

THE ONTOLOGICAL IMPASSE IN THE BOOKENDS OF NUMBERS

Tiago Arrais

Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University (EUA)

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Abstract: It is no easy task to address the ontological significance and implications of a specific Biblical text. The ontological importance of Biblical texts are assumed by scholars but vaguely described in its philosophical context. Throughout this study I will attempt to demonstrate how scholars generally agree that the textual evidence in the bookends of Numbers confirms that a "Divine resident" was ontologically in the midst of the Israelites. Secondly, how scholars leave aside the ontological significance of such affirmations making these untouched philosophical conclusions that depict the worldview of Biblical writers and their understanding of reality ultimately irrelevant. The ontological impasse I will address throughout this study finds significance in the backdrop of this scholarly confusion in relation to the presence of God in the world (the God-world relationship) as depicted in the bookends of Numbers, that is, in Numbers 5:3 and Numbers 35:34.

Keywords: Ontology, Context, Impasse, Presence.

O IMPASSE ONTOLÓGICO NO FECHO DO LIVRO DE NÚMEROS

Resumo: Não é uma tarefa fácil abordar o significado ontológico e implicações de um texto bíblico específico. A importância ontológica de textos bíblicos é assumida pelos estudiosos, mas vagamente descritas no seu contexto filosófico. Ao longo deste estudo, tentarei demonstrar como os estudiosos em geral concordam que a evidência textual no fecho do livro de Números confirma que um "residente Divino" esteve ontologicamente no meio dos israelitas. Em segundo lugar, o fato de os estudiosos deixarem de lado o significado ontológico de tais afirmações faz com que essas intocadas conclusões filosóficas, que retratam a visão de mundo dos escritores bíblicos e sua compreensão da realidade, em última análise, se tornem irrelevantes. O impasse ontológico abordado ao longo deste estudo encontra significado no cenário dessa confusão acadêmica em relação à presença de Deus no mundo (a relação Deus-mundo) como descrito no fecho de Números, isto é, em Números 5:3 e 35:34.

Palavras-chaves: Ontologia, Contexto, Impasse, Presença.



It is no easy task to address the ontological significance and implications of a specific Biblical text.¹ The ontological importance of Biblical texts are assumed by scholars but vaguely described in its philosophical context.² Throughout this study I will attempt to demonstrate how scholars generally agree that the textual evidence in the bookends of Numbers confirms that a “Divine resident” was ontologically in the midst of the Israelites. Secondly, how scholars leave aside the ontological significance of such affirmations making these untouched philosophical conclusions that depict the worldview of Biblical writers and their understanding of reality ultimately irrelevant.³

The ontological impasse I will address throughout this study finds significance in the backdrop of this scholarly confusion in relation to the presence of God in the world (the God-world relationship) as depicted in the bookends of Numbers, that is, in Numbers 5:3 and Numbers 35:34.⁴ Scholars have recognized in the book of Numbers the preeminence of the concept of “presence”.⁵ Numerous studies have also been done in relation to the ritualistic laws in Numbers as they are connected indirectly to the notion of

¹ Fernando Canale has devoted an entire doctoral dissertation to understand the ontological significance of Exodus 3:14, see *A Criticism of Theological Reason: Time and Timelessness as Primordial Presuppositions* (Berrien Springs: Andrews University Press, 1987). As for the concept of ontology I am not referring to ontology of Scripture itself, for more on this see John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), 12-14; and W. Cantell Smith, *What Is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 237. By ontology I refer to the basic concepts and notions one has of reality. The broadest philosophical categories, namely God, man, and world, are depicted in Scripture through the writings of the inspired authors. The task I will attempt to undertake in this study is to uncover the ontological significance of the God-world relationship as depicted in the bookends of Numbers. This way, in this study I will attempt to present a biblical portrayal of ontology as I address the concept of “being” and the concept of “space” and their interrelation as presented by the biblical text.

² Furthermore in this study I will demonstrate this lack of description in regard to the ontological significance of Biblical texts located in Numbers.

³ For more on the concept of worldview and its place in different interpretative traditions see David K. Naugle, *Worldview: The History of a Concept* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

⁴ Further study could be done to determine if such ontologically significant passages could present an underlying structure of the book as a whole. I have chosen these two passages due to their significance to the concept of God’s relationship to the world and their grammatical similarities.

⁵ For some of the studies that emphasize the notion of presence see: William Sanford La Sor and others, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1996), 170-171; Christoph Barth and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *God With Us: a Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1991); Katherine Doob Sakenfeld, *Journeying With God: a Commentary on the Book of Numbers*, International Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995); Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004). Gane even uses the language of marriage to describe God’s intimacy with the people of Israel in the wilderness cf. Ezekiel 16, thus taking the reality of the presence of God into a deeper level.



presence through the symbol of the sanctuary,⁶ yet the conceptual material presented in the book still needs further consideration.

Problem

The book of Numbers begins and ends with ontological remarks. In Numbers 5:3 the text affirms: "...in order that they will not defile their camp in which I dwell among them,"⁷ while in Numbers 35:34 the text reads: "...do not defile the land in which you dwell in, the land in which I dwell in, for I the LORD dwell among the Israelites."⁸ Commentators when translating these two specific texts demonstrate not only the textual differences both texts allow in translation but also the inconsistent ontological conclusions each translation implies.

There are two main problems I will attempt to address in this study, the first concerns the concept of "being"⁹ and the way in which the text describes in reality the presence of God. The question is, does the text of Numbers 5:3 and its immediate context provide any clues to clarify what kind/nature of Divine "presence" was disclosed in the wilderness? Is the text of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 describing God's "real presence", is it depicting a mere manifestation of his power, or is the written text the result of a psychological ecstatic experience of the author with the "divine"? This way, the first question I will address is related to the textual understanding and description of the concept of God in the God-world relationship through the textual portrayal of "being".

⁶ For more on the reality of ritual laws and the sanctuary in Numbers see: Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993); Frank E. Gaebelien, J. D. Douglas, and Dick Polcyn, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: With the New International Version*, 14 Vols., Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord: a Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity, Vol. 5 (Leiden: Brill, 1974); Baruch A. Levine, *Numbers 1-20: a New Translation With Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993); Jacob Milgrom, *Studies in Cultic Theology and Terminology*, Studies in Judaism in Late Antiquity (Leiden: Brill, 1983); Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers: The Traditional Hebrew Text With the New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990).

⁷ Personal translation.

⁸ Personal translation.

⁹ In regard to the concept of "being" I agree with Fernando L. Canale in "Philosophical Foundations and the Biblical Sanctuary", *AUSS*, no. 36 (1998), 185, as he affirms: "the notion of being determines the general nature of reality of which human nature, world, and God are regional aspects. The meaning of Being, then, determines the general meaning of reality to which any specific reality belongs."



The second question I will address in this study is related to the concept of “space”. I have observed different translations of the text of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 in relation to the location of God’s “dwelling” that assume a preconceived perspective of ontology that is not justified by its proponents. Even though the implications of the different translations cannot be seen at this stage the clarification of the *local* of God’s dwelling is key for a complete understanding of the God-world relationship in the text of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 for it clarifies the focus and intention of God’s relation to the world. This way, the second question will focus on the understanding of the “world” in the God-world relationship through the textual portrayal of “space”.

An Excursus on Phenomenological Exegesis

Before I delineate the methodological steps I will take to solve the problems this study attempts to clarify it is fundamental to introduce the concept of phenomenological exegesis in comparison to the most common notion of exegesis which I will call in this study hermeneutical exegesis. Hermeneutical exegesis involves the actions an interpreter takes to interpret the Biblical text following a set of “principles of interpretation” that normally follow a “previous” interpretation of the text.¹⁰ Phenomenological exegesis deals with the formulation of these pre-understandings that ultimately inform the “principles of interpretation” which assume a previous methodological evaluation of the text. These preunderstandings deal with the three main categories in philosophical thought God, man, and world. At this level of presuppositions one cannot use the same principles of interpretation that are used for hermeneutical exegesis since these principles assume a preunderstanding of God, man, and the world. Therefore, phenomenological exegesis

¹⁰ Anthony C. Thiselton in *Hermeneutics: an Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 125, comments on Wycliffe’s pre-understandings of Scripture: “Wycliffe argued that the interpretation of Scripture must follow the intention of its Divine author.” As one can notice, the understanding that Scripture has a “Divine author” already assumes a previous interpretation; it assumes a presupposition that the interpreter brings subjectively to Scripture. This way, the “principles of interpretation” an interpreter brings to the text already assumes a textual understanding. In itself this is not to be seen as something negative. I would even put into question a study that claims to be strictly objective. The task at hand is to allow the Biblical text to determine/judge which of these preunderstandings is in harmony with the text itself, and which are not, making Scripture the source and judge of any subjective insight brought into interpretation. For more on these methodological remarks see my unpublished paper “A New Place for Sola Scriptura: The Significance of Hermeneutical Presuppositions in Theological Method”.



allows one to identify these broad concepts of God, man, and world while permitting the biblical text to be the judge of one's own presuppositions through the concept of phenomenological *epoché*.

On the concept of phenomenological *epoché* Canale writes: "we need to place all previous scientific interpretations of the God principle under Husserlian *epoché*, that is, in methodological brackets."¹¹ Canale also adds: "the phenomenological approach aims to grasp what is being thought in the text."¹² This way, what is thought in the text has preeminence over the active subject that allows his own presuppositions to be "bracketed out" in order that the text is able to speak clearly and without subjective influence. Thus the use of phenomenological exegesis through phenomenological *epoché* allows the principle of *sola Scriptura* to have preeminence in the level of presuppositions where normal principles of interpretation that assume a pre-understanding of Scripture would not be effective.

Methodology and Purpose

Biblical scholars have recently identified the need to allow the biblical text to judge one's presuppositions before coming to an exegetical or structural conclusion of a specific text or book.¹³ Such "judging" of presuppositions by the text has been applied in different

¹¹ Fernando L. Canale, "Philosophical Foundations and the Biblical Sanctuary", *AUSS*, no. 36 (1998), 185. For further insight into the origins and first usages of *epoché* see: Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, The Muirhead Library of Philosophy (London, New York: Allen & Unwin; Humanities P., 1969).

¹² Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, 321.

¹³ The need for allowing the text to judge one's own presuppositions has been recognized by several scholars. I strongly agree with Thiselton in *Hermeneutics*, 8, as he writes: "The texts must translate us before we can translate them." Furthermore John H. Walton in "Equilibrium and the Sacred Compass: The Structure of Leviticus," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 11, no. 2 (2001): 293-304 affirms in the opening quote of his article abstract on the structure of Leviticus that "...interpreters have found it difficult to identify a cohesive structure to the book. One possible explanation may be that we have been deterred by presuppositions". The idea of presuppositions is not commonly debated among biblical scholars. Using grammatical and historical tools to interpret ANE texts, the outcome of a study normally shows little interest in relation to the question as it is normally eclipsed by subjective creativity and a lure to the many objective issues embedded in the text itself. Yet, through reflection on how traditional Christian presuppositions affect theological reasoning Walton identifies the starting point for a deeper understanding of the structure of such a complex book as Leviticus.



ways with different outcomes.¹⁴ The recent interest to evaluate presuppositions provides an opportunity for the biblical text to have a voice once again in this “judging” of presuppositions through the implementation of phenomenological exegesis.

In order to address the twofold problem I have raised earlier, namely the understanding of the concept of “being” and “space” in the bookends of Numbers, I will begin this study by outlining the manner in which scholars translate and understand the text of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 in relation to “being” and “space”, namely, the scholarly understanding of the God-world relationship in these two texts. Secondly, I will propose my own understanding of the issue of “being” and “space” in these two texts using phenomenological exegesis and what I would call “general rules of interpretation”, that is, textual, contextual, and intertextual analysis.¹⁵

Scholarly Analysis of the Concept of “Being”

The text of Numbers 5:1-4 introduces the divine concern for physical ritual impurity inside the camp as it supplements other laws already established in Leviticus 12-15.¹⁶ Numbers 35:30-34 describes the penalties and regulations for the people in relation

¹⁴ Two examples of this reality are: Samuel L. Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Toward a New Biblical Theology*, 1st ed., Religious Perspectives vol. 26 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). Terrien in his volume draws from strong anthropological and sociological structures and inevitably the outcome of his entire biblical theology is conditioned by the set of paradigms he chosen *a priori*. Remarks such as “the theology of presence is the anthropology of communion” and “(the resurrection) does not evoke the thought of Jesus *redivivus*, a mortal brought back for a season of mortal existence, but it sings the *exaltatio* of authentic humanity” [462] prove this outcome to be true. A second example is found in Frank H. Gorman, *The Ideology of Ritual: Space, Time, and Status in the Priestly Theology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 13-38. Gorman clarifies in the beginning of his first chapter, on methodology, that he draws his foundational understandings and paradigms from “cultural anthropology” [13]. In the outset, ritual is understood as “a complex performance of symbolic acts, characterized by its formality, order, and sequence, which tends to take place in specific situations, and has one of its central goals the regulation of the social order” [19]. Once more, the presuppositions rule over the understanding that the “central” goal of ritual is “social order”. Even though it is true that the social aspect of ritual needs to be valued, the concepts of sin, relation to God, and atonement are overshadowed by sociological concerns. Ritual, in the text, is already pre-conceptualized without giving heed to what the biblical text portrays ritual to mean, in theory as well as practice.

¹⁵ This threefold method will allow this study to focus on what the “text itself” affirms in relation to “being” and “space” as it determines which presuppositions I might bring to the text are indeed in harmony with it or not.

¹⁶ For more see Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 519-520; for a description of the specific diseases described in the text and their significance see Thomas B. Dozeman and others, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 2 (Nashville,



to murder followed by its direct consequences to the people and the land where “neither God nor Israel can abide there,”¹⁷ a result that is in direct relation to Leviticus 18:25-28. Nevertheless, the focus of this study is the textual portrayal of the God-world relationship, so at this stage, I will not enter into the ritualistic problems and discussions found in scholarly circles or its intertextual connections, but rather attempt to brake new ground in allowing the book of Numbers to express its textual indicators to the problems I have established earlier.¹⁸

The *Encyclopedia Judaica* correctly summarizes the two different positions among scholars regarding the concept of God’s “being’ or “real presence” among the Israelites in the wilderness.¹⁹ The first, God’s “corporeal presence”, is understood to be “the actual dwelling of God in His abode,”²⁰ as seen in the “Priestly traditions.” The second is the notion of presence as an “abstraction” that affirms that divine presence is not a physical ontic-presence that is in the sanctuary but rather it is related to the conception of God’s “name” being present, as seen in “Deuteronomist traditions.”²¹

With these two concepts in mind, commentators when dealing with the text of Numbers 5:3 as well as 35:34 present different points of view that flow from this twofold perspective.²²

TN: Abingdon, 1998), 60-61; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Ark, 1984); Milgrom, *Numbers*, 33, 344-346.

¹⁷ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 295. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 655, clarifies even more what this section is focused on as he writes that verses 30-34 “deal with two main issues: the matter of witnesses in a capital case and the matter of accepting ransoms in lieu of the lives of either the murderer or inadvertent killer... the section ends with a general statement of theological principles.”

¹⁸ I follow the premise that the Pentateuch is presented in its final form, being one single book, written by one single author, namely, Moses, as presented by the intertextual evidence found in the Bible, cf. Joshua 8:31; II Kings 14:6; II Chronicles 25:4. For more on the issue of authorship, dating, and introductory notes on the book of Numbers which I agree with see Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, Rev. and Expanded ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 2007); Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 475-476.

¹⁹ Moshe Weinfeld, “Presence, Divine,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 16 (Farmington Hills: Thomson Gale; Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 481-484.

²⁰ Ibid. 481.

²¹ Some of the texts that develop this idea are: I Kings 3:2; 5:17, 19; 8:17-20, 44, 48.

²² One should keep in mind that many of the commentators are not addressing the question of “being” per say, rather, they are commenting on the ritualistic motions of the wilderness camp as they make “ontological” remarks in the process that stem from a pre-understanding of God that is at most of the times not justified in their study. In this section I am interested in the commentator’s views in regard to God’s real presence in the camp in order to identify their understanding of “being” and reality. It is also true that others have criticized the nature of such an “ontological” connection when dealing with the Hebrew text



The first group of scholars agrees that what was manifested in the “midst” of the Israelites was the actual presence of God.²³ Milgrom comments: “the Lord’s consent to dwell in the Tabernacle must be matched by Israel’s scrupulousness in keeping the camp pure.”²⁴ Furthermore, commenting on the verb *shokken* “to abide” found in Numbers 35:34 he asserts that it “refers to the indwelling of God in His earthly tabernacle... from which derives the rabbinic term Shekhinah to represent the earthly Presence of the Deity.”²⁵ In the same direction Ashley affirms: the subject is the removal of that which is unclean (*tame*) from the camp – the dwelling of holy Yahweh.”²⁶ These scholars together with others apparently assume that the “holy” is inside the camp/land even though they do not express this reality in ontological terms. Walter Brueggemann is one of the scholars to explicitly address God’s “real presence” as a reality in the Israelite world as he affirms: “what may strike us as punctilious in this material is in the service of ‘Real Presence’. God’s own life will be in the very midst of Israel.”²⁷ Even though I cannot evaluate at this stage in which manner these authors understand “real presence” to function in philosophical terminology, it is still worth mentioning their rationale as to the reality of God’s presence in the Israelite camp.²⁸

since these ontological concepts had been introduced after Hebrew thought came into existence, for more on this issue see Tetsutaro Ariga, “Being and Hayah,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 11, no. 2-3 (1984): 267-288.

²³ For more see Carl Friedrich Keil and Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: The Pentateuch*, 10 Vols., Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975), 28; Bruce C. Birch, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 138. Victor P. Hamilton, *Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 321; Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary*, 1st ed., The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Vol. 4 (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 77.

²⁴ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 34.

²⁵ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 296.

²⁶ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 109.

²⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, Pbk. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 663.

²⁸ Others express the presence of God through the symbols of the sanctuary in comparison to ANE religious praxis, and should be the aim of further study as well. In describing the reality of Divine presence in the wilderness Bernhard Anderson affirms that the Israelite notion was characterized by two objects, namely, the ark of the covenant and the tent of meeting, yet he argues that “during the sojourn in the wilderness, specially at Sinai and Kadesh, the people undoubtedly borrowed patterns of worship and community organization from others” [118]. As the majority of scholars, Anderson seeks to find the answers for a proper understanding of the Israelite *cultus* in the cultures around them, thus conditioning the biblical material to the predominant culture around the Israelites in the wilderness. Even though there is a need for such comparisons, the biblical material cannot be subject to the ANE findings around Israelite worldview.



The second group of scholars emphasize that the concept of Divine indwelling in the camp had to do with the author's subjective perspective of that reality as the biblical text was written.²⁹ One of these scholars is Philip J. Budd, who in his commentary of Numbers gives emphasis to the "author's" theological understanding of presence rather than the reality of this presence as a literal phenomenon among the people. Budd affirms: "the principles affirmed here are a logical consequence of the author's theological understanding of the God who dwells at the center of the community."³⁰ Samuel Terrien, another proponent of this second position of Divine presence and the notion of "being" even though not speaking properly on the text of Numbers 5:3 writes:

In many cases, the "vision" or auditory experience which takes place is described in somewhat ambiguous terms, so that a forceful awareness of numinous proximity is expressed as if the god had "appeared" or "descended" and then "gone away." It is therefore not possible to ascertain from such literature whether a psychological mood, precisely on account of its concreteness, points to an inward emotion of a purely subjective character or to a suprasensorial perception.³¹

In relation to Numbers 35:34 Budd writes that "the idea of God's presence at the center of the community's life is important to the priestly author of Numbers... it is fitting that he should conclude his work on this note."³²

Even though the majority of the commentators favor the former group, where God is understood to be inside the camp/land, still both sides give no ontological explanations to their affirmations or ontological justifications for their conclusions. This way, scholars,

For more see: Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 4th ed., (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1986).

²⁹ The scholars that follow this line of interpretation normally use the historical critical method and other critical means to "demythologize" scripture from its supernatural *phenomena*. Therefore, it is not surprising to see this position being promoted in scholarly work since the basic notion is that the texts depicting the aspect of "vision" or "sight" of the divine belong to the Priestly school and the texts emphasizing the "hearing" or the "name of YHWH" belong to the Deuteronomist tradition. This way, these preconceptions not only cancel the unity of the Pentateuch as a whole but narrow the concept of divine presence in terms of theological "evolution". For more on these ideological progressions see Samuel Terrien's "The Elusive Presence", already mentioned in this study, where Terrien clearly demonstrates how a critical scholars understand the concept of presence along these pre-determined historical/anthropological paradigms. The outcome of Terrien's entire theology is narrowed as he allows ANE evidences and anthropological progressions to condition the biblical material and its theological significance.

³⁰ Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 5 (Waco: Word Books, 1984), 55.

³¹ Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, 63.

³² Budd, *Numbers*, 384.



even though using the same exegetical methodology, arrive at opposite conclusions. When the philosophical foundations of their thinking are not challenged or justified by Scripture no exegetical/theological unity will be in sight.

Scholarly Analysis of the Concept of “Space”

Since the previous section has dealt with how scholars understand the notion of “God” in the God-world relationship now I will briefly categorize how commentators view the issue of the “world” in the God-world relationship as they describe God’s presence in “space”.

The problematic of the issue of space is first noticed in the different translations of the text of Numbers 5:3.³³ The Hebrew אֲנִי שֹׁכֵן בְּתוֹכְכֶם is commonly translated in two different ways. The first emphasizes God’s presence “among the people” while the other emphasizes God’s presence “among the camp”. The translations can be better viewed in the table below:

	Presence among the People	Presence among the Camp
NKJ		“that they may not defile their camps in the midst of which I dwell.”
JPS Tanakh	“so that they do not defile the camp of those in whose midst I dwell.”	
Ashley³⁴		“that they might not defile the camp in the midst of which I am dwelling.”
Gane³⁵	“so they will not defile	

³³ There are no apparent contradictions in translation of Numbers 35:34, yet I will go back to this text throughout this section.

³⁴ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 109.

³⁵ Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers*, 518.



	their camp, where I dwell among them.”	
Budd ³⁶		“so that they do not defile the camp within which I dwell.”
Allen ³⁷	“so they will not defile their camp, where I dwell among them.”	

Knowing that scholars differ in translations of this text, it seems surprising that the issue of “space” is never addressed or given significant attention by commentators.³⁸ The different translations above lead to varied conclusions as to what the text of Numbers is trying to portray in reality. To exemplify some of these translations and their relation to the comprehension of the God-world relationship Stephen Sherwood affirms: “the modern reader may wonder what became of the unfortunates who were expelled from the camp, but the emphasis of the text is on the dwelling of the all-holy God in the camp.”³⁹ The conclusion that God is present exclusively within the limits of the camp/land seems to be informed by an anthropological preconception where the idea that humans, through rituals, have the sociological duty to “maintain” or “invoke” God’s presence in their camp.

Ashley comments on the passage and also emphasizes the location of God’s dwelling in spatial terms: “the subject is the removal of that which is unclean (*tame*) from

³⁶ Budd, *Numbers*, 53.

³⁷ Allen, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2, 738.

³⁸ Even though the issues I am addressing in this study are not observed properly by scholars, other issues surrounding this topic of “presence” should be given further attention. When speaking of the issue of space, some authors are divided on the polarity between locative and locomotive conceptions of the presence of the divine. For a fascinating study on the reality of this differentiation see Benjamin D. Sommer, “Conflicting Constructions of Divine Presence in the Priestly Tabernacle,” *Interpretation* 9, no. 1 (2001): 41-63. I will come back to the mobility of Divine presence further in this study.

³⁹ Stephen K. Sherwood, *Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2002), 145.



the camp – the dwelling of Holy Yahweh”⁴⁰. Budd also emphasizes the ritual impurity of the people as the point of the entire text: “all in contact with such a God must be ceremonially clean. All that is polluted offends his holiness, and must be rigorously excluded.”⁴¹ Dennis Cole not only claims that impurity is the major element of the passage but just as Ashley connects the removal of the contaminated individuals to the holiness of God: “ritual purification and separation from the center of holiness in the community is the focus of the passage.”⁴² Finally, Dozeman, after demonstrating the symbology behind the different diseases and their effects on the people affirms: “holiness emanates from God and is located in the tabernacle. Its sphere of power is in the camp. The incompatibility of holiness and death demands that all signs of the latter be banished from the camp.”⁴³ The presence of God here is explained as a spatial reality and depicted as an “emanated power” that leads impurity outside of “holy space”.

Even though some of these ideas of presence portrayed here are in the text, the lack of description among commentators on the spatial dynamics of this Divine presence leads to confusing theological conclusions as I will demonstrate later. Also, they assume a previous conception of God and the world that is not addressed in the comments of these authors in any form. As one moves to Numbers 35:34 the focus on the spatial notion of the “land” is even more emphasized. Milgrom seeing the connection of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 comments: “the land of Israel is also God’s residence and is therefore equivalent in holiness to His sanctuary. The Lord’s demand in the wilderness that the camp be kept pure (see 5:3) is, in Canaan, extended to all of God’s land.”⁴⁴ This way, the emphasis on the land is taken to its ultimate stage, where the land of Israel becomes the “equivalent” of God’s tabernacle.

It is interesting to note that even though both texts (5:3 and 35:34) have a similar syntactical sequence, some commentators are consistent in emphasizing God’s presence

⁴⁰ Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, 109.

⁴¹ Budd, *Numbers*, 55.

⁴² R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers*, The New American Commentary, Vol. 3b (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 111.

⁴³ Dozeman, *NIB*, 61.

⁴⁴ Milgrom, *Numbers*, 296.



in the land in both texts while others emphasize the land in Numbers 5:3 and God's presence among the people in 35:34, thus creating the "ontological impasse" I have pointed out in this study.

Phenomenological Analysis of the Concept of "Being"

This section will evaluate the text of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 in broad strokes contextually, textually, and finally intertextually in order to grasp what the "text itself" in its final form presents in relation to the issue of the God-world relationship. This exegetical sequence together with phenomenological *epoché* will allow the text to judge any presuppositions one might bring to the text in regard to the issues at hand.

The contextual evidence toward the ontological nature of the book of Numbers is overwhelming since the book itself begins with presence.⁴⁵ Numbers 5:1 is the eleventh speech Moses hears from God since the beginning of the book. The book itself is the record of several divine encounters and orders between God and Moses/Aaron in the context of the sanctuary and the tent of "meeting" which was the center of divine disclosure or "theophanies."⁴⁶ Milgrom adds: "'the tent of meeting', referring to the place where the meeting between God and man takes place... nothing in this term implies a face to face meeting. Moreover, the term bears a temporal as well as a spatial sense; *mo`ed* can refer to the time of a meeting."⁴⁷ By bracketing out, through methodological *epoché*, any of the preconceived ideas the author might have as to the nature of this "meeting" or even if the text meant a face to face meeting with God,⁴⁸ the book of Numbers begins by portraying an ontological historico-temporal reality through its textual description of Divine disclosure. The tent of meeting and the several Divine commands in the context of the passage confirm this ontological reality since God is speaking. Canale affirms:

⁴⁵ Numbers 1:1 in the NKJ version reads: "Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt..." The text of the book begins with a description of a Divine being speaking to a human recipient.

⁴⁶ For more see Milgrom, *Numbers*, 4.

⁴⁷ *ibidem*, p. 365.

⁴⁸ See Exodus 33:11 in the NKJ version: "So the LORD spoke to Moses face to face..."; Numbers 12:8 "I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; And he sees the form of the LORD".



It can be seen that revelation and Being “co-appear” in presence. Revelation points to the ontic appearance as source (origin) of theological knowledge. Foundational ontology considers the ontic appearance as Being. Neither Being nor logos, however, may stand in isolation from each other. Being and logos (revelation) belong together.⁴⁹

This way, since the book of Numbers begins with a Divine speech to a human individual it is safe to affirm at face value that the ordinances that include Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 are ontological in nature.

Also, it is safe to affirm that the presence of the “Holy” inside the camp led the Israelites to obey every command of the Lord.⁵⁰ To undermine the ontological significance of the presence of a Divine Being “speaking” to people, as portrayed in the text, is to neglect the center of the people’s motivation for obedience. It is this type of undermining of the ontological significance of the text that lead scholars to conclude through socio-anthropological paradigms, that this is simply how this specific group of ANE people described in their manner their relationship to the unknown.⁵¹ By allowing the text to speak for itself without any pre-conceived ontological agendas, and based on the fact that the majority of the scholars agree that these specific verses of the book indeed claim that God himself was in the camp/land, it is a dangerous thing to negate the historico-ontological reality embedded in the text. In fact, it is this historico-ontological reality portrayed in the text that gave significance to ritual and to the life of the Israelites.⁵²

Since the majority of commentators do not deny the textual description of God being ontologically present in the midst of the people I will briefly highlight some simple textual markers that confirm this reality. The question at this stage would be: does the Hebrew *אֲנִי יְהוָה שֹׁכֵן בְּתוֹכֶם* found in Numbers 5:3 and *אֲנִי יְהוָה שֹׁכֵן* in Numbers 35:34 imply God’s ontic presence among the Israelites? The majority of the scholars and myself would

⁴⁹ Canale, *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, 345.

⁵⁰ See Numbers 5:4, personal translation: “just as the Lord spoke to Moses, so they did.”

⁵¹ I have mentioned earlier how scholars such as Gorman, in *The Ideology of Ritual*, 19, follow this same line of reasoning concluding that the entire purpose of the ritual dynamics among the Israelites was to establish “social order”.

⁵² The entire idea of the “impure” being led out of the camp (Numbers 5:3) assumes that there was a “holy entity” ontologically inside the camp. If this ontological reality is eliminated the entire nature of ritual in the Old Testament is compromised.



answer yes. The use of the first personal pronoun אֲנִי unnecessary in the text because the idea that God himself “dwells” could easily be rendered by the verb שָׁכַן containing the idea of “God himself” dwelling among the people/land. The use of the first personal pronoun indicates a simple syntactical emphasis in the Hebrew text communicating the idea that “I myself, the LORD, dwell...” This straightforward textual indication is caught by practically all the translations and it should lead into a proper understanding concerning God’s presence being an ontological reality inside the camp as opposed to an ecstatic description by the author.⁵³

The intertextual evidence found in the text needs to be seen in light of Wenham as he writes that “it is impossible to discuss the theology of Numbers in isolation from the other books of the Pentateuch, particularly Exodus and Leviticus.”⁵⁴ Interestingly, the same first personal pronoun indicating a syntactical emphasis in connection to “the LORD” seen in Numbers 5:3 and Numbers 35:34 is found elsewhere in the Pentateuch. The usage of this common word in connection to “the LORD” intertextually could shed insight into the issue of “being” in the text of Numbers. In Genesis,⁵⁵ the first personal pronoun ascribed to “the Lord” normally implies a covenantal reality.⁵⁶ The covenantal nature of the use of the first personal pronoun together with “the LORD” where the Divine comes together with humanity is not limited to the narratives of Abraham or even to Divine covenants only, the use of the pronoun even without the connection to “the LORD” implies a covenantal motif between two human parties.⁵⁷

This idea of “being” expressed by God’s real presence inside the camp as a covenantal reality has been recognized by George Savran as he adds: “the divine-human encounter

⁵³ For more on the connection between the term *hayah* (that expresses the “I am”) in relation to God in its full ontological significance see: CANALE, F. *A Criticism of Theological Reason*, p. 321-349.

⁵⁴ WENHAM, *Numbers*, 39.

⁵⁵ There are scholars who believe the portrayal of “presence” in Genesis to be archaic and primitive, in response to this Sommer says: “Genesis uses narratives about the patriarchs in order to represent a particular religious ideal, and this ideal demands our attention even if it is a product of the Iron Age rather than the Late Bronze Age”. Sommer, *Conflicting Constructions of Divine Presence*, 51.

⁵⁶ See Genesis 15:7; 17:1; 26:24; 28:13.

⁵⁷ See Genesis 31:34.



was not described simply to enhance a particular individual, but was always done with larger societal (and covenantal) concerns in mind.”⁵⁸

This way, the intertextual indicator of the use of the personal pronoun together with “the LORD” could point to the fact that God’s “being”, His “real presence”, appears in a covenantal reality as expressed by Numbers 5:3 and Numbers 35:34. Contextually, textually,⁵⁹ and intertextually, the reality of “being” is affirmed as an ontological covenantal presence, and through the text of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 presents no apparent disagreement in relation to this reality. Translators and commentators agree that the text asserts that God was in the camp while their differences are in how or what kind of “presence” was disclosed. Simply put, God is portrayed in Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 as a God who apparently enters space and time in relation to mankind, and to be more specific, a covenantal relation to mankind.

Phenomenological Analysis of the Concept of “Space”

In this section I will move to the second part of the problematic of this study, the issue of “space” or the “world” in the God-world relationship. Leaving aside any inherent interest in “holy space”, “divine indwelling”, or any other pre determined understanding of the text by applying the concept of *epoché*, at this stage I will allow the text to present its clues as to the *locale* of God’s dwelling.

Contextually Numbers 5:3 could be seen as the result of a Divine promise first made in Exodus 25:8. Not only the textual content alludes to this connection but also its construction:

וְלֹא יִטְמְאוּ אֶת־מִחֲנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שׁוֹכֵן בְּתוֹכָם
Numbers 5:3

וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ וְשָׁכַנְתִּי בְּתוֹכָם

⁵⁸ George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative*, Journal For the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series (London, New York: T&T Clark International, 2005), 2.

⁵⁹ I could also add to this discussion the common supplementation of the verb *hayah* to the expression “I am the Lord”. Normally the verb *hayah* in the nominal clause is absent leading translators to naturally add the verb implying being and existence. The textual evidence is simple and straightforward, commentators see this reality and the different conclusions seen in their input is of theological/philosophical preconceptions normally not addressed as I have explained earlier.



Exodus 25:8

If the narrative sequence of the final form of the text is to be taken as it is, the text of Numbers could be seen as a consequence of Exodus 25:8, with God's mandate for the sanctuary to be built in the beginning, and His clear objective for its construction – to dwell among the “people”. In a textual note, the verb “to dwell” in Exodus 25:8 appears as $\gamma\tau\iota\beta\eta\kappa;\nu'w>$ in the *qal* perfect consecutive with future meaning⁶⁰ implying a future reality that carries the certainty of the past of the perfect form. In Numbers 5:3 as well as in 35:34 the verb appears as שָׁכַן that is, in the *qal* participle, implying a present reality/action.

In relation to the covenantal nature of Divine presence, the sanctuary itself assumes this reality previously portrayed in the use of the first personal pronoun as seen earlier. Since God's appearance carries ontological and covenantal connotations, the reality of the sanctuary naturally borrows these same elements since it is the place where the “glory” of God is manifested to His covenant people. When Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 is seen in the contextual background of Exodus 25:8 it is safe to affirm that the establishment of the sanctuary was foundationally about God dwelling among His people. The fact that God dwelt in the land was subject to the reality of His relationship to His covenant people. This emphasis on God's presence being connected with people cannot be lost in the subsequent portrayals of the rituals performed in the sanctuary of the wilderness or even as this reality shifts in Numbers 35:34 as the people move into the “Promised Land”.

In relation to the translation of the text of Numbers 5:3 and the problematic of the antecedent of בְּתוֹכָם meaning, “among them” in indicating the *locale* of God's dwelling and its motivation, I will firstly present the translation of the text of Numbers 5:3:

command the *Israelites* to remove from the camp any leper, anyone with discharge, and anyone defiled by a corpse, you will remove male and female and send them outside of the camp, in order that they will not defile their camp *in which I dwell among them*.⁶¹

⁶⁰ For more on the perfect consecutive with perfect meaning see: Jacques B. Doukhan, *Hebrew for Theologians: A Textbook for the Study of Biblical Hebrew in Relation to Hebrew Thinking* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1993); Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, Subsidia Biblica (Roma: Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 2006), 363.

⁶¹ Personal translation (emphasis added).



When the text allows for different places of emphasis in the translations, as seen previously in the table of translations, the context could help determine the correct rendition the text should follow. Besides the text of Exodus 25:8, which relates the “among them” to the Israelites, or the “people” Numbers 35:34 also confirms the emphasis on the “people” rather than the land. To see this connection I will also present the translation of the Hebrew text of Numbers 35:34:

וְלֹא תִטְמָא אֶת־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם יֹשְׁבִים בָּהּ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי שֹׁכֵן
בְּתוֹכָהּ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה שֹׁכֵן בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

“Therefore, do not defile the land which you dwell in, the land in which I dwell in, for I the Lord dwell among the Israelites.”⁶²

The textual evidence found⁶³ in this rich text at the end of the book of Numbers sheds further light into a possible solution to the problem. The text affirms that God dwells exclusively in the land, as some have concluded in Numbers 5:3, yet, in Numbers 35:34 this “dwelling” in the land is only a consequence to God’s dwelling among the Israelites. The focus of the passage informs the emphasis of Numbers 5:3, that is, God dwells among the people and His presence in space or in the land is a mere consequence of this ontological reality. Even though Clements attempts to disapprove the relevance of Israelite temples, his portrayal of the reality of a God among the people seems reasonable, Clements writes:

When we look at the Priestly interpretation of the doctrine of Yahweh’s presence with Israel, and compare it with earlier ideas on the subject, we become aware of a very significant change of emphasis. No longer is the presence of Yahweh associated with a particular place at all, but instead it is related to a cultic community... The ark, with its cover and cherubim, is not a place, however, but a piece of cult-furniture, which, like the tabernacle in which its set, is portable and moves about with his people.⁶⁴

⁶² Personal translation.

⁶³ It is also important to note that the text of Numbers 35:34 uses twice the verb שָׁכַן, to dwell”, marking once more the clarification of this issue.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Sommer, *Conflicting Constructions of Divine Presence*, 48, from R. E. Clements, *God and Temple* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), 120.



Sommer also adds an insightful note in relation to God's dwelling and its natural emphasis on the people rather than in "holy space", Sommer writes: "the tabernacle like the law itself, has its origins in the wilderness outside the land of Israel... the most important manifestation of YHWH occurred within the Israelite community, but not within their land."⁶⁵ Together with the law, the reality of Divine disclosure and "presence" was not bound to any spatial marker, it had to do primarily with people. Furthermore, the assurance that God would still dwell among the people in Numbers 35:34 takes the understanding of the God-world relationship into an even deeper level as the people are not centered around the sanctuary in this context but about to be spread out into the land.⁶⁶

These textual parallels depict the intention of the author in alluding to God's dwelling among the Israelites. Everything that followed, ritual, blood, orders and commands in relation to the sanctuary must be seen in the light of the fact that God chose to dwell among people. The commentaries that translate God's dwelling in the "camps", as seen earlier, miss the textual mark resulting in a contradictory theology. For them, the significance of the rituals and orders had to do with legalistic mandates that granted the people the possibility of "maintaining" God near in "sacred space", as a result of their ritualistic efforts. The text does not depict such a reality but rather a God who by His own initiative promised to come down and dwell among the people as seen in Exodus 25:8, made real in Numbers 5:3, and taken into a deeper level in Numbers 35:34. The movement seen in the text is not a dynamic "from below" where the people "maintain" God's presence through ritual and the delimitation of sacred space but rather it is a dynamic better understood "from above", where God chooses to dwell among His people. This movement "from above" also sheds further insight into the foundational understanding of the nature of ritual. Instead of being understood as legalistic steps to "maintain" God's presence in the camps, rituals are portrayed as conditions and

⁶⁵ Sommer, *Conflicting Constructions of Divine Presence*, 48.

⁶⁶ Further study needs to be done in regard to this idea, but apparently God's presence among a covenantal people spread out in the promised land as portrayed in Numbers 35:34 could be one of the first indicators in the Old Testament to the concept and reality of Divine omnipresence where the people, not centered around the sanctuary but spread out into the land, are still experiencing the very presence of God.



opportunities for people to experience God's willingness to dwell among them as He promised.⁶⁷

The removal of the "contaminated" from the camp in Numbers 5:3, through this understanding, is not seen as a negative legalistic mandate but rather as an opportunity for "the contaminated" to enjoy once more God's proximity by being absent from the camp for a time of cleansing. Even the cleansing accomplished outside the camp God himself provided through different means.⁶⁸ The ontological misunderstanding seen in the commentators' reconstructions of the text continues on to Numbers 35:34. Budd says: "these laws about homicide and asylum have to do directly with the land and its protection... proper steps must therefore be taken to ensure that the holiness of the land is secure."⁶⁹

The stress commentators give on the many details in the ritual portions of the text appears to be the result of a non credibility or value in regard to the ontological fact that God intended to dwell among His people and to the intertextual connections the text presents to support this covenantal reality. The ontological emphasis in the text is not on the camp, on "the holy", and not even in the laws themselves, all have a role and significance, but everything must be understood in the intertextual progression where God came down to be wherever His covenantal people were as the specific location of this encounter is seen as a consequence of this Divine intent not its foundation.

Conclusion

I have attempted to allow the text of Numbers 5:3 and 35:34 to be the judge of my own presuppositions by presenting the textual indicators of the God-world relationship through phenomenological exegesis. It seems appropriate to affirm that the text portrays an ontological reality in which God himself appears to be present among His people. The emphasis on the people gives significance to the issue of "space" as the *locale* of God's

⁶⁷ There are also moral, psychological, and spiritual lessons that rituals established among the people that cannot be addressed in this study.

⁶⁸ The God who orders the lepers, the people with discharge, and the ones contaminated by a corpse to leave the camp is the same God who provides for them the ritual cleansing that would allow them to approach God once more as seen in the red heifer sacrifice in Numbers 19.

⁶⁹ Budd, *Numbers*, 385-386.



dwelling but only as a consequence of the location of where His covenant people would be. The transcendence of God is affirmed since the concept of dwelling is assumed to be a temporal reality as mentioned earlier. Clements when speaking of God's dwelling in Zion affirms:

The belief in Yahweh's earthly dwelling-place on Mount Zion did not preclude the idea that he was a God of the skies, whose true dwelling was in the heavens, but rather it presupposed it. The earthly abode was a counterpart of the heavenly abode of Yahweh.⁷⁰

Furthermore, God's immanence is emphasized in a relational manner, flowing from God's freedom to come "from above" and "tabernacle" among his people, as seen in Exodus 25:8, being fulfilled in Numbers 5:3, and taken into a new dimension in Numbers 35:34 where God would follow His people into the land and still dwell among "them". The immanent understanding of God's "real presence" with his people must be seen in the background of covenant and time, as the concept of "space" and "land" become secondary⁷¹ to these previous categories.

The God-world relationship in the textual evidences of Numbers 5:3 and Numbers 35:34 can be summarized in terms of a God who is ontologically present among His covenantal people as the "world" or the land take a secondary role to this covenantal reality. This way, when observing the text as it is, in its natural progression, there is no ontological impasse. The ontological significance of God's "real presence" among His covenantal people as promised in the text of Exodus 25:8 finds its counterpart in Numbers

⁷⁰ Clements, *God and Temple*, 68. The same idea can be seen when speaking of the use of the imagery of the Cherubim inside the Holy of Holies, for more on this see Milgrom, *Numbers*, xxxviii; For more on the cosmical imagery seen in the temple see G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: Apollos: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 29-81.

⁷¹ For more on the reality and divisions of holiness in space as seen in the wilderness see Seth Daniel Kunin, *God's Place in the World: Sacred Space and Sacred Place in Judaism*, Cassell Religious Studies (London; New York: Cassell, 1998). Structuralists have attempted to delineate sacred space through a progression of diagrams indicating the static and dynamic presence of God in relation to the Israelites. Yet, focusing on the reality of sacred space they miss the mark as to the quality of God's initiative to dwell among the people from the beginning. It is this relational reality that joins both the static and dynamic realities of God seen in Kunin's work and the locative and locomotive realities in Sommers' work.



5:3 and is confirmed in Numbers 35:34 where even though the people are to be spread out into the land His presence would continue to “tabernacle” with them.