THE CONCEPT OF THE WILDERNESS IN THE PENTATEUCH

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The Pentateuch, according to M. Noth, is a compilation of five major themes that have been connected from eleven narrative units to form a cohesive thematic outline. Of these sixteen items only four have been defined as the wilderness traditions: the theme of “Guidance in the Wilderness” and the narrative units on “Thirst, Hunger, and Enemies in the Wilderness”, “The Murmuring of the People”, and “Caleb in Hebron”. In identifying these four items, Noth views the wilderness traditions to be distinctive from four other major themes (“Guidance out of Egypt”, “Guidance into the Arable Land”, “Promise to the Patriarchs”, and “Revelation at Sinai”), though he does not address their presence in Deuteronomy. This understanding of the wilderness traditions in the Pentateuch is problematic, however, because the wilderness is the foundational setting of the Pentateuch, especially the Moses story from Exodus to Deuteronomy. The story unfolds with Moses, directed by God, leading the people of Israel from Egypt by “the roundabout way of the wilderness toward Sea of Reeds” (Exod 13:17–18) as far as the plains of Moab (Num 22:1; cf. Deut 1:5), where he died after giving final speeches before entering Canaan. The narratives surrounding Israel’s ancestors (Gen 12–50) and the materials found in Exodus-Deuteronomy, including God’s revelations on Mount Sinai.

(Exod 19–40) and at the Tent of Meeting (Lev 1:1–Num 10:10) and Moses’ explanations of the law (Deut 1–34), are intrinsically related to each other in the present structure of the Pentateuch.

The emphasis on the interrelationships among materials in the Pentateuch neither ignores the unique understandings of the wilderness stemming from diverse materials nor proposes a coherent conceptualization of it through harmonization. Rather, consideration of these interrelationships recognizes the present form of the text as an important datum of exegesis, neglected in past scholarship but rightly deserving to be examined on its own terms. Accordingly, the canonical presentation of the Moses story is the starting point of this paper: it will discuss briefly the concept of the wilderness embedded in the macrostructure of the Moses story—from his birth in Exodus to his death in Deuteronomy. Following this, it will analyze how Deut 1:6–3:29 resignifies the concept. This heuristic exercise acknowledges individuality of the materials supposedly comprising the Pentateuch as well as the canonical interdependence among them.

The Wilderness in the Moses Story

Of many proposals for the macrostructure of the Moses story, R. P. Knierim’s understanding provides a starting point. For him, the macrostructure can be construed as follows:3

I. From Egypt to Sinai
   A. Migration to Sinai
   B. Events at Sinai
      Exod 1–Num 10:10
      Exod 1–18
      Exod 19–Num 10:10

II. From Sinai to Moab
    A. Migration to Moab
    B. Events in the Plains of Moab
       1. Preliminary Events
       2. Moses’ Testament
          Num 10:11–Deut 34
          Num 10:11–21:35
          Num 22:1–Deut 34
          Num 22:1–36:13
          Deut 1–34

3 Rolf P. Knierim, “The Composition of the Pentateuch”, in The Task of Old Testament Theology: Substance, Method, and Cases (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 351–79, especially 355–59. This structure is a combination of his two proposals. In the first one, II.B is titled as “Moses’ testament” which points not to all events which occurred in the Plains of Moab but to only one specific event among them. This appears to be inconsistent with other titles, especially its corresponding I.B. But his second proposal elaborates part II as shown above.