormah etiology); 21:4–9 (fiery serpents story); 21:10–20 (wilderness itinerary); 21:21–31 (battle report); 21:32–35 (wilderness itinerary); 22:1–24:25 (Balaam legend); 25:1–18 (Baal Peor anecdote); 25:19–26:65 (census/conscription report); 27:1–11 (case report, the daughters of Zelophehad); 27:12–23 (commission report); 28:1–30:1 (ritual calendar); 30:2–17 (judicial tradition concerning vows); 32:1–42 (negotiations dialogue); 33:1–35:34 (wilderness itinerary). This itinerary integrates the following units: 33:50–56 (instructions for conquest); 34:1–12 (definition of boundaries); 34:13–15 (inheritance explanation); 34:16–29 (administrative list); 35:1–8 (tariff for Levitical cities); 35:9–34 (tariff for cities of refuge). The last units are 36:1–12 (case report: the daughters of Zelophehad) and 36:13.

This delimitation reveals some of the problems of an exclusive emphasis on form criticism. There is much interest in small and very small units, but broader structures are somewhat neglected. This is the case for the rebellion stories, which are certainly organized in a chiasmic manner, but the authors do not comment on that point. There is an appendix (332–34), where David Palmer offers a reconstruction of the macrostructure of Num 11–36 according to Professor Coats’s manuscript; however, this structure remains mostly on an enumerative level. On the other hand, it is quite astonishing that Num 22–24 is simply presented as “Balaam legend.” A form-critical reading of these chapters should highlight the differences between the narratives and the oracles.

The commentary ends with a series of appendixes (the macrostructure of chs. 11–36, the macrostructure for P and J in these chapters, and an extensive and useful glossary of form-critical terms).

There are many useful insights in this commentary, even for those who are somewhat skeptical about the future of form criticism in biblical research. Knierim and Coats insist on the mix of cultic and military concerns in Numbers, as did Knierim in former publications. For me, this seems to be an element that distinguishes Numbers from the other books of the Torah, and therefore one must agree with the authors that “it is more than arbitrary that Numbers was established as distinct book within the Pentateuch” (17).