

Book Review

Christian Frevel, **Desert Transformations: Studies in the Book of Numbers**, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 137, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2020, xvi + 610 pp., ISBN 978-3-16-153967-1

In the desert, you can remember your name...

(America: A Horse with No Name, 1971)

According to one of the hits of the seventies, the desert is able to remind us of who we are and where we are heading. The wilderness reminds us of our name – that is, of the roots of our true identity. The 2020 work by Christian Frevel¹, titled *Desert Transformations*, is a study volume written in just such a spirit: a partly reformulated and thematically arranged collection of previously published essays on the Fourth Book of Moses² and on the modern research connected with it. The volume's novelty, precision, and command of the material reflect the most recent methodology of Old Testament scholarship, especially regarding the formation history of the Pentateuch. Its special significance also lies in the fact that research on the Book of Numbers and the interpretation of the text have experienced an extraordinary “boom” in recent decades.³

In the author's own words:

This collection of essays records some intermediate results of my own discoveries. The volume appeared within the framework of a research project established by the German Research Foundation, and can be understood as preparatory work for a forthcoming commentary on the Book of Numbers. Twenty essays were produced from publications and studies that appeared between 2007 and 2019.⁴

1 Born in 1962; obtained his theological doctorate in 1994; habilitated in 1998; from 1999 to 2004 professor of biblical theology at the University of Cologne; since 2004 professor of Old Testament at the Faculty of Catholic Theology of the Ruhr University Bochum, and since 2015 appointed extraordinary professor at the Department of Old Testament Studies of the University of Pretoria, South Africa.

2 Numbers – originally *bemidbar* בְּמִדְבָּר – “in the desert.”

3 For further detail, mentioning only the major monographs: Achenbach, Reinhard: *Die Vollendung der Tora. Redaktionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Numeribuch im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003); Davis, Jordan: *The End of the Book of Numbers. On Pentateuchal Models and Compositional Issues* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022).

4 Preface, V.

Novelty and Methodology

The book's main theses already become clear from the introduction (1–23). Frevel attempts to break with the traditional, and still largely dominant, source-critical model (the “source” or “documentary hypothesis”), which has often ignored or misunderstood the Book of Numbers, treating it as a merely supplementary collection of unsystematically arranged materials. He challenges the classical position of Martin Noth, who in his commentary on Numbers (ATD 7, 1966) characterized the book as a “confused and disordered” work. Instead, he claims that the final form of the Torah accords Numbers a structurally and theologically significant role that has so far been consistently underestimated. As Frevel emphasizes, “Numbers takes on a central role” in consolidating authority and normativity within the Pentateuch. The author places the emphasis on a supplementary (*Fortschreibung*) model and on inner-biblical interpretation, demonstrating that Numbers is a deliberately and purposefully developed work with its own internal logic. He argues that the texts of the book consist largely of post-Deuteronomistic and post-Priestly layers, which came into being as the result of continuous interpretive processes rather than from a single, unified source. The author convincingly demonstrates that the book is not merely a random alternation of legal, ritual, and narrative sections. Numbers portrays the community of Israel as a normative, idealized, and theologically constructed community.

Main Themes

Frevel groups his studies into three main categories:

1. Literature, History and Ideology (8 essays).⁵ In this most extensive part, Frevel calls into question the alleged disorder of Numbers, emphasizing the

5 Chapter titles: The Torah Becomes a Blessing: Narratological Impulses for Understanding the Book of Numbers; The Compositional Structure of Numbers within the Five Books of the Torah; Old Texts – Late Connections?; The Role of the Book of Numbers in the Recent Debates on the Pentateuch; Understanding the Pentateuch through the Structure of the Wilderness: Num 21 as a Compositional Link; Life in the Midst of the Land:

book's self-conscious composition and theological horizon. He examines the multifaceted literary and theological interpretation of the Fourth Book of Moses with academic precision, highlighting its complex literary growth, which spans almost five centuries. Frevel meticulously analyses how the texts of Numbers connect with other biblical books through inner-biblical interpretation, and how they reflect the social and political reality of the late Persian period. He portrays the book of "wilderness wandering" as an expanding interpretive corpus (espousing the so-called *Fortschreibung* theory⁶), which reworks earlier traditions while anticipating later developments that will appear especially in Deuteronomy and the Book of Joshua. In this sense the book embodies not a static but a dynamic Torah – "an emergent Torah, or a Torah in formation."⁷ Tradition and innovation are not opposed but mutually defining, shaping Israel's self-understanding during the transition from Sinai to the Promised Land.

One of Frevel's most distinctive moves is the reframing of the wilderness wandering. For him, this temporally forty-year "state" represents a productive and transformative theological space. The "desert, the wilderness" is not merely a narrative interval but a transitional space in which Israel undergoes social, ritual, and institutional transformation. According to Frevel, Numbers "bridges the gap between Sinai and the Promised Land" by recounting – instead of a simple geographical transition – a lengthy process of transformation. This liminal situation makes it possible to discuss questions of law, leadership, blessing, and communal order without tying them exclusively either to Mount Sinai or to the theology of the "land flowing with milk and honey." The desert thus becomes an ideal literary setting for "speech" about identity within a post-monarchical, post-exilic horizon.

2. Ritual and practice (6 essays)⁸: This chapter shows that the density of rituals/rites is one of the most characteristic features of *Numbers*. The opacity

Questions of Centralization in the Book of Numbers; Is There Any Reason Why Balaam Had to Die? (this chapter is worth a piece of criminology); Prophecy, Pseudo-Prophecy and Sorcery in the Book of Numbers; Numbers and the Twelve Tribes; The "Arabian Connection" in the Book of Numbers.

6 For more, see Martin Leuenberger's entry in WiBiLex, <https://www.die-bibel.de/ressourcen/wibilex/altes-testament/fortschreibung>.

7 "Torah in formation," "dynamic Torah," "emergent Torah."

8 Chapter titles: The Concept of Purity in the Context of the Book of Numbers; Wrestling with the Vitality of the Corpses: Understanding the Reasons for the Ritual in Num 19;

and openness of ritual texts was a deliberate strategy for unifying the various post-exilic communities and for establishing a common, centralized norm. Frevel deals at length with the ritual material of the Book of Numbers, firmly rejecting the long-standing so-called “container hypothesis,”⁹ according to which the book contains merely independent legal materials lacking inner coherence. A close reading of texts such as Numbers 5–6 shows this assumption of a shapeless mass of legal material to be entirely mistaken. These chapters exhibit deliberate structural strategies, including keyword linkages, thematic associations, and narrative frames. A key conceptual tool of this analysis is “ritual density.” Frevel argues that the Book of Numbers contains the highest concentration of ritual material in the Pentateuch, second only to Leviticus, and that this density functions as a strategy of normalization. Ritual formulation serves authority, homogenization, and identity formation, while at the same time allowing for a controlled diversity of practice. In Frevel’s formulation, the rituals of the Book of Numbers form the identity container of Second Temple Judaism, securing unity in the midst of variety rather than rigid uniformity.

3. Leadership and Priesthood (6 essays):¹⁰ The author’s command of the material is also evident regarding the hierarchical structure and political power of the priesthood. The book of Numbers regulates the relationship between the Levites and the Aaronite priesthood, highlighting the increasing political and cultic authority of the high priest, who, in the absence of a king, becomes the *de facto* leader of the community. On the whole, Frevel’s volume successfully demonstrates that the Fourth Book of Moses represents

On the Imperfection of Perfection: Observations on the Anthropology of the Rituals of Numbers; The Texture of Rituals in the Book of Numbers: A New View on Ritual Density, the Role of Tradition and the Variety Emerging in Early Judaism; The Sabbath and the Wood-Gatherer: Legal Hermeneutics and Literary History in Num 15:32–36; Interior Design: Some Observations on Endogamy in the Book of Numbers.

9 The view that Numbers is just a loose container of legal materials.

10 Chapter titles: The Transformation of Charisma: Reflections on the Book of Numbers in Light of Max Weber’s Theory of Routinization; Leadership and Conflict: The Charismatic Model of Numbers; “My Covenant Was with Him, a Covenant of Life and Peace”: The Priestly Covenant and the Question of Mixed Marriages; “When Moses Heard This, He Approved” (Lev 10:20): The Connection between Compositional History, the History of Theology, and Inner-Biblical Exegesis in Leviticus 10; “Let the Levites Therefore Be Mine”: Notes on the Connection among Numbers 3, 8 and 18; The End of the High Priesthood: The Hierarchy of Priests and Levites in Numbers.

a key, late phase in the formation of the Pentateuch, which reinterprets the wilderness period as a formative, identity-shaping time.

One of the book's distinctive features is that it is also able to work with sociological concepts – for example, following Max Weber, on the transformation of charisma in Numbers. According to the studies, the Fourth Book of Moses portrays the process of the transformation, or “routinization,” of charismatic leadership in early Israel. The institutionalization of the Aaronite priesthood: the institution of the priesthood, particularly the hierarchy linked to the Aaronite family, represents the response to the rebellions against Moses. The place of charismatic leadership is gradually taken over by legal norms and institutions. This process represents the “depersonalization” of charisma (*Versachlichung*), where power is bound not to a person but to an office. The culmination of the process, in his view, is the appearance of the high priestly office and the increase of its political significance in the post-exilic period, when priestly leadership takes the place of royal (monarchical) power.

Critical Remarks

Although the volume is undoubtedly of great significance, several remarks may also be formulated with a critical character. First: since the volume is an essay collection, certain themes recur multiple times, sometimes in a repetitive manner. A monographic synthesis could render Frevel's program even more coherent. At the same time, this generic feature is not a weakness but rather a sign that the author approaches the same problem from several directions and on several levels.

Second: Frevel's argument at times relies very strongly on the late Persian-period context. This is convincing in many cases, but with certain texts the reader may ask how confidently the historical background can in fact be reconstructed from the text itself. The author, however, is generally cautious and does not entirely conflate compositional logic with concrete historical events.

Third: it is worthwhile situating Frevel's program within the broader landscape of Numbers research, especially alongside the two major monographs cited above – Reinhard Achenbach's *Die Vollendung der Tora* (2003) and Jordan Davis's *The End of the Book of Numbers* (2022) – against which significant methodological divergences become visible. While Frevel works with a fragmentary model and the principle of inner-biblical *Fortschreibung*, in which

the layers grow organically and dynamically into one another; Achenbach proposes a much more sharply contoured, three-phase redactional model: a Hexateuch Redaction in the first half of the 5th century BCE, a Pentateuch Redaction in the second half of that century, and – as his most original contribution – a late “Theocratic Revision” (*Theokratische Bearbeitung*) in the 4th century BCE during the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods. Achenbach also adopts Deuteronomy as the “Archimedean point” of his analysis, whereas Frevel places the Book of Numbers itself at the methodological center. The consequence is that texts which Frevel treats holistically as the products of continuous interpretive processes, Achenbach is rather inclined to dissect into clearly distinguishable redactional strata. Davis, in turn, departs in yet another direction: he expressly distances himself from purely “model-based” approaches – including both classical documentary models and supplementary models akin to Frevel’s *Fortschreibung* – and instead grounds his analysis in three “verifiable tools”: empirical evidence on ancient Near Eastern literary production, historical geography and archaeology, and the influence of Northern (Israelite/Samaritan) traditions. These three approaches are not so much mutually exclusive as complementary, and reading them together throws into sharper relief what is distinctive in Frevel: a sustained sociological and inner-biblical interpretive horizon, together with a marked openness to ritual and to identity formation as theological categories.

Fourth: the academic language and conceptual usage of the volume make it accessible primarily to specialists. This is understandable given the work’s target audience, but at the same time it limits its reception.

Summary – Recommendation

Desert Transformations is a demanding volume (a specialist book in the strict sense of the word!)¹¹, which presupposes familiarity with Pentateuch research and engages extensively with the German-language scholarly literature, which it reads in a uniquely critical way. Owing to its methodological precision and conceptual coherence, it is a milestone work. It works with the Hebrew terminology circumspectly and precisely. Frevel succeeds in proving that the Book of Numbers is indispensable for understanding the formation of the Torah and the theological imagination of early Judaism. Even the title

11 With all its discreet charms and not-so-discreet drawbacks.

of the book is telling: *Desert Transformations* – the desert not as backdrop but as the site of transition and reordering. Numbers really is a “wilderness” book, since it accentuates segments of a long temporal “wandering,” or sets them in entirely different lights and colors – either contrasting them with Exodus and Deuteronomy or precisely complementing them.

Christian Frevel’s *Desert Transformations* sets the study of the Book of Numbers in a decisively new framework and conceptual structure (employing original sociological, literary, and historical concepts in original ways). By foregrounding the book’s compositional sophistication, ritual creativity, and sustained engagement with leadership and power, Frevel positions the Book of Numbers as a central witness to the dynamic processes that shaped the Torah. The essay collection deepens our understanding of the Five Books of Moses and gives insight into the interpretive processes of Scripture. Owing to its methodological precision, conceptual coherence, and the placement of the Book of Numbers in a new, central role, it can be regarded as a milestone of scholarly work, indispensable for understanding the Torah and the theology of early Judaism. One hopes the author will soon complete the commentary these essays have been building toward – a unified, modern, and coherent treatment of Numbers.

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