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The Book of the Wars of Yahweh

Antti Laato

1. Introduction

In the present form of the Pentateuch, wandering of Israelites in the wilderness for forty years has been explained so that it was punishment because Israelites rebelled against Yahweh and Moses (Num 14:26–35). Such a rebellious attitude of Israelites dominates in the narrative of the Pentateuch and it becomes apparent also in the New Testament (1 Cor 10:1–13; Heb 3–4). However, in Isaiah 40–55 and Hosea 2, in later Jewish reception history as, for example, in the Passover Haggadah, and in some other New Testament passages (for example Col 1:12–14) God’s good care and love towards Israelites during the wilderness period has been emphasized. In this article I will show that even though the present form of the Pentateuch emphasizes Israelites’ rebellion against Yahweh in the wilderness its narrative is based in older traditions where the positive relationship between Yahweh and Israel in the wilderness was emphasized. Such a positive tradition appears also in prophetic literature of the Hebrew Bible and is important for understanding the use of wandering motif in later Jewish texts, the New Testament and early patristic literature. It is a great honour for me to dedicate this article to Professor Lauri Thurén who has always emphasized the importance of the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish reception history in the interpretation of the New Testament.

My starting-point in this article is Num 21:10–35. I follow the main trend of research on the Hebrew Bible, according to which these scriptures are writings composed during the exilic and early postexilic period. I argue, however, that the right picture of the transmission process of these writings is possible when they are evaluated from the perspective of empirical models.¹ The empirical model is based on “texts whose evolution can be documented by copies from several stages in the course of their development.”² The perspective of the empirical models is not yet a methodology, only heuristic way to imagine what could have taken place in the transmission process. Briefly, the empirical models suggest that writers in exilic and postexilic period composed texts in three different ways: 1) Writers used older literary sources which they presumably updated linguistically and undertook some editorial work so that they were readable and contextually relevant in the exilic and postexilic period. This means that it is not always possible to construct older literary layers verbatim.³ 2) Writers made paraphrases of the older sources. This means that texts formulated later may be based on older traditions. 3) Writers formulated their own comments and theological remarks which were not attested in earlier sources available to them.

In the case of Num 21:10–35 I will argue that it contains old material which originated from the royal archive of Jerusalem and included the itinerary and the poetic excerpts.⁴ Older poetic excerpts may all have originated from יהוה מלחמת ספר, “the Book of the Wars of Yahweh” (hereafter SMY), perhaps even in combination with the itinerary.

I proceed in the following way. Firstly, I shall make some preliminary remarks on the poetic texts and the itinerary in Num 21:10–35. Secondly, I shall discuss the place names in the itinerary of

¹ See the presentation of my methodology in Laato 2018a, 9–43.

² For this definition, see Tigay 1988, xi. See further Person and Rezetko 2016. Similar empirical perspective is relevant also to biblical manuscripts. For this see further Laato 1996, 62–147, and Müller, Pakkala, and ter Haar Romeny 2014.

³ This was noted already in Albright 1957, 79–80.

⁴ In the redaction history of the Book of Numbers, the passage of Num 21:10–35 is often regarded as containing older tradition historical material. See, for example, the discussion in Fleming 2012, 114–132; Römer 2012 and Römer 2014, 135–149.

Num 21:10–20 and argue, in particular, that the poetic text of Num 21:14b–15 is parallel to, but not dependent on Deut 1:1–5. Thirdly, I shall deal with the Song of Well (Num 21:17–18) and its parallels in Second Isaiah and the Book of Hosea and argue that it was usual to describe the wilderness tradition so that Yahweh took good care of his people. Such a tradition contrasts with the negative “murmuring Israelites in the wilderness” theme in the narrative of the Pentateuch. Fourthly, I shall deal with the Song of Heshbon (Num 21:27–30) and its interpretation. I shall also make some remarks on the relationship between this Song and the archaeological investigations at Tell Heshbân. Finally, I shall present some viewpoints on the nature and theology of the old tradition behind Num 21:10–35 and why it was preserved in the royal archives.

2. Poetic Excerpts and Itinerary Composition

The only reference to SMY in the Hebrew Bible can be found in Num 21:14a. From that text it becomes clear that SMY is an older literary source which the editor has used when writing his text. Seebass writes in his commentary:

Leider ist dies die einzige atl. Mitteilung, dass es ein Buch der Jahwekriege gegeben hat. Sie ist zu isoliert, um über das Buch irgendeine Aussage machen zu können. (Legt man *M* in 14b–15 zugrunde, wird das Ergebnis noch magerer, weil weder der Text verständlich ist noch eine Aussage über Jahwe vorliegt.)⁵

However, there are two other poetic texts, Num 21:17–20 and Num 21:27–30, in that immediate context. From which source have they been taken? Levine has observed, for example, that not only the quotation in Num 21:14–15 but also the Song of Heshbon begins with על־כַּן and this idiom is probably an old literary element to begin a quotation.⁶ The only source mentioned in the context is SMY. Therefore, we cannot exclude the possibility that all three poetic texts have been taken from the very same source.⁷ At which level of the redaction history of the Pentateuch do these poetic excerpts belong? It seems to me that at least the two first poetic passages were integrated in the itinerary composition before they were edited in Numbers 21 in the context of the Priestly account of the wandering Israelites.⁸

The first two poetic excerpts are closely integrated in Num 21:12–20⁹, which consists of an old itinerary of the Israelites in the Transjordan.¹⁰ Walsh has noted that the itinerary in Num 21:12–20 contains linguistic peculiarities indicating that the editor has used an earlier source.¹¹ Walsh refers to Davies who distinguished between “backward-looking” and “forward-looking” itineraries and concludes that “Num 21:12–20 would most closely approximate the pure archival form of the

⁵ Seebass 2003, 340.

⁶ Levine 2000, 91.

⁷ Van Seters (1972, 182–97; 1994, 398–402) has proposed that Jer 48:45–46 is parallel to the Heshbon song in Num 21:27–30 and the latter has been influenced by the former. However, the relationship between these two passages has been dealt thoroughly in Schmitt 1988, 26–43. Schmitt concluded that Jer 48:45–46 is dependent on Num 21:27–30.

⁸ Cf., e.g. Hanson 1968, 297–320. Hanson notes that the Song of Heshbon (Num 21:27–30) was incorporated by the Elohist (p. 307): “The evidence thus interpreted supports the thesis that the Elohist incorporated into his narrative an authentic Amorite Victory Song of the thirteenth century to document his historical note in Numbers 21:26.”

⁹ Num 21:12–20 is not regarded as belonging to the Priestly tradition. For this, see e.g. Davies 1983, 1–13, esp. 8.

¹⁰ For general introduction for itineraries in the ancient Near East and in the Hebrew Bible, see a detailed and informative study of Roskop 2011.

¹¹ Walsh 1974, 20–33.

genre” of a backward-looking itinerary.¹² Num 21:12–20 contains some later editorial explanations which can easily be discerned from the context with typical redactional introductory words (especially v. 13b and 20b; perhaps also 16b).¹³ The texts of Num 21:12–20 do not seem to relate to the Priestly account. Verses 12–13 with their use of מִשֵּׁם and quite indefinite names for the Israelite camping in “Wadi Zered” and “beyond Arnon” are expressions which are not peculiarly Priestly.¹⁴ The poetic expression in Num 21:14–15 is a witness that the Moabite territory was situated south from the Arnon. Such a tradition does not correspond to the historical situation of the later texts in Isaiah 15–16 and Jeremiah 48, according to which Moab’s territory clearly consisted of the areas north from the Arnon River.

Num 21:16a continues a similar style of itinerary as vv 12–13. It introduces a miraculous event which the Israelites experienced in the wilderness when Yahweh gave them water. The second poetic excerpt, Num 21:17–18a, is related to this miracle.¹⁵ The ancient itinerary continues in vv 18b–20a.

The third poetic text is Num 21:27–30. This song is preceded by historical notes in Num 21:21–25 which recounts the military conflict between Sihon and the Israelites, which took place in Jahaz.¹⁶ The wording of Num 21:21–25 parallels the Deuteronomistic passages in Deuteronomy 2 and Judges 11. It is difficult to discern which of the texts is the earliest.¹⁷ Nevertheless, Num 21:27–30 presupposes a narrative according to which the Israelites had defeated Sihon. Geographically Num 21:10–20 places Israelites in the place which is close to Heshbon, the city of Sihon. This being the case, it can be tentatively suggested that the Priestly editor has received an older source which contained an itinerary from the Arnon river to the areas of Heshbon and the three poetic texts related to this itinerary. This older source has not been preserved verbatim but the Priestly editor’s presentation was based on it. In the following pages I describe more closely the content and nature of this older source.

3. The Place Names in the Old Itinerary (Num 21:12–20)

Num 21:14b–15 is a textually difficult passage. Several proposals have been made on how the text could be clarified. Scholars have argued that the text originally described a theophany of Yahweh, but these conjectural proposal remains hypothetical.¹⁸ The fact is that both in the Masoretic text and the Septuagint the poetic passage has been understood as containing geographical areas. One possibility is that Num 21:14b–15 is a part of the longer poetic passage which contained a geographical description. I understand the poetic text in its literary context (Num 21:13–14a): “They set out from there and camped alongside the Arnon, which is in the wilderness extending into Amorite territory. The Arnon is the border of Moab, between Moab and the Amorites. That is why

¹² Quotation is from p. 32. So also Davies 1974, 46–81, esp. 78.

¹³ See the Hebrew text in the appendix. Davies (1980, 1–13) and after him also Miller (1989, 577–95) argue that Num 21:10–13 is a conflation of Num 33:43–44, Deut 2:13, 24 and Judges 11:18.

¹⁴ For discussion, see Seebass 2003, 336–38.

¹⁵ The itinerary, combined with the poetic excerpt, parallels well to a similar motif in 2 Kings 3 according to which the Israelite troops were on their march against Moab in the wilderness and received water.

¹⁶ The location of Jahaz in Ḥirbet Mudēyine at Wādi eth-Themed (the northern tributary to the Arnon) has been suggested in Dearman 1984, 122–26.

¹⁷ See the discussion in van Seters 1972, 182–97; 1980, 117–19 and Miller 1989, 577–95. They argue that Num 20:14–21 and 21:21–35 would be post-deuteronomistic compositions.

¹⁸ Christensen 1974, 359–360. See also Weippert 1979, 15–34; Seebass 2003, 330–332, 340–341.

SMY says ...¹⁹ This introduction refers to the station of the Israelite camp alongside the Arnon, and an old poetic excerpt was used to give proof for this statement. Such a proof was related to the fact that the Israelite tribes settled in Transjordan north from Arnon as biblical accounts and the Mesha Stele clearly indicate²⁰—I shall return to this problem later.²¹

14 Zahab in Suphah and the ravines²²,
the Arnon 15 and the slopes of the ravines
that lead to the settlement of Ar
and lie along the border of Moab.

Instead of the Masoretic *Wahēb* (presumably a place name) the Septuagint reads *Zōob*, a reading which seems to be an alternative place name. The Septuagint version suggests that the translator has understood the text so that it contains two place names mentioned in the first line.²³ This early way to understand the text can be regarded as alternative readings to the place names in Deut 1:1. The name *Sûpâ* can be related to the name Suph (*Sûp*),²⁴ and Zahab to Di-Zahab in Deut 1:1. Weinfeld regards it as problematic to relate the names in Num 21:14 to Deut 1:1, because other names mentioned in Deut 1:1 suggest a location somewhere other than the Arnon area.²⁵ Weinfeld's view, however, is based on his own hypothesis that Deut 1:1 is an excerpt from an old itinerary not preserved wholly. That the place names Suph and Di-Zahab in Deut 1:1 could be localized in the area of Moab is an option²⁶ which can be defended by referring to the context in Deut 1:1–5: Moses delivers his speech “beyond the Jordan in the wilderness” (Deut 1:1) or “beyond the Jordan in the land of Moab” (Deut 1:5). On the other hand, Deut 1:2 stands in isolation from its literary context describing the route from Horeb to Kadesh-Barnea.²⁷ It is unclear why such an itinerary has been presented in Deut 1:2.

Four other names in Deut 1:1b which are listed together with Suph and Di-zahab are Paran, Tophel, Laban and Hazeroth. The wilderness of Paran is a very wide concept which refers to the area north from Sinai and west from Wadi Arabah. However, it is not clear whether it is the wilderness of Paran which is referred to here. Paran could also be another place name here, and it is worth noting that the Samaritan Pentateuch reads the name in the form *pr'n*, not *p'rn* as in the MT. Tophel is an

¹⁹ It is worth noting that Num 21:11 parallels Num 33:44 and Num 22:1 Num 33:48. However, other place names in Num 21:12–20 are without parallels in Num 33. Concerning the list of Num 33 and its function as an independent source, see Cross 1975, 308–309. This view has been criticized in Roskop 2011, 136–44. It seems to me that Num 21:12–20 contains an itinerary tradition which is not at all attested in the most comprehensive list of the itinerary of the Israelites' wandering. I interpret this as an indication that Num 21:12–20 is an independent and separate tradition from Num 33, which in the present form of the Torah aims to summarize the wandering route of the Israelites (see Num 33:1–2). Roskop's (2011, 204–215) understanding of the itinerary of Num 21:10–20 is fundamentally different from my view presented in this article. She argues, for example, that the itinerary in Num 21:18b–20 without any verbs at all indicates that the passage is a later redactional unity. For me this phenomenon (no verbs) indicates that the passage is a part of an old itinerary tradition.

²⁰ Roskop (2011, 50–135) has made a useful survey of how the itinerary genre was used in ancient Near Eastern texts in varied ways and for different aims.

²¹ The translations of the Hebrew texts are from NRSV if not interpreted otherwise.

²² Because of *status absolutus* with an article, הַנְּחָלִים cannot be related as *status constructus* to the following word Arnon.

²³ Note also Seebass 2003, 330–331 where he notes that Waheb and Suphah in the MT could be places.

²⁴ See Levine 2000, 94.

²⁵ See Weinfeld 2008, 126–27.

²⁶ The fact is that there is no agreement among scholars as to where the places Suph, Paran, Tophel, Laban, Hazeroth and Di-zahab in Deut 1:1 should be localized. See e.g. Perlitt 1990, 10–14; Otto 2012, 313–15.

²⁷ These conflicted geographical descriptions in Deut 1:1–5 must be evaluated from the points of literary strategy without attempting to reconstruct a geographically and historically meaningful itinerary. For this see the useful discussion in Roskop 2011, esp. 1–49.

otherwise unknown place name. The same is true for Laban, even though an attempt has been made to identify it with Libnah in Num 33:20–21. Hazeroth is related to the root *ḥsr* and simply means “settlement” in an encampment or an enclosure. There is no need to localize this place to the Peninsula of Sinai, that is, the place mentioned in Num 33:17–18 and the episode mentioned in Numbers 12 (see Num 11:35 and 12:16).²⁸

This survey indicates that we cannot localize the place names in Deut 1:1 with any certainty. This situation is similar for many names of the desert area which are listed in the itinerary of Numbers 33.²⁹ What seems to be clear, however, is that Deut 1:1–5 gives us a geographical setting for Moses’ speech: Israelites were in the land of (northern) Moab³⁰ after having defeated the Amorite kingdom of Sihon and Og (as becomes clear from Moses’ speech in Deuteronomy 1–2). The content of Deut 1:1 suggests that Suph and Di-Zahab should be localized in the Transjordan where the speech of Moses was delivered. The exact location where Moses delivered his speech is Beth-Peor (Deut 3:29). The place is the same as where Moses also died (Deut 34).³¹

The poem refers also to Ar but its location is difficult to determine. Ar is also mentioned in Isa 15:1, but it is not clear whether the reference is to the same place. The problem is that the word itself may simply denote “the city”, and the context indicates that it was an undefined dwelling-place by the Arnon. One option has been to identify the place with el-Bālū^c.³² If this proposal is correct, then the place was situated in the eastern end of the Arnon, which supports the idea that the Israelites circled around the Moabite territory.³³ This would also mean that the geographical places in Num 21:14–15 are located on the eastern slopes of the Arnon outside Moab proper.

Summing up, I would propose that the poetic passage (Num 21:14–15)—which is linguistically very problematic—can be interpreted so that it contains place names which were located in Transjordan. These place names, together with Arnon and Ar, belong to the geographical areas which distinguished the Moabite settlement from the Amorite settlement. This border plays an important role in the history of Israel and Moab as is evident from the biblical sources (Deut 2; Judges 11) and the Mesha Stele as we shall see. Apparently, the poetic text has been preserved in Numbers 21 as evidence about the old border between Moab and the Israelite settlement in Transjordan.

²⁸ According to Num 12:16 the people “moved on from Hazeroth and pitched camp in the desert of Paran” but in Deut 1:1 the order of similar names is different: first Paran and then Hazeroth. This indicates why it is problematic to relate the names in Deut 1:1 to the Sinai area.

²⁹ For this itinerary see especially Davies 1979.

³⁰ It is worth noting that Deut 1:1 presupposes that the areas earlier belonging to the Amorite kingdom of Sihon and Og are now in the land of Moab, indicating that the Deuteronomic text was formulated in a time when these areas were part of Moab—something which is well demonstrated by Isaiah 15–16 and Jeremiah 48.

³¹ For this see Otto 2012, 313–315.

³² For different possibilities see especially Miller 1989, 577–595, esp. 590–595. Concerning el-Bālū^c, see Seebass 2003, 341.

³³ Davies argued that Num 21:10–20 originally described how the Israelites went through Moab and this same route is also given in Num 33:44–45. Davies 1983, 1–13. Davies’ argument is that Dibon mentioned in Num 33:45 is “a well-known Moabite city (Is. xv 2; Jer. xlvi 18, 22).” However, the name of the city in Num 33:45 is not Dibon but Dibon-Gad, indicating that it was built by Gadites—something which is mentioned in Num 32:34. In that verse it is noted that Gadites also built Ataroth and Aroer. In the case of Ataroth the Mesha Stele (lines 10–11) confirms that “the men of Gad dwelt in the land of Ataroth from of old and the king of Israel had built Ataroth for himself.” This indicates that Num 33:45 refers to the areas north from the Arnon which belonged to the Gadites and only later became the possession of Moab as referred by the late texts in Isaiah 15 and Jeremiah 48 quoted by Davies. This means that according to Numbers 33 and Numbers 21 the Israelites actually circled the Moabite area south of the Arnon.

All other place names in the old itinerary (vv. 16a and 18b–20a) are not proper names, but rather were formed according to the events which took place there. This being the case, the names were given by Israelites who related certain events to the places, the original names of which were unknown to them. Beer—meaning “a well”—in v. 16 is related to the event when the Israelites received water there. Beer was apparently situated in the wilderness (as the itinerary continues in 18b). Mattanah (“gift, donation”) in vv. 18–19 may indicate a positive event there, probably another water source. Nahaliel (“wadi of ’El”)³⁴ in v. 19 is also related to a water stream and is an additional example of how important water was to the people wandering in the wilderness. Bamoth in vv. 19–20 was probably a place where the Israelites built an altar or where they found some older cultic site. Haggay (“valley”) was a geographical place, which the editor wanted to explain in 20b by means of a relative phrase: “lying in the region of Moab by the top of Pisgah that overlooks the wasteland.” In the present form of the Book of Numbers Haggay is the place of the Israelite camp where the episode of idolatry takes place (Num 25:1). In this way the editor managed to put his old source in his larger narrative in the Numbers.

This discussion shows that the place names in the old itinerary are mainly related to the events which took place there. The central event reflected in the place names of the itinerary was the finding of water and this justifies well why the poem in vv. 17–18 was integrated into the itinerary. Next, I shall show that this poetic text contains a positive picture of the wilderness tradition as in the Second Isaiah and the Book of Hosea. This indicates that it was one part of the older version of the wilderness tradition which only emphasized Yahweh’s good care of the wandering Israelites. In this aspect the older version differed from the theme of the Pentateuch according to which the Israelites mainly murmured and were disloyal to Yahweh.

4. The Song of Well and the Israelite Exodus and Wilderness Traditions

The Song of Well (Num 21:17–18) is preceded with an itinerary note בארה ומשמ (v. 16a) and the narrative in 16b describes what Moses did there. This narrative episode may be a later editorial explanation. In an older source the poem was introduced only by the words: “Then Israel sang this song.”³⁵ With these introductory words the poem was clearly localized to Beer:

17 Spring up, O well!
Sing about it,
18 About the well that the princes dug,
that the nobles of the people sank—
with scepters and staffs.

The song is integrated intimately with the itinerary because the text continues מתנה וממדבר (“from the desert to Mattana”, Num 21:18) without either any warning or introductory words. This being the case the literary context of the second poetic text (Num 21:17–18) is parallel to the first poem which is also integrated with the itinerary.

³⁴ The name itself refers to the divine name ’Ēl which, in turn, is a constitutive element in the name of Israel.

³⁵ For illustrative nomadic parallels to songs which were delivered when water was found, see Seebass 2003, 342.

The content of the second poem in its literary context gives a positive picture of the wandering Israelites. The water is given to them without a preceding narrative, where the Israelites murmured against Yahweh and Moses—a theme which is attested elsewhere in the Pentateuch (Exod 17:1–6; Num 20:1–12). While Pentateuch does not contain any good parallel to Num 21:16–18, Second Isaiah and the Book of Hosea do provide such parallels.

There are some texts in Second Isaiah (Isa 41:17–20; 43:18–21; 44:1–4) where Yahweh gives water to his people in the wilderness (Isa 41:18; 43:20) or to the thirsty land (Isa 44:3). These texts are part of the exodus typology which is used in Deutero-Isaiah to describe the coming salvation of Israel from the Babylonian exile and its spiritual awakening.³⁶ It seems clear that Second Isaiah, who preceded the Priestly writer of the Pentateuch, knew the older positive tradition about Yahweh's good care of the Israelites wandering in the desert.

Hos 2:16–17 is another important parallel to Num 21:16–18. As in Second Isaiah it speaks about the positive relationship between Yahweh and Israel in the desert, and depicts how Yahweh will give abundant water to his people:

16 Therefore I am now going to allure her;
I will lead her into the wilderness
and speak tenderly to her.
17 From there I will give her back her vineyards,
and will make the Valley of Achor a door of hope.
There she will respond as in the days of her youth,
as in the day she came up out of Egypt.

According to this text, Yahweh loved Israel in the desert.³⁷ The idea that Israel would receive back her vineyards from the desert (the Hebrew מַשְׁמֵר) indicates that there was going to be abundant of waters (compare, Hos 2:21–22). Israel's new life in the desert area was possible because Yahweh would bless it and give it water.

The Valley of Achor refers probably to the episode in Joshua 6–7. After the conquest of Jericho, Achan committed a crime and stole the spoil which was dedicated as *herem* to Yahweh. The consequence was that Yahweh punished the whole of Israel. Hos 2:16–17 emphasizes the new beginning of the people in the wilderness, which means that the geographical area “Valley of Achor” was renamed “a door of hope.”

In the context of the Book of Hosea, the Valley of Achor episode parallels Hos 9:10; 13:4–6 which continue to emphasize that the relationship between Yahweh and Israel was ideal in the desert but was broken when the people came to the Promised Land. As Hos 2:16–17, so also Hos 9:10 contrasts the time in the wilderness with the time in the Promised Land:

When I found Israel,
it was like finding grapes in the desert;
when I saw your ancestors,

³⁶ See Anderson 1962, 177–95. For another view, see Barstad 1989, 21–36.

³⁷ See another view in Dozemann 2011, 55–70.

it was like seeing the early fruit on the fig tree.
But when they came to Baal Peor,
they consecrated themselves to that shameful idol
and became as vile as the thing they loved.

The episode in Baal Peor (Num 25) is used in this text as a turning-point in the history of Israel. When Israel wandered in the wilderness she was loyal to Yahweh who took care of her but in the first step to the Promised Land everything changed. Hos 9:10 relates “the water in the desert” theme geographically to the Moabite wilderness, indicating a similar literary context as in Numbers 21. The third text in the Book of Hosea presents the history of Israel in a similar way (Hos 13:4–6):

4 But I have been the Lord your God
ever since you came out of Egypt.
You shall acknowledge no God but me,
no Savior except me.
5 I cared for you in the wilderness,
in the land of burning heat.
6 When I fed them, they were satisfied;
when they were satisfied, they became proud;
then they forgot me.

Hos 11:1 indicates that not only was the period in the wilderness regarded as an ideal period between Israel and Yahweh but the whole history beginning in the exodus from Egypt was too. Israel was like Yahweh’s own son who he took care of. However, the son grew up in the Promised Land and became rebellious. The penalty for this disloyalty was that the people had to go back to Egypt (Hos 11:5; see also Hos 9:1–4): “Will they not return to Egypt and will not Assyria rule over them because they refuse to repent?”

The exodus and wilderness tradition in the Book of Hosea differs significantly from the way in which they have been presented in the Pentateuch. In the Pentateuch, the central motif of the wandering of the wilderness is a penalty-motif. The people rebel in the desert and this theme is particularly expressed in the Book of Numbers, in the immediate context of Num 21:10–35. According to Num 14:26–38, the Israelites had had to wander for 40 years in the desert because of their rebellion, in order that the whole generation who had left Egypt (apart from Joshua and Caleb) would die before the people could enter the Promised Land. In the Book of Hosea the wilderness episode was, in turn, a golden era where the people had the possibility to enjoy the good care of Yahweh. Another striking difference between the Pentateuch and the Book of Hosea is the motif “going back to Egypt.” In the Pentateuch, this theme is used as the people’s desire to go back to Egypt in order to live good life there (Num 14:1–4; see also Exod 12:11–12; 16:1–3; Deut 1:27; compare, Deut 28:68). However, in the Book of Hosea, the motif “going back to Egypt” is a penalty, because the history of the exodus and the wandering in the wilderness is presented as a golden era between the relationship of Yahweh and Israel. The Book of Jeremiah has also preserved a positive version of the exodus and wilderness history (Jer 2:5–8).

This survey indicates that Num 21:16–18 can best be related to the positive tradition about the wandering of Israel in the wilderness where Yahweh took care of it. The version is older than the present topic in the Pentateuch according to which Israel’s sojourn in the wilderness was characterized as rebellion and murmuring. Therefore, I regard the Song of Well and its literary context, the itinerary, as forming an older source about Israel’s wandering in the wilderness. Best parallels to it can be found in the Book of Hosea.

5. The Song of Heshbon and the Israelite Settlement in Transjordan

The third poetic excerpt which consists of old textual material in Numbers 21 is the Song of Heshbon (Num 21:27–30). The text indicates clearly that the kingdom (or chieftain) of Sihon was situated north of the Arnon.

27 Come to Heshbon and let it be built;
let Sihon's city be established.
28 Fire went out from Heshbon,
a blaze from the town of Sihon (סיחון מקרית).
It consumed Ar of Moab,
the citizens of Arnon's heights.
29 Woe to you, Moab!
You are destroyed, people of Chemosh!
He has given up his sons as fugitives
and his daughters as captives
to Sihon king of the Amorites.
30 But we have overthrown them;
Heshbon's dominion has been destroyed all the way to Dibon.
We have demolished them as far as Nophah,
which extends to Medeba.

Hanson has argued that this text is old and that it is related to the military conflict between Heshbon and Moab.³⁸ In this case the song has an important “Wirkungsgeschichte” in the history of Israel because Jephthah argues in Judg 11:12–28 that the Israelites did not conquer the areas of Moab or Ammon but rather the areas of Heshbon. Hanson characterizes the Song of Heshbon and its meaning in the early Israelite tradition in the following way:³⁹

The Heshbon Song would have played an important role in the reply of the Transjordanian tribes to this claim, for it substantiated their counter-claim that this disputed region was not Moabite territory at all, and that Israel had conquered it not from the Moabites but from Sihon, king of the Amorites.

In this connection the archaeological investigations in Heshbon (Tell Ḥesbân) must be discussed. Unfortunately, all Iron Age remains (c. 1200–500 BCE) “are very fragmentary due to the periodic removal of earlier strata on the top of the hill by later builders.”⁴⁰ There is no archaeological evidence for a fortified city in Heshbon during the beginning of the Iron Age. Num 21:25 gives the impression that Heshbon was an important centre, because other villages were also under its control (בנתיה-ובכל בהשבון). Nevertheless, Num 32:37 gives the impression that the men of Ruben built Heshbon. Does this “building” mean that the Rubenites built up the city of Heshbon for the first time? And if “yes”, when would this building have taken place? In order to receive perspective to this statement concerning building in Num 32:37 it should be compared with Num 32:34 according to which the Gadites built Ataroth. In the Mesha Stele there is a similar statement that Ataroth was built by the Israelite king and this building project took place apparently much later than the

³⁸ Hanson 1968, 297–320.

³⁹ Hanson 1968, 309.

⁴⁰ Greaty 1992, 626–30. Quotation from p. 627. Similar statement is made in Geraty 1997, 19–22. Another possibility is, of course, that the ancient Heshbon was situated elsewhere. For these possibilities, see Boling 1988, 47.

beginning of the Iron Age, that is, the presumed dating of the Israelite settlement process. This indicates that Numbers 32 gives a long time perspective to the history of Israelite settlement in the Transjordan. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the Israelite settlement process in the areas of Heshbon and later building activities there. In the Song, the city of Heshbon is called קריית סיחון. While it is clear that the Hebrew word קרייה can denote a city, even a fortified city (see, for example, Ps 48:3), the word itself seems to be related to the verb, קרה “encounter, meet” and its original meaning is therefore something akin to “settlement”. This leads to speculation about the semantic value of the word in the original poem. In principle, קריית סיחון in the Song (assuming that it is ancient) could also mean the “living-place of Sihon” or something similar. When the Rubenites later built the city of Heshbon and when that city came under Moabite rule, קריית סיחון in the poem was understood in a different way. This new understanding led to the development of traditions (now visible in Num 21 and Deut 2) according to which Heshbon was a strong fortified city which the Israelites conquered and destroyed.

The Mesha Stele proves that an Israelite settlement did exist in the areas north of the Arnon. Mesha crossed this border and destroyed the Israelite settlement there. According to the Mesha Stele, a settlement of Gadites had existed in Ataroth from old (l. 10) and a Yahwistic sanctuary existed in the vicinity of Mount Nebo (l. 14).⁴¹ Mount Nebo (or Pisgah) belonged to the territory of Reuben (Num 32:38; Josh 13:15–23). The fact that Reuben has been regarded as the first-born of Jacob indicates that he played a significant role in earlier Israelite traditions, and the Transjordan must have been the centre of some early Israelite traditions.⁴² Mesha changed the traditional borders between Israel and Moab. In later texts of the Hebrew Bible the areas north of the River Arnon are listed as the areas of Moab (see Isaiah 15–16; Jeremiah 48). This being the case, the content of Numbers 21, according to which the areas north of the Arnon belong to Israel, can be regarded as reflecting the situation before the inscription of the Mesha Stele.

6. From the Older Poems and Itinerary to the Narrative of Pentateuch

Two older poetic sources are known by name in the Hebrew Bible. SMY has been used in Numbers 21 and *Sefer Yashar* in the Deuteronomistic History (Josh 10:12–13; 2 Sam 1:18; 3 Kgdms 8:53 LXX). I have devoted a special study to *Sefer Yashar* where I argued that one central topic in this older document was Yahweh’s victorious march to the Land of Canaan and its aim was the temple mount in Jerusalem, the old religious centre of the Sun deity (3 Kgdms 8:53 LXX). This text indicates how the celestial deities Sun and Moon are powerless in front of the victorious march of Yahweh, the Divine Warrior (Josh 10:12–13, where Sun and Moon are regarded as deities in the original poem).⁴³

Against this background the use of the itinerary genre in SMY is understandable. It contained an old Israelite idea that Yahweh, the Divine Warrior of Israel is in His victorious march toward the Land of Canaan. Sometimes it has even been asked whether *Sefer Yashar* and SMY could be one and same literary source known by two different names.⁴⁴ Assuming that *Yashar* in the name denotes

⁴¹ There is discussion among scholars as to how old the Israelite settlement was in Moab. See Dearman 1989; Stern 1993, 1–14; Sprinkle 1999, 247–70; Routledge 2004, 133–53; van der Steen and Smelik 2007, 139–62. In spite of different opinions, the inscription itself indicates that Gadites lived in Moab from the days of old.

⁴² Concerning this see Cross 1998, 53–70.

⁴³ See Laato 2019, 3–21.

⁴⁴ For discussion, see Christensen 1992, 646–47.

Yahweh, who in Deut 32:4 is described as “righteous” (צדיק) and “upright” (ישר) and who takes care of Israel on its journey to the Promised Land, then the names of the documents SMY and *Sefer Yashar* do not denote different topics.

In the terms of content, the older itinerary core connected with poetic passages (Num 21:12–13a, 14–16aα, 17–20aα, 27–30; see also the Hebrew text in appendix) combined with *Sefer Yashar* could contain the following scenario. Yahweh has shown his strong power by leading the people of Israel from Egypt to the Land of Canaan via the Transjordan. The Israelites have not violated the settlements of Moab but rather bypassed their territories south of the Arnon and then crossed the Jordan and subjugated the Canaanite areas where Sun and Moon deities were worshipped, finally establishing the sanctuary of Yahweh in Jerusalem, the former religious centre of the Sun deity. Such a scenario indicates a rhetoric attempt to persuade the Moabites that the Israelite settlement in the Transjordan was not against the former borders established when the kingdom/chieftain of Sihon was destroyed. Elsewhere I have argued that the United Monarchy should be understood as the result of David and Solomon’s diplomacy where they wanted to establish good political contacts with Egypt, Tyre, Moab, Ammon and some Philistine cities among others.⁴⁵ This being the case it seems plausible to argue that the older core of Num 21:10–35 originates from the royal archives of Jerusalem and its aim was to justify the existence of the early Israelite settlement in the Transjordan which did not violate Moabite interests.

There is one more important question which must still be discussed. If the wandering in the desert was so positive tradition in the early history of Israel how we can explain that it was later reformulated in such a negative way in the Pentateuch. I would argue that there are two important steps in this transformation. The earliest indication for this shift from positive to negative can be found in 2 Kgs 21:7–8, where Yahweh’s words to David and Solomon concerning the Temple of Jerusalem have been preserved:

In this house, and in Jerusalem, which I have chosen out of all the tribes of Israel, I will put my name forever; I will not cause the feet of Israel to wander any more out of the land that I gave to their ancestors, if only they will be careful to do according to all that I have commanded them, and according to all the law that my servant Moses commanded them.

The Deuteronomist relates the wandering motif to the building of the Temple in the reign of (David and) Solomon (1 Kgs 6:1). Israel’s wandering, as presented in Deuteronomy, aims to lead the people of Israel to the place which Yahweh has elected and where Israel can worship Yahweh (Deut 12) and celebrate the Passover (Deut 16:1–8). This place is clearly Jerusalem. In a similar way the old poetic expression in Exodus 15 got a new theological context. Yahweh’s salvation from Egypt and through the desert aimed to lead the people to the Mount where Yahweh’s kingship was manifested (Ex 15:17–18). This new setting of the Israelite wandering tradition meant that the real focus of the salvation plan of Yahweh could not be in the desert—as stated in its older version, attested in SMY and referred to in Hosea and still used in Deutero-Isaiah. Because of the new focus the wandering in the desert first came to denote the insecure life of Israel as clearly noted in 2 Kgs 21:7–8. In the second stage, this insecure life in the desert was combined with Israel’s unbelief, and a new version of the wandering tradition was formulated where the Israelites murmured against Yahweh. This being the case, I would propose the following three stages of development of the exodus and the wandering tradition:

⁴⁵ For this, [see](#) Laato 2018b, 33–58.

1 The oldest stage is witnessed in the old documents like such as *Sefer Yashar* and SMY where the exodus and the wandering in the desert tradition is solely positive. Yahweh has saved his people from the slavery in Egypt and led them to the Promised Land. These documents were used in the time of the United Monarchy and their aim was to signify David and Solomon's diplomacy towards the northern Israelite tribal traditions.

2 After the collapse of the United Monarchy the positive exodus and wandering tradition was transmitted further in the northern religious circles (and became visible in the message of Hosea, among others) while it was buried among the documents of the royal archives of Jerusalem (*Sefer Yashar* and SMY). In the reign of Josiah the new interest toward pan-Israelite traditions was awakened. Josiah introduced the Passover tradition in Jerusalem and its aim was to justify why this festival should be memorized in Jerusalem, the place elected by Yahweh (Deut 12; 16:1–8). Josiah's aim to concentrate all Israelite cult in Jerusalem coloured the exodus and the wandering tradition so that the real aim of the Israelite wandering was to come to the chosen cult place of Yahweh. Therefore, wandering in the desert and/or different cult places in Israel was no longer regarded as an ideal period in the history of Israel. Everybody should seek the cult place in Jerusalem and celebrate the Passover there.

3 In the final stage the Israelites' wandering in the desert was seen as a history of disloyal people who from the beginning of the exodus rebelled against Yahweh. Such a new understanding may have been influenced by the theology presented in the Book of Ezekiel (Ezek 16; 20 and 23), and subsequently adopted in the Priestly version of wandering.

7. Conclusions

In this article I have used empirical models as heuristic perspective to understand the redaction-critical process of Num 21:10–30. With form-historical and tradition-historical analysis I have argued that an older source has been quoted in Numbers 21. This source contained an older itinerary of the Israelite wandering in the Transjordan and older poetic texts which have been integrated with this itinerary before the final edition of Numbers. In my opinion, it is possible that the combination of the itinerary and poetic texts originates from SMY but it cannot be proven.

The editor of Numbers 21 wanted to explain the historical fact that an Israelite settlement once existed in the Transjordan and that the Arnon was regarded as its southern border towards Moab. This scenario corroborates well with the details in the Mesha Stele according to which the Gadites lived in the areas north of the Arnon "from days of old." During the reign of Mesha the situation changed strikingly, as 2 Kings 3 and later texts in Isaiah 15–16 and Jeremiah 48 indicate.

There are two poetic texts in SMY which refer to the Arnon as the border between the Israelite and Moabite settlement. The first one is a geographical description of the border (vv 14–15) and the second one is an Amorite victory song over Moab (vv 27–30). The aim of the latter was to show that the Israelites did not conquer the areas of the Moabite settlement but rather those of the Amorites.

The old poetic text about the well (Num 21:17–18), used by the editor, contains an idea of the positive relationship between Yahweh and the people in the wilderness. This idea is present in the prophetic literature, while in the narrative of the Pentateuch the wilderness narrative is often related to the murmuring of the Israelites.

In Numbers 21 the poetic texts and the itinerary formed an older source SMY which the editor of the Pentateuch used. This older source SMY parallels to *Sefer Yashar* where Yahweh's victorious march against Canaanite deities (Sun and Moon, Josh 10:12–13) and towards Jerusalem (the residence of the Sun deity, 3 Kgdms 8:53) was described and which was used by the Deuteronomist editor.⁴⁶ Both older sources describe Yahweh as the god who takes care of the Israelite people and wanders beside them. The name of SMY indicates what has been described in *Sefer Yashar*, that is, that Yahweh is the Divine Warrior who helps Israel. The adjective ישר refers to Yahweh. In Deut 32:4 Yahweh is depicted as God who is צדיק and ישר. This means that Yahweh is willing to help his covenantal people. Such an interpretive perspective to the adjective is suitable for the excerpts of the *Sefer Yashar* which have been preserved in the Hebrew Bible. The question is whether SMY and the *Sefer Yashar* refer to one and the same document which was known to the Deuteronomist and the editor in Numbers 21 by different names. In any case the names of the document both refer to Yahweh as the Divine Warrior and helper of Israel, and in the terms of content both documents contain texts which are related to the early history of Israel when the Israelites invaded the Land of Canaan and settled there. In addition, the contents of SMY and the *Sefer Yashar* together would describe the itinerary of Israel and Yahweh towards Jerusalem.

I have argued in some recent studies that David and Solomon had a *status quo* policy which meant that they co-operated with the Canaanite people and with Egypt. The economically prosperous period in Canaan at that time was understood differently in the current form of the Hebrew Bible—that is, so that David and Solomon would have subjugated the Canaanite peoples.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, David and Solomon were strong enough to guard the interests of the Israelite settlement. The border between the Israelite and Moabite settlement, in particular, was an important theme in these documents. SMY and the ancient itinerary enclosed in it, was an important document preserved in the royal archives of Jerusalem. They were used for historical reasons and political justification of the geographical areas under the control of the united monarchy. Interest toward an older Israelite history began during the reign of Josiah, and much material now accounted in the Enneateuch originated from this time. This material was rewritten and edited during the exile.

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⁴⁶ For this, see Laato 2019.

⁴⁷ See especially Laato 2018b.

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