

Narrative Texts: Linguistic Dating

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THE DATING OF BIBLICAL BOOKS remains a hotly contested issue in the field of biblical studies, with the trend nowadays to date more and more biblical literature, including the Pentateuch, to the Persian period (sixth–fourth centuries BCE) or even the Hellenistic period (fourth–second centuries BCE)—though the scholars who use this approach typically ignore (intentionally?) the linguistic evidence.¹ For in the case of the books of Genesis and Exodus (the two Torah books dominated by narrative prose), all indications point to an early, rather than a late, date of composition.

One of the great advances in biblical studies in the past several decades is the groundbreaking work of Frank Polak, who has employed a linguistic-stylistic analysis to compare and contrast large swaths of narrative texts. In study after study, Polak has demonstrated two distinct narrative styles: the lean, brisk style of earlier biblical narrative, and the more complex, elaborate style of later biblical narrative.² Polak associates the former with the bard, an active storyteller who vividly brings his characters to life (consider Abraham and Jacob, for example), while the latter finds its home in the chancellery, with scribes relying on a more annalistic portrayal of the events (consider Hezekiah and Josiah, for example).

The earlier, lean, brisk style is characterized by a series of short clauses, connected via parataxis, mainly through the use of the conjunction “and.” The later complex, elaborate style is characterized by more intricate clauses (typically with a higher ratio of nouns per verbs), often linked via hypotaxis—that is, subordination (what are known as “dependent clauses” in English), introduced by

1. This approach is embodied especially in the essays collected in Baden and Stackert 2021, for which see my critical review in Rendsburg 2023.

2. The basic pathfinding study remains Polak 1998, though with many more recent studies as well.

such Hebrew particles as כִּי *ki* ‘because,’ and אֲשֶׁר *’asher* ‘that, which, who, whom’ (their usual meanings).

The latter style is to be seen in the material which dates to the end of the monarchy (end of the book of Kings, narrative portions of Jeremiah, etc.), and then in even more elaborate fashion in the books of the Persian and Hellenistic periods (Esther, Ezra–Nehemiah, Chronicles, Daniel, etc.). The text of Genesis and Exodus, however, almost always reflects the earlier style, with its lean, brisk narration.³ While almost any chapter in the book would suffice to illustrate the point, let us use Gen 29:1–6:⁴

1 And Jacob lifted his legs; and he went to the land of the Bene-Qedem.

2 And he saw, and behold, a well in the field, and behold, there were three herds of flock lying beside it, for from that well they would water the herds; and the stone was large on the mouth of the well.

3 And the herds would be gathered there, and they would roll the stone from the mouth of the well, and they would water the flock; and they would return the stone to the mouth of the well to its place.

4 And Jacob said to them, “My brothers, from where are you?”; and they said, “From Haran are we.”

5 And he said to them, “Do you know Laban ben Nahor?”; and they said, “We know.”

6 And he said to them, “Is there shalom to him?”; and they said, “Shalom, and behold, Rachel his daughter coming with the flock.”

Note similar short verses constructed of short clauses later in the chapter, e.g.:

11 And Jacob kissed Rachel; and he lifted his voice, and he cried.

22 And Laban gathered all the men of the place, and he made a drinking-feast.

In many of these clauses, one finds a one-word subject (or no explicit subject, when a pronoun is embedded in the verbal form), a one-word predicate and a one-word object, thus, e.g., “and Jacob lifted his legs,” “and Jacob kissed Rachel,” “and he lifted his voice,” “and he made a drinking-feast.” On several occasions a single verb comprises the entire clause, as in “and he saw,” and “we know” (the latter in direct discourse).

3. For relevant articles see Polak 2015, 2016.

4. The translation is mine, with an attempt to adhere as close to the Hebrew original as possible.

There are very few noun groups (that is, with two or more nouns collocated, either in a list, in construct, or in apposition); in our passage one finds only עֲדָרֵי צֹאן *ʿadre šoʾn* ‘herds of flock’ (v. 2), כָּל הָעֲדָרִים *kol ha-ʿadarim* ‘all the flocks’ (v. 3), and רַחֵל בִּתּוֹ *raḥel bitto* ‘Rachel his daughter’ (v. 6). In the entire episode of Gen 29:1–30, there are only four instances of אֲשֶׁר *ašer* (vv. 8–10, 27) and six instances of כִּי *ki* (vv. 2, 9, 12 [2x], 15, 21).⁵

While space does not permit a full analysis of a chapter from later biblical literature, one may note the following basic information and relevant examples from the account of Josiah’s reforming activities in 2 Kgs 23:1–28. Noun clauses abound, so that a single clause has one verb and multiple nouns; while hypotaxis and even double hypotaxis occur repeatedly (to wit, the particle אֲשֶׁר *ašer* occurs 39x, often with 2 or 3 instances per verse). A sample verse, 2 Kgs 23:8 serves to demonstrate the point:

וַיָּבֵא אֶת־כָּל־הַכֹּהֲנִים מֵעִרֵי יְהוּדָה וַיִּטְמֵא אֶת־הַבָּמֹת אֲשֶׁר קִטְרוּ־שָׁמָּה הַכֹּהֲנִים מִגֶּבָע עַד־בְּאֵר שֶׁבַע וְנָתַן אֶת־בָּמֹת הַשָּׁעָרִים אֲשֶׁר־פָּתַח שָׁעַר יְהוֹשֻׁעַ שַׂר־הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר־עַל־שְׁמֹאֵל אִישׁ בְּשַׁעַר הָעִיר:

And he (Josiah) brought all the priests from the cities of Judah, and he defiled the high-places at which (אֲשֶׁר *ašer*) the priests offered incense there, from Geba until Beer-sheba; and he destroyed the high-places of the gates, which (אֲשֶׁר *ašer*) were at the entrance of the gate of Joshua, the governor of the city, which (אֲשֶׁר *ašer*) were on one’s left at the gate of the city.

Note that this verse includes four verbs and nineteen nouns. In fact, in the second half of the verse a single verb וְנָתַן *wa-nataṣ* ‘and he destroyed’ governs eleven (!) following nouns.

The key point is this: Nowhere in the narrative prose of the Torah does one find a single verse approaching this kind of complex syntax. To the contrary, as we have seen in the Gen 29 episode above, the authors of the Torah narratives employed a much simpler and yet more lively writing style, bespeaking the earlier period, before the introduction of details associated with the later chancellery style.

The foregoing has treated the larger issues characteristic of the pentateuchal prose narratives. If we look at several specific linguistic items, a similar dichotomy may be observed.⁶

5. By contrast, note eight instances of כִּי *ki* in the 19 verses of Neh 6 and seven instances in the 18 verses of Neh 8, in order to highlight the increased use of this form in a Persian-period composition.

6. For much of the argumentation here, see Hendel and Joosten 2018.

First, the Biblical Hebrew particle *פֶּן* *pen* ‘lest’ occurs throughout the narratives in the earlier biblical books (almost always in direct speech), but to all intents and purposes *never* in later biblical literature. Thus: 17x in Genesis, 13x in Exodus, 3x in Joshua, 5x in Judges, 1x in Ruth, 13x in Samuel—after which there is a dramatic drop-off in attestations, limited to 2 Kgs 2:16, 10:23, 1 Chr 10:4 (and note that in this last passage the Chronicler is simply using his source material found at 1 Sam 31:4). Which is to say, the latest usage of *פֶּן* *pen* ‘lest’ in a narrative text relates to the reign of Jehu in the ninth century BCE (2 Kgs 10:23). As the above data demonstrate, if Genesis and Exodus were written during the later biblical period, one could hardly expect the text to use the word *פֶּן* *pen* ‘lest’ so frequently (30x).

As a second example, consider the word *לְקראַת* *liqra’t* ‘toward’ (used often in a greeting scene with the sense “to meet”), attested as follows in the earlier biblical books: 7x in the Torah, 2x in Joshua, 3x in Judges, 23x in Samuel, 7x in Kings (with the latest of these occurring in 2 Kgs 16:10, in the material about Ahaz, who reigned during the eighth century BCE)—and then once again *never* in Esther, Ezra–Nehemiah, Chronicles, Daniel, etc. (except where the Chronicler again uses his source material from Samuel; namely, at 1 Chr 19:10–11, 17). Were the pentateuchal narratives composed during the later biblical period, one would need to explain the regular use of the form *לְקראַת* ‘toward.’

As a third and final example, consider the expression *הִנֵּה נָא* *hinne na’* ‘behold now,’⁷ used by speakers when entreating someone, e.g., Abram to Sarai in Gen 12:11, Sarai to Abram in Gen 16:2, Isaac to Esau in Gen 27:2, etc. In narrative books, this expression is limited to early biblical prose only, per the following distribution: 9x in Genesis, 2x in Judges, 4x in Samuel, 7x in Kings, though not after 2 Kgs 6:1—that is, within the Elisha story (set in the ninth century BCE). By contrast, *הִנֵּה נָא* *hinne na’* ‘behold now’ is totally absent from the late narrative books of the Bible. Once again, we may ask, were the pentateuchal narratives—or in this case at least Genesis—composed during the later biblical period, one would need to explain the regular use of the expression *הִנֵּה נָא* *hinne na’* ‘behold now.’ Speakers continue to entreat people in the later narrative books (e.g., Mordecai to Esther in Esth 4:13–14), but they simply do not use the phrase *הִנֵּה נָא* *hinne na’* ‘behold now.’

We could multiply such examples of linguistic data points (indeed, see further below), but let us return to an issue raised by Polak, though with a look at something more specific. One of the ways that noun groups become more

7. The two elements of the expression are almost always connected with *maqgef* (hyphen), as shown here.

frequent in the later books is via the constant use of apposition, especially when a person is mentioned, with the repeated use of his name *and* his rank, title, or position—though such is not the case in the Torah narratives.

Thus, for example, מֶלֶךְ אֲבִימֶלֶךְ *'abimelek* 'Abimelech,' king of Gerar, occurs 24x in the Abraham and Isaac narratives, but only on three occasions is his appellation provided: מֶלֶךְ גֵּרָר *melek gərar* 'king of Gerar,' when he is first introduced at Gen 20:2, and מֶלֶךְ פְּלִשְׁתִּים *melek pəlištim* 'king of the Philistines,' when he is reintroduced at 26:1 and at 26:8. Otherwise, he is called simply אֲבִימֶלֶךְ *'abimelek* 'Abimelech' (21x). Similarly, בָּלָאק *balaq* 'Balaq' occurs 40x in the Balaam narrative (Num 22–24), but only thrice is he called מֶלֶךְ מוֹאָב *melek mo'ab* 'king of Moab' (Num 22:4, 22:10, 23:7).⁸

When one compares pericopes from the later period, one sees a marked contrast. Thus, for instance, in seven of the eight times that Hilkiyah the priest is mentioned in 2 Kgs 22–23 (during the reign of Josiah), he is referred to as "Hilkiyah the priest," using either the long form of his personal name (חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַכֹּהֵן *hīlqiyyahu hak-kohen*—22:4, 8, 14; 23:4, 24)⁹ or the short form thereof (חִלְקִיָּה *hīlqiyya hak-kohen*—22:10, 12). Only once does his name suffice without further descriptor, and in this sole instance, one notices that the name + title combination occurs earlier in the verse (22:8).

In similar fashion, several chapters later Nebuchadnezzar is introduced, but he always bears the royal appellation: נְבוּכַדְנֶצְצַר מֶלֶךְ בָּבֶל *nəbukadneššar melek babel* 'Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon' (2 Kgs 24:1, 10–11; 25:1, 8, 22).

From still later in the development of Hebrew prose writing, with Neh 8 as our sample text (from the Persian period), one observes a similar pattern with reference to the main character Ezra. Once again, almost always his name is followed by a descriptor, thus, either עֶזְרָא הַסֹּפֵר *'ezra' has-soper* 'Ezra the scribe' (4x: vv. 1, 4–5, 13) or עֶזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן *'ezra' hak-kohen* 'Ezra the priest' (1x: v. 2), and in one instance with both titles עֶזְרָא הַכֹּהֵן הַסֹּפֵר *'ezra' hak-kohen has-soper* 'Ezra the priest the scribe' (v. 9). Only on one occasion does his name suffice (v. 6).

The point of this exercise is to show the following: If the Torah were written during the late monarchic period (time of Josiah and his successors) or during the Persian period (time of Ezra), one would expect that Balaq and Abimelech would be referred to consistently (with an occasional exception) by the name + title combination as 'Balaq king of Moab' and 'Abimelech king of Gerar' or

8. The first of these uses a slightly different formulation מֶלֶךְ לַמּוֹאָב *melek la-mo'ab* 'king of Moab'.

9. More accurately in three of these verses (22:4, 8; 23:4), his title is actually חִלְקִיָּהוּ הַגָּדוֹל *hīlqiyyahu hak-kohen hag-gadol* 'Hilkiyah the high priest', but we leave that point aside here, so as not to complicate matters.

‘Abimelech king of the Philistines,’ though as we saw above these phrases occur only very occasionally, usually when the character is first introduced or after the passage of some time.

Very briefly I may mention two other linguistic contrasts between the Torah narratives and the late compositions. This pair of passages is quite revealing:

Gen 12:15 וַתִּקַּח הָאִשָּׁה בֵּית פַּרְעֹה

wattuqqah ha-’išša bet par’o

‘and the woman (Sarai) was taken into the house of Pharaoh’

Esth 2:8 וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ

wattillaqah ’ester ’el bet ham-melek

‘and Esther was taken into the house of the king’

The context of the two passages is strikingly similar, though note the grammatical difference: In the former, earlier passage, the passive verb is expressed through the *qal* passive (known from Ugaritic and early biblical literature), while in the latter, later passage, the passive verb is expressed by the *niph’al* (which increasingly serves to express the passive in later stages of the language).

Next, see above, at 2 Kgs 23:8, especially this verbal usage: וַיִּנְתֹּן אֶת־בָּמֹת וַיִּשְׁעָרִים *wə-nataṣ ’et bamot haš-šə’arim* ‘and he destroyed the high-places of the gates,’ with the verb comprised of conjunctive וַ- *wə-* ‘and’ and suffix-conjugation וַיִּתֵּן *nataṣ* ‘he destroyed,’ what I call *wə-qatal*. This formulation is used elsewhere toward the end of the book of Kings (23:4–5, 10, 12, 14–15; 24:14; 25:29) and in later books (see, e.g., Ezra 3:10, Esth 9:25) to express the past tense with some regularity.¹⁰ This usage is exceedingly rare in the Torah narratives (limited to Gen 21:25, 28:6); again, were these texts written at a later period, one would expect many more instances of *wə-qatal* to express the past tense.¹¹

All of this linguistic-stylistic evidence points to the relatively early composition of the pentateuchal narratives. Until now I have not proposed an absolute date, but rather merely have contrasted the anteriority of the Torah texts to the late monarchic, exilic, and postexilic texts. Can we be more precise?

To my mind, we can, though one needs to incorporate into the discussion some nonlinguistic material. As I have written on several occasions,¹² the con-

10. Joosten 2012, 227–28

11. As students of Biblical Hebrew learn early on, the form *wəqatal* (often called the *waw* consecutive) normally expresses the future (Joosten 2012, 288–301), including throughout the Torah (e.g., Exod 4:14–15 [4x]).

12. See most recently Rendsburg 2019, 443–67; 2021, 14–15.

tent of the pentateuchal narratives (especially Genesis) reveals the contemporary setting of the writer(s) as tenth-century Jerusalem. The promise from God to Abraham that kings would descend from him and Sarah (Gen 17:6, 16), the boundaries of the land promised to Abram (Gen 15:18), the allusions to Jerusalem (Gen 2:13, 14:18), the connections of Moab, Ammon, and Edom to Israel (Gen 19:37–38, 25:30), and more, all reflect the united monarchy of David and Solomon. The narratives (in some earlier form) may hark back to premonarchic times, but they achieved their final status during the tenth century.

RETHINKING THE COMPOSITION OF THE PENTATEUCH

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

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