Wilderness Material in Exodus (Exodus 15–18)

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The wilderness material constitutes an important part of the book of Exodus. Compositionally, it connects the two centers of the book—the liberation from Egypt (Exod 1–14) and the divine revelation at Mount Sinai (19–40). With regard to content, it reflects the difficulties of Israel’s way to freedom. Liberated from oppression in Egypt, the people are not relieved from all needs of human existence, but confronted with new dangers and challenges. The textual definition, compositional structure, and literary assignment of the wilderness material in the book of Exodus, however, is far from being clear and not yet settled.

1 Definition of the Unit

Most scholars define the limits of the wilderness stories from Exod 15:22 to 18:27,¹ as seems to be suggested also by the editors of the present volume. This division has to do with, on the one hand, the fact that the long Song of Moses (15:2–18) accompanied by the short Song of Miriam (15:21) together, at the beginning of the unit, constitute a heavy compositional marker that interrupts the narrative flow and seems to conclude the entire process of Israel’s liberation from Egypt in the first part of the book (Exod 1:1–14:31). On the other hand, it takes into consideration that Exod 19:1, at the end of the unit, begins the story of YHWH’s revelation on Mount Sinai, something which paves the way for all of the legislation and establishment of the sanctuary in the second part of the book (19–40). Despite these observations, however, the limits of the unit are not certain.

As far as its beginning is concerned, the statement “Then Moses made the Israelites set out from the Reed Sea and they went into the wilderness of Shur” (Exod 15:22) does not set a clear compositional marker for a new period of Israel’s existence, even less so since 13:20 had already indicated that the people

reached “the edge of the wilderness” in Etam. According to these itinerary notes one gets the impression that Israel—after having emigrated from Egypt (12:37)—only continued that way into the wilderness, which it has already followed. Moreover, as George Coats among others has shown long ago, there are two passages that explicitly introduce the wilderness wanderings and the reasons why God chose “the way of the wilderness” for his people (13:17–19) or the means through which God guided the people through the desert (vv. 20–22). But these passages are positioned before Israel’s final salvation from the Egyptian army (14:1–31). This result accords with fact that the Reed Sea story shows a people that fears being killed in the desert (14:11–12) and contains a complaint that has close parallels in the wilderness stories (16:3; 17:3). Thus the exodus and the wilderness units overlap each other in the present shape of Exod 13–15, showing a complex structure, one which probably results from diverging editions of the book.

Similar observations can be made concerning the end of the traditional wilderness unit in the book of Exodus. Although the Sinai story clearly starts in Exod 19 with a new date of the following events, the wilderness meeting between Jethro and Moses in chapter 18 is already at the “mountain of God” (v. 5). Its second part, in which Jethro helped to relieve Moses of his duties as a legislator, prepares for the revelation of the divine law. And even the water miracle of Massah-Meribah is thought to have already happened at Horeb (17:6). Thus, in their present form, the stories at the end of the unit of the wilderness journey constitute a kind of transition to the revelations on Mount Sinai. Moreover, one may ask whether the Jethro story, apart from its location, has anything to do with the topic of wilderness. Therefore, the wilderness material is less defined than the Exodus- and Sinai-traditions and in fact interwoven with them.

2 Different Structures within the Unit

In its present form, the unit of Exod 15:22–18:27 not only shows blurred limits, it also has no clear structure. Aaron Schart attempted to argue for a type of

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3 Aaron Schart, *Mose und Israel im Konflikt: Eine redaktionsgeschichtliche Studie zu den Wüsten-erzählungen* (OBO 98; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), 38–44, is one of the few interpreters who explicitly addresses the differing limits of the unit, but does not offer an explanation.