

The Nation's Transjordanian Vanguard

Running throughout the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua is an extended narrative that explains how two (and a half) of Israel's twelve tribes came to occupy territories east of the Jordan, instead of settling in Canaan with the rest of the nation. Featuring multiple episodes and dramatic developments, this Narrative of the Transjordanian Tribes (abbreviated hereafter to "NTT") depicts 1) their initial petition to take up residence in the Transjordan, which provoked vilification from Moses; 2) their later crossing of the Jordan and service on the front lines for the nation during the conquest of Canaan; 3) the recognition Joshua paid them for their contributions before he released them from service to return to their families; and 4) the large altar they built thereafter at the Jordan that almost caused a civil war between them and their kin in Canaan.

In what follows, we examine Numbers 32, the first and most important episode of the NTT. Our treatment of this text will strive to be as simple as possible, but the details are crucial to understanding how scribes engaged with each other around central questions of belonging and Israel's national identity. As noted in the introduction to this volume, our reconstruction of texts is not a preliminary matter but rather an indispensable part of our interest in both the dynamics and texture of biblical war commemoration.

THE NARRATIVE OF NUMBERS

In Numbers 21, Israel not only vanquishes the enemies who assault them but also settles in their territories. With respect to Sihon and the Amorites, for example, we are told:

Israel put [King Sihon of the Amorites] to the sword, and took possession of his land from the Arnon to the Jabbok. . . . And Israel settled [*wayyēšeb*] in all the towns of the Amorites, in Heshbon, and in all its villages. Num. 21:24–25

Settlement is also reported for Jazer and its villages (21:31) as well as the realm of King Og of Bashan (21:35). Given that the reader has already been told that Israel took up residence in these Transjordanian towns and villages, the account in Numbers 32 presents three difficulties: First, it does not presuppose that the nation is already living in the region. Second, only two of the twelve tribes wish to settle in this region. Third, their desire to settle there enrages Moses. The battle accounts in chapter 21 depict the settlement as having already taken place; moreover, it was undertaken by the entire nation and didn't face opposition from Moses.¹

To address issues posed by Israelite communities in the Transjordan, the authors of Numbers 32 had no other choice than to tell the fuller story, as it were, of how part of the nation came to possess homes beyond Canaan's borders. In this new account, Reuben and Gad seek permission to settle in the conquered territories of the Transjordan, yet instead of shirking their duties to the nation, they agree to fight in the vanguard when the Israelites cross the Jordan and invade Canaan.²

The detailed itinerary recorded in Numbers 21:10–20 brings the Israelite camp all the way to the vicinity of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho and the place where Moses dies (Deut. 34:1). From here, they can move on to the plains of Moab (Num. 22:1) and to Shittim (Num. 25:1) and then, after the death of Moses, cross the Jordan in order to commence the conquest of Canaan (Josh 2:1, 3:1).

As observed in Chapter 3, the narrative is moving with an ineluctable force toward this final rest stop before Israel crosses the Jordan. One

¹ Source-critical analyses, such as those by Ludwig Schmidt ("Die Ansiedelung von Ruben und Gad im Ostjordanland in Numeri 32,1–38," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 114 [2002], 497–510) and Joel Baden (*J, E, and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* [Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 141–153), augment the incoherency between chapters 21 and 32 by assigning *both* of these texts to the Elohist. Their reconstructions overlap in many respects with that of Horst Seebass, "Erwägungen zu Numeri 32:1–38," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 118 (1999), 33–48. See now also Liane Feldman, "The Composition of Numbers 32: A New Proposal," *Vetus Testamentum*, 63 (2013), 408–432, and Olivier Artus, "Numbers 32: The Problem of the Two and a Half Transjordanian Tribes and the Final Composition of the Book of Numbers" in Frevel, Pola, and Schart, *Torah*, 367–382.

² I suggest that this synchronic reading of the narrative corresponds, essentially, to its diachronic development. The text may have a non-Priestly substratum, but it is itself a supplement to an older narrative thread.

therefore has good reason to conjecture that the narrative's oldest substratum consists of a basic itinerary connecting Egypt to Canaan with a minimal number of episodes in between. Seen in this way, much of Numbers and Deuteronomy represents a massive yet secondary block of material that has been interpolated, piecemeal, into the older narrative.

The Transjordanian battle stories in chapter 21 and the Balaam material in chapters 22–24, while relatively early texts, were probably not included in this older narrative. Yet even if the battle stories in chapter 21 appear to be supplementary, they are presupposed by chapter 32 and therefore must predate the latter. Most scholars agree that the remaining texts, which separate the battle stories in chapter 21 from the lengthy account in chapter 32, represent either supplements to an independent “Priestly source” (see the discussion later in this chapter) or additions made in the Pentateuch's final compositional stages.³

COMPOSITION OF NUMBERS 32

Coming now to the composition of chapter 32, a number of clues indicate that the account has evolved from an older and much smaller core. Provided below is a literal translation of the text, arranged to show the results of my analysis. The indented material is what I identify as supplementary layers of the account, while the nonindented parts in boldface are what I ascribe to an older substratum. Isolated insertions are marked in italics:

1 Now the Reubenites and the Gadites owned a very large number of cattle. [They looked at the land of Jazer, *and at the land of Gilead*, and behold the place was a place for cattle. *Possibly part of the original iteration, linked to Numbers 21:31–32; see discussion.*]

2 **The Gadites and the Reubenites came and said to Moses,**

to Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the congregation saying: 3 “Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon 4 – the land that Yhwh subdued before the congregation of Israel is a land for cattle; and your servants have cattle.” 5 They said,

“If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession; do not bring us across the Jordan.”

³ The battle accounts in chapter 21 have been (heavily) supplemented, yet most were likely added earlier than the Balaam material in chapters 22–24. This would explain why Balaam is not mentioned in Deuteronomy 1–3, in contrast to the references to him and Balak in the historical reviews of Joshua 13 (see v. 22), Joshua 24 (see v. 9) and Judges 11 (see v. 25), which were likely composed after the first iterations of Deuteronomy 1–3.

6 Moses said to the Gadites and to the Reubenites, “**Shall your brothers go to war while you dwell here?**”

7 “Why will you discourage the hearts of the Israelites from going over into the land that Yhwh has given them? 8 Your ancestors did this, when I sent them from Kadesh-Barnea to see the land. 9 When they went up to the Wadi Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the hearts of the Israelites from going into the land that Yhwh had given them.

10 Yhwh’s anger was kindled on that day and he swore, saying, 11 ‘Surely none of the people who came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, because they did not fully follow me.’ (12 That is, no one except Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua son of Nun, for they fully followed Yhwh.)

13 And Yhwh’s anger was kindled against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all the generation that had done evil in the sight of Yhwh had disappeared. 14 And now you, a brood of sinners, have risen in place of your ancestors, to increase Yhwh’s fierce anger against Israel! 15 If you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness. Indeed, you will have destroyed this entire nation.”

16 They approached him and said, “**We will build sheepfolds here for our flocks and towns for our little ones. 17 But as for us, we will march as shock troops before the Israelites, until we have brought them to their place. Our little ones will stay in the fortified towns because of the inhabitants of the land. 18 Yet we will not return to our homes until all the Israelites have obtained their inheritance. 19 We will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance will come to us on this side of the Jordan to the east.**”

20 Moses said to them,

“If you do this – if you take up arms to march to war before Yhwh, 21 and all those of you who bear arms cross the Jordan before Yhwh, until he has driven out his enemies from before him 22 and the land is conquered before Yhwh – then after that you may return and be free of obligation to Yhwh and to Israel, and this land shall be your possession before Yhwh. 23 But if you do not do this, you will have sinned against Yhwh. And know your sin – that it will find you out.

24 Build towns for your little ones, and folds for your flocks; but do what you have promised.”

25 Then the Gadites and the Reubenites said to Moses, “Your servants will do as my lord commands. 26 Our little ones, our wives, our flocks, and all our livestock shall remain there in the towns of Gilead. 27 But your servants will cross over, everyone armed for war, to do battle for Yhwh, just as my lord orders.” 28 Moses gave command concerning them to Eleazar the priest, to Joshua son of Nun, and to the heads of the ancestral houses of the Israelite tribes. 29 And Moses said to them, “If the Gadites and the Reubenites, everyone armed for battle before Yhwh, will cross over the Jordan with you and the land shall be subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilead for a possession; 30 but if they will not cross over with you armed, they shall have possessions among you in the land of Canaan.”

31 The Gadites and the Reubenites answered, “As Yhwh has spoken to your servants, so we will do. 32 We will cross over armed into the land of Canaan before Yhwh, but the possession of our inheritance shall remain with us on this side of the Jordan.”

33 **And Moses gave to them** – to the Gadites and to the Reubenites and to the half-tribe of Manasseh son of Joseph – **the kingdom of King Sihon of the Amorites, and the kingdom of King Og of Bashan, the land and its towns, with the territories of the surrounding towns.**

34 The Gadites rebuilt Dibon, Ataroth, Aroer, 35 Atroth-Shophan, Jazer, Jogbehah, 36 Beth-Nimrah, and Beth-Haran, fortified cities, and folds for sheep.

37 The Reubenites rebuilt Heshbon, Elealeh, Kiriathaim, 38 Nebo, and Baal-Meon (some names being changed), and Sibmah; and they gave names to the towns that they rebuilt.

39 The descendants of Machir son of Manasseh went to Gilead, captured it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were there. 40 Moses gave Gilead to Machir son of Manasseh, and he settled there. 41 Jair son of Manasseh went and captured their villages, and renamed them Havvoth-Jair. 42 And Nobah went and captured Kenath and its villages, and renamed it Nobah after himself.

According to my analysis, the earliest edition of the account was only a quarter of the size of the present text. Such dramatic growth for a biblical text wouldn't be surprising, but what evidence is there to justify reconstructing the text as I've done?

A still popular approach in biblical studies attributes the remarkable length of this account not to textual growth but to the combination of independent documentary sources. Supporting this approach are a number of ostensible repetitions or doublets. For example, there seem to be two beginnings to the story: the first in verses 1a and 5, and the second in verses 2–4.

In conducting my analysis, I tested this approach and was initially convinced of its merits. I even published a piece arguing that the account is a synthesis of two independent versions.⁴ But further analysis has revealed a different composition process: instead of weaving together separate narrative threads, the scribes produced the account by *adding* lines to a base text. What propelled this activity of supplementation – often referred to using the German term *Fortschreibung* – was the scribes' concern 1) to expound upon what they deemed to be the text's salient points and 2) to correct lines that, in their estimation, might leave the reader with a false impression.

⁴ Jacob L. Wright, “Redacting the Relationship of the Transjordanian Tribes,” TheTorah.com website, <https://thetorah.com/redacting-the-relationship-to-the-transjordanian-tribes/> [2015]. I was (inexcusably) unaware of the excellent studies by Feldman (“The Composition of Numbers 32”) and Artus (“Numbers 32”) when writing that piece and failed to engage with them.

The account begins by setting the context for the tribes' petition to settle east of the Jordan. The unstated question addressed in the first lines is: What was it about these two tribes in particular that occasioned their petition? Why wouldn't the other ten tribes have wanted to settle there? In response, the narrator sets forth two historical "facts" that the reader needs to know: 1) the Reubenites and Gadites boasted large herds, and 2) these eastern territories were ideal for cattle.

If this first verse (or at least the first half of it) was part of the original account, it would be difficult to explain why the scribe in the very next verse renames the subject, instead of including the simple formulation "and they said" (a single word in Hebrew and the most common in biblical narratives), as in verse 5. According to the prose style of biblical narratives, the renaming of a subject is repetitive unless the intervening details cause confusion about the subject's identity. In this section, we were told who the actors are just two lines earlier, and they are still the ones performing the action in the directly preceding line. But if the account had originally begun in verse 2, there would have been no way for a later scribe to compose a new introduction without first identifying the subject, even if it produced an infelicitous repetition with what follows.

Notice that in verse 1a the scribe changes the order of "Reubenites and Gadites." This order runs contrary to the remainder of the account, yet it conforms to the canonical order of the tribes. The introduction in verse 1a likely belongs to a late, if not the latest, compositional stage. (Given what we observe in other biblical and ancient Near Eastern texts, this assertion is unsurprising.⁵) Notice also that the tribes only have cattle in verse 4, whereas they have "a very large number" of cattle in verse 1a.

THE SHIFTING CONTEXTS OF THE ACCOUNT

The earlier supplement in verses 2b–4 harmonizes the account with the expectations of Priestly circles. Here, as so often in the Pentateuch, these circles wanted their readers to understand that – in keeping with the theocratic model of governance they promoted – the tribes knew their petition needed to be presented not only to Moses but also to the priest Eleazar and leaders of "the congregation." The Priestly imprint can be felt not only here but also in Moses's initial denunciation (vv. 7–14), in his

⁵ For a study of this editorial strategy, see Sarah Milstein, *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision Through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

later consent (vv. 20–23), and in his instructions to Eleazar and Joshua (vv. 25–32).

Now, if Priestly circles went to great lengths to bring this account into conformity with their theocratic agenda, it follows that these circles did not draft its earliest iteration. This is a consequential point. There can be no doubt that much of the Pentateuch derives from (Priestly) scribes working in the employ of the temple. They began their work perhaps shortly before the destruction of the Judean kingdom in 587 BCE, but they appear to have flourished during the Persian period, when a new temple assumed a central role in Judah's governance as an imperial province. One of the earliest products of their literary activity is what scholars have long identified as a brief, yet highly nuanced, narrative of Israel's early history. This narrative was likely not a supplementary layer but an independent source, which was eventually added to older materials to create the Pentateuch.⁶

If the first drafts of our account are not the product of Priestly circles, where would they have originally appeared in the narrative of Numbers? According to my reconstruction, the account begins with two tribes approaching Moses and presenting a petition: "If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession; do not bring us across the Jordan."⁷ To what place are the tribes referring when they speak of "this land"? The additions explicitly name the desired territory because over time it had become necessary to do so: as the account grew, so did the rest of the book, and the massive amount of supplementary material in the preceding ten chapters distanced it from its original setting.

As noted above, what may be an older narrative thread, consisting of a brief travel itinerary, locates Israel in "the plains of Moab on the other side of the Jordan [and] Jericho" (Num. 22:1). This is where Moses dies at the end of Deuteronomy and where the conquest of Canaan will commence in the book of Joshua. The continuation of this travel itinerary specifies the place as Shittim ("And Israel dwelt in Shittim," Num. 25:1A); this place is not mentioned again until the conquest of Jericho (Josh. 2:1,

⁶ In its present form, the Pentateuch consists disproportionately of Priestly materials. Some of these texts were added directly to the originally independent "Priestly source," but many others were composed in the framework of the emerging Pentateuch. For a treatment of recent research, see Germany, *Exodus-Conquest Narrative*.

⁷ As often noted, the form of the narrative, with parties approaching Moses and voicing a petition, bears a striking resemblance to the account of Zelophehad's daughters in Numbers 27. The latter, however, is more thoroughly Priestly in its formulations.

3:1). If these lines in Numbers 22:1 and 25:1a are older, then the location would have changed between Numbers 21 and Numbers 32, and we would expect the narrator to have renamed the territory instead of referring simply to “this land.” This observation may indicate that the author of our account didn’t see a problem with linking “this land” to “the plains of Moab on the other side of the Jordan [and] Jericho.” Alternatively, it may indicate that something is missing in our analysis.⁸

A possible solution presents itself in Numbers 32:1b: “They looked at the land of Jazer, and at the land of Gilead, and behold the place was a place for cattle.” The last (and likely oldest) reference to Jazer in the wider narrative appears in a brief paragraph at the end of chapter 21, which describes Israel taking up residence “in the land of the Amorites” and Moses sending out a battalion “to spy out Jazer.” In carrying out their mission, the unnamed subjects capture its villages and dispossess the Amorites who were living there (see vv. 31–32).⁹ If chapter 32 originally began in verse 1b, the account may have been conceived as the direct sequel to the conquest of Jazer described in chapter 21.

The problem with this suggestion is the presence of what some scholars deem to be older lines from the travel itinerary in 22:1 and 25:1a, yet it’s possible that these lines represent (early) additions that function as literary links to the accounts of Moses’s death and the conquest of Jericho. The statement in 25:1a that “Israel dwelt in Shittim” is in tension with the similar statement in 21:31 that “Israel dwelt in the land of the Amorites.” The matter is further complicated by 22:1, which reports that “the Israelites journeyed, and they camped in the plains of Moab on the other side of the Jordan [and] Jericho.” The first clause is formulated with late (Priestly) language, but without it, Israel would still be dwelling “in the land of the Amorites.” Moreover, in the account of Moses’s death in Deuteronomy 34, what is likely the oldest line (v. 5) describes the location as “the land of Moab,” whereas what many deem to be an editorial line (v. 1) uses the language of Numbers 22:1 (“the plains of Moab” and “Jericho”). Therefore, while Numbers 22:1 and 25:1a may be relatively old, their formulation renders them unreliable as

⁸ That Numbers 22:1 and 25:1a represent older parts of the exodus-conquest narrative is argued by Reinhard G. Kratz; see his *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

⁹ Most scholars deem this paragraph to be older than the episode with Og of Bashan (vv. 33–35), which likely is original to Deuteronomy 3 and was added late to Numbers 21; see Chapter 1, n. 11.

fixed points in any attempt to discern the stratification of the exodus-conquest narrative.¹⁰

There's plenty of room for debate on these matters. The distance separating the tale of the Transjordanian tribes from the conquest accounts in chapter 21, and the tensions between these texts, are problems that face all diachronic approaches. Any reconstruction involves huge blocks of diverse materials spanning the books of Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua, and it's unlikely that the original threads connecting early episodes in the sources were transmitted for centuries without being altered. The older edition of the tale appears to have been very concise and probably does not belong to a source – or at least not to one of the conventionally demarcated documents (Yahwist, Elohist, etc.). It's more likely that this older edition was composed as a supplement to the conquest accounts in chapter 21 and stood in close proximity to them before the intervening materials were composed.¹¹

TRIBES BEFORE KINGS

Numbers 32 features many finely nuanced details (especially with respect to geographical details) that we must necessarily pass over in this book. But several are eminently relevant to our interest in the politico-theological dynamics of war commemoration.

In the earlier version, we are not told why the tribes make their petition. The Priestly expansions to the introduction answer that question with the

¹⁰ Even if Numbers 22:1 and 25:1a are parts of this original thread, they do not read smoothly in direct sequence and presuppose the presence of the Balaam account or some episode between them. The expression “plains of Moab” appears frequently and consistently in (post-)Priestly texts.

¹¹ Feldman's E and P accounts (“The Composition of Numbers 32”) are, by and large, parallels, which leads one to ask: Why did a redactor go to the trouble of synthesizing them, obscuring in the process the nuanced differences that they may have had originally? (My analysis offers a rationale for the duplication by identifying an intentional polemical response in the Priestly account.)

The notion that “the compiler” preserved four separate sources almost completely intact because he deemed them to be “sacrosanct” (see reference to the work of Baruch Schwartz in Chapter 2, n. 23) raises the problem that rearranging a holy text (by splicing it into bits and pieces and then synthesizing it with other supposedly sacred sources) constitutes a radical violation of its integrity. The approach presupposes an understanding of the text's sacrality as inhering in its discrete words and phrases. Aside from the historical problems posed by this understanding, practitioners of this approach must consistently posit the conscious erasure of words and phrases. Even if the erasure was confined to a minimum, it severely undermines the foundational assumption guiding this approach.

two “facts” that we discussed above (i.e., the country was well suited to cattle, and these tribes had cattle). In making these claims, the scribes drew information from the older edition of the story, which presents the eastern tribes declaring that they will “build sheepfolds for their flocks and towns for their little ones” before they march off to battle for the nation (vv. 16–19). Later, Moses reiterates their declaration when accepting the proposal: “Build towns for your little ones, and folds for your flocks; but do what you have promised” (v. 24).

What might have prompted Priestly scribes to ascribe large herds to the two tribes? At the most basic level, the additions fill a conceptual gap in the text: the tribes’ petition makes better sense now that we know they left Egypt with a lot of cattle. Moreover, the Song of Deborah in the book of Judges refers repeatedly to herds and flocks when it formulates an indictment against the Transjordanian tribes, and this indictment, as we shall see, bears remarkable affinities to the question that Moses asks the tribes in our text.¹²

But there is likely more going on here. Without the additions, the account would leave the reader wondering about what motivated the tribes’ petition. Were they trying to shirk their wartime obligations in the same way they turned a deaf ear to Deborah’s call-to-arms? This, indeed, is the first thing Moses asks when he begins his indictment in verse 6. The Priestly scribes effectively exonerated the tribes of this dishonorable intention, first by reframing the petition (vv. 2b–4) and then by prefacing a new line to the introduction (v. 1; drawn perhaps from Deut. 3:19).

We have to take a step back to appreciate the historical fiction: the kings of Israel had conquered territories east of the Jordan, and over time these territories came to be thought of as places where early Israelite communities had once lived.

The Mesha Stele, arguably our most important extrabiblical artifact bearing on the history of the Hebrew Bible, provides invaluable clues for understanding ancient Israel’s political relationship to the Transjordan. Discovered in 1870, the inscribed monument was set up in circa 840 BCE to commemorate the military triumphs and building projects of the Transjordanian ruler Mesha as he enlarged his kingdom of Moab.

¹² Our account in Numbers may have been directly occasioned by the indictment of the Transjordanian tribes in the Song of Deborah, where they are chastised for “dwelling/remaining” with their flocks instead of responding to joining Deborah’s war effort; see Chapter 6, n. 2, as well as the discussion of the Transjordanian tribes in Chapters 11 and 12.

In the Bible, Gad is the name of one of Jacob's twelve sons whose descendants occupied territory in the Transjordan. According to Mesha's account, however, the people of Gad had dwelt in a territory called Ataroth from time immemorial. Later, Mesha claims, a king of Israel (likely Ahab's son Jehoram) came and laid claim to this territory, fortifying its chief city Ataroth (Khirbet Ataruz), but, with the help of his national deity, Mesha captured the city and "killed all the warriors of the city for the welfare of the god Chemosh and Moab." (Recently, an altar was discovered at Ataroth bearing an inscription that may bear on these events.) On the basis of Mesha's account, it seems likely that the territory and people of Gad came to be identified with Israel in the ninth century, when rulers of the Omride dynasty conquered the region and fortified Ataroth.¹³

The book of Samuel dates Israel's first appearance in the Transjordan to the inaugural moment of Saul's reign, more than a century before the reigns of Omri and Ahab. An Ammonite king had attacked the Transjordanian town of Jabesh-Gilead. Desperate for help, the inhabitants of this town seek military assistance from their Israelite neighbors across the Jordan, and in response Saul ventures across the river to rescue them (1 Samuel 11). Read on its own, the account suggests that these inhabitants were not Israelites.¹⁴

A biblical manuscript discovered at Qumran, as well as the retelling of the events by Josephus, reveal how later scribes attempted to reconcile the account in Samuel with the book of Judges, which describes the razing of the city. In the "new and improved" versions of the story, Saul embarks on a mission to save "the Israelites who lived beyond the Jordan." These Israelites are identified explicitly as members of the tribes of Gad and Reuben, and they flee to Jabesh-Gilead for refuge after the internecine warfare depicted in Judges 21 had depopulated the town.¹⁵

¹³ On Israel's presence in the Transjordan during the Iron Age, see Gaß, *Die Moabiter*; Jeremy M. Hutton, *The Transjordanian Palimpsest* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009); Bruce Routledge, *Moab in the Iron Age* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

¹⁴ The story of Saul's reign concludes by commemorating the bravery of Jabesh-Gilead, which sends every one of its "valiant men" across the Jordan to retrieve the bodies of Saul and his sons after they fall in battle against the Philistines. The account of that rescue operation (see 1 Sam. 31:12) signals to the reader that the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead were not Israelites, as they are depicted cremating the bodies of Saul and his sons. For a discussion of the texts and how the town came to be identified as Israelite in the larger narrative, see Wright, *David, King of Israel*, 66–77.

¹⁵ See Frank M. Cross, "The Ammonite Oppression of the Tribes of Gad and Reuben: Missing Verses from 1 Samuel 11 Found in 4QSamuela," in Hayim Tadmor and Moshe Weinfeld (eds.), *History, Historiography and Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Magnes,

The evidence from Qumran presupposes the work of earlier generations to integrate the Transjordanian communities into the nation's narrative. The ancestral stories in Genesis identify Gad and Reuben as the names of two of Jacob's twelve sons; as such, they are the ancestors of two tribes, also called Gad and Reuben, that were part of the people of Israel during the exodus. The account in Numbers creates a clever fiction to explain how these tribes came to settle in the Transjordan instead of crossing over the Jordan with the rest of the nation: during the nation's tenure in Egypt, Gad and Reuben had developed into tribes that possessed large herds, and since the land in the Transjordan was exceptionally suited to cattle, they had petitioned Moses for permission to settle in this territory. With respect to Ataroth, the account claims that the Gadites built this city at the time of the conquest – centuries before the reigns of Israel's kings.

THE NATION'S AVANT-GARDE

When the Transjordanian tribes respond to Moses in the older version of Numbers 32, they promise to lead the way into battle, serving in the perilous role of the vanguard: “But as for us, we will march as shock troops before the Israelites until we have brought them to their place.”

The vanguard battalion or “avant-garde” conventionally consists of the most skilled, fearless, determined, and loyal units of an army. In many ancient Western Asian armies, leaders were called *alik pani* (lit. the one who goes at the front). The title could be borne also by the king and/or a deity (often in personal names), as a reflection of the unmatched martial valor attributed to royal and divine warriors. Vassal kings and their troops frequently were expected to take this position at the front as a way of demonstrating their willingness to die for the suzerain, demanded of them in many vassal treaties.

In our account, the eastern tribes vow to leave their flocks, children, and women behind and cross the Jordan armed for battle (v. 17). The

1983), 148–58; Eugene Charles Ulrich, *The Qumran Text of Samuel and Josephus* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978); Alexander Rofé, “The Acts of Nahash According to 4QSam^a,” *Israel Exploration Journal*, 32 (1982), 129–33; Nadav Na’aman, “The Pre-Deuteronomistic Story of King Saul and Its Historical Significance,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 54 (1992), 638–58; Frank Moore Cross et al. (eds.), *1–2 Samuel*, Discoveries in the Judean Desert 17 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Compare the addition of this prologue to the way the authors of the book of Judges have superimposed a twelve-tribe framework on older accounts; I treat this matter in Part IV.

primary purpose of these statements about flocks, children, and women staying behind is neither to address logistical matters nor to gender the battlefield as a space for the performance of manhood.¹⁶ That these three groups would not participate in combat goes without saying for the scribes who composed these lines.¹⁷ The statements concern rather the motivation for the tribes' participation: By leaving their flocks and families back in the sheepfolds, houses, and towns of Jazer and Gilead, they demonstrate that they didn't have their eyes set on the lands and houses they would receive as a reward for their wartime service. Instead of being impelled by a material incentive, they risk their lives out of solidarity with their Cisjordanian kin, who did not yet have properties and houses of their own.¹⁸

When they render service during the invasion of Canaan, the eastern tribes do not need to be coerced with the threat of corporal punishment or harsh penalties – the common mechanisms of conscription in the ancient Near East.¹⁹ In Joshua 1, where anyone who fails to perform military service is threatened with the death penalty, it is not the officers of the troops who pronounce this judgment, but rather the members of the Transjordanian tribes, who speak for themselves. Collectively, “the Reubenites and the Gadites” express their solidarity, affirming that everyone will bear arms across the Jordan.²⁰

¹⁶ The gendering of space in relation to the battlefield and home/bed is discussed in Part IV.

¹⁷ While Numbers 32 mentions women only once and in passing (see v. 26), Deuteronomy 3:19 and Joshua 1:14 (which is likely a quotation of Deut. 3:19) place women first in their lists of those who do not contribute.

¹⁸ See esp. 32:18–19. Cf. Thucydides's *History* 1.74, where an Athenian embassy reminds the allies of their different motivation for fighting: “We assert, therefore, that we conferred on you quite as much as we received. For you had a stake to fight for; *the cities which you had left were still filled with your homes, and you had the prospect of enjoying them again.*” Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Richard Crawley, ed. Donald Lateiner (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006 [1986]), 48 (emphasis added).

¹⁹ For example, the Hammurabi Code (§§ 26 and 33) lays down the death penalty for soldiers (*redû*) who fail to go on a military expedition or who hire substitutes in their stead, as well as for officers who allow substitutes in their ranks, tolerate desertion, or recruit deserters.

²⁰ See Num. 32:21, 27–28; Deut. 3:18; Josh 1:14, 18. As Rashi noted on the use of the singular “he said” in Numbers 32:25 (*kūlām kē'îš 'ehād* [all together as one]), the text presents the Transjordanians acting in unity when they willingly offer themselves. The expression *kē'îš 'ehād* occurs in two prominent texts (Judg. 20 and 1 Sam. 11) in reference to the people uniting for war. In both of these texts, the Transjordan is a central issue, and in the first, the representative town of Jabesh-Gilead fails to mobilize with the rest of Israel.

A similar objective informs the composition of Joshua 22:1–9, which tells how the eastern tribes collected the reward for their service. As they return to their homes and families, Joshua not only blesses them; he also loads them down with “much wealth, very much livestock, silver, gold, bronze, and iron, as well as a great quantity of clothing” (22:7b–8). By presenting the war spoils as an added bonus rather than as a condition of the pact made with Moses, these texts, as we shall see in Chapter 5, eliminate any basis for assuming that the Transjordanians fought for financial gain, and they make it clear that Joshua formally recognized the Transjordanians as full-fledged members of the nation: they had contributed selflessly to the campaign and hence deserve a handsome share of the booty seized from their own enemies (Josh. 22:8).

KINSHIP AND COMMAND

When dramatically amplifying the account in Numbers 32, the Priestly circles continued to affirm the Transjordanian tribes’ membership among the people of Israel. Yet in making a case for them, they did something surprising: they expanded Moses’s indictment into a lengthy and shrill denunciation of the tribes’ petition.

The older version of the account begins with Reuben and Gad expressing their desire to dwell in the Transjordan. Moses responds to their petition with a single accusatory question: “Shall your brothers go to war while you dwell here?” (v. 6). The narrative continues, in verse 16, with the tribes “drawing near” to Moses and explaining their petition.²¹ In the expanded Priestly versions, Moses is enraged by their petition and proceeds to harangue them at great length (vv. 7–15) for “discouraging the people from passing over into the land that Yhwh gave them.”

In his new, lengthy indictment, Moses evokes the pivotal moment in the nation’s past when the spies discouraged the Israelites from entering the land. “And now you, a brood of sinners, have risen in the place of *your ancestors*, to increase Yhwh’s fierce anger against Israel! If you turn away from following him, he will again abandon them in the wilderness; and you will destroy all this people” (vv. 14–15, emphasis added). The

²¹ The verb for “drawing near” (Hebrew root *n-g-š*) is used here, as often elsewhere, to present a formal entreaty (see, e.g., Josh. 14:6, 21:1; Gen. 18:20–23). (Notice the formulation of the Gileadite women’s action in Num. 27:1.) What bears out my reconstruction here is the failure to name the subjects in verse 16 after such a lengthy passage (vv. 7–14).

comparison serves a clever rhetorical function. By accusing the two tribes of the same sin that an early generation of Israelites had committed, Moses's fulminations remove any room for doubt that the Transjordanian communities are descendants of the exodus generation and thus full-fledged members of Israel. Both share culpability with respect to the conquest of Canaan. Whereas a new generation of the nation is poised now to take possession of the land west of the Jordan, these two tribes persist in the sins of a generation that was consigned to death in the wilderness.

Moses's accusations – both in the older version and in the later Priestly editions – reflect what appear to have been widely shared misgivings toward the Transjordanian tribes (and the various communities represented by these tribes in the narrative).²² The scribes who created Numbers 32 addressed this sentiment in their ranks by taking it seriously and having Moses himself share it. Ultimately, however, they undermine it by having the tribes vigorously repudiate Moses's charges.

The older version of the account never even mentions Yhwh and emphasizes national solidarity. Responding to Moses's question, the tribes declare that they will not abandon their "brothers" and will serve as a vanguard for the nation. The Priestly expansions assume an ethos of fraternity, yet they highlight a different purpose for fighting: The tribes now serve as a vanguard *for Yhwh*, and they do so in conformity with *Moses's command*. Failure to participate in the war effort constitutes a violation of Mosaic authority.

The Cisjordanian campaign has now been redefined as a holy war. Yhwh conquers "the land" for himself by "driving out his enemies before him." What was originally an offer of the tribes to fight as the nation's avant-garde now begins as a command by Moses and ends with a pact obligating these tribes to participate. Military service is no longer a gesture of fraternal solidarity but an act of obedience to Yhwh, with the nation's

²² In *David, King of Israel*, I study the wide array of texts attesting to the ways in which biblical scribes used war commemoration to negotiate relations with the Transjordan; the examples range from Bani the Gadite among David's most valiant warriors in the book of Samuel to the poetic descriptions of Gadite and Reubenite troops in the book of Chronicles. The memory of these tribes lives on in the imagination of the rabbis, who claim that they were the first to be exiled (*Lam. Rab.* 1.5). The rabbis follow Moses in being incensed by their request in Numbers 32; however, the tribes are said to have redeemed themselves by crossing the Jordan and helping their kin so that they were permitted to participate in the dedication of the tabernacle (*Num. Rab.* 13.19). Likewise, the rabbis locate the place of Moses's burial in Gadite tribal lands (*b. Soṭah* 13b) and identify the prophet Elijah as a Gadite (*Gen. Rab.* 71).

deity assuming the place of its members. The Transjordanians now fight as Yhwh's vanguard.

In his negotiations with Reuben and Gad, Moses stipulates that because they participated in the Cisjordanian campaign, the territories they occupy in the Transjordan will have the status of "possession before Yhwh" and the tribes themselves will be "exempt of obligation to Yhwh and to Israel" (vv. 20–23). The word for "exempt" is *nāqî* (lit. clean), a technical term that appears elsewhere in contexts of military and civic obligations owed to *the state*.²³ Here, it appears in a context that describes failure to fight "before Yhwh" as "sin" against the deity: "But if you do not do this, you will have sinned against Yhwh – be sure your sin will find you out!" (v. 23).

The account does more than strike a balance between the competing views of the Transjordanians; it also fuses fraternal obligations with the law laid down by Moses: "Your servants shall do as my lord commands" (v. 25), and "whatever Yhwh has spoken to your servants, that we shall do" (v. 31). Fidelity to Mosaic law comes to supplement, rather than supplant, kinship obligations.²⁴ What makes Israel a people is a shared sense of kinship, while what unifies them as a nation and guarantees their longevity in their homeland is compliance with the divine commandments.²⁵

The authors of our account rediscovered and reaffirmed a basic insight that guides the compositional history of the Pentateuch and Former Prophets: A feeling of fraternity and national belonging frequently fails to provide sufficient motivation for collective action. In any large and diverse community, bonds are easily formed between subgroups, while loyalty to the larger body is more difficult to inspire. (Thus, notice in Num. 16:1 the presence of Reubenites in Korah's rebellion against Moses's authority.) The ancient scribes who composed our account were convinced that a common deity, and a common law code that represents the will of that deity, had the capacity to surmount primordial rivalries and provide a broader foundation on which their communities could coalesce into a thriving nation.

²³ See, e.g., Deut. 24:5; 1 Kings 15:22.

²⁴ See also Deut. 3:18–20; Josh. 1:12–15, 22:1–9.

²⁵ According to Numbers 32:30, if they fail to abide by this commandment, they do not forfeit their right to call themselves Israel; instead, they are punished with the loss of property. This difficult statement probably refers to the loss of individual tribal allotments. Loss of property, in addition to corporal punishment/execution, is a common punishment for failure to render military service in ancient Near Eastern states.

PERFORMING PEOPLEHOOD

When the communities of Israel and Judah were reconstituting themselves under foreign rule, they rarely had opportunities to take up arms for their native interests. Yet through war commemoration, biblical scribes could continue to tap the potential of armed service as the most basic mode of what I call “performing peoplehood.” To belong to a people, one must fight in their ranks, and it’s the task of war commemoration to identify who rendered this service and sacrifice, as well as who dodged their duties to the nation. This is precisely what the older version of Numbers 32 does.

After empires subjugated the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, new modes of national participation emerged. Among the most basic were communal construction projects, and this fact explains the prominence of building accounts in the Pentateuch (the tabernacle) and Ezra-Nehemiah (the temple and city walls).²⁶ Alongside building projects, activities that we might call cultic or religious – worship of Yhwh and fidelity to Mosaic law – became paramount, and in Numbers 32 we can witness how Priestly scribes affirmed this point as they embellished an older war memorial.

Numbers 32, therefore, serves two purposes. The first is the negotiation of belonging via war commemoration. This purpose informs the account’s foundational stratum, which is past- and narrative-oriented. The second purpose, which was introduced in the Priestly reworking of the account, is didactic and normative, with Yhwh and his commandments affirmed as the basis of Israel’s national identity. These two purposes correspond not only to the two basic strata in the composition of Numbers 32 but also to two fundamental stages in the formation of the biblical corpus. They are the subject of more focused attention in the following chapters.

²⁶ I treat this shift from battles to building in *David, King of Israel*, chap. 10.