

“From Rebellion and Death to Victory: On Appellative Paronomasia in Numbers 20-21”

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ABSTRACT: In this presentation, I examine the employment of appellative paronomasia in Numbers 21-22, two chapters whose structures are symmetrical and exhibit close thematic and linguistic parallels. I contend that the device is more extensive than hitherto observed and that it represents a literary strategy that amplifies the chapters’ central themes. For most of the itinerary, these include the themes of rebellion over water, punishment, and death. Many of these devices evoke the name of Miriam whose death marks the story’s opening. However, as one nears the end of the text it is the theme of Yahweh’s benevolence that emerges as the primary theme, first with the giving of water, then with healing, and finally, with the granting of enemy lands into Israelite hands, all of which bear cosmological nuance.

TERMS:

A. **Paronomasia** = sound devices that function *across word divisions* and involve a *dissimilarity* in meaning.

Appellative paronomasia = any type of paronomasia that reflects on the *name* of a god, person, place, or thing. “Appellative” describes a *function*, not a type.

B. **Polysemy** = devices that involve *multiple meanings* in a *single* context

On these devices generally in ancient Near Eastern texts, see my **open source** book:

“*Wordplay*” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Ancient Near Eastern Monographs Series, 26; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2021).

It is **free** to download at: www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/9780884144762_OA.pdf

1) Close thematic and linguistic parallels between Numbers 20 and 21 (according to J. Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, p. 465):

- | | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| I. Failure of leaders | I'. Failure of people |
| A. Miriam dies (ominous start) | A'. Arduous detour (ominous start) |
| B. People complain over water | B'. People complain over water |
| Leaders rebel against God | People rebel against God |
| C. God provides water | D'. People punished |
| D. Leaders punished | C'. God heals and provides water |
| E. Three reverses in fortune | E'. Three victories |
| 1. Edomites block them | 1. Against Amorite king Sihon |
| 2. Mourning for Aaron | 2. Battle at Jazer |
| 3. Canaanites block them | 3. Against Og of Bashan |

2) מְרִיבָה *mê mārībāh* “waters of Meribah” are named because the people רָבוּ *rābū* “quarreled” with Yahweh (Num 20:13). The latter derives from the root רִיב *rīb*.

הַחֲרַמְתִּי *hormāh* “Hormah” is named after Yahweh set it to the ban. The text states הַחֲרַמְתִּי *ha-hāramtī* “I will proscribe [their cities]” (Num 21:2); and וַיַּחְרַם *way-yahārēm* “he (Yahweh) set it to the ban” (Num 21:3).

בְּאֵר *bə’ēr* “Beer” is named because there Moses provided the Israelites with water from a בְּאֵר *bə’ēr* “well” (Num 21:16-18).

3) שָׁם מָרְיָם וַתִּקְבֹּר שָׁם *šām māryām wə-tiqbōr šām* “Miriam died there and she was buried there” (Num 20:1).

4)

וְלוֹ נָוְעָנוּ בְּנוֹעַ אַחֵינוּ לְפָנֵי יְהוָה:

וְלָמָּה הֵבֵאתֶם אֶת־קַהֲלִי יְהוָה אֶל־הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לָמוּת שָׁם אֲנַחְנוּ וּבְעִירָנוּ

“If only **we had expired** when our brothers **expired** at the before Yahweh!
Why have you brought Yahweh’s congregation into this wilderness for us
and our beasts **to die** there?” (Num 20:3-4)

The passage uses the roots נָוַע *gāwa* “expire” and מוּת *mūt* “die.”

5) הַזֶּה הָרַע הַמָּקוֹם *ham-māqōm hā-rā’ haz-zeh* “this evil place” and לֹא מָקוֹם זֵרַע *lo’ maqōm zera’* “place of no seed” (Num 20:5). This is also anagrammatic paronomasia.

6) מְרִיָּם *miryām* “rebels” (Num 20:10) echoes מִרְיָם *miryām* “Miriam.” In the pre-Masoretic text the two words appear identical: מְרִיָּם and מִרְיָם. The Israelites already were called בְּנֵי־מְרִי *bənē-merī* “sons of rebellion” in Num 17:25.

7) מִרְיָם *miryām* “Miriam” and מַיִם *mayim* “water” (Only the consonant ר *resh* intervenes). Her name means “Beloved of Yam (the Sea).” The name combines the Egyptian component *mrī* “beloved” and the Semitic theophoric element Yam “Sea.”

8) פַּעַם מַיִם *pa’āmāyim* “twice” and מַיִם *mayim* “water” (Num 20:11).

9) מְרִיבָה *mê mārībāh* “waters of Meribah,” connected the root רִיב *rīb* “quarrel” (Num 20:3, 20:13).

- 10) מַרִּיבָּה מֵי *mê mārībāh* “waters of Meribah,” also suggests מַרִּי *mārī* “rebellion.”
- 11) עַל אֲשֶׁר־מַרִּיתֶם אֶת־פִּי לִמֵּי מַרִּיבָּה 11) “it is because you rebelled against my command concerning the waters of Meribah” (Num 20:24). Here paronomasia occurs between מַרִּיתֶם *mārītem* “you have rebelled” and מַרִּיבָּה מֵי *mê mārībāh* “waters of Meribah.”
- 12) מַרִּיבָּה מֵי *mê mārībāh* “waters of Meribah” and מַרִּי *mārī* “rebellion” also suggest the name מִרְיָם *miryām* “Miriam.”
- 13) Note the identical forms מִרְיָם *miryām* “Miriam” and מִרְיָם *miryām* “their rebellion” (the latter is found in Neh 9:17).
- 14) “You did not trust me to affirm my sanctity (לֹא־הִקְדִּישְׁנִי *la-haqdīšēnī*)” (Num 20:12), and וַיִּקְדָּשׁ *way-yiqqadēš* “his sanctity was affirmed” (Num 20:13). Both anticipate the site of קָדֵשׁ *qādēš* “Qadesh” (Num 20:14).
- 15) יָמִים רַבִּים *yāmim rabbim* “a long time” (lit. “many days”) recalls מַיִם רַבִּים *mayim rabbim* “many waters” (Num 20:11). Both phrases paronomastically suggest מִרְיָם *miryām* “Miriam.”
- 16) Repeated use of the root מוּת *mūt* “die” (Num 20:1, 20:4, 20:26, 20:28) and גָּוַע *gāwac* “expire” (Num 20:3, 20:29). גָּוַע *gāwac* often marks the result of punishment (e.g., Gen 6:17, Josh 22:20). See also #4 above. Also Aaron was יָאַסַּף *yē’āsēp* “gathered” to his people (Num 20:24, 20:26).
- 17) הַרְמָה *hormāh* “Hormah,” see # 2 above.
- 18) Mount Hor is הַר הָהָר *hor hā-hār*, lit. “Mountain, the mountain” (Num 21:4).
- 19) הַר הָהָר *hor hā-hār* “Mount Hor” suggests אַהֲרֹן *’ahārōn* “Aaron.”
- 20) “And Yahweh said to Moses and to Aaron at Mount Hor (וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן בְּהַר הָהָר *’ahārōn bə-hor hā-hār*)” (Num 20:23). When he dies it is twice called הַר הָהָר *hā-hār* “the mountain” (Num 20:28).

21) The account parallels the rebellion of Aaron and Miriam against Moses in which Miriam is the only one to receive the punishment immediately (Num 12:10). In Num 12:15, **הָאֶסְרָה** **מִרְיָם** “Miriam was gathered,” i.e., to the camp, while in Num 20:26, **וַאֲהָרֹן יֶאֱסֶרְהָ** “Aaron was gathered,” i.e., to the underworld.

22) **יַם־סוּף** *yam-sūp* “Sea of Reeds.” Num 21:4 presents a geographic problem: it cannot be the Reed Sea they just crossed.

23) Cf. Egyptian *š-ỉr.w* “Sea of Reeds” and *š-ḥr* “Sea of Horus.” In Egyptian texts one must pass through it to reach the afterlife.

John R. Towers, “The Red Sea,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 18 (1959), pp. 150-153.

Walter Witfall, “The Sea of Reeds as Sheol,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 (1980), pp. 325-332.

Bernard F. Batto, “The Reed Sea: *Requiescat in Pace*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102 (1983), pp. 27-35, understands **סוּף** *sūp* as the homonym “end/extinction.”

24) People ask why they have been brought to the desert **לָמוּת** *lā-mūt* “to die” (Num 21:5).

25) **וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיָּמָת עַם־רַב** “the seraphim serpents.” See also **וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ אֶת־הָעָם וַיָּמָת עַם־רַב** **מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל** “they bit the people and many of the people died from among Israel” (Num 21:6).

26) **עַם־רַב** *‘am-rāb* “many people.” **רַב** *rāb* can be read as the adjective “many” from the root **רָבַב** *rābab* or the masculine singular participle form of the root **רִיב** *rīb* “quarrel.” The forms are identical. Does it mean “many people” or “people who quarrel”?

27) **נַחֲשׁ נְחֹשֶׁת** *nāḥāš nāḥōšet* “bronze serpent” (Num 21:9).

28) On the imitation of hissing sounds in the pericope involving the serpents, see:

Victor A. Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes: Listening to Numbers 21:4-9,” *Scriptura* 87 (2004), pp. 278-287.

29) **פַּעַמַּיִם** *pa‘āmayim* “twice” to produce **מַיִם** *mayim* “water” > the **נַחֲשׁת** *nāḥōšet* “bronze” empowers the **נַחֲשׁ** *nāḥāš* “serpent.”

30) אֲבוֹת *ʾobot* “Oboth” (Num 21:10) means “waterskins” or “ghosts.” Note also the paronomasia between מֵאֲבוֹת *mē-ʾobot* “from Oboth” and מוֹאָב *mōʾāb* “Moab” in (Num 21:11).

31) הַעֲבָרִים *ʿīyyē hā-ʾābārīm* “Iyye-ha-abarim” (Num 21:11) means “the ruins of the deceased (lit. those who have passed).” Cf. Isa 31:9, Job 34:20, 33:18, 36:12.

32) בְּמִדְבַּר אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי מוֹאָב מִמְזֶרַח הַשָּׁמֶשׁ (Num 21:11). This places them in the west, where the sun sets into the underworld.

33) Moses produces water by way of a בְּאֵר *bəʿēr* “well.” The community commemorates it in song (Num 21:17-18). This recalls Moses’ promise not to drink from Edom’s בְּאֵר *bəʿēr* “well” (Num 20:17) and anticipates his promise not to drink of the בְּאֵר *bəʿēr* “well” in Sihon’s territory (Num 21:22).

34) *Book of the Wars of Yahweh* and the sites וָהֶב “Waheb,” מַתָּנָה “Mattanah,” and נַחְלִיאֵל “Nahaliel” each suggest “gift, grant” (Num 21:14, 21:18-19). וָהֶב “Waheb,” derives from the verb יָהֵב “give,” and מַתָּנָה “Mattanah” is from the root נָתַן *nātan* “give.” The toponym נַחְלִיאֵל suggests the “property/inheritance of El.”

35) בָּמוֹת “Bamoth” (Num 21:19-20) suggests מוֹת *mōt* “death.”

36) On the peak of Pisgah overlooking הַיְשִׁימוֹן *ha-yəššimon* “the wasteland” (Num 21:20). Themes of rebellion, punishment, and death fade when the Israelites leave the wasteland. The narrator signals the shift by stating that the Israelites went to Mattanah and Nahaliel from מִדְּבָר “Midbar” (Num 21:18). The name means “wilderness.”

37)

28 כִּי־אֵשׁ יֵצְאָה מִחֶשְׁבּוֹן לְהִבָּהּ מִקִּרְיַת סִיחֹן אֶכְלָה עָר מוֹאָב בְּעֵלֵי בָמוֹת אַרְנוֹן:
29 אוֹי־לָהּ מוֹאָב אֶבְדָּתָּ עִם־כְּמוֹשׁ נָתַן בָּנָיו פְּלִיטָם וּבְנֹתָיו בַּשָּׁבִית לְמֶלֶךְ אַמְרֵי סִיחֹן:
30 וַיִּירָם אֶבְדַּר חֶשְׁבּוֹן עַד־דִּיבּוֹן וַנְּשִׁים עַד־נֹפַח אֲשֶׁר עַד־מִדְּבָא:

Fire went forth from Heshbon, flame from Sihon’s city,
Consuming Ar of Moab, the lords of Bamoth by the Arnon.
Woe to you O Moab! You have perished, O people of Chemosh!
His sons are rendered fugitive, and his daughters into captivity to the Amorite king,
Sihon.
We hurled them, perished is Heshbon all the way to Dibon.
We laid waste all the way to Nophah all the way to Medba (Num 21:28-30).

38) נִפְחָה “Nophah.” The root means “fan flames, burn.”

39) The verb for “perish” is אָבַד *abad* (2X). There is parasonance and anagrammatic paronomasia with מוֹאֵב *mō’ab* “Moab” (2X), דִּבּוֹן *dibōn* “Dibon” and מֵדְבָא *mēdbāh* “Medbah” (Num 21:29-30).

40) The place name בְּמוֹת *Bamoth* suggests מוֹת *death* (Num 21:28).

41) The name of the god Chemosh means “subduer.” Here it is ironic.

42) Og, the king of Bashan, was the last of the Rephaim, a race of giants also known as the Anaqim (Num 13:22, 13:33; Deut 1:28). Rephaim also means “shades.”

43) The “gifted” victories suggested by וְהֵב *“Waheb,”* מַטְנָה *“Mattanah”* and נַחְלִיאֵל *“Nahaliel,”* find resolve in בְּיָדְךָ נִתְּתִי אֹתוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־עַמּוֹ וְאֶת־אֶרְצוֹ *“into your hand I have given him and all of his people and his land”* (Num 21:34).

44) בָּשָׁן *bāšān* “Bashan” appears twice in Num 21:33. It also means “serpent” (e.g., Deut 33:22, Ps 68:23). It appears with the definite article, i.e., הַבָּשָׁן, lit. “the Bashan/serpent.”

45) הֶשְׁבּוֹן *hešbōn* “Heshbon.” Paronomasia with בָּשָׁן *bāšān* “Bashan” (Num 21:34). Heshbon suggests a derivation from the root הָשַׁב *hāšab* “devise, consider, or think.”

Cf. הֶשְׁבּוֹן הֶשְׁבּוּ עָלֶיהָ רָעָה *“In Heshbon (hešbōn) they have devised (hāšbū) evil against it”* (Jer 48:2). In Numbers 21, readers must “consider, think about” Heshbon’s fate.

46) מַיִם רַבִּים *mayim rabbīm* “many waters” (Num 20:11) has cosmological overtones (e.g., Hab 3:15). See Herbert G. May, “Some Cosmic Connotations of *Mayim Rabbīm*, ‘Many Waters,’” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 74 (1955), pp. 9-21.

47) סֶלֶע *“rock”* or “Rock” (epithet for Yahweh), e.g., 2 Sam 22:2, Ps 18:3, 31:4, 42:10, 71:3.

Num 20:8 credits the rock with giving its waters: וְנָתַן מִיָּמָיו *“it (the r/Rock) will give forth its waters.”*

48) Sites whose names have been seen as invented include: וְהֵב *“Waheb,”* מַטְנָה *“Mattanah,”* נַחְלִיאֵל *“Nahaliel”* (Num 21:14, 21:18-19), and הַר הַחֹר *“Mount Hor”* (Num 21:4).

49) Miriam is identified only as Aaron's sister (Exod 15:20), and she and Aaron challenge Moses's authority and reprimand him for marrying a Kushite (Num 12:1-6).

50) Num 12:4 refers to the **שְׁלֹשָׁתָם** “three of them” (also the **שְׁלֹשָׁתְכֶם** “three of you”), before Yahweh separates Miriam and Aaron as the **שְׁנֵיהֶם** “two of them” (Num 12:5).

51) Exod 15:22-23: “They departed for the wilderness of **Shur** (**שׁוּר**); they **traveled** three **days** (**יָמִים**) in the wilderness and **found** no **water** (**מַיִם**). They came to **Marah** (**מַרְהָה**), but they could not drink the water of **Marah** (**מַרְהָה**) because it was **bitter** (**מָרִים**); that is why it was named **Marah** (**מַרְהָה**). And the people **murmured** against Moses, saying ‘What will we drink?’”

שׁוּר *šūr* Shur means “travel, journey,” or “look at, see, behold,” or “rise up against someone.” Each connects to traveled, found, murmured, respectively.

מַרְהָה *mārāh* Marah connected paronomastically to **מָרִים** *mārīm* “bitter.”

יָמִים *yāmīm* “days,” **מַיִם** *mayim* “water” (2X), **מַרְהָה** *mārāh* “Marah,” and **מָרִים** *mārīm* “bitter” each constitutes appellative paronomasia with **מִרְיָם** *miryām* “Miriam.”

מָרִים “bitter” and name **מִרְיָם** “Miriam” are identical in the pre-Masoretic text.

52) Exod 15:27: “And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water (**מַיִם**) and seventy palm trees (**תְּמָרִים**); and they encamped there beside the water (**מַיִם**).”

מַיִם *mayim* “water” occurs twice, also suggests **מִרְיָם** *miryām* “Miriam.”

תְּמָרִים *tēmārīm* “palms” echoes both **מָרִים** *mārīm* “bitter” and **מִרְיָם** *miryām* “Miriam.”

53) On the Song of the Sea and its use of paronomasia and grammatical features to imitate the sounds of water, see Scott Noegel, “Hidden Waters: The Sounds of Sinking in the Song of the Sea,” in press.