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The Incoherence of the Book of Numbers in Narrative Perspective¹

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Introduction

The problem of the incoherence of Numbers is so often repeated in scholarly literature that it is possibly superfluous to remark upon it. Perhaps it is enough to cite Martin Noth's conclusion that "[f]rom the point of view of its contents, the book lacks unity, and it is difficult to see any pattern in its construction."² Source, tradition, and redaction-criticism apart, Numbers contains an amazing variety of genres, one of the most genre-diverse books of the Hebrew Bible, according to Gordon Wenham.³ Those very different materials are juxtaposed next to each other, many times without any obvious organisation, where one passage would lead naturally into the next one. The problem is well described by Eryl W. Davies:

The structure of the book of Numbers has proved notoriously difficult to determine, for it appears to consist of a collection of unrelated fragments devoid of any unifying purpose of meaning. Laws are juxtaposed with narratives in a seemingly random fashion, confirming the impression that the various units were compiled without any logical or coherent plan. Moreover, the wide variety of material contained in Numbers (poetry, tribal lists, census lists, itineraries etc.) merely adds to the difficulty of finding the book's inner cohesion.⁴

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented in the Pentateuch (Torah) section at the SBL International Meeting in Amsterdam, July 22–26, 2012. It presents parts of my research on Numbers, which is to be presented in full in a forthcoming doctoral thesis with the preliminary title *Composite Artistry in the Book of Numbers – A Study in Biblical Narrative Conventions*. I would like to take the opportunity to express my thanks for comments and questions on the material during the SBL sessions.

² Martin Noth, *Numbers: A Commentary* (trans. James D. Martin; London: SCM Press, 1968), 1.

³ Gordon Wenham, *Numbers* (OTG; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 26.

⁴ Eryl W. Davies, *Numbers* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995), li.

This scenario has not prevented but rather triggered scholars to try to elucidate the arrangement of Numbers, and suggestions abound as to how the book might be understood to be structured. The most common way to structure Numbers has been geographically, and examples range from G. B. Gray's 1903 commentary in the ICC-series, via Jules de Vaulx's 1972 French commentary, to Gordon Wenham's 1981 Tyndale commentary, just to mention a few.⁵ There have also been chronological suggestions,⁶ we have Mary Douglas' ring-structure,⁷ the two-generational structure of Dennis Olson,⁸ and one of the most recent, Won Lee's structure of the book in a preparation and execution of a migratory campaign, which has been taken up and developed by Rolf Knierim and George Coats in their FOTL commentary of 2005.⁹

Without reviewing these suggestions in detail and criticise them, we can simply note the vast disagreement on how to understand Numbers as a whole, and the difficulty in presenting a suggestion that would receive more common support. The idea of this article is not so much to present yet another suggestion on how to understand Numbers at large, even though it does, but rather to discuss a few questions revolving around what we might call the narrative features of the book and how these contribute to – and disrupt – the coherence of the book.¹⁰ This would constitute a side-way glance at the book and its coherence, as compared with

⁵ George B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903); Jules de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972); Gordon Wenham, *Numbers* (TOTC; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1981).

⁶ See, e.g., Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

⁷ Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (JSOTSup, 158; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

⁸ Dennis T. Olson, *The Death of the Old and the Birth of the New: The Framework of the Book of Numbers and the Pentateuch* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

⁹ Won W. Lee, *Punishment and Forgiveness in Israel's Migratory Campaign* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); Rolf P. Knierim and George W. Coats, *Numbers* (The Forms of the Old Testament, 4; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005).

¹⁰ The term "book" is here used primarily as a variation in reference to Numbers, and is not meant to ignore or suppress the fact that Numbers is part of the larger Pentateuch or that it has had a complicated pre-history. For a discussion of the possibility of treating Numbers separately, see, e.g., Olson, *Death of the Old*, 43–53; Christoph Levin, "On the Cohesion and Separation of Books Within the Enneateuch," in Thomas Dozeman, et al. (eds.), *Pentateuch, Hexateuch, or Enneateuch? Identifying Literary Works in Genesis through Kings* (Ancient Israel and Its Literature, 8; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2011), 127–154; Erich Zenger and Christian Frevel, "Die Bücher Levitikus und Numeri als Teile der Pentateuchkomposition," in Thomas Römer (ed.), *The Books of Leviticus and Numbers* (BETL, 215; Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 35–74, here 55.

earlier research, while at the same time addressing the question of the coherence of Numbers. The discussion that follows falls in two parts: first, what it might involve to understand narratives, and second, what such a narrative perspective might mean for understanding the abstruse book of Numbers.

How Do We Approach Narratives?

Surely, this article is not the first piece of research to suggest that we may benefit from considering narrative aspects in discussing the coherence of Numbers.¹¹ However, the suggestion made here is not simply that Numbers is a narrative and therefore coherent. There is a mainstream variant of this suggestion, which would say that behind all narratives of the world there is a common structure that rules how narratives achieve their meaning, and that our task as scholars of Numbers therefore would be to see how this structure emerges in the book, gives it meaning, and holds it together. But such an understanding is flawed, in my view, both theoretically and in terms of what could perhaps be called exegetical common sense. Before looking more specifically at what it might mean to interpret narratives, we will therefore need to address a few general aspects bearing on how we approach narratives, which originate in this mainstream understanding of narrative. First and very shortly, as for the exegetical common sense, Numbers is not a narrative, as compared to, for example, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* or Winston Churchill's autobiographical history *My Early Years*; therefore we cannot discover a narrative structure in Numbers. In turn, applying such a structure to Numbers would be a category mistake, and would lead us astray in interpreting the book.

Second, and more theoretically and at length, the problem with the idea of a common structure behind all narratives is that it assumes almost a Platonic world-view, where essence is primary in understanding phenom-

¹¹ See e.g. Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, calling Numbers a "Saga"; Wenham, *Numbers*, 26–29, who sees in Numbers a "story of Israel and God's dealing with the nation." See also Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1992), 34, who uses Robert Alter to explain the interchange of law and narrative in the Pentateuch; David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (2nd edn; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 108ff., who emphatically says that the Pentateuch is a story; and the analysis of John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical Theological Commentary* (Library of Biblical Interpretation; Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992).

ena rather than the phenomena themselves. The argument here is rather the opposite, perhaps a more Aristotelian view, pointing downward to the phenomena themselves. In such a view, narratives are not objects that have necessary and sufficient properties that are there in nature, like the plants and animals classified by the Swedish scientist Linnaeus, but they are rather something like fleeting linguistic constructions that share certain family-resemblances, changing over time and dependent on social conventions for their interpretation;¹² in the case of the biblical material, these narratives happen to be written down. Narratives are better conceptualised as linguistic acts made by persons in communication, and if we want to discuss how we understand them, and in extension, the role of narrative in Numbers, we cannot proceed from a definition of what properties “all and only narrative” must have in common.¹³ We rather need to ask ourselves how we usually interpret those texts that we typically point out as narratives, and how we may use that competence when we encounter new texts, like the book of Numbers.

If such a general scenario concerning how we understand narratives is correct, the suggestion in this article is more specifically that in interpreting narratives we typically reckon with three parameters, as has been argued by Swedish Old Testament scholar Greger Andersson.¹⁴

The first parameter can be called a narrative paradigm:

This can be described as a particular arrangement of events ... In the typical example, the events are related temporally, causally and thematically in a plot with a beginning, a middle and an end. The plot gives the story a certain significance and genre.¹⁵

¹² Greger Andersson, *Untamable Texts: Literary Studies and Narrative Theory in the Books of Samuel* (London: T & T Clark, 2009), 63; and at more length, Lars-Åke Skalin, “Centres and Borders: On Defining Narrativity and Narratology,” in Per Krogh Hansen (ed.), *Borderliners: Searching the Boundaries of Narrativity and Narratology* (Holte: Medusa, 2009), 19–76. Such an understanding relies of course ultimately on Wittgenstein’s term “family resemblance”; see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; vol. 1; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963).

¹³ The formulation is from Gerald Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology* (rev. edn, Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 66, s.v. “narratology.”

¹⁴ For what follows, see Greger Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives: A Critical Examination of Some Synchronic Studies on the Book of Judges* (Örebro: Universitetsbiblioteket, 2001), 138–139.

¹⁵ Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 138; cf. Lars-Åke Skalin, *Karaktär och perspektiv: att tolka litterära gestalter i det mimetiska språkspelet* (Acta Universitatis

In short, this means that the narrative creates its own space, as it were, through its plot and theme.¹⁶ The narrative paradigm is, in general, interchangeable with what in narratology has been called “story.”¹⁷ Many scholars argue that the narrative paradigm is a cognitive category which helps humans to order and understand reality, similar in this function to metaphor, logic, analogy and the like.¹⁸ If this was the only parameter

Upsaliensis; Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991), 137–138. Many theorists would also consider the presence of a narrator as essential for narrative, see, e.g., Franz K. Stanzel, *A Theory of Narrative* (trans. Charlotte Goedsche; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); cf. Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (3rd edn; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 3–14; Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 31–35, 267; Prince, *Dictionary*, 58–61, s.v. “narrative.” Such an understanding is not undisputed in narrative theory, however, see, e.g., Greger Andersson, and Lars-Åke Skalin (eds.), *Berättaren: en gäckande röst i texten* (Örebro Studies in Literary History and Criticism, 3; Örebro: Universitetsbiblioteket, 2003); Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (Boston, MA: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982); Emile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique générale* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); Käthe Hamburger, *Die Logik der Dichtung* (2 stark veränd. ed.; Stuttgart: Ernst Klett, 1968).

¹⁶ This has been observed in philosophy of history, for example, Louis O. Mink, “Narrative Form as Cognitive Instrument,” in Robert H. Canary and Henry Kozicki (eds.), *The Writing of History* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 129–149, here 142–143. On theme as uniting a literary work, see Peter Lamarque, *The Philosophy of Literature* (Foundations of the Philosophy of the Arts; Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 132–173; Boris Tomashevsky, “Thematics,” in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (eds.), *Russian Formalist Criticism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 66–95, here 62–66.

¹⁷ Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 138. For a short description of story, see Prince, *Dictionary*, 93, s.v. “story”; cf. Dan Shen, “Story-Discourse Distinction,” in David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (eds.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* (Abingdon, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 566–568.

¹⁸ Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 138; Mink, “Narrative Form,” 131; Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit: L’Intrigue et le récit historique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1983). For examples of this use of “narrative” see, among others, Peter Brooks and Paul Gewirtz, *Law’s Stories: Narrative and Rhetoric in the Law* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1996); W. B. Gallie, *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); Melanie C. Green, et al., *Narrative Impact: Social and Cognitive Foundations* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002); Anthony Paul Kerby, “The Language of the Self,” *Philosophy Today* 30 (1986): 210–223; David Novitz, “Art, Narrative, and Human Nature,” *Philosophy and Literature* 13 (1989): 57–74; Theodore R. Sarbin, *Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct* (Praeger Special Studies; Praeger Scientific; New York: Praeger, 1986); Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe* (Baltimore, VA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). In the context of this article, theological undertakings deserve separate mention: Hans W. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nine-*

relevant for interpreting narratives, a considerable degree of human activity could be described as narratives, including Numbers.

The second parameter is the actual verbal presentation of the story, in our case the text, which in narratology has been called “discourse.”¹⁹ This is the aspect of narrative that is “directly available to the reader.”²⁰ However, discourse is more than the physical dimensions of a particular text. It also includes the “expression plane of narrative,”²¹ the specific formulation or appearance of a story, covering as well “the variables that an author has at his or her disposal when he or she constructs a narrative.”²² In short, it is often said in narratology that discourse represents “the ‘how’ of narrative as opposed to its ‘what’,”²³ the latter being the “subject” of the narrative, or its story.

The third parameter, finally, is “the situation – the language game – and hence the intention of the storyteller,”²⁴ which pertains to a certain narrative. The notion of language-games is of course taken from Wittgenstein, but more simply put, we may say that we ask of a narrative what kind of “game” we are invited to in reading it. To exemplify, the two most fundamental language-games of narratives can be called factual narratives and storytelling narratives.²⁵ In factual narratives a game is played to re-

teenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974); Stanley Hauerwas and Gregory L. Jones, *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989); Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn; Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

¹⁹ See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (trans. Jane E. Lewin; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 26–27; Prince, *Dictionary*, 21, s.v. “discourse 1”; and Dan Shen, “Story-Discourse.” The parameter has been thoroughly researched by the branch called “discourse-narratology,” which has been extremely influential in narratology at large and represents what scholars from different veins in general associate with narratology. For a description of discourse-narratology, see Prince, *Dictionary*, 66, s.v. “narratology, 2.”

²⁰ Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction – Contemporary Poetics* (2nd edn; New York: Routledge, 2002), 4; see Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 27. Rimmon-Kenan uses the word “text” for discourse, see p. 3, footnote 2, even though she here refrains from comparison of terms.

²¹ Prince, *Dictionary*, 21., s.v. “discourse.”

²² Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 138.

²³ Prince, *Dictionary*, 21, s.v. “discourse.”

²⁴ Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 138; cf. Skalin, “Centres and Borders,” 51–70. See also Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, for language-games.

²⁵ The terminology is borrowed from Andersson, *Untamable Texts*, see chap. 3; cf. Skalin, “‘Telling a Story’”; idem, “Reflections on Fictional and Non-Fictional Narratives,” in Lars-Åke Skalin (ed.), *Narrativity, Fictionality, and Literariness: The Narrative Turn and the*

port about reality, like a narrative in a newspaper article or the earlier mentioned *My Early Years* by Winston Churchill, for example, or perhaps the short reports about the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah in the books of Kings. What is intended here is not to say that such narratives are not constructed or that they are free from ideology, mirroring reality, or anything of that sort, but that a fundamental purpose with them is to refer to reality. In storytelling narratives, on the other hand, we are more likely to get stories told for their own sake, narratives that are good stories, and paradigmatic examples are the stories in *Thousand and One Nights*, but also the earlier mentioned *Jane Eyre*, and perhaps the Balaam-story in Numbers.

An advantage in talking about these three parameters in approaching narratives is that they make it possible to distinguish between different kinds of narratives.²⁶ We can identify both more typical narratives as well as border-line cases and discuss in light of the parameters why they turn out differently and how this affects their meaning. This seems to be especially valuable in approaching Numbers, since we in this incoherent collection of materials encounter passages that most people would have no problem in calling narratives, like the spy-story in Num 13–14, and passages which seemingly mix narrative features with other ones, like chapter 15, which in the middle of rules and regulations has a short narrative sequence about a man gathering wood on the Sabbath, and therefore being stoned. In reading Numbers from the narrative perspective suggested here and looking for its coherence, we should therefore ask about the types of narratives we find, whether there is a meaning in their being found to-

Study of Literary Fiction (Örebro Studies in Literary History and Criticism, 7; Örebro: Örebro University, 2008), 201–260; idem, “Centres and Borders.” Note in this regard the similar comments of Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (trans. Peter R. Ackroyd; Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1965), 32, on how to divide the narratives of the Hebrew Bible; the identification of fictional novellas in the Hebrew Bible by W. Lee Humphreys, “Novella,” in George W. Coats (ed.), *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 82–96, here 83–84, 86–88; and the classification of several books in the Hebrew Bible as “belletristic” by Morton Smith, *Palestinian Parties and Politics That Shaped the Old Testament* (2nd corrected edn; London: SCM, 1987), 121–22. Finally, Coats makes a division of narratives that approximates what is said below, George W. Coats, “Tale,” in Coats, *Saga*, 63–70, here 63–64. *Contra*, e.g., Clines, *Theme of the Pentateuch*, 108–119, who in characterising narrative only draws on examples which are narrative fiction, and Angela Roskop, *The Wilderness Itineraries: Genre, Geography, and the Growth of Torah* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 33, who makes the differences between the language-games only a matter of degree and not of kind.

²⁶ Andersson, *The Book and Its Narratives*, 138–139.

gether in the same book, and whether this meaning helps us to understand the puzzling nature of Numbers.

Narrative Features in the Book of Numbers

Coming then finally to the book of Numbers itself, and having the narrative perspective presented above in mind, I would argue that we as a first step can differentiate between four kinds or levels of narrative in the book.

The first kind is what we could call *genuine narratives*. Here I would place stories like Manna and Quails (11:4–34); Aaron’s death (20:22–29); and the Balaam-story (22:2–24:25), to name a few.²⁷ What is distinctive about these stories is that they share a certain similarity in terms of narrative paradigm and discourse. When it comes to the first parameter, they all have a rather full narrative paradigm with a sequence of events related temporally, causally, and thematically in a plot with a beginning, middle, and end. In light of the second parameter, discourse, the stories of this kind are all quite straightforward narratives, told in chronological order, mostly in a scenic mode with rather much dialogue, but also summarised narration.²⁸ Finally, in light of the third parameter, the question of language-game, we would seem to have both factual narratives, like *Aaron’s Death* (20:22–29), reporting, albeit for priestly ideological purposes, about the death of Aaron and the installation of Eleazar in his stead, and storytelling ones, like the already mentioned Balaam-story, in which at least the episode with the jenny would seem to point to its aim to present a good story to its readers.

The second kind we might call *independent narrative sequences*. Here I would place Num 5:1–4 (expulsion of unclean from the camp), 11:1–3 (the revolt and fire at Taberah), and 21:1–3 (victory at Hormah). When it comes to the first parameter they are very short, and not much is depicted in them, which gives them a rather truncated narrative paradigm. Nevertheless, they have their own narrative space, and are not worked into the surrounding passages, and are therefore *independent* narrative sequences. In view of discourse, the sequences are told in summary, borrowing, so to

²⁷ One can note that this understanding of narrative comes close to Knierim and Coats’ definition of “story,” see Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 360–361. The units so termed by them are almost equivalent to the passages I single out here, apart from the Balaam-unit, which they call “legend.”

²⁸ For the concepts “summary” and “scene,” see Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 93–99, 109–112; Prince, *Dictionary*, 85–86, s.v. “scene,” and 95–96, s.v. “summary.”

speak, a convention from more genuine narratives.²⁹ The sequences seem primarily to have a redactional purpose in their context, being thematic introductions, as it were, of purity (5:1–4), rebellion (11:1–3) and victory (21:1–3).³⁰ Given this, we might say in view of language-game that the sequences intend to report history, but have a clearly theme-introducing function in their contexts.³¹

The third kind is, in my view, best termed *instrumental scenes and situations*. Here I would place the narrative parts of Num 7:1–89; 9:1–14, 15:32–36, 27:1–11, and 36:1–12, most of these being, in the terminology of Wenham and Levine, “case-law reports.”³² The scenes and situations

²⁹ The summary, or truncated form of the sequences, is quite well captured by the characterisations of 11:1–3 by Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 171, and by Christian Kupfer, *Mit Israel auf dem Weg durch die Wüste: Eine leserorientierte Exegese der Rebellionstexte in Exodus 15:22–17:7 und Numeri 11:1–20:13* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 85–86.

³⁰ Motifs of purity are also found in Num 1–4, but 5:1–4 can still be understood to introduce purity as a theme since, although present in chaps. 1–4, it takes centre stage in 5:1–4. On 5:1–4, see also Reinhard Achenbach, *Die Vollendung der Tora: Studien zur Redaktionsgeschichte des Numeribuches im Kontext von Hexateuch und Pentateuch* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für Altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte, 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 203, 205–206, 501; Erik Aurelius, *Der Fürbitter Israels: Eine Studie zum Mosebild im Alten Testament* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1988), 144–145; Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 72–73, 172–173; Kupfer, *Mit Israel auf dem Weg*, 89–90; Thomas Römer, “Israel’s Sojourn in the Wilderness and the Construction of the Book of Numbers,” in Robert Rezetko, et al. (eds.), *Reflection and Refraction: Studies in Biblical Historiography in Honour of A. Graeme Auld* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 434. Moreover, Van Seters, citing Volkmar Fritz, calls Num 11:1–3 a *Bespielstück* and compares the sequence with Judg 3:7–11 (Othniel); John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1994), 227.

³¹ Cf. Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1–20* (AB, 4A; New York: Doubleday, 1993), 74–78, who lists these passages under the title “historiography.” Levine also makes a factual reading of Num 21:1–3 in idem, *Numbers 21–36* (AB, 4B; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 125–126.

³² See primarily Wenham, *Numbers*, 42–45. Wenham says about this group of laws that “[i]t is often surmised that many of the laws found in the Pentateuch and other Near Eastern codes developed in this way [being case law], but there are only four cases where this is explicit in Numbers” (42). Such a reasoning suggests that Wenham uses the “narrative component” of these passages to distinguish them from other case laws – which is also shown in his designation of them as “case law reports.” It also explains a difference compared with Levine, who in discussing the same group also includes chaps. 31 and 32 (Levine, *Numbers 1–20*, 78–80). The “law-component” is not as strong in these chapters as in Wenham’s selection. However, as is seen from 15:32–36, these divisions are not either-or characterisations, but rather attempts to sort tendencies from the parameters set out. See furthermore the discussion of 15:32–36 in Mary Douglas, *In the Wilderness: The Doctrine of Defilement in the Book of Numbers* (JSOTSup, 158; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 107–108.

depicted here are there to provide background and circumstances for the rule or law that is laid down in the passage. They could be compared to illustrations in dictionaries, textbooks, and the like, which serve the function of supporting a larger text.³³ In our terminology of parameters, these scenes and situations do not have a full narrative paradigm, and hardly a truncated one either, as the former kind of narrative in Numbers. One or two events are depicted at most, which serve to introduce a law or instruction in the passage as a whole. In this respect instrumental scenes are different from the former kind, as they are more dependent on the larger passage. Nevertheless, on the discourse-level there is some connection to “narrative” in that short scenes with dialogue are displayed, showing typical situations that a law is meant to address. Because of the instrumental function of the scenes and situations in non-narrative passages, they should be taken as factual language-games, while at the same time it does not matter much if the events they depict actually have happened, since it is the typical features of the situation that are of interest.

Fourth and last, there are also what can be called *narrative fragments, insertions, and embroidering*, i.e., minor parts of the rest of the passages of Numbers. These are narrative notes found in mainly non-narrative passages. An example is provided by the fragments found in Num 8: “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying ...” (v. 5) and “Moses and Aaron and the whole congregation of the Israelites did with the Levites just as the Lord had commanded Moses concerning them ...” (v. 20ff.). Such fragments are used throughout Numbers to introduce and round off laws, cultic rules, lists, and other similar material, and are also often used to warrant such material, for example by showing the original obedience of Israel.³⁴ In view of the three parameters, the only remainder of a narrative character in these fragments is that an event is related to, and, so to speak, “hooked onto” a law, a rule, or a list; as a result it stands out a bit for us to observe and it becomes possible for us to detach the event somewhat from the law, rule, or list.

These four groups, then, represent the narrative features that we find in Numbers: genuine narratives, independent sequences, instrumental scenes, and narrative fragments. They do not make up all the text of Numbers, but are intermingled with other materials in other genres, primarily laws, cul-

³³ The comparisons concerning this kind of narrative are made by Marie-Laure Ryan, “The Modes of Narrativity and Their Visual Metaphors,” *Style* 26/3 (1992): 368–387, here 381.

³⁴ *Contra* Knierim and Coats, *Numbers*, 196–197.

tic rules, lists, and songs. In view of this, Numbers would most of all seem to be a collection of quite variegated material,³⁵ of which a rather large part can be said to be narratives of different kinds. Saying that is an important step towards grasping the book as a whole and its character. However, the next step is to say more concerning the interplay of these narrative features and other material in Numbers.

The Narrative Features of Numbers and Its Coherence

Having thus mapped narrative in Numbers, the main conclusion to be drawn is quite obviously that Numbers contains not only many different genres, but also different types of narrative. This means that the question of the coherence of Numbers from a narrative perspective becomes a question of how these different kinds of narratives come together in the book. I would like to end shortly by addressing that question.

The two most common narrative features in Numbers are genuine narratives and narrative fragments, the latter being spread out through the book. Looking at the individual passages of Numbers at a distance and seeing them as they are put together, I would argue that the narrative fragments constitute a thin thread throughout the book. It is torn apart from time to time, but is always knit together again. Thus, introductory phrases like “Yahweh said to Moses” (2:1, etc.) together with concluding phrases like “the Israelites did just as Yahweh had commanded Moses” (2:34, etc.) not only serve to introduce and round off individual passages, but can also be understood to connect a certain passage to those that precede and follow, with their similar introductions and conclusions. If we add the other three kinds of narrative in Numbers to this thread one might describe the result as a patched cloth of different fabrics. At the thinnest parts it is only a narrative thread, but sometimes it grows into scenes (as in 7:1–89; 9:1–14, 15:32–36, 27:1–11; 36:1–12), at other times into longer sequences (as in 5:1–4; 11:1–3; 21:1–3), and from 11:4 onwards we encounter full-fledged stories with their own beginnings, middles, and ends. The cloth, including the non-narrative passages aligned to it, constitutes the book of Numbers.

³⁵ Cf. Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Old Testament: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 40; John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983); idem, *The Life of Moses*, 1–3.

If we now compare this patched cloth with the first two parameters of narrative interpretation, Numbers as a whole could be described, first of all, as having a narrative paradigm of sequence, where one passage might be understood to follow after another. Thus, we would understand the passages of Numbers to be put in a roughly chronological order. To exemplify, after the first census (1:1–54), we understand Yahweh to have commanded a certain order of encampment and marching (2:1–34), and after the break-up from Sinai (10:11–36), we understand the complaint at Taberah (11:1–3) to follow, then the events with the manna, quails and the seventy elders prophesying (11:4–35), and so forth. A first unifying effect of reading the narrative and non-narrative materials together in Numbers would thus be chronology, or one passage or event following upon another in a sequence.³⁶

Secondly, it is also possible to see causality operating in this patched cloth, in terms of there being a logic of progression from one passage to another. Another way to put it is to say that there is a sense of plot in the book. However, it is not as evident as the idea of sequence or chronology. Positively, the plot may be outlined as follows: the Israelites prepare to set out for wandering from Sinai to the promised land (Num 1–10), but start complaining (Num 11–12) to the point of forfeiting the promised land for the first generation (Num 13–14), which constitutes a first turning point in the book. The Israelites are sent out on an additional forty years wandering (Num 15–20), which, however, finds a reversal in the short sequence about the Battle at Hormah, which they win (21:1–3), after which the Israelites again turn towards the promised land, and prepare for conquering it (21:4–36:13). We would thus have a plot concerning Israel wandering in the wilderness, with two turning points in it. However, not all passages of Numbers can be linked to this plot. The purity rules of confession and restitution and concerning an unfaithful wife (5:5–31) are not linked to this wandering with its ups and downs. Neither is the priestly benediction (6:22–27), the rule for the second Passover (9:1–14), the miscellaneous cultic rules of chapter 15, the rule on corpse impurity and the red heifer

³⁶ There are two exceptions to a chronological progression in Numbers: 7:1–89 and 9:1–23 are set explicitly before the beginning of the book (cf. 1:1; 7:1; 9:1; 9:15). This is not the place to discuss the intricacies of these passages; suffice it to say that we need not understand 7:1 and 9:15 as exact dates necessarily set before 1:1, and that we may understand 9:1 as a flashback in the overall progression of Numbers; cf. Gray, *Numbers*, 1, 85–86; Milgrom, *Numbers*, 53, 67, 362–364; and H.S. Nyberg, *Hebreisk Grammatik* (2nd edn; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1952), 296.

(19:1–22), or the cultic calendar (28:1–30:1). Saying this does not mean that these passages do not have any connections to the book, but they are not placed where they are in terms of plot. Thus, the book of Numbers would present a fragmented plot of wandering, which partly holds the book together, but not every part of it.

Coming back to the three parameters, in view of the third, Numbers is most fruitfully read in a factual language-game, I would hold, referring to a certain period in the history of Israel (which does not imply anything about its historicity). Together, the materials in Numbers allude to a certain historical period when Israel wanders from Sinai to Moab and receives laws and rules along the way. However, this does not mean that Numbers has a full narrative paradigm, or coherence on the discourse-level, so that it would cohere into a single story plotting that wandering. Rather, we have a fragmented “larger story,” which is created by reading the materials of Numbers together, some being narrative, others not, but together giving rise to a surplus of meaning, creating this fragmented story of wandering. The primary level of meaning would thus lie with the individual passages, but read together a surplus value of meaning is created, which partly holds the material together. It is on these terms, I claim, that one may speak of the narrative character of Numbers and the coherence it generates for the book. The coherence would lie primarily in sequence, or chronology between the passages, and a fragmented causality, or plot, which aims to portray a certain period in the history of Israel.

Saying that, we come back to the quotation from Noth, with which we began. After stating the disunity of Numbers, the quotation continues: “[s]een as a whole, [Numbers] is a piece of narrative, but this narrative is interrupted again and again by the communication of more or less comprehensive regulations and lists which are only loosely linked to the narrative thread by the short, stereotyped introductory formula, ‘Yahweh said to Moses ...’”³⁷ Thus, there is here, I think, fertile ground for a conversation between different methods, since Noth’s conclusion is not only possible to state in terms of source, tradition, and redaction-criticism, but also in terms of narrative theory. One of the most interesting aspects of this is of course the criteria used for identifying narratives and for delimiting individual passages.

³⁷ Noth, *Numbers*, 1–2. Cf. also Julius Wellhausen, *Die Composition des Hexateuchs und der historischen Bücher des Alten Testaments* (3rd edn; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1899; reprint 1963), 98, on the loose connection of the narrative material in Numbers.

Conclusion

The incoherence of Numbers is often assumed in scholarly literature on the book and this is not surprising in view of its very varied content. This article has analysed the incoherent nature of the book of Numbers in the light of its narrative features.

First, the article discussed how we approach narratives. It was argued that narrative is not a natural kind with essential properties; hence what we need to grasp in interpreting narratives is not some kind of genetic code ruling its interpretation. However, the world is full of narratives with a family-resemblance, and understanding them depends on exposure to them and their conventions, which is learned hands-on in everyday life. Typically, what is heeded in reading narratives are three aspects: 1) a narrative paradigm, being a story with theme and plot; 2) the discourse, i.e. the actual verbal presentation of the story; and 3) the language-game understood to pertain to the narrative, for instance, it being a factual narrative or a storytelling narrative.

Second, looking at Numbers and its coherence with this reasoning about narratives in mind, the article argued that we find four types of narratives in the book: genuine narratives (e.g., the spy-story in Num 13–14); independent narrative sequences (e.g., 5:1–4, expulsion of the unclean from the camp); instrumental scenes and situations (e.g., 9:1–14, the second Passover); and narrative fragments (e.g., 8:5, “The Lord spoke to Moses, saying”). These groups do not cover all the text of Numbers, meaning that not everything in Numbers can be defined as narrative. Rather, the different kinds of narratives here presented interact with non-narrative material, like laws, cultic rules, lists, songs etc. When read together, both the narrative and the non-narrative material can be said to create a “larger story” of Israel wandering from Sinai to Moab. A narrative thread of sequence (chronology) and sometimes causality (plot) can be delineated throughout Numbers – a thread that sometimes grows into scenes, and at other times into separate stories. Sequence and causality are the primary means, then, which contribute to the coherence of Numbers from the narrative perspective chosen here. Together, the materials allude to a certain period in the history of Israel, the wandering in the wilderness. This “larger story” is fragmented, however, and the coherence of the book disrupted, because of the mixing of different narrative and non-narrative materials, and because not every passage is aligned to the framework of causality (plot). The book is thus best described as a collection or anthology, having a real but limited coherence in narrative terms.