In The Wilderness: The Doctrine Of Defilement In The Book Of Numbers

Mary Douglas

This book is a classic work on the anthropology of the Book of Numbers. Up to now Bible scholars have tended to dismiss Numbers as Wellhausen called it the junk room of the Bible, and most contemporary commentaries feel called upon to say something about its apparent lack of coherence. This book argues that Numbers is composed of twelve alternating sections of law and narrative arranged in a ring, with each law and narrative section corresponding to its pair on the other side. Notes from a Hebrew scholar confirm the pattern by identifying objectively the beginnings and endings of law and narrat
The earth needs a detox because of the defilement of Esau. Mary Douglas argues that, like Leviticus, Numbers is actually a highly complex book arranged in a regular ring structure which plots the narratives and laws into 12 parts. She argues that it is only through an understanding of the ring formation of these parts that one can fully appreciate the meanings behind this complex work. For the term piecemeal see Purity and Danger, p. 41. Thus, Douglas articulates here a position quite different than that which she espoused in her 1993 article, where she views Leviticus as a simple ring (p. 11).