

Narrative Texts

Gary A. Rendsburg

ONE OF THE MOST DISTINGUISHING features of the Pentateuch is the consistent use of narrative prose, self-evident from the first chapter (the story of creation) to the very end (the death of Moses). The modern reader may take this for granted, since almost all storytelling in modern literature (in English, French, German, Hebrew, etc.) is presented in prose—whether fiction, historical fiction, or nonfiction. But such was not the case in antiquity, where almost all narrative literature was presented in poetry.

Ancient Epic Poetry

One need only consider the well-known corpora from Mesopotamia, Ugarit, the Aegean, and beyond. In Mesopotamia, both Sumerian and Akkadian myths and epics are written in poetic style.¹ The former include compositions such as the Eridu Genesis and the Descent of Inanna, while the latter include Enuma Elish (the Babylonian creation account) and the Gilgamesh Epic. This last-named composition was the literary classic of the cuneiform world: Its standard version comprises twelve tablets; about 200 copies (almost all fragmentary) have been found,² including as far away as at Emar, Ugarit, Hattusa, and Megiddo;³ and portions were translated into Hittite and Hurrian.⁴ Through such wide distribution of the Gilgamesh Epic, along with native traditions, the tradition of narrative poetry was fostered throughout the region.

In the West Semitic world, the earliest stories are the narrative poems from Ugarit: the Baal Cycle (spanning six tablets), the Kirta Epic (three tablets), and

1. See Jacobsen 1987 and Foster 2005.

2. See the magisterial critical edition by George 2003.

3. To cite one important study, see George 2007.

4. Beckman 2019.

the Aqhat Epic (three tablets), dated to the thirteenth century BCE.⁵ The discovery of this material almost one century ago has revolutionized biblical studies, and it remains the most essential cognate literature for the field.

As we travel west into the Aegean, we observe that the oldest Greek literature is in poetry: the epic poems of Homer—*Iliad* and *Odyssey* (usually dated to ca. 800 BCE, but with roots reaching back centuries), and the mythic poetry of Hesiod—*Theogony* and *Works and Days* (eighth c. BCE). All of these works predate the prose writings of Herodotus and Thucydides (both fifth c. BCE) by several centuries.

Still further west we reach Rome, where the oldest Latin literature once again is in poetry. The father of Latin literature is the poet Livius Andronicus (third c. BCE), who both translated Homer's *Odyssey* into Latin verse and composed his own Latin poems. The Roman poetic tradition reached its zenith with the trio Virgil (70–19 BCE), Horace (65–8 BCE), and Ovid (43 BCE–18 CE) and their famous compositions, respectively, *Aeneid*, *Odes*, and *Metamorphoses*.

This survey suffices to demonstrate the point that ancient storytelling was presented as poetry, rather than prose. To complete the picture, the oldest literature in various Western European literary traditions are also poems: *Beowulf* in English (eighth c. CE), *Hildebrandslied* in German (ninth c. CE), *La Chanson de Roland* in French (eleventh c. CE), and *El Cantar de mio Cid* in Spanish (twelfth c. CE).

Egyptian Influence on Israelite Narrative Style

In light of these ancient poetic traditions within the various literary-linguistic orbits, how does one explain why the people of ancient Israel recounted their stories in prose? And while our focus is on the Pentateuch, one notes the presence of prose narratives not only in the Torah, but also in the following books: Joshua, Judges, and Samuel.

The attentive reader may have noticed that I (intentionally) skipped over one of the most important ancient Near Eastern cultures in my survey above. I refer here to ancient Egypt, which is the exception to the rule, for from this cultural realm we have only narrative prose. Middle Kingdom texts include the Story of Sinuhe, the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor (Sh.S.), and the Eloquent Peasant,⁶ while New Kingdom texts include the Story of Wenamun, the Doomed

5. These major poems, along with shorter ones, are conveniently collected in Parker 1997.

6. The petitions of the Eloquent Peasant are in poetry, as befitting his elevated speech, a key factor in the story, but the narrative framework is in prose.

Prince, the Tale of Two Brothers, and the Capture of Joppa.⁷ Almost undoubtedly, the Egyptian narrative prose style served as the model for the ancient Israelite literati, as these remarkable and yet anonymous individuals set out to craft the brilliant stories that eventually found their way into the canonical books of the Torah (especially the sustained narratives found in Genesis and Exodus, and with smaller amounts incorporated into Numbers).

The question arises, then: But why? Why was the Egyptian literary style somehow acceptable to the Israelites, while the dominant poetic style of Canaanite and Akkadian literature was deemed not acceptable? To my mind, the answer lies in the contents of the literary compositions. Canaanite and Akkadian poetic myths naturally focus on the panoply of deities to be found in the respective pantheons. *Enuma Elish*, for example, focuses on Ea, Apsu, Tiamat, and Marduk (along with many other deities), while the Baal Cycle focuses on El, Asherah, Yam, Mot, Baal, Anat, and Kothar wa-Ḥasis (along with others). If we turn to the epics, which focus on human heroes (and thus are more in line with the biblical accounts), the gods and goddesses continue to appear. Thus, for example, in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, Ea, Enlil, Ishtar, and Shamash all play prominent roles, while in the Ugaritic epics of *Kirta* and *Aqhat* the deities also appear: El, Baal, and Asherah in the former, and El, Baal, Anat, and Kothar wa-Ḥasis in the latter. It appears that in the minds of the Israelite authors, these poems were too polytheistic and could not serve as a model for the revolutionary religion based on the worship of a single deity, YHWH.⁸

Now the knowledgeable reader may ask: But were not the Egyptians equally as polytheistic as the Canaanites and Babylonians? Do not Ra, Isis, Horus, Seth, Osiris, Hathor, et al., appear in many Egyptian texts? The answer, of course, is yes, although with one notable exception. If we turn to the Egyptian prose narratives, we notice something striking: the relative dearth of references to Egyptian deities by name. Moreover, when the divine is mentioned, the Egyptian scribes use the generic word *ntr* 'god, deity.' Thus, for example:⁹

- Sinuhe B 42–43 (upon Sinuhe's arrival in Canaan): "I do not know what brought me to this country; it is as if planned by god."

7. For standard translations of these tales, see Lichtheim 1973–1980 and Simpson 2003.

8. The reference to Dan'el, father of Aqhat, in Ezek 14:14, 20; 28:3 (*ketiv* דָּנִיֵּל *DN'L*, *qere* דָּנִיֵּיִל *daniyyel* 'Daniel' = the same vocalization used for the Jewish figure) demonstrates that the Israelites were aware of the Ugaritic/Canaanite epic. Various passages in Elijah's mocking of Baal in 1 Kgs 18 demonstrate a similar familiarity with Ugaritic/Canaanite myths.

9. Translations by Lichtheim 1973–1980.

- Sinuhe B 126 (Sinuhe to the ruler of Retenu): “Is there a god who does not know what he has ordained?”
- Sinuhe B 147–148 (upon Sinuhe’s defeat of the local champion): “It was the god who acted.”
- Sh.S. 5–6 (upon the ship reaching home): “Praise is given, god is thanked.”
- Sh.S. 113–114 (snake to the sailor): “It is god who has let you live and brought you to this island of the *ka*.”
- Sh.S. 143–144 (snake to the sailor): “One will praise god for you in the city before the councillors of the whole land.”
- Sh.S. 176 (with reference to the pharaoh, upon the sailor’s return to Egypt): “He praised god for me in the presence of the councillors of the whole land.”
- Eloquent Peasant 312 (at the end of the eighth petition): “That is the rule of god’s command.”
- Two Brothers 16.3, 17.10 (twice Bata’s wife says to the Pharaoh): “Swear to me by god!”
- Wenamun 1.38–39 (while in Byblos): “Now while he was offering to his gods, the god took hold of a young man [of] his young men and put him in a trance.”
- Wenamun 1.47–48 (while in Byblos): “When morning came, he sent and brought me up, while the god rested in the tent where he was on the shore of the sea.”

It is true that occasionally one finds reference to “the gods” in the plural (e.g., Shipwrecked Sailor 57). It is equally true that occasionally the names of individual deities appear, though typically only when the context demands such. For example, when Sinuhe writes to the palace toward the end of the tale (B 206–210), he invokes all manner of Egyptian gods (Ra, Montu, Amun, Horus, Hathor, Atum, Nut, et al.), as befitting the context of official correspondence. In similar fashion, Amun is mentioned throughout the Wenamun narrative, since the hero’s appointed task is to procure cedar wood in the Lebanon for the temple to Amun in Thebes.

In general, though, the narrative tales—especially the three that focus on the journeys of the three individuals (Shipwrecked Sailor, Sinuhe, Wenamun)—more commonly refer to “the god” generically, as the passages above demonstrate. Such generic language never occurs in the Ugaritic and Babylonian poetic epics, where individual gods repeatedly are named in their relationship with the human

heroes. For example, Kothar wa-Ḥasis fashions a bow for Aqhat, which Anat then desires, in fact, to the point of slaying Aqhat.

The model presented here implies that Israelite literati were aware of the Egyptian narrative prose tales. There is no direct evidence for this, although there is certainly sufficient indirect evidence.¹⁰ To be sure, the Israelite scribal tradition was very much indebted to the Egyptian one (most strikingly by using hieratic numerals in Hebrew inscriptions), so that one can imagine that the influences from the more dominant culture (Egypt) to the less prominent one (Israel) extended into the realm of literary style and composition.¹¹

An Israelite Epic Poetic Tradition?

One question remains: Did Israel ever possess an epic poetic tradition, which was abandoned in favor of the narrative prose storytelling style, or did Israel commence its literary tradition with the latter from the start? Good arguments may be made for both positions. On the one hand, the scenario presented here suggests that Hebrew narrative texts were written in prose from the outset. On the other hand, the snippets of narrative poetry embedded into the biblical prose texts (Exod 15, Judg 5, etc.), composed in an archaic Biblical Hebrew, suggest that earliest Israel did compose at least some epic poetry (somewhat akin to the Ugaritic material), although ultimately the prose system won the day, as outlined above. In addition to the two major poems just cited, note that when the Hebrew prose texts cite older works (the Book of the Wars of the Lord in Num 21:14; the Book of Jashar in Josh 10:13, 2 Sam 1:18), the quoted material is in poetry.¹² Given the good arguments in both directions, the present writer is agnostic on this issue and is content here merely to raise the question, while leaving it unanswered.¹³

Regardless of how the above question is to be determined, we may aver that the main Israelite literary tradition most obviously was narrative prose. The writers combined the historical narrative with epic features (items such as the baby in the bulrushes, the splitting of the Sea of Reeds, and so on), to which was added a theological overlay, so that one may visualize the overall effect via the arithmetical formula: biblical narrative prose = history + epic (+ theological overlay).

10. A stellar example of such evidence is the 110-year-old lifespan of both Joseph and Joshua (Gen 50:22, 26; Josh 24:29), in line with the ideal lifespan of an ancient Egyptian, for which see Janssen 1950.

11. In general, see Burke 2020.

12. The former snippet is exceedingly obscure, perhaps due to the even more archaic nature of the Hebrew phraseology in Num 21:14–15.

13. For the argument that ancient Israel did write epic poetry (although with reference to the opposing opinion as well), see Greenstein 2018.

Israelite Adaptation of Homecoming Motif

The remainder of this essay is devoted to the most important narrative theme from the ancient world, including its resonance in the Bible, especially in the Torah. I refer here to the journey motif and the subsequent *nostos* or homecoming motif.¹⁴ The great heroes of old left their homelands, then engaged in episodic journeys to one or more foreign lands, and then returned home in peace and success. The prime examples are Gilgamesh, Sinuhe, the Shipwrecked Sailor, Wenamun, and Odysseus,¹⁵ while a mini-version occurs in the story of Jacob in Gen 28–35.¹⁶

Most readers of ancient literature have not realized that the grand narrative arc of the Torah (and into Joshua) embodies this major narrative theme. Moreover, it is important to observe what the ancient Hebrew writers accomplished: They used the theme freely, but they converted the hero from the individual to the communal. All Israel leaves Canaan and sojourns in Egypt (Genesis–Exodus); all Israel leaves Egypt and collectively traverses the wilderness (Exodus–Numbers); and all Israel returns to settle the land of Canaan (Joshua). True, Moses dominates the narrative, but his life does not originate in the land of Canaan, and he never reaches the land of Canaan. Only all Israel as a collective unit engages in the journey and the *nostos*.

Moreover, the shift from the individual concern to the national one explains the use of the third-person narrative voice. Tales such as Sh.S., Sinuhe, and Wenamun are told in the first-person perspective of the protagonist. The stories of the Torah, and almost all other biblical literature, by contrast, are reported in the third person, thereby allowing for a greater narrative scope provided by an omniscient narrator.¹⁷

The ancient Israelite literati clearly were at home with the narrative traditions—both epic-poetic and prose-narrational—of the ancient world. In the end, they rejected the former literary style (even as they incorporated motifs such as the flood story, so well known from the Gilgamesh Epic and other Mesopotamian texts), and opted for the latter, for the reasons stated above. In so doing, however, the Israelite authors shifted the focus from the individual to the

14. The centrality of this motif was identified by Gordon 1965, 102, 111, 125, 223.

15. One will admit that Gilgamesh's return home is not as successful as the others, but the main point remains nonetheless. In addition, note that while we lack the end of the Wenamun story, all scholars agree that the hero must have returned successfully to Egypt, with timber in hand for the great gate of the temple to Amun.

16. Rendsburg 1984.

17. See especially Sternberg 1985. For additional considerations, see Pioske 2022, esp. 322–24.

communal and corporate entity of Israel as a people. In such fashion, the brilliant architects of the biblical prose narratives created an altogether new literature, a national narrative, one which continues to inform readers until the present day.

RETHINKING THE COMPOSITION OF THE PENTATEUCH

EDITED BY Kenneth Bergland, Roy E. Gane,
Gary A. Rendsburg, and A. Rahel Wells

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© 2026 by Kenneth Bergland, Roy E. Gane, Gary A. Rendsburg,
and A. Rahel Wells

Published by Hendrickson Publishers
3 Centennial Drive
Peabody, Massachusetts 01960
www.hendricksonpublishers.com

Print: 979-8-4005-0158-6
ePub: 979-8-4005-0159-3
Kindle: 978-8-4005-2593-3
Apple: 978-8-4005-2597-1

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Cover design by Karol Bailey.
Cover art is a medieval “carpet” page from the The Burgos Bible.

Printed in the United States of America.

First Printing — April 2026

Library of Congress Number: 2025950865

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Archaeological Periods</i>	<i>xix</i>
<i>Ancient Near East Map</i>	<i>xxi</i>
<i>Ancient Israel Map</i>	<i>xxii</i>

Introduction

1. Toward a Positive Model for the Composition of the Pentateuch 1
*Kenneth Bergland, Roy E. Gane, Gary A. Rendsburg,
and A. Rahel Wells*
2. A Brief History of the Documentary Hypothesis 10
Benjamin Kilchör and Joshua Berman
3. Pseudonymity in the Torah?: An Assessment of the Evidence
for the Composition of Deuteronomy 1:1–4:44 17
Daniel I. Block

Part One: Setting the Stage

4. A Multi-Lens Approach as Reading Strategy 31
J. Caleb Howard
5. The Textual Evidence 39
Sidnie White Crawford
6. Scribal Practices in Mesopotamia 48
Alan R. Millard
7. Scribal Practices in Ancient Egypt 55
James K. Hoffmeier
8. Composition Dating Through Content Analysis 62
L. S. Baker Jr.

Part Two: The Pentateuch and Ancient Near Eastern Literature

9. Literary Culture in the Biblical World: Linear Alphabetic Script 71
Richard S. Hess

10.	Literary Culture in the Biblical World: West Semitic Cuneiform	80
	<i>Richard S. Hess</i>	
11.	Narrative Texts	88
	<i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>	
12.	Legal Texts	95
	<i>Shalom E. Holtz</i>	
13.	Cultic Texts	101
	<i>Roy E. Gane</i>	
14.	Poetic Texts and Myths	109
	<i>Richard E. Averbeck</i>	
15.	Hortatory Texts	116
	<i>Ada Taggar Cohen</i>	

Part Three: Linguistic Dating of the Pentateuch

16.	Methodology for the Linguistic Dating of the Pentateuch	125
	<i>Aaron D. Hornkohl</i>	
17.	Loanwords	133
	<i>Benjamin J. Noonan</i>	
18.	Narrative Texts: Linguistic Dating	139
	<i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>	
19.	Legal Texts: Linguistic Dating	146
	<i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>	
20.	Cultic Texts: Linguistic Dating	155
	<i>Roy E. Gane</i>	
21.	Poetic Texts: Linguistic Dating	163
	<i>Elizabeth Robar</i>	
22.	Hortatory Texts: Linguistic Dating	171
	<i>Aaron D. Hornkohl</i>	
23.	Strata in Classical Biblical Hebrew	180
	<i>Yoel Elitzur</i>	

Part Four: Literary Styles in the Pentateuch

24.	Coherence and Composite Texts	193
	<i>Kenneth Bergland</i>	

25. Narrative Texts: Literary Styles	201
<i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>	
26. Legal Texts: Literary Styles	207
<i>Michael LeFebvre</i>	
27. Cultic Texts: Literary Styles	214
<i>Gerald A. Klingbeil</i>	
28. Poetic Texts: Literary Styles	220
<i>Elizabeth Robar</i>	
29. Hortatory Texts: Literary Styles	230
<i>Daniel I. Block</i>	

Part Five: Literary Structure and Unity in the Pentateuch

30. Genesis	243
<i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>	
31. Exodus	252
<i>Richard M. Davidson</i>	
32. Leviticus	259
<i>Gary A. Rendsburg</i>	
33. Numbers	267
<i>C. John Collins</i>	
34. Deuteronomy	273
<i>Benjamin Kilchör</i>	
35. Toward the Theme of the Pentateuch	280
<i>Roy E. Gane</i>	

Part Six: Innerbiblical Reuse in and of the Pentateuch

36. Methodology for Determining Reuse and Direction of Dependence	291
<i>Kenneth Bergland and Felipe A. Masotti</i>	
37. Intertextual Networking in the Pentateuch	301
<i>Benjamin Kilchör</i>	
38. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Former Prophets	309
<i>Koert van Bekkum</i>	
39. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Major Prophets	316
<i>John Bergsma</i>	

40. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Minor Prophets	322
<i>A. Rahel Wells</i>	
41. Innerbiblical Reuse Between the Torah and the Writings	328
<i>Kenneth Bergland</i>	
<i>Final Reflections</i>	
42. Reflections on Key Passages in the Pentateuchal Material	339
<i>Koert van Bekkum</i>	
43. The Role of Moses in the Composition of the Pentateuch	347
<i>Richard E. Averbeck and B. J. Hilbelink</i>	
44. Faithful Inquiry: Faith Commitment and Critical Analysis of the Pentateuch	355
<i>Joshua Berman and Daniel I. Block</i>	
<i>Appendix</i>	
<i>New Directions in Pooh Studies: Überlieferungs- und religionsgeschichtliche Studien zum Pu-Buch</i>	362
<i>David J. A. Clines</i>	
<i>Bibliography</i>	371
<i>Contributors</i>	423
<i>Index of Ancient Texts and Inscriptions</i>	425
<i>Index of Biblical References</i>	429