

Narrative Texts: Literary Styles

Gary A. Rendsburg

AS INDICATED IN MY ESSAY in chapter 11 of this volume, the most striking aspect of biblical narrative texts is the use of prose writing. Most storytelling in the ancient Near East (ANE) and ancient Mediterranean was conveyed in poetry, with the exception of the ancient Egyptian prose tales. These latter compositions (such as *Sinuhe*, *Shipwrecked Sailor*, *Wenamun*, etc.) influenced the ancient Israelite literati to adopt the prose style to convey their national story. The result was the exquisite prose storytelling that dominates Genesis and the first half of Exodus, with smaller sections scattered in Numbers (and in fact beyond into the following books, especially Judges and Samuel).

Biblical narrative, however, differs from its Egyptian analogues in several important ways. First, the Egyptian tales almost always focus on a single individual, while the biblical narratives expand the focus. Thus in Genesis, even when the focus is on specific individuals, such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, the family context is present, with wives, children, siblings, servants, and so on (all with names and personalities of their own), all adding depth to the account. More broadly, especially for the Torah's most sustained narrative—namely, the account of the exodus and the wilderness wanderings—while Moses clearly plays the prominent role, in essence the story is the story of a nation, not of their leader alone.

Secondly, the biblical narratives bring together the three key elements of history, epic, and theology. Here we must bracket the stories of Gen 1–11, which lie outside the realm of history; that is to say, while scholars may debate into which epoch Abraham or Joseph or Moses should be placed, there is a broad consensus that such is at least possible, in contrast to stories about Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Noah, which fall outside history as we know it. From Gen 12 onward, though, the three elements of history, epic, and theology comingle

to create the engaging narrative. To focus on just the first two, if the story were all history per se, it would, to be honest, make for boring reading (compare, for example, some of the laconic material about later Israelite and Judahite kings in the book of Kings); while if the story were all epic, it would border on the fantastical (compare, for example, the Egyptian Tales of Wonder on Papyrus Westcar, with a wax crocodile turning into a live crocodile, and with a lector-priest splitting the waters to reveal the princess's lost pendant).

The beauty of the biblical narratives lies in the blending of these two features into a coherent story. To be sure, the historian in me wishes that there were more of the former (that is, history) and less of the latter (that is, epic), for if such were the case, we may be able to situate the exodus into a specific timeframe, without debate.¹ In such writing, one would expect the names of the individual pharaohs (that is, the pharaoh of Joseph, the pharaoh of the enslavement, and the pharaoh of the exodus) to be mentioned. In like fashion, one would expect a credible chronology, and not, for example, the 430 years mentioned in Exod 12:40–41, a figure which cannot possibly be correct if Moses and Aaron are the great-grandchildren of Levi (see Exod 6:16–20).²

But the literary scholar in me would decry such a presentation of Israel's history, for we would lose the absolute beauty of the biblical narrative. It is, to repeat, the blending of the history and the epic which accords the narrative texts their remarkable literary brilliance. Somewhere in Exodus there must be a historical kernel, but as readers we are so much the richer for all the various epic features which provide the account with its allure and attractiveness. So many of these epic features are to be found in other ancient storytelling, especially in Egyptian texts.³ The baby in the bulrushes (Moses) finds a close parallel in the foundational myth of ancient Egypt—namely, the need for Isis to place her baby Horus in a basket amongst the reeds on the banks of the Nile in order to protect him from the wicked machinations of his uncle Seth. Many of the plagues feature in Egyptian texts, including the Nile turning to blood, the three days of darkness, and indeed the killing of the first born. Moses' parting of the Sea of the Reeds finds a close parallel in the Boating Party, one of the tales of wonder included in Papyrus Westcar (see above). To provide one example from Canaan, note that the grossly inflated number of 600,000 adult Israelite males leaving Egypt (Exod 12:37)—in some sort of military fashion, as implied by the term רָגְלִי הַגְּבָרִים *ragli hag-gəbarim*, approximating English 'men on foot' (see also חֲמִשִּׁים

1. For my own view, which posits an exodus (or exoduses) in the early twelfth c. BCE, during the early years of the Twentieth Dynasty, see Bietak and Rendsburg 2021.

2. See Rendsburg 1990.

3. For more detailed treatments, see Rendsburg 2006b; Rendsburg 2015.

hamušim ‘armed’ [Exod 13:18] and *עַל צְבָאוֹתָם* *al šib’otam* ‘by their armies’ [Exod 12:51])—finds a congener in the even more grossly inflated number of 3,000,000 men who comprised the army of King Kirta of Ugaritic lore (CAT 1.14 IV 16 *tl̥t mat rbt* ‘three hundred myriads’).⁴

To repeat once more, for the point requires constant attention, the combination of a historical kernel and an epic overlay is what makes the narrative texts of the Torah (and Joshua) so singularly magnificent. Egyptian prose tales, Ugaritic epic poetry, and Babylonian epic poetry (such as the Gilgamesh Epic) are all worthy of study and literary analysis, but to my mind (and that of others, such as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg),⁵ they do not rise to the literary brilliance of the biblical prose narratives.

In addition to the above there is the theological factor, for we must never lose sight of the presence of the divine hand, certainly when such is explicit and visible, as in the exodus narrative (see Exod 8:15; 9:3, etc.), but also when such is less visible, almost to the point of lacking altogether, as in large swaths of the Joseph story (though see Gen 45:5–8; 50:20, both passages expressed by Joseph).

All of the above may be visualized via the mathematical formula, which I typically write on the board while teaching:

$$\text{BIBLICAL NARRATIVE} = \text{HISTORY} + \text{EPIC} (+ \text{THEOLOGY OVERLAY})$$

The above comments offer insights into biblical narrative at the macro-level—that is, via an analysis of the literary canvas as a whole. For the remainder of this essay, I turn to an analysis more at the micro-level, as we survey selected literary-linguistic features employed by the writers in their crafting of the prose accounts of the Torah (and beyond, especially in the books of Judges and Samuel and in the Elijah-Elisha narratives in Kings).

The most salient feature is the use of short clauses (and hence short verses), which are heavily verbal and less nominal, and which use parataxis to advance the storyline. Almost any pericope in Genesis will serve to demonstrate the point, for which see the passages from Gen 29 in chapter 18 above. As observed there, a clause typically has a single subject, a single predicate, and a single object, resulting in short, crisp storytelling.⁶

4. For the larger context, see Gordon 1952, esp. 213.

5. Alter 1981/2011; Sternberg 1985.

6. This style stands in sharp contrast to later Hebrew style, which developed during the late monarchy and even more so during the Persian period. In texts from these epochs one finds a less verbal and more nominal style, with longer clauses (and hence longer verses), and with a much higher use of hypotaxis, or subordination, akin to dependent clauses in English. For more detailed analysis, again see chapter 18 in this volume.

Such is the style of the Torah narratives, almost without exception, in what Frank Polak calls the lean, brisk style of storytelling associated with the bard in an oral setting (even as the texts almost undoubtedly existed in written form as well).⁷

Given the oral-aural nature of storytelling in ancient Israel (and elsewhere in the ANE), the bards delighted in employing wordplay and alliteration at various points in the narrative to enhance the reading (or perhaps better, the listening) pleasure. A delightful example occurs at Gen 29:10–11. Near the end of v. 10 the text reads *וַיִּשְׁקֵת אֶת-צֹאן לָבָן wayyašq ʾet šoʾn laban* ‘and he [Jacob] watered the flock of Laban,’ while at the start of v. 11 the text reads *וַיִּשְׁקֵב יַעֲקֹב לְרַחֵל wayyiššaq yaʾaqob la-raḥel* ‘and Jacob kissed Rachel.’ Note the alliteration between *wayyašq* ‘and he watered’ and *wayyiššaq* ‘and he kissed.’⁸ The aural nexus is enhanced by the wordplay, given the two objects of the respective verbs, as one realizes that *רַחֵל raḥel* ‘Rachel’ also means ‘ewe,’ thereby paralleling, as it were, the word ‘flock’ in the prior clause. Indeed, this wordplay was anticipated in vv. 6 and 9 earlier, for while v. 6 *וַיֵּבֶן רַחֵל בֵּיתָא בָּצָהָ עִם-הַצֹּאן wə-hinne raḥel bitto baʾa ʾim haš-šoʾn* may be rendered ‘and behold, Rachel his daughter coming with the flock,’ note how the word *בָּצָה baʾa* evokes the sound that sheep make! I easily could imagine a presenter of this text emphasizing the word as /baaaʾa/ (see also v. 9).⁹

The examples just provided involve common words in the language. Let us turn our attention, accordingly, to the employment of rare words, even unique words, within the narrative. More often than not, these words are used to produce alliteration, as seen in the following examples: a) Gen 21:7 *מִלַּל millel* ‘say, utter’ (as opposed to the root *מ-ר-א ʾ-m-r*) echoing *וַיִּמַּל wayyamol* ‘and he circumcised’ (v. 4) and *וַיִּגְמַל wayyiggamal* ‘and he was weaned’ (v. 8); b) Gen 24:21 *מִשְׁתַּאֵה mištaʾe* ‘gazing’ echoing *וַתִּשְׂאֵב wattišʾab* ‘and she drew (water)’ (v. 20) and *לִשְׁתּוֹת lištōt* ‘to drink’ (v. 22); and c) Num 25:8 with the collocation of *קִבְּבָה qubba* ‘tent’ (used only here in the Bible) and *קִבְּבָה qeba* ‘belly’ (used elsewhere only once).¹⁰

The ancient Israelite literati were masters of the Hebrew language in other ways as well. They readily engaged in style-switching, employing Aramaic-like words and phrases in certain discrete pericopes. Thus, when Abraham’s servant travels to Aram to obtain a bride for Isaac (Gen 24) and when Jacob travels to

7. Polak 1998, 2015, 2016.

8. Note further how the reader holding the text would have seen the selfsame four consonants for both words, to wit, *וּשְׁק wayšq*.

9. See Rendsburg 2019, 572–74.

10. See the following studies: Rendsburg 2008a, 2016a, and the relevant chapters in Rendsburg 2019.

Aram to live with his uncle Laban (Gen 29–31), the Hebrew prose is peppered with Aramaic-like features.¹¹ A prime example is the word לוז *luz* ‘almond’ in Gen 30:37 (the only time this usage appears in the Bible), known from all Aramaic dialects, used here instead of the standard Hebrew word שָׂקֶד *šaqed* ‘almond.’ Though there is more, for the unique usage also serves to enhance the alliteration in the phrase מַקְלֵ לְבָנָה לֶח וְלוֹז וְעֶרְמוֹן *maqqaḥ libnē laḥ wə-luz wə-‘ermon* ‘a rod of fresh poplar, and almond, and chestnut.’ Though there is more still, for the reader has recently heard the word לוז *luz* at Gen 28:19, where the author informs us that Bethel was formerly called Luz.

The same style-switching technique is evident when Balaam, the Aramean prophet, is brought by Balaq, king of Moab, to curse the people of Israel (Num 22–24). Once again, the text is replete with Aramaic-like elements, such as the word מַלְכוּת *malkut* ‘kingdom’ (in the form מַלְכֻתוֹ *malkuto* ‘his kingdom’) in Num 24:7.¹²

The text demands much of the reader or listener, as every word and every phrase is laden with import and meaning. In addition to the examples presented above, consider Gen 29:26. When Jacob complains to Laban that he labored for Rachel, not for Leah, Laban responds לֹא־יַעֲשֶׂה כֵן בְּמִקְוֵמֵנוּ לָתֵת הַצֶּעִירָה לְפָנַי הַבְּכִירָה: ‘it is done not such in our place, to give the younger before the first-born.’ Through such a statement, the reader is brought back to Gen 27, where Jacob the younger placed himself before Esau the first-born to deceive his father Isaac; thus Laban’s words and, indeed, his action serve as Jacob’s punishment, as the deceiver is now deceived. Incidentally, note that Gen 27 typically is ascribed to ‘J,’ while Gen 29:25–28 is assigned to ‘E,’ so that the source critics miss the point made here. Only through a holistic reading of the narrative does the true message and the literary brilliance of the biblical story shine through. Note, moreover, nowhere does the text state “and this happened to Jacob as punishment for what he himself had done to Isaac”; rather, the reader must remain attentive throughout in order to apprehend the message and to appreciate fully the literary achievement.¹³

The astute reader will further realize that Rebekah was the instigator of the plot to deceive Isaac. Should she not be punished as well? She is, though in the most fascinating manner, for she is simply written out of the story. When Jacob returns to the land of Canaan, he is reunited with his brother Esau (Gen 33:4) and he is present for the death and burial of his father Isaac (Gen 35:29)—but

11. See Rendsburg 2006a.

12. Otherwise, the Torah uses מַמְלָכָה *mamlaka* ‘kingdom’ (12x), the SBH form.

13. For further analysis of Gen 29, see Rendsburg 2019, 568–92.

there is not a word about Rebekah. The reader is led to understand that Rebekah died during the intervening twenty years of Jacob's sojourn in Aram. The text is silent, however, as she is the only one of the patriarchs and their primary wives to lack a death notice.¹⁴ Once again, the writers of these stories used every literary technique available to them—including silence!—and one must assume that at least the most sophisticated readers in ancient Israel could appreciate them all.

One further technique used in the narrational style is the employment of *וַיַּהֲבֵה* *wa-hinne* 'and behold' at key points in the story. This simple grammatical particle serves to change the perspective from that of the narrator to that of the character (akin to the point-of-view [POV] shot in motion picture direction). See, for example, Gen 29:2 (cited in chapter 18 above), where the reader gets to experience the scene as Jacob sees it, as he looks from afar at the well and the flocks. Even more striking is the use of *וַיַּהֲבֵה* *wa-hinne* 'and behold' at v. 25, where Jacob awakes in the morning, and *וַיַּהֲבֵה הִיא לֵאָה* *wa-hinne hi' le'a* 'and behold, she is Leah,' and not Rachel at his side. A less creative writer would have used a bland expression such as "And Jacob saw that it was Leah." By contrast, by using *וַיַּהֲבֵה* *wa-hinne* 'and behold' at this crucial point in the account, the reader gets to experience the scene (even as the reader already knows that Leah has been substituted for Rachel) as Jacob experiences the morning light.¹⁵

Finally, note how the crafters of the biblical narratives enjoyed structure. At first glance, the Torah narratives may appear to be a loose array of unconnected episodes, but the storytellers succeeded to create structure, nonetheless. This is certainly true of the redactional structure in the Primeval History and the chiasmic structures in the Ancestral Narratives,¹⁶ though other devices are used as well, including overlapping ones. The best example is the plagues narrative (Exod 7–12), as the story is crafted with the plagues both as pairs (plagues 1–2, 3–4, etc.) and as triads (1, 4, 7 / 2, 5, 8 / 3, 6, 9), for which the reader is directed to my earlier study.¹⁷

The reader rightly may be amazed to find such a panoply of literary devices in biblical narrative prose, especially within the Torah—texts written 3,000 years ago—but there they are, all working together to create the greatest literary achievement in the ancient Near Eastern world.

14. See Rendsburg 1984, 364–65.

15. For further discussion, with many more examples, and with credit to the scholars who first discovered this technique (Francis Andersen and Jan Fokkelman), see Rendsburg 2019, 411–23.

16. See my essay "Genesis," chapter 30 in this volume.

17. Rendsburg 2016b.

RETHINKING THE COMPOSITION OF THE PENTATEUCH

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

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