

The Integrity of the Wilderness Itinerary (chap. 33)

The prevailing view in biblical scholarship is that the wilderness itinerary of **Numbers 33** is a composite. To cite a recent analysis: verses 5–8 and 43–44 were taken from the Priestly narratives (see **Exod. 12:37; 13:20; 14:2; 16:1; 17:1; 19:2; Num. 21:10–11**); verses 8–9, from the Jahwist (see **Exod. 15:23, 27**); verses 17–18 from the Elohist (see **Num. 11:34–35**); and verses 30–33 from the Deuteronomist (see **Deut. 10:6–7**). Furthermore, a number of verses are editorial glosses (vv. 1–2a, 3–4, 8–9, 38–40). Only verses 12–14, 18–30, 34–35, and 41–42 contain names not found in any of the above-mentioned sources; these were drawn from a discrete document.¹

However, as early as A. Dillmann,² serious objections to this theory have been raised, as follows: (1) Names that are common to both **Numbers 33** and the narratives sometimes differ in form and in order (see the Comments to vv. 8, 31–33). (2) A few names in the narratives do not appear in **Numbers 33** (e.g., 11:3; 21:16, 19; and see the Comment to v. 16). And (3) conversely, many names in **Numbers 33** do not appear in the narratives (e.g., vv. 18–30). Thus, it is hardly likely that this chapter is a composite of place-names drawn from other Pentateuchal sources. To the contrary, it is more logical to assume that since so many names in **Numbers 33** are unattested anywhere else, it represents the master list for the other sources. In other words, the chapter is not a composite text but, in the main, an authentic unified itinerary.

Such, indeed, is the assumption of M. Noth, who has proposed that **Numbers 33** represents an ancient pilgrimage route to Mount Sinai, as proof of which he cites Elijah’s hurried visit to the “mountain of God” (**1 Kings 19**).³ However, it is hazardous, to say the least, to infer the existence of pilgrimages to Sinai in biblical days on the basis of a single prophetic tale, with its emphasis on the miraculous and in the absence of any other corroboration from either biblical or rabbinic sources.

Recently, G. I. Davies has suggested a new approach, based on comparative literary grounds.⁴ He notes that the style of the literary chain “they set out from A and encamped at B; they set out from B and encamped in C ...” (whereby the B name in one link occupies the A position in the next link) is also exemplified in the records of military campaigns in the ancient Near East. Thus a letter of Shamshi-Adad I of Assyria (18th cent. B.C.E.) found in the Mari archive describes the following transport: “from Shubat-Enlil to Tilla, from Tilla to Ashihim, from Ashihim to Iyati, from Iyati to Lakushir, from Lakushir to Sagaratim” (**ARM 1.26**). Here, just as in **Numbers 33**, the stations are repeated. The correspondence, however, is not exact since the Mari account is verb-

¹J. de Vaulx, *Les Nombres* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1972).

²A. Dillmann, *Die Bücher Numerii, Deuteronomium, und Josua* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1897).

³M. Noth, “Der Wallfahrtsweg zum Sinai (Nu33),” *PJ* 36 (1940): 5–28.

⁴G. J. Davies, “The Wilderness Itineraries: A Comparative Study,” *TynBul* 25 (1974): 46–81.

less. A more precise parallel is found in the records of the military campaigns of the Assyrian emperors of the ninth century. These utilize the formula “from city A I departed, in city B I spent the night”; and in the next stage, B will occupy the A position. Even more striking is the expansion of this formula as found in the campaign records of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859):

I spent the night in the city of Shadikanni
The tribute of Shadikanni—silver, gold, lead, vessels of copper and flocks—I received.
From the city of Shadikanni I departed.

The expansions in the Ashurnasirpal text deal not only with the receiving of tribute but also with military exploits, river crossings, and the finding of water. What is significant about these expansions is that their content also informs the expansions in [Numbers 33](#): Note the crossing of the sea (v. 8), the problem of water and provisions (vv. 9, 14), the battle with the Canaanites (v. 40). Thus, the allegation that these expansions are editorial glosses is refuted. To the contrary, they are integral to the itinerary since, just as in the Assyrian analogue, they record notable events essential to the journey.

In Egyptian itineraries, place-names are not repeated; instead, dates are used to sustain continuity. Even though they display a form that differs from those of the Bible, they record a fact that may be of significance for the biblical itineraries. The annals of Thutmose III (15th cent.) testify that his campaign records “are set down on a roll of leather in the temple of Amon today” ([ANET](#), p. 237). It was, thus, considered vital to preserve the account of the Pharaoh’s campaigns in the temple archives, testimony to the glory of the gods who bestowed victory upon Pharaoh: It was incumbent upon the Egyptians to remember and extol them forever. There is, therefore, no a priori reason to doubt the statement that Moses wrote down the itinerary ([33:2](#)): By preserving the wilderness stations, Israel would always recall the many benefactions bestowed by the Lord while He brought them to the promised land (see [Num. R. 23:1](#), cited in the introductory Comment to chap. 33).

One can conclude that the list of stations in [Numbers 33](#) is part of a widely attested itinerary genre. In particular, it exhibits the same form and style as the ninth-century campaign records of the Assyrian monarchs: It repeats the names of the campsites and adds pertinent information regarding military exploits, the availability of water and provisions, and the crossing of rivers, but it does not indicate dates or distances covered. Israel’s wilderness trek—also a military campaign—was, therefore, written down according to the prevailing ancient Near Eastern style of recording itineraries of military campaigns.

How are the discrepancies between [Numbers 33](#) and the narrative itineraries to be explained? F. M. Cross⁵ has observed that there are exactly twelve formulas in the narratives that correspond to the station list of [Numbers 33](#), six which take Israel from Egypt to Rephidim, the stop before Sinai ([Exod. 12:37; 13:20; 14:1–2; 15:22; 17:1](#)), and six from Sinai to the plains of Moab

⁵F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973).

(Exod. 19:2; Num. 10:12; 20:1; 20:22; 21:10–11; 22:1). The scheme’s symmetry betrays its derivative nature; and **Numbers 33** is its likely original source. Cross makes a second plausible suggestion that the narrative itineraries only allude to the stations in the list of **Numbers 33**. They do not cite them but subsume them under the general designation “wilderness X.” Thus, for example, the wilderness of Paran (10:12) covers the stations Rithmah to Ezion-geber (33:19–35).

Although a number of problems still remain, the evidence presented above points to the conclusion that **Numbers 33** is an ancient itinerary of the wilderness trek—the master list from which the individual itineraries in the narratives were drawn.

A comparative table of the wilderness itineraries in the Torah follows. Italicized names indicate stations that appear only once. (See also Maps 1 and 2.)

Num. 33	Exodus, Numbers	Deuteronomy
Rameses	Rameses	
Succoth	Succoth	
Etham	Etham	
Pi-hahiroth	Pi-hahiroth	
Marah	Marah	
Elim	Elim	
<i>Yam Suf</i>		
Sin wilderness	Sin wilderness	
<i>Dophkah</i>		
<i>Alush</i>		
Rephidim	Rephidim/Massah and Meribah	Massah
Sinai wilderness	Sinai wilderness	Horeb
Kibroth-hattaavah	Kibroth-hattaavah/ Taberah	Taberah
Hazeroth	Hazeroth	Kibroth-hattaavah
[Paran]	Paran wilderness/Kadesh	Kadesh-barnea
<i>Rithmah</i>		
<i>Rimmon-perez</i>		
<i>Libnah</i>		
<i>Rissah</i>		
<i>Kehelath</i>		
<i>Mount Shepher</i>		
<i>Haradah</i>		
<i>Makheloth</i>		
<i>Tahath</i>		

<i>Terah</i>		
<i>Mithkah</i>		
<i>Hashmonah</i>		
Moseroth		Beeroth-bene-jaakan
Bene-jaakan		Moserah
Hor-haggidgad		Gudgod
Jotbath		Jotbath
<i>Abronah</i>		
Ezion-geber		Ezion-geber and <i>Elath</i>
Zin wilderness/Kadesh	Zin wilderness/Kadesh/Me Meribah	
Mount Hor	Mount Hor	
<i>Zalmonah</i>		
<i>Punon</i>		
Oboth	Oboth	
Iye-abarim	Iye-abarim	<i>Moab wilderness</i>
	Zered	Zered
	Arnon	Arnon
	<i>Beer</i>	<i>Kedemoth wilderness</i>
	<i>Mattanah?</i>	
Dibon-gad	<i>Nahliel</i>	
Almon-diblathaim	<i>Bamoth</i>	
Hills of Abarim	<i>the valley/Pisgah</i>	
	Yahaz	Yahaz
	Edrei	Edrei
Steppes of Moab	Steppes of Moab	the valley/ <i>Beth-peor</i>

EXCURSUS 72

The Literary Structure of 33:50–56

Introduction: *In the land of Canaan* (vv. 50–51)

A. *The Reward for Obedience* (two apodoses, *ve-horashtem*) (vv. 52–53)

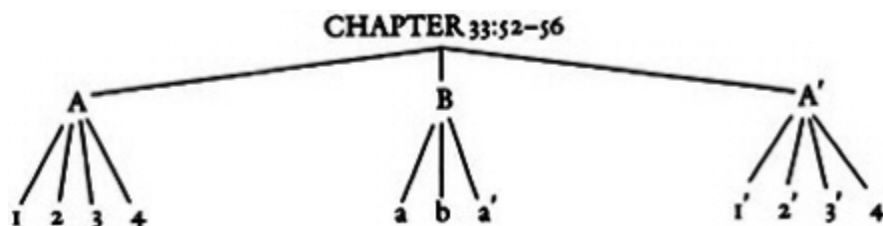
1. If Israel evicts the inhabitants (v. 52a α)
2. And destroys their cult objects (v. 52a β b)
3. Israel will possess and settle the land (v. 53a)
4. So God has promised (v. 53b)

X. *The Division of the Land* (v. 54)

- a. by lot for clan location (v. 54a α)
 - x. by population for size (v. 54a β)
- a'. by lot for tribe location (v. 54a γ , b)

A'. *The Punishment for Disobedience* (two apodoses, *ve-hayah*) (vv. 55-56)

- 1'. If Israel does *not* evict the inhabitants (v. 55a α)
- 2'. They will sting Israel with their cult (v. 55a α)
- 3'. And harass Israel militarily (v. 55b)
- 4'. So God, instead, will evict Israel (v. 56)



What follows are refinements of an unpublished paper by my student, the late Daniel Levy. Verses 52-56 reveal an introverted structure (AXA') in which the end (A') completely reverses the beginning (A). This reversal is carried out in all four statements that comprise A and A': If Israel does/does not evict the Canaanites (11'), the cult objects Israel fails to destroy will “sting” them (22'), the remaining Canaanites will prevent them from dwelling in the land (33'), and God will, in the end, evict Israel instead of the Canaanites (44').

The common language underscores the mirror relationship of AA': 11' are, but for the negation, precisely the same; 22' balance each other by the same alliterative sounds *ts* and *sk* (my student, E. Adler; see the Commentary); 33' also use the same vocabulary (*ha-'arets*, *yashavh*, *bah*) with the main verbs reversed: you shall evict (the inhabitants of) the land else they will harass you; and 44' share the common word *lakhem*, that is, instead of God giving the land “to you,” God will do “to you” what He had intended for the Canaanites—evict you from the land. Moreover, the two apodoses that comprise A begin with the same word *ve-horashtem* (vv. 52a, 53a) balancing the two apodoses that comprise A', which also begins with the same word *ve-hayah* (vv. 55a β , 56a).

The pivot of this introversion (X) is itself a miniature introversion (axa'). The same vocabulary is shared by aa' (*hitnaḥel*, *goral*), and the two lines also correspond in idea: The lot will determine the location of both the tribe and the clan. The pivot of the minor introversion (x) stresses that the size of each holding will be determined by population. The language and idea of aa' are drawn from 26:55; those of x stem from 26:54a. As mentioned in the introductory Comment to 33:50-56, v. 54 (X) had to be repeated because the initial plan to divide Canaan among the twelve

tribes (chap. 26) has been compromised by the settlement of Reuben, Gad, and half-Manasseh in Transjordan (chap. 32), necessitating the redivision of the land among the remaining nine and a half tribes.

EXCURSUS 73

The Boundaries of Canaan (chap. 34)

Map 3 shows that the borders of Canaan given in chapter 34 do not correspond with the reality of Israelite settlement in any historical period. The most outstanding discrepancy was established in the time of Moses and detailed in chapter 32—the settlement of two and a half tribes in Transjordan. Throughout the national existence of Israel there were Israelite holdings in Transjordan; yet the promised land as delineated in chapter 34 marks the Jordan River as Israel’s easternmost boundary. It was B. Mazar, followed independently by R. de Vaux,¹ who first discovered that these boundaries correspond precisely to those of the province of Canaan of the New Kingdom of Egypt. Beginning in the fifteenth century, Canaan was the official name of Egyptian holdings in Asia. Its northern boundary was fixed in the thirteenth century by the peace treaty between Ramses II and the Hittite empire (ca. 1270), which left the city of Kadesh in Hittite hands and the Damascus region under Egyptian control. Since Egyptian records never mention the Gilead or southern Transjordan—archaeology informs us that they were unsettled until the thirteenth century—it is clear that the Jordan was the eastern border of Egyptian Canaan.

Indeed, all the data in the Book of Numbers confirm that the land of Canaan never extended east of the Jordan (32:29–30; 33:51; 34:2; 35:10; see Josh. 22:9, 32), and it is these borders that are alluded to earlier, in 13:17, 21, and described in detail in chapter 34 as well as in Joshua 13:2–5 and Ezekiel 47:15–20. (Josh. 13:4–5 adds significant data concerning the northern boundary: Aphek, modern Afqa, 24 kilometers [15 mi.] east of Byblos; Byblos within Canaan; the Amurru kingdom outside Canaan). This view is also held by the rabbis, who declare that the Land of Israel is holy (Mish. Kel. 1:6) but not Transjordan (Sifrei on Deut. 26:2).

The discrepancies between the *promised* land and the *real* land of Israel can be quickly determined by superimposing the map of one on the other. The results, illustrated in Map 3, reveal three kinds of discrepancies: (1) land that was neither apportioned nor annexed—approximating parts of present Lebanon and Syria in the north; (2) land apportioned but not annexed—the coastal strip of Philistia and the one between Acre and Sidon; and (3) land not apportioned but

¹ B. Mazar, “Canaan on the Threshold of the Age of the Patriarchs” (Hebrew), *Eretz Israel* 3(1954): 18–32; R. de Vaux, “Le pays de Canaan,” *JAOS* 88 (1968):23–29.