CHAPTER ONE

THE MURMURING NARRATIVES: AN OVERVIEW

The present study focuses upon the wilderness murmuring narratives found in the priestly stratum of the Pentateuch. The stories under consideration are those found in Ex. 16 (the Manna), Num. 13–14 (the Scouts), Num. 16–17 (the Korah stories) and Num. 20 (the waters of Merivah). All of these materials belong, on the whole, to P and portray Israelite complaint or “murmuring” in the wilderness. However, these stories cannot be studied in isolation. The murmuring stories of P belong to the overall corpus of murmuring traditions. It is thus important to come to an initial understanding of the key issues related to the “murmuring motif” in general. Following this, we will be able to investigate the murmuring stories of the priestly stratum and to determine to what extent the patterns and characteristics of the murmuring stories on the whole pertain to or vary from those deriving from the priestly school.

THE IMAGE OF THE ISRAELITES IN THE DESERT

An Overview of Scholarly Opinion

A major critical issue relating to the murmuring stories concerns the question of the image of the Israelites of the wilderness period. On the one hand, many non-narrative texts throughout the Hebrew Bible refer to the wilderness period as one of continual Israelite rebellion.

---

1 This study does not include the story of the miracle at the Sea of Ex. 14. True, the story is composed of priestly material and contains a murmuring-speech in verses 11–12. Nonetheless, the murmuring-speech is of a non-priestly character. Furthermore, the story does not belong to the cycle of wilderness narratives (cf. Coats, Sea Tradition).

2 This issue constitutes the starting point for the discussion of the murmuring motif. Cf. Coats, Rebellion, pp. 13–17.

3 For an analysis of some of the most important non-narrative texts relating to the wilderness period cf. Coats, Rebellion, pp. 192–248; Adamiak, Justice, pp. 32–75, 80–83. Strangely, both of these works make no mention of the material in Is. 63:7–64:11.
This depiction is generally thought of as coinciding with those elements in the Pentateuchal wilderness narratives which portray murmuring and punishment. On the other hand, the murmuring narratives also contain certain elements which do not seem to coincide with this negative portrayal. Many of the stories lack any element of punishment and instead portray divine aid and provision. Moreover, some non-narrative texts, particularly in Hosea and Jeremiah, appear to refer to the wilderness period as a time of Israel’s loyalty to God.⁴ A major critical issue has thus centered on how to resolve these two portrayals of Israel during the desert wandering.

The overwhelming majority of scholars has resolved the tension by positing a development in the murmuring traditions. While the early traditions portrayed Israel in a positive, or at least neutral light, the later traditions portrayed Israel in an increasingly negative light. The traditions of punishment are thus seen as reflecting a later development of the traditions about the wilderness period, which originally dealt only with divine aid and provision. In fact, the entire motif of Israelite murmuring is, traditio-historically speaking, a secondary motif. While the Pentateuchal narratives in their present form combine Israelite murmuring with divine aid and provision, the original traditions of aid and provision did not contain the murmuring motif at all and thus did not portray Israel negatively. Noth asserts:

> At first the theme “guidance in the wilderness,” with the use of a number of individual narratives, would have dealt simply with the divine help granted in the afflictions of the wilderness to the Israelites who had been brought out of Egypt.⁵

Only at a later stage is provision portrayed as a response to murmuring which, in many instances, brings with it the element of punishment. The stereotypical repetition of the murmuring motif in almost identical terms in various stories indicates that we are dealing with a relatively late motif (though, for Noth, still belonging to the pre-literary stage) that imposes commonality to originally distinct traditions. Coats particularly emphasized the traditio-historically sec-

---

⁴ The most important of these are Hos. 9:10; Jer. 2:2. For Jeremiah’s and Hosea’s perception of the desert period and their relation to the Pentateuchal traditions see Talmor, Desert, pp. 50–53; Weinfield, Deuteronomy, p. 31; Daniels, Hosea, pp. 59–61; Deroche, Jeremiah; Dozeman, Hosea.