

Im Auftrag der Arbeitsgemeinschaft der Assistent:innen

an bibelwissenschaftlichen Instituten in Österreich

hg. v. Veronika Burz-Tropper, Antonia Krainer, Agnethe Siquans und Werner Urbanz

Peer reviewed

Vol. 33,1

2024

C. NEUBER: „Raum erkunden / Exploring Space“. Editorial	1
C. ZIEGERT: Framing Space. Determining the Meaning of Space-Related Biblical Hebrew Lexemes	7–27
N. H. da SILVA FERREIRA: Contexts of Ancient Rural Landscapes Creating Human Culture and Language	28–49
J. FORSLING: Exploring the Wilderness in the Book of Numbers	50–65
H. COHEN YADAN: Spatial Conceptualization and the Imagery of Space in the Rahab Story	66–86
S. KIRSCHNER: Stadt, Land, Felsspalte. Raum und seine ethische Bedeutung in den Simson-Erzählungen (Ri 13–16)	87–107
M. BUNZEL: Raumerkundungen in der poetischen Literatur der Hebräischen Bibel. Metaphorische Räume im Ijobbuch und in den Psalmen	108–126

www.protokollezurbibel.at

ISSN 2412-2467



Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) Namensnennung – Nicht-kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung 4.0 International Lizenz.

EXPLORING THE WILDERNESS IN THE BOOK OF NUMBERS

Leaving the World of the Text to Interpret Its Literary Setting

Erforschung der Wildnis im Buch Numeri. Die Welt des Textes verlassen und sein literarisches Setting interpretieren

Josef Forsling

Biblical Studies Department

Stockholm School of Theology, Åkeshovsvägen 29, 168 39 Bromma, Sweden

josef.forsling@ehs.se

ORCID 0000-0001-7334-1269

Abstract: As an inquiry of space-related methods this article evaluates the concept of “the world of the text” in relationship to the book of Numbers. It is contrasted with a more loose understanding of setting as referential field, which has been used in connection with narrative anthologies. Numbers may be described as an anthology with an attenuated frame narrative concerning Israel’s wandering through the wilderness. Therefore, setting as referential field is a better way to conceptualize space in the book than reading for the “world” of Numbers. This is seen through two case-studies where the two approaches are compared. One concerning the high census numbers at the start of Numbers together with the wilderness setting, which are shown to not invite a “factual” reading of them in a world of the wilderness, but rather as theological constructs connected to the tabernacle. The other concerning the confused itinerary notices, which are shown to not cohere into a logical trail through the wilderness, but rather fulfill their function in the passages they are part of, among other things.

Abstract: Als eine Untersuchung raumbezogener Methoden stellt dieser Artikel das Konzept der „Welt des Textes“ mit Bezug auf das Buch Numeri auf den Prüfstand. Es wird mit einem loseren Verständnis von Setting als Bezugsfeld kontrastiert, welches in Verbindung mit erzählenden Sammlungen verwendet worden ist. Numeri kann als eine Sammlung mit einem losen erzählerischen Rahmen über Israels Wanderung durch die Wildnis beschrieben werden. Darum ist Setting als Bezugsfeld besser geeignet, um Raum in diesem Buch zu konzeptualisieren, als nach der „Welt“ von Numeri zu suchen. Dies wird anhand von zwei Fallstudien gezeigt, in welchen die beiden Zugänge verglichen werden. Eine betrifft die hohe Anzahl des Volkes am Beginn von Numeri zusammen mit dem Setting der Wildnis, wobei gezeigt wird, dass diese Zahlen nicht „faktisch“ in einer Welt der Wildnis verstanden werden wollen, sondern als theologisches Konstrukt in Verbindung mit dem Heiligtum. Die andere betrifft die verwirrenden Angaben zur Reiseroute, wobei gezeigt wird, dass diese sich nicht zu einem

logischen Weg durch die Wildnis zusammenfügen, sondern ihre Funktion in den Erzählpas-sagen erfüllen, zu denen sie gehören.

Keywords: Narrative Theory; Book of Numbers; World of the Text; Setting; Wilderness

1. Introduction

Historical analyses apart, research on the book of Numbers has to a large extent revolved around finding a structure for the book. Early on geographical structures were often suggested, so that Num 1–10 were situated at Sinai, Num 11–21 at Kadesh, and Num 22–36 at Moab (approximately).¹ However, Dennis T. Olson's suggestion has been most influential. He says that Numbers portrays two distinct generations, one sinful that dies in the wilderness, and one obedient that prepares for entering the promised land. This is marked in Numbers by the two censuses in Num 1–4 and Num 26, so that the book should be structured in two parts: Num 1–25 and Num 26–36.² Won W. Lee's argument has also been important. According to him, the most decisive episode in Numbers is the spy-story in chapter 13–14, which means that Israel has to turn around and wander for forty years – a concept that explains the long journey and why Israel has not reached the promised land by the end of the book. If so, Numbers can be divided in two other parts than those suggested by Olson, Num 1–10, preparing for the wandering, and Num 11–36, describing the failed execution of the wandering towards the promised land and the consequences of this.³ While these suggestions are often formulated at the exclusion of the others, a reasonable way forward is to say that while none of them explains everything we find in Numbers and its contents, they all capture important aspects of the book, which is best understood as a loose narrative anthology of the wandering through the wilderness with much non-narrative material in it.⁴

Starting from this insight, however, one thing is a constant throughout the book: the setting in the wilderness. This is not so much a line of thought that

¹ Three prominent examples of this are George B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC), Edinburgh 1903, xxii–xxiii; Jules de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (SB), Paris 1972, 11–13 and Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (TOTC), Leicester 1981, 14–18.

² 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 1985.

³ Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel's Migratory Campaign*, Grand Rapids 2003; it was Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers* (FOTL 4), Grand Rapids 2005 that developed Lee's original suggestion into a structure for the book as a whole.

⁴ See Josef Forsling, *Composite Artistry in the Book of Numbers. A Study in Biblical Narrative Conventions*, *Studia Theologica Holmiensia* 22 (2013) 78–88.

draws the different passages of the book together, as a common background for much of the material. But what does it mean for the interpretation of the book? In what follows, I would like to explore two alternative approaches in narrative theory concerning setting or space, and how they affect the interpretation of the wilderness as space in *Numbers*: space as “world of the text” or space as “setting” (or referential field).

2. Narrative Theory and Space in the Book of Numbers

The dominant way of speaking about setting in narrative theory is related to the concept of “the world of the text.” That is, while reading, the reader imagines for him- or herself the places, situations, events, and characters that the story tells about, which all together form a world, which in turn forms the basis for the interpretation of the text. Thus, if there are gaps in the story, the reader may fill in these in correspondence with the type and logic of the world created, the cultural competence assumed, or simply what the reader finds morally important. This world and the act of interpreting it is something different than the world behind or in front of the text, which both require different sets of methods with their own interpretative practices.

The origins of the concept of the narrative text as a “world” are several and would seem to go back to the work on aesthetics by Wolfgang Kayser and Monroe C. Beardsley in the late 1950s.⁵ But the idea is widespread and for our purposes, it is perhaps more relevant to see that it is intimately connected to setting or space. In her widely read introduction to narrative theory (or narratology) Mieke Bal states about space that “In the world narrative conjures up... things

⁵ See Wolfgang Kayser, *Entstehung und Krise des modernen Romans*, Stuttgart 1954 and Monroe C. Beardsley, *Aesthetics. Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism*, Cambridge, ²1981, 114–115. An exhaustive genealogy is impossible to present here, but important early works include Félix Martínez-Bonati, *Die logische Struktur der Dichtung*, *Deutsche Vierteljahrschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 47 (1973) 185–200; Lubomír Dolozel, *Extensional and Intensional Narrative Worlds*, *Poetics* 8 (1979) 193–211; id., *Truth and Authenticity in Narrative*, *Poetics Today* 1 (1980) 7–25 and Kendall L. Walton, *How Remote are Fictional Worlds from the Real World?*, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 37 (1978) 11–23. For narrative theory or narratology more specifically the idea is implicit in Claude Bremond, *La logique de possible narratif*, *Communications* 8 (1966) 60–76 and Tzvetan Todorov, *Les catégories du récit littéraire*, *Communications* 8 (1966) 125–151, and explicit in Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse. Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film*, Ithaca 1978. A classic discussion taking the concept further is found in Marie-Laure Ryan, *Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory*, Bloomington 1991 and the reasoning is connected to cognitive science in David Herman, *Story logic. Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*, Lincoln 2002 and also in popular introductions, such as Janine Utell, *Engagements with Narrative*, London 2016.

can happen because that world is spatial. It gives space to events, so that events can, as the phrase goes, *take place*.”⁶

Similarly, Yairah Amit, in her introduction to the narrative analysis of the Hebrew Bible, states the following when opening her chapter on places and place indications: “Since the characters in the story-world exist, as we do, in space as well as in time, let us now look at the spatial aspects of the biblical stories.”⁷

However, in the last two decades this way of approaching narrative has received some pointed criticism. The criticism starts with the simple observation that talking about the “world of the text” is of course a metaphorical way of elucidating theory. “World” is a concept used by scholars to talk about what they see in the texts and to voice what they see – i.e., interpret the text.⁸ There is no literal world in the text. Put in this way, one may ask if “world” is the best analytical concept that may be used for explaining what is done in interpretation, or more simply, for describing what we see in the text. Several narrative theorists would argue that even though the concept of “world” captures aspects of the reading process, most clearly the experience of immersion and reflection while reading, many times the concept would seem to obfuscate interpretation and understanding, rather than enhance it.

Thus, British literary scholar Richard Walsh has argued in relationship to narrative fiction that the idea of “the world of the text” creates a problem in that “[t]here are always going to be gaps and indeterminacies in the interpretative construction of fictional worlds” raising the question of “... how far does the reader pursue the gap-filling process it licenses? What criterion limits that interpretative pursuit?”⁹ The answer is that if the text is a world, there is no limit to the gap-filling, since we abandon the text as a written product that is read and

⁶ Mieke Bal, *Narratology. Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, Toronto ³2009, 138.

⁷ Yairah Amit, *Reading Biblical Narratives. Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, Minneapolis 2001, 115; cf. Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (BLS 17/JSOTSup 70), Sheffield 1989, 184–196.

⁸ For this way of viewing concepts in literary interpretation, see Stein H. Olsen, *The Structure of Literary Understanding*, Cambridge 1978.

⁹ Richard Walsh, *The Rhetoric of Fictionality. Narrative Theory and the Idea of Fiction* (Theory and Interpretation of Narrative), Columbus 2007, 16–17; see more recently id., *Beyond Fictional Worlds. Narrative and Spatial Cognition*, in: Per Krogh Hansen et al. (eds.), *Emerging Vectors of Narratology*, Berlin 2017, 461–478. Cf. Johannes Anderegg, *Fiktion und Kommunikation. Ein Beitrag zur Theorie der Prosa* (Sammlung Vandenhoeck), Göttingen 1973; Lars-Åke Skalin, ‘Telling a Story’. Reflections on Fictional and Non-Fictional Narratives, in: id. (ed.), *Narrativity, Fictionality, and Literariness. The Narrative Turn and the Study of Literary Fiction* (Örebro Studies in Literary History and Criticism 7), Örebro 2008, 201–260. For this perspective in Biblical Studies, see Greger Andersson, *Untamable Texts. Literary Studies and Narrative Theory in the Books of Samuel* (LHBOTS 514), London 2009.

instead relate to it as we relate to “our own” world, in which everything may be related or relevant for interpreting it. But this goes against deep-seated intuitions in reading and understanding narratives.

By way of illustration, we might consider the British detective fiction and TV-series the *Midsomer Murders*. Midsomer is a small county in England, and each episode revolves around a murder that has taken place in the seemingly cozy and idyllic countryside. However, after a few seasons, with a murder in each episode, you might be excused for asking “how many murders can actually happen in Midsomer county?” But as “good readers” of this TV-series we understand that we are not supposed to ask that question or fill in that gap, because it breaks the spell of the fiction, so to speak. Or more to the point: because it is part of the genre of the series that in order to enjoy it, we simply leave that question unasked and focus on the idyllic setting and the exciting struggle of the chief inspectors. There is thus a limit to the gap-filling process in the interpretation of the *Midsomer Murders*, which can be generalized also to texts, and that is that the limit is set by the fact that we are reading a literary product, which is a certain type of text that requires a certain type of approach, and we are not visiting a world and describing it. In a similar way Walsh argues that

the horizon of a reader’s encounter with a fiction is determined not by what it is possible to infer, but by what is worth inferring. The reader will not pursue inferential reasoning beyond the point at which it ceases to seem relevant to the particulars of the narrative, in a specific context of interpretation.¹⁰

Therefore, I would argue that in approaching *Numbers* as a narrative anthology and asking for the meaning of the space it presupposes, we are better served by a concept of literary setting, than one suggested by the concept of “the world of the text.” Such a concept of setting need not be complicated. Two common ways of understanding what setting in literary works signals in narrative theory are captured by the following definitions: setting as “The spatiotemporal circumstances in which the events of a narrative occur”¹¹ and even more simply “...[t]he larger backdrop against which the events transpire.”¹²

Now, *Numbers* is not a narrative in which events happen one after another in a plotted sequence, but, as I have suggested, a narrative anthology with much non-narrative material in it. Therefore, the concept needs to be amended somewhat to come closer to the form of literature that *Numbers* represents.

¹⁰ Walsh, *Rhetoric of Fictionality* (fn. 9) 18; cf. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Works and Worlds of Art* (Clarendon Library of Logic and Philosophy), Oxford 1980, 131–134.

¹¹ Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, Lincoln, Revised edition 2003, 88.

¹² Seymour Chatman, *Reading Narrative Fiction*, New York 1993, 63.

In the study of modern anthologies of short stories, so called short story cycles – which may include non-narrative material as well – it has been noted that one of the things that creates coherence between the different short stories and other material is just setting, which may work as a ‘gathering spot’ for the stories and different materials gathered in the collection, and providing an element of interconnection in portraying a certain place or region and what has taken place there. Thus,

[a] common setting, clearly defined, provides for the reader a necessary frame of reference; it offers, to use a term coined by Wolfgang Iser, a ‘referential field’ upon which one can register meaning and establish connections during the act of reading (or rereading) the text.¹³

My suggestion is that such a reasoning on setting as referential field is also applicable to an ancient anthology format as the one we find in Numbers. In what follows, I aim to show how this way of understanding setting better help us to appreciate space-related features of Numbers than approaching them as parts of a “world.”

3. Two Case Studies of Space in the Book of Numbers

3.1. *The Census Accounts in the Wilderness of Sinai and Their Meaning*

Numbers famously opens by indicating its setting: “Yahweh spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first [day] in the second month of the second year of their going out of Egypt...” (Num 1:1). This is the reason for the book’s most common Hebrew title, *bemidbar*. What Yahweh says to Moses is to take a census of the Israelites, which is then listed in the first four chapters, and is the reason for the Greek title *arithmoi*, or Numbers. In an ecological reading of Numbers, Anthony Rees has suggested that

this positioning is important, not so much in relationship to the events immediately described, but, rather, in relation to the events that unfold during the book of Numbers as a whole. The words ‘in the wilderness’ relate not only to the counting and organizing of the people, but also to all of the events that follow: the march, the complaints, the battles, the apostasy, and everything else that makes up this strange book.¹⁴

¹³ Maggie Dunn/Ann Morris, *The Composite Novel. The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (Studies in Literary Themes and Genres 6), New York 1995, 31. See more recently, Jennifer J. Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle*, Edinburgh 2018, 37–59.

¹⁴ Anthony Rees, *Voices of the Wilderness. An Ecological Reading of the Book of Numbers* (Earth Bible Commentary Series 5), Sheffield 2015, 7.

Thus, the wilderness can be assumed as the setting throughout and inferences drawn as to what this means for interpreting the book. But what inferences can be made? Commenting on the high numbers of the Israelites in the first four chapters, Rees states that

we need not venture into the historical veracity of these numbers. It is clear enough they are an invention. But, ultimately, these numbers are not so important to us. What is of import is the ecological impact of this moving group of people and the retinue of animals that accompanies them as they move about the wilderness. Certainly this isn't two million people, but it is a significant group of people that in itself gives us material to consider: the trampling of the earth, the destruction of plant life and the subsequent impact on the shelter and food supply of animals, the exhaustion, the dirtying of limited water supplies and, of course the occupation of other people's land. [...] If the book of Numbers is reimagined with this enormous community at its centre, then the complaints about food and water that punctuate it make complete sense. Actually, they become an acute environmental and humanitarian disaster.¹⁵

This is in my view clearly a reading of the “world of the text” of Numbers, filling in the gaps authorized by our knowledge of the wilderness and its ecology to interpret the discrete passages of the book. Even though the census-numbers are made up, we are to take them at face value and from this infer depths of meaning in the book. But is this the function of the wilderness as setting in the book of Numbers?

A preliminary observation about the setting in Numbers is that it is so unimportant for the first ten chapters. We find it in short introductory and concluding notes to the passages (cf. Num 1:1, 19; 3:4, 14; 9:1, 5), but they are not necessary to the subject of the passages, apart from chapter 9, which outlines Passover celebration in the wilderness and the guidance of the cloud and fire over the tabernacle during the wandering. So, what are the functions of these notes?

A first function would seem to be to differentiate Numbers from Leviticus, indicating that a new book opens, which is slightly different from the preceding (and following).¹⁶ While Leviticus is exclusively set on mount Sinai, a setting to which its final verse also refers (Lev 27:34; cf. 26:46), Numbers begins in the wilderness of Sinai (Num 1:1), as if zooming out to view the broader area around the mountain. In a similar way, Numbers ends on the steppes of Moab (Num 22:1 etc. until 36:13), which also is the setting for Deuteronomy that follows, but then

¹⁵ Rees, *Voices of the Wilderness* (fn. 14) 10, 11.

¹⁶ For the following, see Olson, *Death of the Old* (fn. 2) 43–53; and Christian Frevel, *Desert Transformations. Studies in the Book of Numbers* (FAT 137), Tübingen 2020, 53–81. Cf. further Christoph Levin, *On the Cohesion and Separation of Books within the Enneateuch*, in: Thomas Dozeman/Thomas Römer/Konrad Schmid (eds.), *Pentateuch, Hexateuch or Enneateuch? Identifying Literary Works in Genesis through Kings* (AIL 8), Atlanta 2011, 127–154.

Deuteronomy has its own structure of three speeches which separates it from Numbers (Deut 1:1–5).

A second function of the setting signaled in Num 1:1 is that it is not so much focused on the wilderness in the first ten chapters of the book, as on the tent of meeting. There are two aspects of this. First, Num 1–4 sees Israel organizing around the tabernacle and being instructed in how to care for it in taking it down. Simultaneously, this is also a grading of the Israelite community, where the priests are positioned at the inner circle around the tabernacle and the secular tribes in an outer circle around it. Among the priestly clans, the Aaronides are the most important in comparison to the Levites (Num 3–4), and among the secular Judah is the most important (Num 2).¹⁷

The reason for this is the holiness of the tabernacle, and this, more than anything else, defines the setting or referential field for the following chapters. For instance, Num 5 introduces purity rules that are the logical next step after the holy camp has been structured, and Num 8 concerns the ordination of the Levites serving in the priestly hierarchy set up.¹⁸

But the setting in terms of priestly hierarchy is also important for the murmuring stories in Num 11–20, and not the least Num 16–17, in which Korah, Dathan, and Abiram directly challenge it, and after which the hierarchy is confirmed again in Num 18. Furthermore, the purity measures set out in Num 5:1–4 are also taken up in Num 12. In Num 5, “... all being leprous, having a discharge, and all being impure through a corpse” (v. 2) are to be sent outside of the camp. In Num 12, Miriam, having challenged Moses together with Aaron, becomes leprous, but after having been healed she is sent out of the camp seven days to observe the purity rules (vv. 10–15).

Moreover, the setting around the tabernacle is also a way of guaranteeing continuous revelation. Following a revelatory logic of the Pentateuch, the Israelites arrive in the wilderness of Sinai in Exod 19:1. There, God reveals himself in thunder and lightning (19:16). Moses goes up on the mountain to speak to God

¹⁷ Cf. Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora. Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (BZABR 3), Wiesbaden 2003, 443–498; Jaeyoung Jeon, *From the Reed Sea to Kadesh. A Redactional and Socio-Historical Study of the Pentateuchal Wilderness Narrative* (FAT 159), Tübingen 2022, 169–191 and Philip P. Jenson, *Graded Holiness. A Key to the Priestly Conception of the World* (JSOTSup 106), Sheffield 1992, 40–55.

¹⁸ For Num 5 (and 6) being appropriate here in relationship to the holy camp set out in Num 1–4, cf. Philip J. Budd, *Numbers* (WBC 5), Nashville 1984, 54; Christian Frevel, *Ritual Innovation in a Textual World. Ritual and Innovation in the Book of Numbers*, in: Nathan MacDonald (ed.), *Ritual Innovation in the Hebrew Bible and Early Judaism* (BZAW 468), Berlin 2016, 139–142; Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers. The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (The JPS Torah Commentary), New York 1989, 33 and Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (fn. 1) 89–90.

(19:3) and later on God commands the building of the ark, from which he will speak from now on (25:22). In Leviticus God speaks from the tent of meeting where the ark is placed (Lev 1:1 *passim*), but in Numbers God speaks in the tent of meeting (Num 1:1; cf. esp. 7:89).¹⁹ In this way, the speaking of God in the laws and in the stories are tied to the idea of the holy community gathered around the tabernacle.

In short, the setting in the wilderness in Num 1–10 serves to introduce ideas of Israel as a holy community gathered around the tabernacle, and from there being guided by God, rather than serving as allusions to an uninviting and fragile environment. Inferring more than this from the setting risks overinterpretation. This is especially the case with the high numbers and the idea of the wilderness as a dangerous and fragile space.

Concerning the high numbers, it would seem that the only reason to take them literally – even though they are symbolic! – is that they are thought to refer to actual numbers in a world similar to ours. However, Benjamin E. Scolnic has shown how the lists instead are literary devices and as such encapsulate a mystery to make a point. In the lists we see the promise to Abraham about descendants as many as the stars in heaven (Gen 15:5–6) or as the sand (Gen 13:14–17) being fulfilled, whose main point is to communicate the blessed status of Israel:

The census lists of Numbers create a fascinating paradox in that they list the unlistable and count the uncountable. The census lists count the Israelites at a time when they are ‘beyond numbering.’ This paradox summarizes and reflects an important Biblical theme [...] The Israelites, blessed by God with great fertility, have achieved huge numbers [...] the census lists of Numbers 1 and 26 are literary devices, as didactic in purpose as a Biblical narrative or poem. [...] [And] should be read not so much for their historical value as for their thematic value, for their power to focus our attention on an important aspect of the theocentric faith of the Bible.²⁰

What Scolnic terms “historical value” may also pertain to the numbers read as “real” numbers, but in a projected world in the text. This also risks missing that the numbers are literary devices with a thematic value, which are found in a certain type of text: the list genre relating that which is a wondrous blessing.

Furthermore, we need to be careful in understanding the setting in the wilderness (together with the large group of people) to be a dangerous and frail place, which causes the complaint about food and water in the murmuring episodes. An intriguing case is the food mentioned in Num 11. At large, it is about

¹⁹ Cf. Christophe Nihan, *From Priestly Torah to Pentateuch. A Study in the Composition of the Book of Leviticus* (FAT, 2. Reihe 25), Tübingen 2007, 103–105, 379–382, who observes a similar move (within the basic priestly writing, Pg) but does not emphasize the revelatory aspect.

²⁰ Benjamin E. Scolnic, *Theme and Context in Biblical Lists* (SFSHJ 119), Atlanta 1995, 42, 65.

manna and quails, and the Israelites longing for meat instead of manna in looking back to Egypt (11:4, 6–7). But they also mention fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (11:5). These have often been understood as food typical of Egypt, but in fact they are also found in Canaan.²¹ Even fish, that have often been thought to be typical of Egypt and the river Nile, are found at all archaeological sites in Palestine.²² Therefore, Laura Feldt has made the following observation:

In this way, the fantastic character of ordinary food (fish, cucumbers, watermelons, leeks, garlic, etc., Num 11:5) is communicated. Surrounded by fantastic events in the wilderness, in the presence of the deity, eating marvellous food every day (Num 11:6), what the people want is the food of everyday life. By presenting the people's nostalgia for everyday life and everyday food, the text communicates about the lived space of its recipients, and the major issues relevant to it: in everyday life in the land, the people easily forget who is the divine source of alimentation.²³

In Num 11, then, the food is an indicator of the setting, but not in any simple way. Surely, the longing for food indicates the wilderness and a precarious situation. At the same time, the food also invites the first readers to view this setting a bit from a distance and in comparison to their own (precarious) situation, to appreciate the everyday miracle of food on the table. Setting, then, works not so much to conjure up an image of the dangerous and fragile wilderness, as pointing back at the reader and his or her own setting, as it were.

Summing things up, the setting at the start of Numbers serves several functions: introducing the tabernacle and the holy status of the camp surrounding it, continuing revelation, and signaling the blessed character of the Israelite community. These aspects also play a role in the rebellion stories that follow. Again,

²¹ For what follows, see Nathan MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat? Diet in Biblical Times*, Grand Rapids 2008 and Cynthia Shafer-Elliott, *Food Preparation in Iron Age Israel*, in: Jonathan S. Greer/John W. Hilber/John H. Walton (eds.), *Behind the Scenes of the Old Testament. Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, Grand Rapids 2018, 456–463.

²² Wim van Neer et al., *Fish Remains from Archaeological Sites as Indicators of Former Trade Connections in the Eastern Mediterranean*, *Paléorient* 30 (2004) 101–147 and see Neh 13:16.

²³ Laura Feldt, *Wilderness and Hebrew Bible Religion. Fertility, Apostasy and Religious Transformation in the Pentateuch*, in: id. (ed.), *Wilderness in Mythology and Religion. Approaching Religious Spatialities, Cosmologies, and Ideas of Wild Nature* (RelSoc 55), Berlin 2012, 78. Feldt possibly overstates her case in assuming that vegetables are typical of everyday life in Palestine in the Persian period. Vegetables were grown in gardens and because of the dry climate, this may have been an arduous process reserved for the rich, see 1 Kings 21 and Juliana Claassens, *Food*, NIDB 2 (2007) 472–476 and MacDonald, *What Did the Ancient Israelites Eat?* (fn. 21) 25–26. At the same time, farmers also tended to diversify their production base, David Hopkins, *Agriculture*, NIDB 1 (2006) 73–79; the textual evidence is not conclusive. Thus, in Deut 11:10–12 Egypt is likened to a garden in contrast to Canaan, but this does not mean that there were no gardens in Canaan, and the contrast presupposes that the reader knows what a garden is. In a similar way Isa 1:8, 30, and Jer 31:12 presuppose acquaintance with gardens.

the case of Num 11 shows that there is no simple one-to-one connection between wilderness and ideas of a vulnerable space. Such aspects would seem to be primary in looking at the meaning of setting for Numbers, but risk being lost or deemed shallow in an immersive reading of the world of the text beyond the textual surface.

3.2. *The Confused Itineraries and Disobedience*

A second important characteristic of setting in Numbers is its confused itineraries. This is one of the reasons why geographical structures of the book have been unsuccessful – it is simply difficult to pinpoint exactly where the Israelites are. This applies especially to the middle part of the book, chapters 11–21, and even more to the itineraries relating to the areas around Edom and Moab in Num 20–21.²⁴

An example of the confusion is that the short battle episode in Num 21:1–3 would seem to interrupt the Israelites being at Mount Hor at the death and succession of Aaron (Num 20:22–29), and their setting out from mount Hor in 21:4a, which is noted in a Wiederaufnahme (resumption). This is emphasized by the belated etiology for Hormah in 21:3 in the battle episode, a place that has been mentioned already in the spy-story (14:45).

Now, in his work on the macrostructure of Numbers, Won W. Lee has argued that this going back and forth depends on the obedience and disobedience of the Israelites as they wander through the wilderness.²⁵ The disobedience starts in the spy-story where the Israelites are camped at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran (13:3; cf. 10:12; 12:16). After the disastrous rebellion, Yahweh orders the Israelites: “Turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Reed Sea” (14:25b). Upon hearing the judgment of Yahweh, the Israelites repent and want to conquer the land, but they do so in vain, being beaten by the Canaanites at Hormah (14:39–45).

²⁴ See Achenbach, *Vollendung der Tora* (fn. 17); Israel Finkelstein, *The Wilderness Narrative and Itineraries and the Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, in: Thomas E. Levy/Thomas Schneider (eds.), *Israel's Exodus in Transdisciplinary Perspective. Text, Archaeology, Culture, and Geoscience (Quantitative Methods in the Humanities and Social Sciences)*, New York 2015, 39–53; Christian Frevel, *The Various Shapes of Moab in the Book of Numbers. Relating Text and Archaeology*, HBAI 8 (2019) 257–286 and Angela Roskop, *The Wilderness Itineraries. Genre, Geography, and the Growth of Torah* (HACL 3), Winona Lake 2011.

²⁵ See Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness* (fn. 3) 276–279 and id., *The Transition from the Old Generation to the New Generation in the Book of Numbers. A Response to Dennis Olson*, in: Wonil Kim et al. (eds.), *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millenium. Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*, vol. 1 (SAC), Harrisburg 2000, 210–219.

About forty years pass, and at Num 20:1, the Israelites are again at Kadesh, but in the wilderness of Zin. Here the disobedience of Moses and Aaron shows at the waters of Meribah (20:1–13), but also, according to Lee, in Moses sending messengers to Edom and asking for a safe passage. Why? The most important reason is that

[...] Moses disobeys Yahweh's command to him regarding Israel's migration from Kadesh: 'Turn tomorrow and set out for the wilderness by the way to the Red Sea' (14:25b). Second, in light of the fact that the shortest way to enter Canaan from Kadesh-Barnea (other than to take the southern route where Israel failed) is to travel straight east through Edom's territory, Moses' request for safe passage through Edom means he is taking the initiative to search for another approach to Canaan after the Israelites' disastrous attempt to penetrate the land from the south. In regard to the precise route for entering the promised land, both the Israelites and Moses become guilty of going their own ways rather than Yahweh's. In Num 13–14 it is the Israelites who had rejected Yahweh's plan and took initiative to enter Canaan; now in 20:14 it is Moses who takes the initiative to seek the easiest way to Canaan, disregarding Yahweh's explicit directive.²⁶

However, this is the end of the disobedient first generation that Olson speaks about, and the short interruptive episode on the battle at Hormah signals the new generation and its victorious future. This is also shown in the itinerary note that follows the episode in 21:4a, which states "From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom." Lee writes:

By stating that Israel set out 'by the way of the Red Sea,' v. 4a speaks of Israel's implementation of Yahweh's command in 14:25b [in contrast to the old generation and Moses]. [...] Thus, Yahweh's command in 14:25b is finally fulfilled in 21:4a.²⁷

What Lee does here may be read as a type of "world of the text"-reading of Numbers, since the geographical notices must add up in a real world where human and divine motifs and initiative determine the movement, and Numbers is a deeply coherent text that mirrors this geography of the world represented.

But the geographical notices do not add up. This is seen most clearly in the different locations of Kadesh, in the wilderness of Paran or the wilderness of Zin (which are different parts of the southern wilderness), in the fact that the Hormah-episode interrupts the itinerary-sequence, having Canaanites rush out in the wilderness, and that Hormah is introduced in 21:3 as if it had not been mentioned already in the spy-story.²⁸

²⁶ Lee, *The Transition from the Old Generation* (fn. 25) 214.

²⁷ Lee, *The Transition from the Old Generation* (fn. 25) 217–218.

²⁸ See George W. Coats, *The Wilderness Itinerary*, CBQ 34 (1972) 139–140; G. I. Davies, *The Wilderness Itineraries and the Composition of the Pentateuch*, VT 33 (1983) 1–13 and Roskop, *The Wilderness Itineraries* (fn. 24).

Furthermore, Numbers is not a deeply coherent text that mirrors a world. Instead, it is better taken as a somewhat uneven anthology, whose different parts nevertheless all tend to assume the wilderness as the setting, or referential field. A few things support this reasoning.

First, the command to ‘set out by the way of the Red Sea’ in 14:25b is best read as only part of the spy-story and not operative for the book at large. This is only to be expected with anthologies, which are made up of discrete and rounded off units, which nevertheless may be interconnected in different ways. It is also argued by the introduction to the phrase: “Turn *tomorrow* and set out...” This is then disobeyed the following day by the Israelites, but that fact does not mean that the command waits to be fulfilled for the rest of Numbers.

Second, both Edom and Moab are rounded in strange ways in Num 20–21. But this would not seem to have so much to do with the obedience or disobedience of the Israelites and Moses, which could be taken to affect a simulation of real movement in the real world. Instead, the answer is a literary move, or better reflection, on Deut 2:4–6, 18–19, which expressly forbid the Israelites to conquer any territory from the Edomites and the Moabites or challenge them in any way.²⁹ It is probable that the redactor had earlier material that seemingly contradicted this command, and created a compromise. Thus, setting in Num 20–21 is a literary creation in the service of theology, and not an attempt to teach obedience by way of representing a coherent world of movement.

Finally, the interruptive character and belated etiology in the episode with the battle at Hormah is hard to reconcile with any logical movement in a world. But I would argue that the setting here highlights the thematic and theological purpose of the passage. And in this, I am in agreement with Lee: the episode marks a turning point in Numbers.³⁰ That the Israelites win a crushing victory indeed would seem to signal something new in Numbers, as compared to the rebellion stories. And that this happens at Hormah – where the Israelites suffered a terrible defeat according to the spy-story – highlights the very function of it being a turning point. It is as if the events ending the spy-story are played backwards here, which is achieved by the repetition of the setting at Hormah. Geographically, or in terms of projecting a coherent world geographically, it does not make sense. But as a thematic pointer to a turning point among the passages that make up the anthology that is Numbers, it works pretty well. Setting as “[...] a ‘referential field’ upon which one can register meaning and establish connections during the

²⁹ Cf. Frevel, *The Various Shapes of Moab* (fn. 24). See also Nathan MacDonald, *The Book of Numbers*, in: Richard A. Briggs/Joel N. Lohr (eds.), *A Theological Introduction to the Pentateuch. Interpreting the Torah as Christian Scripture*, Grand Rapids 2012, 128–143.

³⁰ See Forsling, *Composite Artistry* (fn. 4) 123–124.

act of reading (or rereading) the text”³¹ here becomes a good analytical tool for expressing what happens in the text.

These arguments should not be taken to mean that obedience or disobedience are not an important theme in Numbers. What is more, they are also connected to the setting in the wilderness, but in a more general way. This has to do with a curious difference between the murmuring stories of Exodus and Numbers, respectively. While the Israelites rebel in both books, they are punished for the rebellions in Numbers but not in Exodus. This contrast is all the more underlined by the fact of the episodes that are parallel in the books, but where punishment is one of the significant differences: Manna and Quails (Exod 16/Num 11), and water from the rock (Exod 17/Num 20).³²

The reasons for this have in all likelihood to do with the setting in the wilderness: whether the Israelites are found before or after Sinai. Before Sinai they have not been given any law or made any covenant. But in Numbers they are found not at mount Sinai but in the “wilderness of Sinai” as if one step removed from the mountain, and with law and covenant as presuppositions for the community that they have become. After Sinai, in the book of Numbers, it is as if the Israelites are held responsible for their rebellions to a different degree.³³

Indeed, Jay A. Wilcoxon once compared the story in the Pentateuch at large to the growing maturity of Israel from birth to adulthood, where “Sinai is the ‘bar mitzvah’ of ‘Israel’[...] the point at which moral responsibility formally begins.”³⁴ When we come to Numbers and the setting of the wilderness of Sinai, then, Israel can be expected to know and behave better.

Moreover, this relates not only to the law as individual stipulations to be followed or very generally the covenant being honored or not. It also concerns Israel as a cultic community gathered around the tabernacle. Wilcoxon goes on to argue that

clearly related to the difference of Israelite responsibility before and after Sinai is the fact that the Israelites only became a structured community at Sinai. At Sinai Israel

³¹ Dunn/Morris, *The Composite Novel* (fn. 13) 31.

³² Most commentators indicate the difference. Milgrom, *Numbers* (fn. 18) xvi, gives a concise summary and notes that the difference has been observed since at least *Leviticus Rabba* 1:10.

³³ For different interpretations, see George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness. The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament*, Nashville 1968; Richard Adamiak, *Justice and Retribution in the Old Testament. The Evolution of Divine Retribution in the Historiographies of the Wilderness Generation*, Cleveland 1985; David Frankel, *The Murmuring Stories of the Priestly School. A Retrieval of Ancient Sacerdotal Lore* (VTSup 89), Leiden 2002 and Jeon, *From the Reed Sea to Kadesh* (fn. 17).

³⁴ Jay A. Wilcoxon, *Some Anthropocentric Aspects of Israel’s Sacred History*, JR 48 (1968) 333–350: 347.

receives the Law, that is, a divinely sanctioned ordering for its common life. The large body of prescriptive materials incorporated into the Sinai theme provides a few basic principles for Israelite order, but, more important, it provides institutional forms and functions for the regularized presence of the sacred within the community (the cultic establishment centering in the tabernacle) and for access to the sacred by representatives and members of the community. The possession of this divinely sanctioned order for its common life opens up new possibilities for Israelite murmuring and rebellion. It is now possible to rebel against the centers of authority within that order, not because of some crisis like drought, famine, or military danger, but simply out of envy and ambition. There are several instances of this kind of rebellion after Sinai, none before.³⁵

Now, the structured community being formed at Sinai is in reality formed in the first ten chapters of Numbers, as we have seen. It is here, and especially in Num 1–4, that Israel is given its hierarchy, which then is rebelled against in the Korah-story of Num 16–17, and indirectly in Num 12.

In short, the setting after Sinai and around the tabernacle in Numbers are together an important referential field for several of the murmuring stories in the book and explain significant aspects of them, which are vital for their interpretation. This is not a one-to-one connection between setting and details in specific narratives, nor are they interpretative keys given through our imagining what the wilderness is like. Instead, through explicitly mentioning spatial references and through juxtaposition of passages in the literary make-up that is the Pentateuch, the setting is presented to the reader.

4. Conclusion

What I have hoped to show in this article are the interpretative limits of the concept of “the world of the text” in analyzing space in biblical texts, and that other analytical concepts, loose ones as setting and referential field, are often to be preferred. This has to do with the non-comprehensibility of the spatial references of the biblical text and seeing that the text we are to interpret is primarily a literary product, a certain type or genre of text, and that this must guide our reading. The methodological metaphor of “world of the text” relies first and foremost upon the readerly experience of immersion. However, while immersion is an unavoidable part of reading literature, as well as the enjoyment of it, it is not the same as interpretation, nor can it replace it. This has been argued in relationship to the book of Numbers in two extended case-studies. First, it was argued that the census accounts do not invite a factual reading of the high numbers (even though inside the parameters of an imagined or represented “world”). Rather,

³⁵ Wilcoxon, *Some Anthropocentric Aspects* (fn. 34) 345.

these numbers point to the blessed status of Israel, and made part of the description of the camp of Israel structured around the holy tabernacle. Again, especially the latter fact is important for understanding the rebellions later on in Numbers. Second, it was argued that the confused itinerary notices should not be read together to form a clear geography in a possible world, and as such be taken as indicators of the obedience or disobedience of Israel. Rather, the itinerary notices often fulfill their function inside the passages they are part of, or are reflections of other passages such as Num 14:25b and Deut 2:4–6, 18–19. Furthermore, the important setting for understanding obedience and disobedience in Numbers is rather its relationship to the Sinai-pericope and that the rebellion stories in Numbers are set *after* Sinai. This means, after the law has been given and the covenant made, which includes Israel becoming a structured community around the tabernacle in Num 1–4 and being expected to take on a greater moral responsibility.