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Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers (Book Review)

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Adriane Leveen’s Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers is a sophisticated and often engaging treatment of what may well be the most neglected and yet the most haunting book of the Torah. Indeed, the premise of Numbers – that the very people called out of Egypt by YHWH become the objects of divine disgust and violence, to the point where the deity arranges for their (near-)complete annihilation in a lonely wasteland – makes for a powerful and often grisly annihilation. Freud, for one, certainly saw YHWH – the ‘volcano-god’ – as a demon of sorts, who leads his people along a path of murder and neglect, and more recent scholars have shown barely hidden disdain for the post-Exodus drama of the Pentateuch. For example, in his Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992), well-known Egyptologist Donald Redford claims that ‘an honest reading’ of Numbers ‘cannot help but reveal that the tyranny Israel was freed from, namely that of Pharaoh, was mild indeed in comparison to the tyranny of Yahweh to which they were about to submit themselves’ (p. 422). Many others have noted the seemingly patchwork composition of Numbers, composed as it is with a strange mixture of narration, laws, legal cases and ritual instructions, and for many modern readers the book simply seems to lack the pastoral charms of Genesis or the august deliverance of Exodus.

Despite all of this, Leveen argues that we should see Numbers as more than just filler material in the broader Torah, and that Numbers is a complex literary composition with its own internal logic, integrity and structure. More specifically, Leveen seeks to show how the Numbers tradition is shaped and ordered by the concept of memory, a concept that reveals its power as the proverbial double-edged sword: memory can act as a positive force, teaching readers through the distilled memories of times past the nuances of correct behavior and ritual authority. However, other memories, dangerous memories of Egypt and life in captivity, can rise to the surface and threaten to undo the people’s resolve and the entire redemptive mission of the exodus. Memory is not a one-sided affair; as Leveen claims, ‘Numbers vehemently and persuasively challenges such a fixed, static view of biblical memory’ (p. 21), and perhaps because of this complexity this book of the Torah has been set aside in some recent treatments of the ‘memory’ idea in biblical scholarship (see p. 197, n. 51).

The theoretical concept of ‘memory’ as a cultural phenomenon of historical and theological value has recently found a home in biblical studies, where ‘memory’ has become a popular and fruitful alternative to the heated and sometimes uninspiring debates between ‘minimalists’ and ‘maximalists’ regarding the historicity of this or that biblical event or hero (see the recent books by Mark S. Smith (The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2004), and Ronald Hendel (Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005)). Still, there is a lurking danger of sorts in this enterprise of reading the Bible as a product of ‘memory’, biologically speaking, at least, memory is a process embodied in an individual human mind, and thus there is no ‘group mind’ with a ‘group memory’ in this sense, no extra-individual, living, physical organ that can encode anything like an individual human ‘memory’. Furthermore, one can certainly imagine how the invocation of a concept like ‘groupmemory’ could (at least) subtly mask the very real and very potent social dynamics inherent in every sentence of what a narrator or government agency or dictator might wish to present as a ‘shared memory’. However, Leveen demonstrates that she is not unaware of the problematic nature of the theoretical concept (see Chapter 1, ‘Desert bound’, in particular pp. 13–16), and, to her credit, she points to the plain fact that unexpressed, private memories are not accessible to study, and thus we must turn to studying the ways in which public renderings of events ‘corrupt and transform . . . individual recollections’ (p. 14). The concept of biblical narrative as memory, for Leveen, turns out not to be a method for preserving some pristine, apolitical set of religious values, but rather is a process that is enacted and re-enacted in the matrices of contention, religious power and politics. Insofar as these memories are statically enshrined in the book of Numbers, however, this complex narration of coerced recollections is not without its own specific literary shape. In Chapter 2 (‘Weaving by design’) Leveen goes about stating her assumptions regarding when and to a certain extent, how Numbers grew into its present literary state. ‘Editors’ worked not merely as neutral compilers of diverse scraps of tradition, but rather they ‘envisioned and argued for a life under specifically priestly control’ (p. 27) and wove the past ‘into a bleak present while awaiting for a better future’ (p. 39), a characteristic that Leveen claims is a consistent reminder in Numbers of ‘mediating editorial intelligence’ (p. 39). Leveen assumes the work of these shadowy and anonymous ‘editors’ took place between the 7th and 5th centuries BCE, hardly a novel conclusion (as she herself acknowledges, p. 31), and that they incorporated disparate sources and many earlier materials. Biblical scholars know embarrassingly little about who these editors were, or where they worked, or when, and yet ‘the editors’ can sometimes serve as convenient shorthand for referring to whoever put together what we now have in its final form. It should be noted that while this very concept of the ubiquitous ‘editor’ in biblical studies has recently come under fire (see, for instance, John Van Seters, The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the ‘Editor’ in Biblical Criticism, Winona Lake, Eisenbrauns, 2006), one does not get the sense that Leveen conjures the notion of an editor as a deus ex machina for the purposes of avoiding a close reading of sources. On the contrary, such nuanced readings of narrative structure permeate Leveen’s work (see, for example, her brief description of how the priestly source created the current structure of chapters 1–10 on pp. 78–8), and thus her reading of Numbers may not even suffer or change too much if she were to speak of a specific ‘author’ or several ‘editors’ during any given time period.

In Chapter 3 (‘Priestly purposes’), Leveen examines the role of priests in Numbers, where the priestly office is given special precedence. Although Leveen claims that priests and prophets are presented in a state of tension in Numbers (p. 48), it is ultimately the priests who gain the upper hand (p. 54). Moreover, Numbers gives us a hierarchical arrangement within the priesthood not evident from the other four books of Torah, that is, the Levites are presented as a clearly subordinate class under the Aaronids (p. 56 ff.). From this, Leveen tentatively suggests that the exilic period could have stimulated the anxiety over authority and the need for religious structure so evident in Numbers (p. 56 ff.). Chapter 4 (‘Variations on a theme: Shaping memory in the wilderness’) continues the development of the basic ideas set out in the beginning of the book, and explores ways in which memory in Numbers is not just a tool of priestly legitimation, but also serves as a voice of ‘countermemory’, where a dominated group tells their story. This dominated group comprises the nameless, wayward and fickle people, whose desire for food and comfort threatens to unravel the entire deliverance project. Even while these people eventually come to serve as a gruesome example of YHWH’s wrath, the fact that both priestly and popular voices are heard is, for Leveen, a reminder of how the edited version of Numbers’ gives us ‘the striking preservation of both views. Memory needs to be understood as both reliable and explosive’ (p. 91).

In Chapter 5 (‘Crisis and commemoration: The use of ritual objects’), Leveen presents us with perhaps her most interesting and provocative reading of Numbers. Using Victor Turner’s four stages of social drama (breach, crisis, redressive action and recognition of schism, as discussed, for example, in his Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1974)) to understand the conflicts in Numbers...
Leveen demonstrates exactly how the book of Numbers is shaped by the notion of conflict, and how the text as an everlasting ‘memory’ can serve as a legitimation of true authority in the face of threatened insurrections and meaninglessness. Leveen’s use of Turner’s anthropological framework is a solid example of how the social sciences can function as a guiding principle in reading a biblical narrative; the text in Numbers is naturally illuminated through these stages, and we begin to understand (at least implicitly) that the editing of Numbers was not merely an antiquarian scribal activity, but rather that its stories of contestation and authority are rooted in the urgent concerns of a community in a real-life social setting. While Leveen is to be commended on her sophisticated use of theorists such as Turner, there are other points at which the ‘highlights’ of certain methodologies are introduced in an almost perfunctory manner. For example, M. Douglas, F. Jameson, P. Bourdieu, H. White, C. Bell, C. Geertz, R. Williams and others enter the roll-call of critical theorists at various points and – to greater or lesser extents – are used to supplement Leveen’s arguments (often in extended block quotes), but it is not always made clear exactly how these individuals help us to understand the specific dynamics at play in any particular historical or sociological context of ancient Israel. A deeper and more original engagement with fewer voices (such as the study carried out with Turner’s theories) may have been more productive toward this end.

Leveen continues her study through a chapter discussing the unburied physicality of Israel’s dead, left in the desert as a reminder of punishment (Chapter 6, ‘Falling in the wilderness: The politics of death and burial’). Here, it is eloquently argued that the desert of wandering represents a mass graveyard where the refusal of burial for Israel’s disobedient dead is a kind of eternal punishment. These individuals are not forgotten, however, since their memory lives on in the narration of Numbers. ‘Memories become anchored, and are developed, through their association with specific places or types of space’, and for the exodus generation, this space now exists forever ‘in a mental geography of great desolation’ (p. 162). The last chapter of the book (Chapter 7, ‘Inheriting the land’) explores the ending to the book of Numbers, one that would seem to provide anything but closure to the great drama that has ensued throughout the book. Leveen argues that the last incident in Numbers (in Chapter 36) – the conclusion to the legal case involving the daughters of Zelophehad – does in fact contribute an appropriate sense of ending; for Leveen, the fact that a legal matter is abruptly raised and solved in the last chapter serves as ‘a significant clue to the explanation for why Numbers ends in the way it does. A legal ruling can and will be revised’ (p.174). This is no small matter, as now ‘Israel is entering the land with the most important possession of all, the knowledge that the community will be governed by law and legal stipulations, but that such rulings are subject to legal review and revision . In other words, the legal culture that Israel is to inherit from Moses and to take into the land under priestly supervision is a living and growing one’ (p. 180).

In the end, Leveen’s Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers exhibits a sensitivity toward the ways in which the dark themes of Numbers can evoke meaningful poetic responses in the modern world – poetic inspiration at several points is taken from Nahman Bialik’s 1902 poem, Metei Midbar (‘The dead of the desert’, in Selected Poems, Israel, Dvir, 1981) – and her interaction with the text displays the kind of nuance and multi-layered understanding that may prove useful for theologians in Jewish and Christian religious traditions. Leveen’s work here certainly does not make new progress toward understanding very much of the specific historical or social contexts in which the book of Numbers came to fruition, and Leveen does not make any pretense of solving such problems (pp. 53–63 represent an exception, however). Text critical and linguistic work is largely absent from Leveen’s treatment, and – more often than not – Leveen is content to follow the views of other established authorities on matters of sources and translation. Rather than making significant contributions in the aforementioned areas, this book is a highly focused discussion of the literary structure of Numbers, of memory, and of the uses of memory in the Torah, and as such it is to be recommended not only to biblical scholars who deal with the politics of narrative structure and the shaping of tradition over time, but also to those interested in sociological and religious theories of memory and their interface with religious studies, politics, critical theory and psychology.

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