

P. Pitkänen, *A Commentary on Numbers: Narrative, Ritual and Colonialism*, Routledge Studies in the Biblical World, Routledge, London/New York 2018, xiv+253 pp. Cased. ISBN 978-1-138-70657-6

Pekka Pitkänen's new commentary on the Book of Numbers analyses the Old Testament text from a decidedly interdisciplinary perspective. P. not only combines exegetic methods with approaches from post-colonial, migration and ritual studies, but also considers results from archaeological field research in the Levant.

The text is divided into two main sections: a detailed introduction (pp. 1–52) and a commentary (pp. 53–218). In addition, the volume also features five illustrations, four tables, an extensive and current bibliography (pp. 219–30) and three indexes (pp. 231–53). The author's objective is to present a new reading that seeks to understand the Book of Numbers as a carefully designed work within the larger context of the *Hexateuch*. P. assumes an at least 'semi-historical' content of the texts pertaining to the Moses story (p. 15), and the clear writing makes the text accessible to an audience beyond specialists in the field. Parts of his book take a noticeable Christian stance on ethical and religious issues.

Historically, the author locates the events narrated in the Book of Numbers in the southern Levant of the Late Bronze Age, 13th century BC (p. i). P. posits that at that time a new (Israelite) society displaced and supplanted the existing indigenous (Canaanite) population. This development was then put into writing as a 'settler colonial document' (pp. 40–50) in relative chronological proximity during the first half of the 11th century BC (p. 37) and edited over time. P. bases his early dating of the Book's original draft on the literary depiction of the important role of Shiloh as a Yahweh sanctuary in the Book of Joshua. In this context he relies in particular on his premise of the *Hexateuch's* unified literary nature.

This approach to historicity and dating is without question in marked contrast to the usual interpretation of the Book of Numbers in an academic context, which rarely ascribes historical value to the text as a source for reconstructing the history of ancient Israel. Instead, the Book of Numbers is commonly interpreted as an anthology of little connected legislative texts, whose creation can at the earliest be dated back to the Persian period (5th and 4th centuries BC).¹

The historical authenticity of biblical passages concerning Shiloh, such as Joshua 18:1 (the construction of the tabernacle there) or Judges 21:19 (report on annual Yahweh feasts), which seem to substantiate its considerable significance as Israel's central sanctuary in the Late Bronze Age, however, has been contested since W.M.L. de Wette (1780–1849) and the emergence of the historical-critical method. As far as archaeology is concerned, neither the Danish excavations of the 1920s and 1930s in Tell Sailun² nor the Israeli expeditions of the 1980s under the direction of I. Finkelstein³ were able to document architectonic structures in Shiloh for the Late Bronze Age. A certain number of pottery and small finds, which were identified as votive offerings (but which could only be located in Area D of the Israeli excavations), on the other hand indicate that Late Bronze Shiloh was an uninhabited, isolated place of worship, of at most local significance. A supra-regional use of any

¹ See, for example, T. Römer, 'Das Buch Numeri und das Ende des Jahwisten'. In J.C. Gertz *et al.* (eds.), *Abschied vom Jahwisten: Die Komposition des Hexateuch in der jüngsten Diskussion* (Berlin/New York 2002), 215–31; H. Seebass, *Numeri: 1. Teilband, Numeri 1,1-10,10* (Neukirchen-Vluyn 2012), 25*–38*; K. Schmid, *Literaturgeschichte des Alten Testaments: Eine Einführung*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt 2014), 173–74.

² See M.-L. Buhl and S. Holm-Nielsen, *Shiloh: The Danish Excavations at Tall Sailun, Palestine, in 1926, 1929, 1932 and 1963: The Pre-Hellenistic Remains* (Copenhagen 1969); A. Kempinski, 'Shiloh'. In E. Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem 1993), 1364–66.

³ See D.G. Schley, *Shiloh: A Biblical City in Tradition and History* (Sheffield 1989), 67–80; I. Finkelstein, 'Shiloh: Renewed Excavations'. In Stern (as in n. 2), 1366–70; I. Finkelstein *et al.* (eds.), *Shiloh: The Archaeology of a Biblical Site* (Tel Aviv 1993).

kind as a significant religious site in the mid-11th century BC, the early Iron Age I, has (so far) eluded historical and archaeological documentation.⁴ P.'s dependence on Shiloh for his chronological alignment of the Book of Numbers hence warrants scepticism.

The commentary part is structured for each passage into three recurring subdivisions: 'context', 'comment' and 'meaning'. Under 'context' P. presents a general reconstruction of each respective passage's content. The 'comment' section adds a line-by-line analysis of the content. The occasional references to ancient oriental textual traditions (in particular those from Mari and Ugarit) and to archaeological sites and finds (such as the silver amulets of Ketef Hinnom, p. 82), with which the author relates the Book of Numbers to its ancient oriental environment, are especially praiseworthy. Individual examples from a cuneiform context and from archaeology on the other hand are referenced only briefly and discussed rarely, probably due to the focus on a general readership as the target audience. A reference to readings for further study would nevertheless have made a welcome addition for such non-specialist readers. Finally, in the 'meaning' section P. draws parallels to New Testament texts and confronts the difficult task of outlining the Book of Numbers' significance for the present day from a Christian-theological perspective.

Besides having accomplished a work that is easy to read, P. attempts in his book to balance historical analysis on the one hand with an interpretation of an ancient text from a Christian perspective for the present on the other. In doing so he prefers a conservative dating of events and strives to demonstrate the Book of Numbers' textual coherence, in clear distinction to research and dating approaches preferred within academia, a potentially problematic decision.

One strength of the commentary is the author's new approach regarding the question of how to evaluate texts about war and violence in the Old Testament. P. tries to show how depictions of violence which have been interpreted as fictional by previous researchers could be reinterpreted differently based on more recent and current post-colonial and sociological approaches. His approach will likely be received well in academic circles and overall the commentary will no doubt be met with a positive response among a generally interested readership rooted in a Christian religious community.

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