INTRODUCTION

This work deals with the stories of murmuring in the wilderness belonging to the priestly stratum of the Pentateuch. Scholars have noted that these narratives constitute a "story type" of their own whose hallmark is the Israelite complaint. The complaint, which usually attacks the leaders for the exodus from Egypt, is expressed in stereotypical, formulaic language. Scholarly attention has been given to the stories of complaint in the wilderness on two levels. First, scholars have attempted to trace the development of each particular tradition from its earliest to latest stages. Second, this information has been utilized to help reconstruct the development of the portrayal of Israel during the wilderness wanderings throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Many of the stories of complaint belong to the priestly stratum (= P). According to the overwhelming majority of scholarly opinion, the priestly literature in the Pentateuch represents the latest stages of Pentateuchal material. This opinion concerning the lateness of the priestly material has dominated research on the murmuring stories and affected scholarly conclusions as relates to both levels of investigation mentioned above. Each individual priestly narrative (e.g., Manna, Merivah, etc.) is commonly seen as reflecting the latest stages in the development of the tradition that it treats. Thus, the priestly manna story is considered late in relation to the non-priestly manna materials and the priestly story of water provision (Num. 20) is considered late in relation to its non-priestly counterpart (Ex. 17). Furthermore, the

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1 Vervenne (Protest) gives a good overview of the various forms of the murmuring speeches and stories. Cf. also Buis, Conflits.
2 Special studies have been devoted to various wilderness themes. Belz devoted a study to the Caleb traditions (Caleb), and Lee (Rock) and Propp (Water in the Wilderness) to the theme of water provision. Several scholars have given special treatment to the manna tradition (Malina, Manna; Maiberger, Manna) and a special study has also been devoted to the tradition of the copper serpent of Num. 21 (Maneschg, Schlange).
3 A brief overview of the various portrayals of the wilderness period with an attempt at determining the historical development is given by von Rad, Theologie, I, pp. 279–284. Adamiak, Justice, gives a more detailed overview.
4 For the history of the problem see Thompson, Moses.
priestly stories of complaint as a whole are commonly portrayed as reflecting the latest stages in the development of the portrayal of Israel in the desert. While many scholars would now admit that many of the cultic laws and institutions preserved in P are pre-exilic in origin, the narrative parts of P are still generally seen as exclusively late literary creation cut off from early, vital tradition. It is our conviction that the scholarly assumption concerning the late literary nature of the narratives of P is one-sided. While we admit that much of the priestly narrative in the Pentateuch is late, there is also much priestly narrative that reflects the earliest stages of tradition. We believe that this is particularly true as regards the priestly murmuring stories. If this assertion is correct, a significant rewriting of the history of the individual murmuring traditions, as well as of the history of the portrayal of Israel in the desert is required. The present study attempts to contribute toward that rewriting.

**The Approach Adopted**

The present study deals with the stories of desert murmuring in Ex. 16, Num. 13–14, 16–17 and 20:1–13. These stories are among the most difficult texts in the Pentateuch. Each of the texts reflects an intricate combination of priestly and non-priestly narrative materials. The contradictions and inconsistencies between the sources (and

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6 Note the words of Rendtorff, Two Types of P, p. 80: “I believe that only rather late priestly writers began to use this [= P'] language for other topics, such as, for example, creation, flood, patriarchs, exodus and so on. That means that the appearance of this language in the narrative parts of the Pentateuch is late, the latest one we have in these narrative parts. But this does not say anything about the age of the language in its internal cultic use, which could be as old as the cultus in Israel itself. Therefore ‘P’ as a cultic tradition can be old, even if it might have undergone several changes. But the narrative parts of ‘P’ are late, so that ‘P’ as a source or layer of the Pentateuch is late but containing old cultic material.” Note also the assessment of Clements, Pentateuchal Problems, pp. 105–106 that “there has been widespread acceptance of the recognition that lists of cultic laws and rules of varying antiquity were incorporated into it [= P] by either the original author or a late editor. This makes readily explicable the fact that these partly reflect a pre-exilic situation. What is not shown by this, however, is that the P narrative history is of such early origin, and this can confidently be rejected…” (italics mine). Similar comments are made by Blenkinsopp, *Pentateuch*, p. 238 and Nicholson, *Pentateuch*, p. 220.