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### Jacob Milgrom's Analysis of the Book of Numbers

Jacob Milgrom views the book of Numbers as a significant narrative that helps provide coherence to the “epic” story of Israel detailed throughout the Hexateuch (the first six books of the Older Testament, Genesis-Joshua). Milgrom believes that Numbers is an imperative text in the Hexateuch because it describes the events of the Israelites in the wilderness *after* they make their covenantal commitment with YHWH at Sinai.

Milgrom sees Sinai as the “pivotal” event in Israel’s narrative history. He says, “Sinai is the watershed in Israel’s wilderness experience. Indeed, it is the pivot as well as the summit for the Torah books as a whole.”<sup>1</sup> The promises that YHWH makes to the Israelites and vice versa at Sinai, however, radically affect the relationship between God and the newly covenanted people as they journey through the wilderness together. The book of Numbers is a text that helps define and describe how the Israelites are to live in relationship with God in a post-covenantal context.

Numbers, according to Milgrom, is describing the journey of the “covenanted people of God” in the wilderness from Mount Sinai to the borders of Canaan. This journey is described in three main stages: the wilderness of Sinai (1.1-10.10), where the Israelites are preparing for the journey; the vicinity of Kadesh (10.11-20.13), where they spend most of the forty years; and from Kadesh to the steppes of Moab (20.14-36.13), where they prepare to conquer and settle the promised land.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Milgrom, Jacob, *Numbers: The JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), xvi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

One special literary feature of the book of Numbers is its regular alternation between law (L) and narrative (N) in describing the events and experiences of the Israelites in the wilderness. Milgrom presents the pattern as follows: 1-10.10 (L); 10.11-14.45 (N); 15 (L); 16-17 (N); 18-19 (L); 20-25 (N); 26-27.11 (L); 27.12-23 (N); 28-30 (L); 31-33.49 (N); 33.50-56; 34-36 (L).<sup>3</sup> Milgrom compares this structure to that of ancient Near Eastern vassal treaties where a recounting of the “suzerain’s benefactions to his [*sic*] vassal” (N) would be followed by a reciting of the “stipulations imposed upon the vassal” (L) by the suzerain.<sup>4</sup> In Numbers, the Israelites are constantly reminded of their suzerain’s (God’s) providence and fidelity towards them (N) and are asked to honor the benefactions of that suzerain by living by the commandments of the Sinai covenant (L).

Milgrom argues that the compiling of the book of Numbers probably took place sometime in or prior to the ninth-century B.C.E. He supports this hypothesis mainly with evidence gained from literary criticism. In his research, Milgrom found that eleven priestly terms used and fifteen priestly institutions mentioned in the book of Numbers completely disappear from usage in the postexilic age.<sup>5</sup> From this evidence, Milgrom deduces that the book of Numbers could not have been compiled and completed in the Persian period, as some scholars (such as Baruch Levine) suggest, because if it had, the writers and redactors would have been using outdated “terms” to describe “outdated” institutions.

Milgrom believes that multiple authors had a hand in forming the final Masoretic manuscript of the book of Numbers. He argues that later Priestly material was added to existing epic (JE) and Priestly material to complete the book. Milgrom says, “Two writers of the Priestly

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, xv.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.

school—possibly redactors—added their interpolations to combined Priestly and epic material, thereby composing the book of Numbers.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Milgrom, Jacob, “Numbers” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 14, ed. D. N. Freedmann (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 1148.