

*Diachrony in Biblical Hebrew* is an anthology, not a monolith. It gathers different perspectives from different scholars, all of whom display the importance of the discipline, but many of whom disagree with one another in the specifics of application of the methods they describe, and some of whom flatly disagree with each other as to certain methods, procedures, and conclusions. In other words, the book tells you what people are working on within the discipline of diachronic linguistics as it pertains to Hebrew, but does not provide a single viewpoint or conclusion. Accordingly, it must be used cautiously and appreciated for the progress report on a lot of researchers' findings that, in essence, it is.

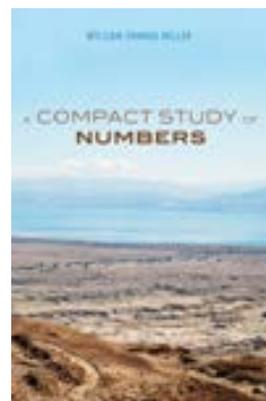
Douglas Stuart  
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary  
South Hamilton, Massachusetts, USA

---

William Thomas Miller. *A Compact Study of Numbers*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013. xv + 239 pp. £17.00/\$28.00.

---

Miller's volume on the book of Numbers delivers precisely what its title promises. This book proceeds through the text section by section, walking the reader carefully through various issues in a concise but readable format. Each section in the book treats a pericope of Numbers briefly, making this volume user-friendly considering its topic and aims. Adding to that is what Miller calls "the heart of this study guide," namely, the study questions provided in each chapter, for which answers are given at the back (p. xi). While this format takes some getting used to as an independent reader, it could be pedagogically effective in groups (see esp. p. xv.) Occasionally, Miller provides a "Conclusion" to a section or sections, and closes the book with a "Retrospective."



The stated purpose of the study is to make the "numbing cascades" of details in Numbers, like "ceremonies, fragmentary areas of jurisprudence, archaeology, geography, and history," more available to "average Christian readers" (p. ix). Miller rightly notes the relative lack of narrative structure to Numbers compared to other Pentateuchal books, along with its many genres and varied topics, and therefore sets out to help Christians gain a clearer sense of the book's purpose. Miller suggests that Numbers seeks to "credit God (working with Moses, the lawgiver) for as much guidance as possible as far back as possible" (p. x).

Miller depends heavily on Baruch Levine's two-volume Anchor Bible commentary, and thus adopts many of Levine's higher-critical views. Consequently, Miller's diachronic approach to Numbers makes critical issues a very prominent aspect of each chapter, and informs his evaluation of Numbers generally. Miller effectively adopts a tradition-historical approach to OT theology, viewing Numbers as a late book with multiple authors, editors, and community theologies whose particularities deserve primary focus over any unity within the book. For Miller, these sources are so numerous, ambiguous, and sometimes conflicted, that he bypasses a holistic approach as Levine does (*Numbers 1–20* [New York: Doubleday, 1993], 49), and treats "each chapter [of Numbers] on its own literary merit" (p. xii).

Some examples of the issues that occupy this study are in order. First, Num 5:1–31 contains several sections of Levitical laws, including the trial by ordeal for potential adulteresses in vv. 11–31. Miller colorfully points out this could strike modern readers as "superstitious and oppressive . . . useless for

us now as a rusted blunderbuss or a gruesome pile of damaged dinosaur bones,” and thus takes space to discuss it (p. 21). He briefly points to links between this text to the concept of breaking faith, but gives most space to probing the circumstances, procedure, and social rationale of the ordeal, even in the section’s answers (pp. 198–200). Amid the complexities of this text, it seems a missed opportunity to omit discussion of the holiness of God, his desire for a pure people, and the sanctity of the marriage covenant, even between God and Israel, much less forgiveness for the faithless.

Second, the narrative of Balaam is worth note, even if briefly. When it comes to the donkey’s rebuke of Balaam, Miller simply states that, while “amusing, [it] is a fable” that was awkwardly inserted and is easily skipped over (p. 105). Indeed, Miller largely does so (although see pp. 108, 222). Whether or not one thinks the donkey actually spoke, this scene is integral to the larger narrative, and therefore also to the point of the Balaam cycle. But Miller neglects even to offer possible reasons for its purportedly late insertion, or why it must be a fable. By contrast, over six pages are dedicated to a “review” of various Balaam traditions (pp. 118–24). In other cases as well Miller chooses not to discuss the possible narrative or theological significance of features of the biblical text broadly, but limits himself to narrow description.

To my mind, Miller’s target audience is unclear, which creates difficulties. He mentions his goal of providing “a cohesive guided tour or virtual classroom experience,” although this does not significantly illuminate the matter (p. xi). Miller goes on to speak of a “general reader” who is encouraged merely to “scan anything too technical” (ibid.), and later mentions designs for “study groups” more than “students in a traditional classroom” (p. xv). These statements suggest the indistinct purpose of this book. The heavy load of technical detail does not obviously complement Miller’s wish to help “average Christian readers” either (p. ix).

Unfortunately, it is precisely the average Christian reader who may be least helped by Miller’s study. He barely discusses how Numbers coheres with the themes of the Pentateuch, to say nothing of the rest of Scripture. Certainly the book of Numbers—its outline, composition, history, and theology—offers many complexities. But Miller seems to overcompensate, focusing so exclusively on a descriptive and genetic account of the book that he offers virtually no practical application for the Church. In effect, there is little about this compact study that is particularly Christian at all.

Indeed, this outcome is a general weakness of an exclusively tradition-historical approach to the OT. While he mentions praying and applying Scripture to life in a small group setting (p. xv), Miller’s presentation of the content of Numbers makes little appeal to any scriptural unity, much less authority, that might prompt such activity. Even the book’s “Retrospective” section is scarcely prescriptive, asking the reader to do most of the personal application as Miller focuses on social issues. The value of Numbers for Christian life and godliness is thus regrettably obscure, despite Miller’s thesis that the book credits God for Israel’s guidance.

In these ways Miller’s book seems somewhat lopsided, even while it provides useful scholarly information distilled from Levine. It seems that Miller’s study, neither a devotional nor a commentary, would be more useful for the interested layperson at least if read alongside, for instance, Gordon Wenham’s *Numbers*, Old Testament Guides (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

William A. Ross  
University of Cambridge  
Cambridge, England, UK