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Firstborn, Farmer, Soldier, Spy

The Place of Reuben in Israelite Tribal Discourse

The tribe of Reuben is a curiosity. Historically we know virtually nothing about it, yet Reuben plays an outsized role in literature as instigator of incest, victim of a one-of-a-kind natural disaster, and first of the tribes to claim its territory. In this essay, I will ask: Why is *Reuben*, of all tribes, depicted as Israel's firstborn? The answer to this question spans three books of the Pentateuch and has implications for how we understand its formation, so it is a fitting way to honor someone who has done so much to shape how we think about those issues. It is a joy to dedicate this essay to Thomas Römer, whose support and encouragement have done so much to make my own work possible.

1 Soldier, Spy

The early chapters of Numbers depict the Israelites preparing to leave the wilderness of Sinai. They are organized by tribe around the sanctuary (Num 2), they bring offerings to support its operation (Num 7), and, when it is time to depart, they move in the order they were camped (Num 10). This stretch of the wilderness narrative is priestly in character, and, as I have argued elsewhere, at least some of it is part of a version that is emplotted like an Assyrian annal. The scribe hijacked the very narrative form used to project the power of empire and turned it on its head, envisioning a fragmented and exiled people as whole again, a well-organized, twelve-tribe contingent of soldiers marching triumphantly home in service of their divine king. The fact that *Judah*—the tribe of kings—is listed first, leads the way, and camps in the place with access to the sanctuary's interior may seem out of place in a narrative that is priestly and exilic, the product of a time when Israel had no human king. Yet kingship discourse is quite at home here, given that Haggai and Zechariah envision a key role for Zerubbabel, heir to the Davidic line, in rebuilding the temple.¹

1 For the annalistic emplotment of P^g, see Erisman 2011: 136–184 and Erisman 2025. On kingship discourse, see Wilson 2017.

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The book of Numbers does not begin this way, however. Judah may be first in line in chapters 2, 7, and 10, but *Reuben* takes pride of place in chapter 1, where the tribes are organized in a way that is informed more by genealogy than politics—Reuben is identified in Num 1:20 as Israel’s firstborn, and this Reuben-first order appears again when representatives from each tribe are chosen to spy out the land.² How might we explain this variance? As Sara Milstein shows us in *Tracking the Master Scribe: Revision through Introduction in Biblical and Mesopotamian Literature*, it was common in the ancient Near East for scribes to transform a text by supplementing it at the very beginning. A new beginning can be accompanied by other changes throughout the work, but it shoulders the burden of changing how the work is received, which it can do by virtue of the fact that it comes first and sets expectations that readers carry with them into the rest of the text.³ The description of the military camp in Num 2 presumes a military census, as it organizes spatially all of the soldiers who have been enrolled. The term for muster (פיקוד), is repeated for every tribe and in all the summaries, so it is clear that the arrangement of the military camp was preceded by the census in Num 1. But it need not have been Num 1 *in its current form*. A new introduction can be crafted out of whole cloth, but it can also be achieved by substantively revising an existing text. The new introduction to Numbers, I will argue, was crafted by making some strategic adjustments to a Judah-first census.

One adjustment would have involved flipping the order of the Judah and Reuben groups (see fig. 1). The Judah-Issachar-Zebulun group is now in Num 1:26–31 and the Reuben-Simeon-Gad group in verses 20–25, but they could easily have come in the opposite order in a previous version of the text, an order that would match Num 2:3–16. An edit like this would not have left a fracture in the text of Num 1; only the variant order of the tribes vis-à-vis Num 2, 7, and 10 allows us to suspect that the text has been revised. Based on this factor alone, however, it is equally possible that Num 2 subverted the Reuben-first sequence in order to put the Judah group first.⁴ So we need a means of determining whether we really are dealing with a case of revision through introduction. Fortunately, there are several other signs that the census in Num 1 has been revised, and, as we will see, these signs are all related, which suggests that we are indeed dealing with a strategic, goal-oriented revision.

2 The order of the tribes in Num 13:3–16 is different from Num 1 in several ways: Gad is moved to the end, Ephraim and Benjamin are placed above Zebulun, and Joseph is linked with Manasseh, who is now separated from Ephraim. Space does not permit us to consider the logic behind these differences, but that list is tied to the innovation that happens in Num 1 by virtue of its Reuben-first order.

3 Milstein 2016.

4 Indeed, both arguments have been made. For the idea that the matrilineal order in Num 1 was shifted to a political order in Num 2, 7, and 10, see Jeon 2022: 169–171. For the idea that Num 2 was reframed by Num 1, see Kislev 2016: 196–197.

Numbers 2, 7, 10	Numbers 1
Judah	Reuben
Issachar	Simeon
Zebulun	Gad
Reuben	Judah
Simeon	Issachar
Gad	Zebulun
Ephraim	Ephraim
Manasseh	Manasseh
Benjamin	Benjamin
Dan	Dan
Asher	Asher
Naphtali	Naphtali

} Joseph

Fig. 1: The relative order of the twelve tribes in Numbers 2, 7, and 10 versus Numbers 1.

Joseph and the Levites

The other difference between the list of tribes in Num 1 and those in Num 2, 7, and 10 is that Ephraim and Manasseh are grouped as sons of Joseph (Num 1:10, 32; see fig. 1). This problematizes the count of twelve, which is persistent among lists of the tribes. Martin Noth long ago proposed that we might account for this persistence by understanding early Israel on analogy to the Greek amphictyony, a league of twelve tribes bound to each other in support of a common sanctuary.⁵ That analogy would leave us with two ways to understand Joseph's presence here and preserve the number twelve: either Levi was excluded and Joseph was split into Ephraim and Manasseh, or Levi was included and Ephraim and Manasseh were grouped together as Joseph. The fact that there are twelve tribes in Num 1, as in Num 2, *without* Joseph tips the scales toward the second option. We might view “of the descendants of Joseph” (לְבִנֵי יוֹסֵף) in Num 1:32 as a revision to the list that imitates the immediately following “of the descendants of Ephraim” (לְבִנֵי אֶפְרַיִם) in order to reframe it. This reading is strengthened by evidence that the military camp has been revised in order to make a tribe out of the Levites, who are otherwise not construed as such. The census concludes with a seemingly straightforward statement that the Levites “were not mustered among” the Israelites (Num 1:47). Indeed, they

⁵ For the amphictyony theory, see Noth 1966.

are not listed as one of the tribes in either Num 1 or Num 2; they simply camp around the sanctuary, a position appropriate for cultic professionals. Yet the Levites *are* counted in Num 3–4, where they are also depicted in genealogical terms and treated as a tribe. The statement that “the Levites were not mustered among them” in Num 1:47 can thus be read in two different ways, to say either that the Levites were not mustered *at all* or that they were not mustered *at the same time as* the rest of the Israelites.

This ambiguity sticks with us until after we have read the description of the military camp in Num 2, at which point we encounter information that helps us navigate it. The statement that the Levites were not counted with the others appears again in Num 2:33, as we prepare to begin reading more about the Levites in chapters 3–4. This recapitulation clearly has Num 1:47 in mind, because it uses the same unusual form of the verb “to muster” (פקד). Numbers 2:33 would have us believe that we read a command at the end of chapter 1: “The Levites were not mustered among the Israelites, just as the LORD commanded Moses.” But Num 1:47 is a statement, not a command; its basic idea is repeated in verses 48–49 and *recast* as a divine command, which extends through verse 53. Notably, while they are called “Levites” (הלויים) in Num 1:47 and 2:17, they are referred to as the “*tribe of Levi*” (מטה לוי) in this new introduction, and that colors how we read every mention of them that comes in its wake.

This repetition and reframing is a sign that the text was revised in order to introduce a new possibility for reading it, particularly with regard to the place of the Levites. The first reading—the Levites were not mustered *at all*—makes best sense when we consider that the census in Num 1 and the camp in Num 2 both involve a complete set of twelve tribes without the Levites. Yet a version of the text that follows Num 2:32–34 into chapters 3–4 requires the second reading—they were not mustered *at the same time as* the rest of the Israelites—because the Levites are, in fact, counted there. The description of the camp in Num 2 has been given a new introduction in Num 1:48–54, and the ideas established there are more fully developed in Num 3–4.⁶ The Levites, not initially numbered among the soldiers of the LORD, have been incorporated into their ranks as a tribe like all the others.

6 Readings of Num 1–4 have vacillated between a tendency to break it down into more fragments than seems plausible and a preference to see it as all of a piece; e. g., Kellermann 1970 and Achenbach 2003, respectively. But there is some evidence of revision in these chapters. My reading follows Seebass 2009, who also thinks that Num 1 (census) and 2 (military camp) are P^g, and that the focus on the Levites is a later development, and particularly Samuel 2014: 158–160 on the idea that the description of the camp has been reframed. I do not, however, agree with Samuel that the reference to the Levites in Num 2:17 is a later addition to the camp (159) or that the counting of the Levites (verses 14–39) is part of the base text of Num 3, which was revised in order to elevate Aaron. He

Tribal discourse, as we can see, played an important role in how scribes envisioned Israel's return from exile. A weak point in Noth's amphictyony hypothesis is that he understood the tribal lists to preserve information about early Israel and so tried to explain Israelite social organization prior to becoming a monarchy with a concept that is not attested until the seventh and sixth centuries BCE. The amphictyony analogy is more likely to have been deployed in order to convey the idea of Israel united around a sanctuary, and we find that idea in Num 2, a priestly text focused not on Israel's origins but on its reconstitution and restoration after the exile.⁷ Yet this vision did not remain static. Andrew Tobolowsky has shown us that shifts in the tribal concept are often ideologically driven, much like the inscribing and reconfiguring of Greek unity in the Hesiodic *Catalogue of Women*.⁸ We encounter one such shift as Num 2 is reframed and the Levites are *treated as* a tribe where they were not before. If the census in Num 1 were a wholly new introduction, Levi would be listed as one of the twelve, as would Joseph, and there would be no mention of Ephraim and Manasseh. As it stands, Num 1 has the same twelve-tribe list as Num 2, 7, and 10, which has been retrofitted in order to account for this shift.

The vacillation of Levi's tribal status in the early chapters of Numbers is usually taken as a sign that the Levites were removed from the tribal structure in order to assume a special clerical status. Tobolowsky notes that, "rather than a priestly fact, we have here a priestly *agenda*—a deliberate effort to enhance the status of Levi."⁹ The reframing of Num 2 is no doubt driven by an agenda, but it is not *this* agenda, which is informed by the assumption that the birth of Jacob's sons in Gen 29–30, 35, where Levi is a tribe, is either an older text or preserves older ideas about Israelite social structure. Our reading of the editorial work in the early chapters of Numbers tells a different story. The Levites have not been removed from the tribal structure in order to be promoted. They have been *added to it*, which should prompt us to wonder whether they are being demoted instead.

thinks that, if the counting of the Levites is part of the revision focused on Aaron, "a Levite would have to count as a זר [a 'stranger']," a term otherwise reserved for laypeople (165–166). Yet this is precisely the point. Counting the Levites makes them no different than the other tribes, and that move is part of the effort to elevate Aaron.

⁷ See discussion in Weisman 1992, esp. 116–119. Frevel 2021: 164 thinks that Deut 1:23 might be the earliest use of the amphictyony concept, but I am inclined more toward Weisman on this, because Deut 1:23 is a reference to the scouts episode, which I take as a revision to P⁶, which already has the twelve-tribe concept; see Erisman 2025.

⁸ Tobolowsky 2017.

⁹ Tobolowsky 2022: 56–57.

Chronology

Another sign that the census in Num 1 has been revised involves chronology. A year has passed since the Israelites left Egypt, and now they are preparing to depart from Sinai at the beginning of a new year. In the current text of Num 1, God instructs Moses to muster the Israelites on the first day of the *second* month (verses 1, 18). We can track this timing into the early chapters of the book, as they celebrate a second Passover on the fourteenth day of the *second* month (Num 9:6–14) before they depart from Sinai on the twentieth day, also of the *second* month (Num 10:11). In the midst of these preparations, they celebrate an initial Passover on the fourteenth of the *first* month (Num 9:1–5), after they have brought offerings for the dedication of the sanctuary, starting on the “day when Moses finished setting up” the sanctuary (Num 7:1)—namely, the first day of the *first* month (Exod 40:2, 17). We could read these latter two events as flashbacks in the context of a version of Numbers that begins a month later. Yet the Israelites bring their offerings (Num 7:10–88) and depart from Sinai (Num 10:12–28) in texts associated with the same Judah-first tribal order we find in Num 2, and we now see that this version of the text has been reframed in order to make the Levites into a tribe. Could this revision also have changed the chronology of the Israelites’ departure from Sinai?

The chronology in the early chapters of Numbers is a longstanding conundrum, but Nathan MacDonald has recently given us the key to its solution. His investigation of the literary history of the tabernacle narrative shows that the ordination ritual in Exod 29 took one day, but that it was reworked in Lev 8–9 into an eight-day ritual, the last day of which sets Aaron apart from other clerics in terms of his responsibilities. This transformation introduces a significant chronological problem because the eight-day ritual partially overlaps the twelve days of dedication offerings in Num 7. These offerings are followed by the dedication of the Levites in Num 8, which appears to have been deliberately positioned between the dedication offerings and the observance of Passover on the fourteenth of the first month. Importantly, the Levites are not ordained here but purified in order to serve Aaron in a subordinate role. The dedication of the Levites in Num 8 thus complements the hierocratic goals of the extended ritual in Lev 8–9.¹⁰

The new eight-day ordination ritual forced a shift in the chronology for the departure from Sinai. MacDonald explains the overlap between the eight days of ordination and the twelve days of dedicatory offering as a result of the scribe’s decision to turn back the clock in order to facilitate the dedication of the Levites but also separate it in literary terms from the ordination of Aaron (in Leviticus) by

¹⁰ MacDonald 2023: 187–213, 240–254.

putting it in Numbers because he views Num 7–10 as a coherent block of text.¹¹ Yet it looks increasingly like the early chapters of Numbers have been revised, and the subordination of the Levites to Aaron here complements the effort in the new frame for Num 2 to characterize them as no different than any other Israelite tribe. They may have the privilege of serving the sanctuary, but they are subject to encroachment just like everyone else.¹²

The reframing of Num 2 involves not only the demotion of the Levites but also adjustments to the tribal structure once led by Judah in order to include the Levites among the tribes. Because Num 7 and 10 have the same Judah-first list of tribes as Num 2, we should consider that they were *already part of the narrative* when the eight-day ordination ritual in Lev 8–9 was crafted to supplant the one-day ritual in Exod 29. That revision continued into Numbers, where it involved shifting the chronology to accommodate the eight-day ritual; events that once happened in the first month now happen in the second. The delay is put solidly in place in Num 1 and enhanced in Num 9:6–14 by a legal innovation that allows for a second observance of Passover.¹³ Yet its character as a revision becomes evident when we run into the Judah-first order of the dedication offerings and their overlap with the eight-day ordination ritual. The timing is a casualty of a revision that we can now see involves maneuvering Aaron into an exclusive role that sidelines his fellow Levites.

11 On the notion that Leviticus focuses more on the priests, particularly Aaron's role in the office of high priest, while discussion of how Aaron relates to the rest of the Israelites, including the Levites, is left for Numbers, see Frevel 2018: 96 and Hieke 2018.

12 Although the Levites camp around the sanctuary and serve it, they are not allowed inside, and they are not permitted to touch ritual implements, on pain of death; to try would be a form of encroachment. The demotion of the Levites also involves the redefinition of words in the new frame for Num 2, not just at the end of chapter 1 but substantively in chapters 3–4. Levine 1993: 153 and Milgrom 1990: 29 note one element of this, as the verb עָבַד ("to officiate" (e. g., in 1 Chr 9:28) comes to refer only to portage duties through the pairing of עֲבוּדָה with מִשְׁעָה. This wordplay is perhaps at its most tense in Num 4:4 ("This is the service of the Kohathites in the tent of meeting: the most holy objects"), the straightforward meaning of which is that the Kohathites perform rituals with these objects, yet that meaning is subverted by verse 15, where they are forbidden to touch these very objects. I explore similar treatments of שָׂרָת ("to serve" as cultic officiant versus at the pleasure of a king) and פָּקַד ("to muster" versus "to appoint") in Erisman 2025.

13 The itinerary notice in Num 10:12 narrates their departure, while verse 11 situates it in the second month. These need not be of a piece; verse 11 can easily be taken to reframe their departure (which would originally have taken place in the first month) in line with the chronological shift prompted by the eight-day ordination ritual in Lev 8–9. Notably, Num 10:11 also mentions guidance by the cloud, which Frankel 1998 takes as a feature of H, not P⁶—yet another sign that departure in the second month is part of a later priestly version of the wilderness narrative. Guidance by the cloud is painstakingly detailed in Num 9:15–23 on the heels of second Passover and could easily have been written by the scribe responsible for the chronological revision.

Who Took the Census?

Aaron also plays an explicit role in the revision of Num 1, where it is not altogether clear who took the census. The chronological fluctuation across the first ten chapters of Numbers has a parallel here in the fluctuation between singular and plural. God speaks to Moses alone in verse 1, and Moses alone musters the Israelites in verse 19 (ויפקדם), yet Aaron acts along with him in verses 3 and 17, and verse 44 indicates that the twelve chieftains assisted them. This problem is less acute than the chronological tensions. Despite the signs that Moses acts alone, God's command to take the census is plural (שאו in verse 2 and תפקדו in verse 3) and, as such, implies Aaron's involvement even before he is mentioned by name at the very end of verse 3. We find another singular verb with Moses and Aaron as its subject in verse 17 (ויקח משה ואהרן), prompting us to wonder whether Aaron might have been added here to a sentence whose verb and subject once matched in number. But use of a singular verb with a compound subject is not unattested, so it is equally possible that Aaron and the twelve chieftains they take here are native to the text.¹⁴

If Aaron was added to a version of Num 1 in which the census was taken by Moses alone, the edits were simple and well executed. He was added to verse 17 in order to make a compound subject, an edit that produces a syntactically acceptable text. He was also tacked onto the end of verse 3 along with direct address to Moses, while the preceding verbs in verses 2–3 were changed to plural simply by adding a *waw* (שאו את ראש כל עדת בני ישראל...תפקדו אתם לצבאתם אתה ואהרן).¹⁵ These texts read cleanly, with little sign that they have been revised. Yet we have two reasons to think that these are, in fact, edits.

One reason involves the twelve chieftains who assist with the census, who are enumerated in Num 1:4–16 and then “taken” by Moses and Aaron to help gather and count the whole community in verses 17–18. If they were added along with Aaron, verse 3 in the previous version of the text would have been immediately followed by “Moses took these men” (ויקח משה את האנשים האלה) in verse 17, and “these men” would have referred not to the twelve chieftains, as it does now, but to men in Israel, twenty years and older, who are able to bear arms (verse 3). Moses would have taken these men not to help him and Aaron count the whole community but in order to count *these men* (verse 19). Adding the twelve names in verses 4–16 changes the referent from the men being counted to the men assisting with the count. The end of verse 17, where “these men” are said to be “designated by name”—clearly a

¹⁴ For other examples, see Joüon 1993: § 150q.

¹⁵ Edits like this were also made in Num 12 and 20 in order to implicate Aaron in a text that did not mention him; see Erisman 2025.

reference to the twelve men just named—and all of verse 18 complement the addition of the chieftains in verses 14–16 by stipulating that they (plural, הקהילו) gathered the whole community in order to be counted. Two features of verse 18 alert us to the possibility that Aaron and the twelve chieftains were implicated as helpers in a census initially taken by Moses alone. First, here they assemble the whole community (כל העדה), not just men twenty and over who are fit for military service; a new idea about the nature of the census and who is counted is put into place here. Second, they gather the whole community on the first day of the *second* month, not the first, which ties the involvement of Aaron and the twelve chieftains to the chronological revision prompted by the extended ordination ritual in Lev 8–9.

The other reason to think that the role of Aaron and the chieftains as helpers with the census came into play as part of a revision is that MacDonald's analysis of the literary history of the tabernacle narrative reveals a version (P^s) in which the instructions for building the sanctuary were given to Moses alone.¹⁶ Indeed, Moses sets it up alone in Exod 40:1, on the first day of the *first* month, and we have seen that this version continues into Numbers. If it includes the dedication offerings in chapter 7, it stands to reason that it would also include a version of the census in chapter 1 that preceded the Judah-first organization of the military camp in chapter 2. The inclusion of Aaron thus appears to be tied to the revision that shifted the chronology, which in turn is tied to the revision in which the Levites are subordinated to Aaron and become one of the twelve tribes, forcing Ephraim and Manasseh to be framed as Joseph in order to maintain the count of twelve. This network of revisions increases the likelihood that the Judah and Reuben groupings were flipped so that *Reuben*, not Judah, comes first (see fig. 1), as part of the same agenda that drove the others.

2 Firstborn

Reuben is not just listed first. He is also explicitly identified as the firstborn of Israel (Num 1:20). This directs us back to the Jacob narrative, particularly the birth of his twelve sons in Gen 29:1–30:4 and 35:16–20, where the Reuben-first tribal system that is created through strategic revision in Numbers is laid out as though it were natural, an effort that is aided by the use of genealogy, which allows social constructs be articulated in kinship terms.¹⁷ This Reuben-first tribal-genealogical system is

¹⁶ See the summary of the different versions in MacDonald 2023: 83–98.

¹⁷ Tobolowsky 2017: 130–131 is inclined to see Num 1:20 as an isolated addition to an otherwise P^s text, but the Reuben-first order here (versus the Judah-first order of the P^s texts that follow) and

also fleshed out in Chronicles, and Tobolowsky entertains the possibility that the Chronicler is responsible for it, but he does not write off the possibility that it was first crafted in the Pentateuch.¹⁸ As he notes, this system is “positioned strategically to redefine the rest of biblical tribal discourse.”¹⁹ Our revision through introduction is not limited to the book of Numbers but begins in *Genesis*.

This revision includes not only the birth of Jacob’s sons but also a series of texts that track the Reuben-first tribal-genealogical concept into Exodus and anticipate the hierocratic concerns that drive the revision of the early chapters of Numbers. Genesis 35:22–26 offers a concise summary of the twelve sons, while 46:8–27 fleshes out the next generation, including Gershon, Kohath, and Merari, the three sons of Levi, who factor into the new frame for the military camp as porters more so than clerics, as well as Ephraim and Manasseh, who are now clearly *not* counted among the twelve. Exodus 1:1–6 offers another concise summary, while 6:14–27 lists the sons up through Levi in order to focus on the family of Aaron, whose exclusive role in the extended ordination ritual is a corollary to the dedication of the Levites to serve in a subordinate role. These texts, Tobolowsky notes, “frame materials, and they form transitions...without being characteristic of the majority of the discourse.”²⁰ They also involve substantive revision to the early chapters of Exodus and Numbers, where they color how we read what follows in both of those books.

This reading may have significant implications for the place of the Jacob narrative—or at least the birth of his sons—in the literary history of the Pentateuch.²¹ We can sense these if we track the tribal-genealogical concept into Numbers, where we can see the mechanics and the logic of the revision: it reconfigured what used to be commonly regarded as a base priestly (P⁶) version of Numbers in order to elevate Aaron and sideline the Levites, and this agenda was supported by shifts in the tribal concept—namely, the inclusion of Levi as a tribe and the grouping of Ephraim and Manasseh as Joseph. The birth narrative in Gen 29:1–30:4 and 35:16–20 lays out quite neatly what is achieved through revision in Numbers. One implication is that the birth of Jacob’s sons may not have begun life as a story about only the northern

its probable connection to other elements of revision suggest that we should view the reference to Reuben as Israel’s firstborn as part of this revision.

18 Tobolowsky 2016.

19 Tobolowsky 2017: 135.

20 Tobolowsky 2017: 135–136.

21 To what extent the Jacob narrative is implicated in this revision beyond the birth of the twelve sons is beyond the scope of this essay. Consideration of this question must weigh evidence that older northern material plays an important role (e. g., de Pury 2006, Blum 2012, Sergi 2018) alongside evidence for its southern focus (e. g., Na’aman 2014, Strine 2018) and its structural unity, which is notably centered on the birth narrative (Fishbane 1975).

tribes, as some scholars argue, not only because its full suite of twelve sons sets the stage for the revision in Numbers, but also because the Judah-first tribal concept being revised there already involves a full set of twelve tribes, unified in support of the sanctuary and led by Judah.²²

A second set of implications relates to the question of priestly layers in the Pentateuch. There is no doubt that the early chapters in Numbers are priestly, but, as more scholars have found an ending for P^g in Exodus or Leviticus, they have been viewed as a later priestly addition to it. Our reading of these chapters problematizes the idea that P^g ends prior to Numbers, especially because we find here a continuation of the P^g tabernacle narrative, in which Moses alone builds the sanctuary and musters the Israelites before dedicatory offerings are brought by all twelve tribes, led by Judah.²³ The fact that the new, Reuben-first tribal concept is put in place in a revision to P^g as part of a hierocratic agenda raises the possibility that the birth of Jacob's twelve sons in Gen 29:1–30:4 and 35:16–20 is also a late priestly text. Thomas Römer and Israel Finkelstein have characterized it as a post-priestly addition to the Jacob narrative, but the notion that it might itself be priestly in character would occur to *no one* based on the standard ways in which we have identified different strands of pentateuchal narrative—it contains no priestly language, no characters who are priests, no interest in ritual calendar or sacrifice.²⁴ Nevertheless, when we look at other factors such as ideological goals, strategies, and the use of genre (in this case genealogy) to achieve them, we can see that this birth narrative contributes to that hierocratic agenda in a very important way.

3 Farmer

Why would a hierocratic agenda involve giving *Reuben* pride of place as the firstborn of Israel? Reuben's position is associated with the southern tribes of Judah, Simeon, and Levi, which are often understood as a later addition to texts that consisted of only northern tribes.²⁵ Tobolowsky thinks that Reuben comes first because

22 I in no way mean to imply that the twelve-tribe concept in P^g came out of nowhere, just that its emergence is not to be sought in the texts we are reading here (the Jacob narrative and the early chapters of Numbers), which already assume it; other texts such as Judg 5, Gen 49, Deut 33, and Josh 13–19 would have to factor into that discussion. For the idea that the southern tribes were added to a narrative about the births of six or eight northern tribes in Gen 29–30, see Levin 1995 and Fleming 2012: 74–81, respectively.

23 For further discussion of the end of P^g, see Erisman 2025.

24 For the birth narrative as post-priestly, see Finkelstein and Römer 2014: 335–336.

25 See Judg 5, which lacks the southern tribes, and, e. g., the analysis of Gen 49 by Macchi 1999.

the author who prioritized Judah, Simeon, and Levi leveraged the existing northern tradition (which included Reuben, in his view) in order to present his southern strategy as though it were northern. This was effective because Reuben was “likely long destroyed by the time this southern tradition emerged.”²⁶ Yet the literature we have about Reuben indicates that he is not a northern tribe but a *Transjordanian* tribe, and one whose status among the Israelites was contentious.

In the face of contention about Transjordan’s status, Num 32 makes a rhetorical case for Reuben’s privileged place not as Israel’s firstborn but as the first tribe to settle. Transjordan, rich in “fields and vineyards,” was conquered in Num 21:21–31, and the Reubenites now request that Moses allow them to settle on this territory, which is suitable for their cattle. The usual reading of this text takes it as a neutral telling of how their settlement came about, which has either been supplemented by or combined with a source in which Moses critiques the Reubenites (verses 7–15). Yet, as I have argued elsewhere, Num 32 argues for the inclusion of Transjordan in the promised land, which is usually limited to Cisjordan.²⁷ Moses’s speech plays a key role, as he gives voice to concerns about allowing the Reubenites to settle so soon, becoming farmers and herders and establishing landed wealth before the Israelites have even crossed the Jordan. Moses is particularly concerned that, if the Reubenites fail to help the rest of the Israelites conquer and settle their land, it may jeopardize the land promise and fracture the community. This concern is assuaged as the dialogue continues, paving the way for full inclusion of the Reubenites despite having established themselves economically, as farmers and herders, sooner than the other tribes.

What might the Reubenites’ landed status have to do with the hierocratic agenda that drives the revision of the early chapters of Numbers? We can begin to answer that question by considering the place of Num 32 in the literary history of the Pentateuch. It clearly depends on the scouts episode (Num 13–14), because Moses leverages what happens there in order to impress upon the Reubenites that settling in Transjordan could dissuade the others from moving on into Canaan, and history could repeat itself, resulting in even further delay. I read the scouts episode as a revision of P^g that turns its triumphant march into tragedy. The conquest of Transjordan in Num 21:21–31 is also a revision of P^g, which was emplotted as an Assyrian annal in order to articulate a vision for return to the land after the exile.²⁸

²⁶ Tobolowsky 2020 (quote 44).

²⁷ Erisman 2019 and Erisman 2025.

²⁸ I articulate this literary history mainly in Erisman 2025, although my case for Num 21:21–31 is in Erisman 2011: 204–215.

This suggests that the rhetoric of Num 32 involves a situation at some point during the period of restoration.

It was common for priestly families during the Second Temple period to develop business relationships and to intermarry with landowning families in order to acquire wealth and status, and these relationships appear to have supported the temple economy in Jerusalem.²⁹ The Tobiads were just such a landed family during the Hasmonean period, and they may have descended from a Tobiah who, in the Persian period, was involved in just such a scenario, as the priest Eliashib allowed him space in the temple precinct for doing business. Yet this practice was contentious, and Nehemiah promptly evicted Tobiah upon his return from Babylon.

Zechariah's vision for restoration brings us closer to the likely period of our texts. Zerubbabel, governor of Judah and heir to the Davidic line, is depicted as rebuilding the temple, classically a royal activity. Yet his status as the Branch is anything but clear, because other parts of this vision involve Joshua ben Jehozadak, and by the end it is *the priest*, not the Davidic heir, who appears to wear the crown. This textual mess is difficult to sort out, but one way to disentangle it is to understand that the vision initially put its hope for restoration in Zerubbabel but was revised to maneuver Joshua into that role when the project was (or was perceived to be) faltering under Zerubbabel's leadership.³⁰ Joshua's "crown" is funded by three individuals who returned from Babylon, who may have provided the resources to maneuver Joshua into power such that he could ensure the success of this political project. We know little about these individuals, but they include a Tobiah, who may be a progenitor of the later Tobiads.³¹

Notably, the Tobiads make their home in *Transjordan*, a characteristic they have in common with the Reubenites, along with landed wealth that may have been established while the rest of the returnees were still struggling to settle. These parallels suggest a new way to understand Reuben's place in the reconfiguration of tribal discourse that happens in Genesis and the revision to the early chapters of Numbers. Tobolowsky is surely correct that Reuben's obscurity by this point in Israel's history allowed scribes to use this tribe in ways that would not have been plausible if it were still well known. Yet it is more likely, given the literature we have, that Reuben was used as a way to incorporate the Transjordanian Tobiads into Israelite tribal discourse than to northernize a southern strategy. Perhaps they were rewarded not only with the prospect of a memorial in the Jerusalem temple (Zech

²⁹ Fried 2004: 201–211.

³⁰ For more detailed discussion, see Erisman 2025.

³¹ Mazar 1957 argues that Nehemiah's Tobiah is the grandson of the Tobiah in Zechariah 6, who is in turn the grandson of a Tobiah mentioned in the Lachish letters prior to the exile.

6:14) but also with full inclusion in the community despite their residence outside of Israel's territorial boundaries as they had previously been drawn.³²

Reuben's position as Israel's firstborn, and as the first to settle and acquire wealth, can thus be understood as a way to mark the Tobiads' role in rebuilding the temple and restoring Israelite society under the political leadership of a *priest*. This reading fits the hierocratic agenda that drives the revision of the early chapters of Numbers—the shift in chronology to make room for an enhanced ordination ritual that gives the high priest a distinctive set of prerogatives and privileges, the inclusion of the priest as an administrator of the census (not coincidentally a tool for taxation as well as military conscription), the subordination of the Levites, and the concomitant shifts in tribal discourse. The Levites become a tribe like all the others, Ephraim and Manasseh are grouped as Joseph in order to maintain the count, and the Judah and Reuben groups are swapped so that the *Transjordanians* come first.

4 Conclusion

Our exploration of why Reuben comes first has implications for how Genesis is linked with the rest of the Pentateuch, a question in which Thomas Römer has been invested from the very start of his career. The string of texts that prioritize Reuben pursue a priestly agenda related to the restoration of Israel. They are implicated in Genesis, Exodus, and Numbers, and some occupy introductory positions. Based on this limited study, we cannot claim that the scribe responsible for them linked Genesis and Exodus for the first time, or that he was responsible for book divisions in the Pentateuch, but it is certainly possible and a question worth pursuing. What is striking, however, is that this effort is not “redactional” but involves the creation or transformation of a wide-ranging set of texts—Gen 27–35, Num 1–10, 21, and 32, and probably also the tribal allotments in Josh 13–19—in a politically motivated effort to craft literature that is implicated in a pivotal moment of Israel's history. What was there before this? Is there more to this literature? Did this scribe have the last word? I hope this study continues Thomas's work by inspiring others to track answers to these questions.

³² This would be akin to later efforts such as the portrayal of the Tobiads in the book of Tobit as participating in endogamous marriage and otherwise following the example of the patriarchs in Genesis, as detailed by Ego 2018.

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