

1993

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Recommended Citation

Watts, James W. "'This Song' Conspicuous Poetry in Hebrew Prose." Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose. Ed. Johannes C. de Moor, Wilfred G. Watson, AOAT 42. Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchen Verlag, 1993. 345-58.

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“This Song” Conspicuous Poetry in Hebrew Prose

James W. Watts

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The Hebrew Bible contains many passages in which prose narrative surrounds conspicuous poetry. The various theoretical and practical difficulties in distinguishing Hebrew prose from verse in other texts do not negate this observation. Explicit genre labels often appear in both the prose frameworks and the beginnings of poems, telling readers that the genre and mode have changed. The interpretive problem then becomes, not *whether* this is verse, but *why* poetry appears precisely here. What does poetic expression accomplish that Hebrew prose narrative cannot or will not do?

Comparative study of conspicuous inset poetry suggests that Hebrew narratives use it to achieve certain distinguishable effects. The placement of poetry within prose became an established convention of Hebrew narrative, and the broad lines of this convention's development can be discerned in the history of First and Second Temple Jewish literature. Beginning with the explicit markers of poetic genres, I will survey the voicing, narrative roles, and history of Hebrew inset poetry.

1 Explicit Markers of Inset Poetry

Designations of genre mark many inset poems in narratives of the Hebrew Bible. The most common designation is a nominal or verbal form of *šîr* “song, sing” which appears in the narrative introductions to the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1), the Song of the Well (Num. 21:17), the Song of Moses (Deut. 31:19, 21, 22, 30; 32:44-45), the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5:1), and David's Thanksgiving (2 Sam. 22:1).¹ Some later Second Temple literature written in Greek continues this tradition by making references to singing (*hymneō*) and song (*hymnos*) in the narrative introductions to the Prayer of Azariah/the Song of the Three (AddDan. 1) and Judith's victory song (Jdt. 15:13).

¹The noun appears in both masculine and feminine forms distributed in an intriguing pattern over the Hebrew Bible. The feminine noun *šîrâ* occurs nine times in narrative settings of inset poetry, but never in Chronicles or the Psalter (except for the superscription to Ps. 18, which has been taken over from 2 Sam. 22). The masculine form *šîr* appears in twenty-six Psalm titles, fourteen times in Chronicles, and sporadically in other prose texts, but never with narratively inset poems. Explanations for this phenomenon range from the comment in *Exodus Rabbah* 23, “all the songs that have heretofore been composed (mentioned in the Scriptures) are of the feminine gender ... but the song of the future ... will be of the masculine gender” (M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim* ... [New York 1971] 1568), to A.B. Davidson's suggestion that the feminine denotes a single instance of the collective masculine, though he recognized exceptions (*Hebrew Syntax* [Edinburgh 1896] §14.3).

Other narrative markers also suggest musical performance of inset poetry. The command to give thanks (*lēhōdôt*) prompts levitical singers (*hamšōrērīm*) to respond with a hymnic medley in 1 Chr. 16. Nominal and verbal forms of *qinā* "lament, dirge" introduce David's elegies for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:17) and for Abner (2 Sam. 3:33).²

Since reading in the ancient world usually involved reading aloud to listeners, the shift in genre from story to song may have prompted a change in performance from reading to singing and, especially in liturgical settings, invited the participation of the audience as well. It is at least likely that the original readers and hearers of these texts would have been familiar with some of the songs. In that case, their placement within narratives aimed partly to arouse musical and cultic associations.³

Other poetic markers have fewer musical connotations, though the possibility that the reading of poetry invariable involved some element of song or rhythmic accompaniment should not be ruled out. The first verse-lines of David's Last Words and two of Balaam's oracles identify the pieces as *ne'um* "oracle" (2 Sam. 23:1; Num. 24:3,15). The label *bērākā* "blessing" describes Isaac's blessing of Jacob (Gen. 27:27-30), Jacob's blessing of his sons (Gen. 49:28), and Moses' blessing of the people (Deut. 33:1). Forms of *māsāl* "saying" designate a wider variety of poetry, appearing in the narrative introductions to both the ballad of Heshbon (Num. 21:27) and Balaam's oracles (Num. 23:7, 18; 24:3, 15). Not all genre designations used to mark Hebrew inset poetry point specifically to the poetic mode. *Hitpallēl* "pray" introduces Hannah's and Jonah's psalms (1 Sam. 2:1; Jon. 2:2), but also introduces prose prayers (e.g. Is. 37:15; Jon. 4:2). Hezekiah's psalm is called a *miktāb* "writing" (Is. 38:9), a term which also introduces letters (2 Chr. 21:12).⁴

Thus Hebrew narrative frequently labels inset poetry with explicit genre designations. In this respect, poetry is treated like some narratively inset prose genres: cf. the phrase *zō't tōrat* "these are the laws/instructions" that punctuates parts of Leviticus (e.g. 6:7, 17, etc.). The above summary shows, however, that most markers of inset poetry not only designate the genre but also point to the poetic mode.

²Note the close association made between *qinōt* "laments" and *haššārīm wēhaššārōt* "singing men and women" in 2 Chr. 35:25.

³G.W.E. Nickelsburg commented on AddDan: "The poems convert the story from mere narrative to quasi-liturgical drama, eliciting the involvement of an audience attuned to such liturgical tradition and, perhaps, familiar with the compositions themselves" ("The Bible Rewritten and Expanded," in M.E. Stone (ed.), *Jewish Writings in the Second Temple Period* [CRINT 2/2; Assen, Philadelphia 1984] 151). Ironically, these poems likely have the opposite effect on many modern readers of the Hebrew Bible who, unacquainted with the songs' music, are tempted by the rare vocabulary, archaic grammatical constructions, and obscure allusions in many of these songs to skip to the next prose story.

⁴W.W. Hallo used this term to connect Hezekiah's Psalm to the Sumerian and Akkadian tradition of royal letter-prayer inscriptions and therefore translated it "letter" in Is. 38:9 ("The Royal Correspondence of Larsa: I. A Sumerian Prototype for the Prayer of Hezekiah," in B.L. Eichler, et al. (eds.), *Kramer Anniversary Volume* [AOAT 25; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1976] 209-224; *idem*, "The Expansion of Cuneiform Literature," *PAAJR* 46-47 [1979-1980] 307-322; *idem*, "Letters, Prayers and Letter-Prayers," in *Proceedings of the Seventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* [Jerusalem 1981] 17-27). He noted that if the emendation *miktām* is correct, its translation as "inscription" (following LXX *stēlographia* in Ps. 56:1, 57:1, etc.) would point in the same direction. Since *miktām* appears only in psalm superscriptions, however, this label seems to indicate poetry more than *miktāb* does.

The rhetoric of inset poems often reinforces the genre markers of the narrative frames with its own self-designations. Three Hebrew psalms in narrative contexts place cohortative "I will sing/praise/speak" formulas at or near their beginnings: 'āšîrâ "I will sing" (Ex. 15:1); 'ādabbērâ "I will speak" (Deut. 32:1); 'āšîrâ 'āzammēr "I will sing, I will serenade" (Judg. 5:3).⁵ Claus Wilcke found cohortative "I will sing/praise/etc." formulas to be a characteristic feature of a number of hymnic prologues to Akkadian epics, though relatively rare in free-standing Akkadian hymns.⁶ They also mark the beginnings of hymns in two Ugaritic poems which switch from hymn to narrative and back again.⁷ The cohortative formulas thus seem to have been a fairly common device for marking off hymnic from narrative poetry. They serve that same purpose in these three Hebrew psalms, though here the narrative settings are prose.

Imperative exhortations to praise also mark some inset hymns. The first six colons of the Levitical Medley (1 Chr. 16:8-9) open with plural imperatives:

<i>hōdû lYHWH</i>	Praise Yahweh!
<i>qîr'û bišmô</i>	Call out his name!
<i>hōdî'û bā'ammîm 'ālilôtâw</i>	Declare his works to peoples!
<i>šîrû lô</i>	Sing to him!
<i>zammērû lô</i>	Serenade him!
<i>šîhû bēkol niplē'ôtâw</i>	Talk about all his wonders!

Such imperative introductions do not distinguish inset hymns from the free-standing versions, as 1 Chr. 16 shows: its introduction quotes verbatim from Ps. 105.⁸ Within a narrative context, however, imperative exhortations like cohortative formulas provide obvious markers of a composition's hymnic genre. The Song of the Sea shows the close relationship between the imperative and cohortative formulas: the repetition of its first verse-line (Ex. 15:1b) in the women's antiphonal response (v.21b) transforms 'āšîrâ "I will sing" into šîrû "sing!"⁹

⁵Of the 150 psalms in the Psalter, only six have the formula in initial or near-initial positions: 'āšîrâ in Ps. 89:2; 'āzammēr in Ps. 9:3, 101:1, 138:1, and 146:2; both in Ps. 108:2. The phrases appear more frequently in the middle or at the end of psalms, usually as part of a vow of praise.

⁶C. Wilcke, "Die Anfänge der akkadischen Epen," ZA 67 (1977) 178, 186. He pointed particularly to the Anzu Epic (CT 15, 39f.), an unnamed Old Babylonian epic (CT 15,3-4), and the Agusaia Hymn (VS 10, 214 I, which he labeled an "epic poem"). In free-standing poems, the cohortative introductory formula appears most frequently in personal laments.

⁷*Nikkal* begins and ends with hymns introduced by 'āšr "I sing", between which is a short narrative section which concludes with *d'āšr* "of whom I sing" (KTU 1.24:1, 38, 40). *Shachar and Shalim* begins with a hymn and contains another, both beginning 'iqr'a "I call" (KTU 1.23:1, 23). Wilcke drew attention to both texts as parallels to the use of the "I will praise" formula in Akkadian hymnic prologues ("Die Anfänge," 186). However, the generic nature and the purposes of these texts, especially *Shachar and Shalim*, are not clear.

⁸The entire piece is a medley of parts derived from Ps. 105, 96 and 106.

⁹This change to a masculine imperative, together with the narrative introduction *watta'an lāhem miryām* "Miriam responded to them (masculine)" (v.21a), indicates an antiphonal response to the men's song in vv.1-18. Z. Weisman ("šrwtyh (JUD v 29)," VT 26 [1976] 116-120) and E.B. Poethig (*The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel* [New York, 1985] 86-90) argue that 'ānā lē- is a technical term for responsive singing. Thus the evidence of narrative and song in v.21 argue against taking the line as a title for the whole song (*contra* F.M. Cross

I cite these examples simply to illustrate how standard structural elements of Hebrew psalmody reinforce narrative efforts to mark a shift in genre and mode. The distinguishing features of any genre serve to identify it and, when set within narrative, to mark it off from its context. Hebrew writers frequently buttressed such internal generic signs with explicit nominal or verbal labels in the prose framework.

Such efforts do not, however, eliminate all ambiguity in distinguishing poetry from prose, as the Song of the Sea illustrates. Though nominal and verbal (both third person imperfect and first person cohortative) forms of *šir* "song, sing" clearly mark the song's beginning (Ex. 15:1), the song's end remains ambiguous. Verse 19 takes the form of a tricolon in which each line ends with *yām* "sea". This nod in the direction of poetic composition may indicate that the verse was intended as a conclusion to the poem, and traditional tradents include it in the song.¹⁰ But its style and vocabulary create a voice that sounds more like the narrator than like Moses, Miriam, and the Israelites. Therefore modern translations and commentaries end the song with v.18, regarding v.19, in the words of G.W. Coats, as "a gloss on vv.1b-18, marked distinctly by a change in style from metrical balance to prose narrative."¹¹ Obviously, the criteria for distinguishing prose from poetry in Ex. 15 have changed over time, and Hebrew writers did not always mark the boundaries explicitly.¹²

2 The Voicing of Inset Poetry

Biblical Hebrew narrative always places inset poems into the mouths of characters. If the narration occasionally takes on poetic characteristics, such shifts in mode are not marked by genre labels. The Hebrew narrator is, at least overtly, restricted to prose narration. Conversely, inset poems do not narrate stories; when characters take the role of narrator, they speak in prose.¹³

and D.N. Freedman, "The Song of Miriam," *JNES* 14 [1955] 237; F.M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* [Cambridge 1973] 123-124).

¹⁰The Song of the Sea appears first among the "odes" appended to the Septuagint Psalter, where it begins (after the superscription "the Song of Moses in Exodus") with v.1b but concludes with v.19. Hebrew manuscripts and early printed Bibles also include the verse in the psalm (A. Dillmann, *Die Bücher Exodus und Leviticus* [hrsg.v. V. Ryssel; Leipzig 1897] 175). The end of the psalm is obvious in rabbinic Bibles because of the special Talmudic rules governing the way the songs in the Torah (i.e. Ex. 15, Deut. 32) are to be written (Babylonian Talmud *Megillah* 16b; see I. Yeivin, *Introduction to the Tiberian Masorah* [Masoretic Studies 5; tr. E.J. Revell; 1980] 43).

¹¹G.W. Coats, "The Song of the Sea," *CBQ* 31 (1969) 3.

¹²For the most part, the differences between prose prayers and poetic hymns appear clear, but ambiguous cases include the long levitical prayer in Neh. 9:5-37. For discussions of its classification as prose or poetry, see M. Greenberg, *Biblical Prose Prayer as a Window to the Popular Religion of Ancient Israel* (Berkeley 1983) 63 note 1, and H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, TX. 1985) 305-308.

¹³The songs in Ex. 15 and Judg. 5 describe events in the process of celebrating them, but do not provide sequential narratives. "This poetry never narrates" noted I. Yeivin, and described the distinction: "The description highlights the significance of the events, their religious and emotional value, it praises and it derogates, but it does not narrate the action in sequence, how what happened happened" (in B. Mazar, et al. (eds.), *Entsiqlopedya miqra'it*, vol. 7 [Jerusalem 1976] cols. 638-639; translated in A. Preminger and E.L. Greenstein, *The Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism* [New York 1986] 191).

The Hebrew voicing conventions of inset poetry form a striking contrast to the conventions of the mythic and epic traditions in other ancient Semitic cultures. Not only do myth and epic narrate in poetry, they may also shift from narrative to hymnic poetry and back again, usually in the narrator's voice. Hymnic prologues and epilogues frame many Sumerian and Akkadian texts, and may also have been a feature of Ugaritic literature.¹⁴ An example which makes its hymnic intention immediately clear is the beginning of the Standard Babylonian version of *Anzu*, a fourteen-line hymn which begins:

Of the son of dwellings' king, famed (and) Mami's dear,
Of the Mighty One will I sing and sing — of Enlil's godly child.
Of Ninurta, famed (and) Mami's dear,
Of the Mighty One will I chant all praise — of Enlil's godly child.¹⁵

Inset songs, especially laments, also appear in the speeches of characters, such as Mar-duk in the *Erra* epic:

“Ah Babylon whose top I had made as luxuriant as that of a palm tree, but which the win[d] has scorched!
“Ah Babylon that I had replenished with seed like a pine cone, but whose fullness I could not sate myself!
“Ah Babylon that I had tended like a thriving orchard, but whose fruit I could not taste!
“Ah Babylon that like a seal of *elmesu* (-amber) I had hung on Anum's neck!
“[Ah Ba]bylon that I had held in my hands like the Tablet of Destinies, handing her over to nobody else!¹⁶

Mythic and epic literature thus incorporates inset genres but preserves a consistently poetic mode of discourse. Hymnic elements serve to conclude Mesopotamian prose texts as well, but there in the form of prose prayers. Babylonian commemorative inscriptions and Assyrian annalistic and display texts often end with blessings and/or short prayers.¹⁷ Thus cuneiform texts usually preserve the same mode of writing, whether prose or verse, throughout a given text. Inset hymnic genres are chosen to

¹⁴See C. Wilcke, “Formale Gesichtspunkte in der Sumerischen Literatur,” in *Sumerological Studies in Honor of Thorkild Jacobsen* (AS 20; Chicago 1976) 243–246; *idem*, “Anfänge,” 153–215. The Ugaritic evidence remains unclear because the beginnings of the three major mythic and epic compositions (the Ba'al cycle, *Keret*, and *Aqhat*) are either fragmentary or missing. Hymnic prologues and epilogues in two smaller compositions, *Nikkal* (KTU 1.24) and *Shachar and Shalim* (KTU 1.23), suggest that Ugaritic literature may have shared this feature with its Mesopotamian counterparts.

¹⁵W.W. Hallo, W.L. Moran, “The First Tablet of the SB Recension of the Anzu Myth,” *JCS* 31 (1979) 65–115.

¹⁶IV 40–44; translated by L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (SANE 1/3; Malibu, CA. 1977) 50. Cf. Gilgamesh's lament over Enkidu in *Gilgamesh* VIII 1–44, translated in J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton 1969) 87–88; and Anat's lament in the Ugaritic epic *Aqhat*, KTU 1.18:IV.39–40; translated in J.C.L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh 1978) 113.

¹⁷A.K. Grayson, “Histories and Historians of the Ancient Near East: Assyria and Babylonia,” *Or* 49 (1980) 151–154, 160–161.

accord with the mode of the whole text.¹⁸

The Hebrew conventions governing the voicing of inset poetry find much closer parallels in ancient Egyptian texts than in ancient Semitic literatures. Egyptian stories usually take the form of prose narrative rather than epic poetry, and frequently contain poems and hymns in the narrator's or characters' voices.¹⁹ The poems may play structural roles within the larger piece. Thus the story of *Horus and Seth* ends with a royal hymn sung by Isis, the celebratory genre explicitly marked in the introduction:

Then Pre rejoiced greatly and said to the Ennead: "Jubilate throughout the land, jubilate throughout the land for Horus, son of Isis!" And Isis said:
 "Horus has risen as ruler, life, prosperity, health!
 The Ennead is in feast, heaven in joy!
 They take garlands seeing Horus, son of Isis
 Risen as great Ruler of Egypt.
 The hearts of the Ennead exult,
 The entire land rejoices
 As they see Horus, son of Isis
 Given the office of his father,
 Osiris, lord of Busiris."²⁰

J. Spiegel argued that in this position, the hymn serves to actualize the story for its hearers.²¹

A kind of poetic epic did develop in some of the royal inscriptions of the New Kingdom period, as Miriam Lichtheim pointed out:

The *Kadesh Battle Inscriptions of Ramses II* break new ground in literary form; for the long section of the inscriptions known as *the Poem* is a *narrative poem*, an epic, and the first of its kind in Egypt. Heretofore poetry had served to celebrate and to instruct; it had not aimed at narration.²²

¹⁸In Sumerian and Akkadian texts, the lines of text usually correspond to the lines of poetry, which makes it relatively easy to distinguish verse from prose, since in the latter no attention is given to where lines end (with the obvious exceptions of lists; see Wilcke, "Formale Gesichtspunkte," 231). This scribal convention was not always observed at Ugarit, with the result that in such cases the distinction between prose and poetry must be made on the basis of internal criteria.

¹⁹Because line-divisions are frequently not marked in Egyptian texts, the distinction of poetry from prose is difficult and disputed. Though it is clear that many Egyptian texts use both prose and poetry, or at least various levels of poetry, translators differ in where they place the boundaries between the modes. For discussions of the problem, see G. Fecht, "Die Wiedergewinnung der altägyptischen Verskunst," *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 19 (1963) 54-96; J.L. Foster, "Thought Couplets in Khety's 'Hymn to the Inundation'," *JNES* 34 (1975) 9; *idem*, "Sinuhe: The Ancient Egyptian Genre of Narrative Verse," *JNES* 39 (1980) 98; G. Burkard, "Der formale Aufbau altägyptischer Literaturwerke: zur Problematik der Erschließung seiner Grundstrukturen," *Studien zur altägyptischen Kultur* 10 (1983) 79-118; M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, vol. I (Berkeley 1973, 1976, 1980) 11.

²⁰Translated by Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, 222-223.

²¹J. Spiegel, *Die Erzählung vom Streite des Horus und Seth* (Leipziger Ägyptologische Studien 9; Glückstadt 1937) 105.

Even royal inscriptions which stick with prose narration use elevated language for other purposes. Encomiums to or by the king often begin such inscriptions. They become more elaborate in the New Kingdom period and continue in use throughout the first millennium BCE.²³

The *Victory Stela of King Piye* (or Pi or Piankhy; ca. 734 BCE) stands out among Egyptian inscriptions for the realistic style of its third person narration. Much of the direct speech may be considered verse, and the narrative explicitly designates two speeches in the mouths of crowds as songs. The longer of the two concludes the inscription:

His majesty sailed south, his heart joyful, and all those near him shouting. West and East took up the announcement, shouting around his majesty. This was their song of jubilation:

“O mighty ruler, O mighty ruler.
Piye, mighty ruler!
You return having taken Lower Egypt,
You made bulls into women!
Joyful is the mother who bore you.
The man who begot you!
The valley dwellers worship her,
The cow that bore the bull!
You are eternal,
Your might abides,
O ruler loved of Thebes!”²⁴

The Piye Stela shares the following features with Hebrew narratives containing psalms in narrative contexts: first, the celebratory songs are placed in characters' mouths; second, the third person narrator is restricted to realistic prose descriptions of events; third, a song is placed at the end of the account as a thematic climax and summary; fourth, like some of the Hebrew psalms in narrative contexts, the Egyptian songs are victory hymns to the conqueror. The congruence of these features in Egyptian and Hebrew literature of the first half of the first millennium BCE suggests that they may represent an international trend in literary genres. The evidence is too sparse, however, especially from first millennium Egypt, to allow any firm conclusions.

A survey of the range of inset poetry in ancient Near Eastern poetic and prose

²³Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, 6. She noted that there is considerable dispute over whether the “Poem” portion of the Kadesh Battle Inscription is in fact poetic or simply another prose narrative account, which “illustrates how tentative, uncertain, and incomplete is our grasp of ancient Egyptian styles and literary forms” (58). The variety of versification employed in translations of the Merneptah Stela suggests that a similar difficulty is encountered there (cf. *ANET*, 376–378, Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, 73–78, and the partial translation of R.J. Williams in D.W. Thomas (ed.), *Documents from Old Testament Times* [New York 1958] 137–141).

²⁴Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, 39; vol. III, 38, 87–88, 91.

²⁵Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. III, 80. The song reappears as a free-standing hymn in another inscription, according to N.-C. Grimal (*La Stèle Triomphale de Pi(‘ankh)y au Musée du Caire* [Cairo 1978] 180 n.536), who noted that “les chants jubilaires en particulier ... utilisent les procédés courants des hymnes religieux et royaux” (*ibid.*, 265).

narrative does suggest that a text's manner of narration plays the decisive role in determining how any inset poetry appears. Poetic third person narration in epics and myths, as well as first person narration in both prose and poetry, permitted shifts into hymnic or other laudatory genres by the narrator as well as characters. The use of a more restrained, "realistic" third person prose narration seems to have limited the narrator's range of comment and emotional expression, and hence the variety of genres which the narrator could employ directly. Writers evaded such restrictions on the narrator by shifting the bulk of commentary and emotional reaction, and the genres which express them, to characters within the story. The use of inset poetry quoted as direct speech allowed ancient writers to expand the representational scope and affective impact of their stories without compromising the objective attitude of the narrators.

Such restrained third person narration dominates the prose of the Hebrew Bible. Though the degree of commentary allowed to the narrator varies considerably, Hebrew narrators never shift into the overt emotions of praise or condemnation characteristic of Hebrew poetry. The obvious exceptions, the first-person narratives in Ezra and Nehemiah with their direct appeals to God, serve to confirm the general rule by their uniqueness. The rest of the Hebrew Bible limits its narrators to third-person prose narration, with the result that in ancient Israel, as in Egypt (with only a few exceptions), no epic literature appears.²⁵ Only in 1 Maccabees do we find, for the first time in Israel's extant literature, a third person narrator who shifts from narration to praise, lament, and exhortation and back again with a freedom reminiscent of the narrators in cuneiform literature.²⁶

3 The Narrative Roles of Inset Poetry

A survey of explicitly marked poems in Hebrew narrative shows the various ways that inset poetry expands the representational scope of prose narrative. The poetry usually structures the story by appearing at or near the end of episodes or whole books. The poems emphasize themes overtly which the narrative may depict more subtly, and sometimes give expression to ideas in tension with those of the prose. The songs in particular serve to actualize stories, that is, make them more real by involving hearers or readers in the mood of the moment. Characterization seems to be the most prominent effect of inset psalms of individual thanksgiving. A survey of the poems, however, yields one prominent negative observation: it is rare for poetry to influence the *plot* of Hebrew narratives.

The exceptions to this rule include: Isaac's blessings of his sons (Gen. 27:27-29, 39-40) which initiate the action of the entire Jacob cycle of stories; the victory chant

²⁵The Egyptian parallels to Hebrew prose narrative cast doubt on the claim that Israel must have possessed an epic tradition like the other Semitic nations. For different developments of this claim, see S. Mowinckel, "Hat es ein israelitisches Nationalepos gegeben?" *ZAW* 12 (1935) 130-153; U. Cassuto, "The Israelite Epic," *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, vol. II (tr. I. Abrahams; Jerusalem 1975) 80-109; F.M. Cross, "The Epic Traditions of Early Israel: Epic Narrative and the Reconstruction of Early Israelite Institutions," in R.E. Friedman (ed.), *The Poet and the Historian* (HSS 26; Atlanta 1983) 13-23; D. Damrosch, *The Narrative Covenant: Transformations of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature* (San Francisco 1987).

²⁶See G.O. Neuhaus, *Studien zu den poetischen Stücken im 1. Makkabäerbuch* (FB 12, Würzburg 1974).

for Saul and David (1 Sam. 18:7; 21:12[11]; 29:5) which prompts Philistine fear and Saul's jealousy; and David's lament over Abner (2 Sam. 3:33-34) which helps the king exonerate himself to the public. These inset poems are quite short, especially when compared with other examples of the same inset genres which do not play plot roles (e.g. Jacob's blessing of his sons in Gen. 49, Deborah's victory song in Judg. 5, and David's lament over Saul and Jonathan in 2 Sam. 1). However, two longer pieces do involve the plots of the narratives which contain them. The song of Moses (Deut. 32) has a limited impact on the plot: the previous chapter anticipates the poem with instructions to have it inscribed and taught to the people. Balaam's oracles (Num. 23:7-10, 18-24; 24:3-9, 15-24), which are in fact rather lengthy expressions of the blessings genre, serve as the main focus of narrative action in Num. 22-24.

Most inset poems in Hebrew prose have no impact on the narrative plot. The narratives do not anticipate the poems (except with brief prose introductions) nor does the poetry impact the subsequent action.²⁷ Since as a general rule a poem's presence does not affect the action and its absence would not disturb it, lack of plot role cannot serve as evidence that a poem has been inserted into the prose secondarily. Inset poetry usually serves other purposes than plot development in Hebrew narrative.

Those purposes are accomplished by placing poems in strategic positions within narratives, typically at or near the climax of the action. Here they interpret the narrative by emphasizing certain themes and by characterizing the major actors in explicit terms. This use of poetry to structure and interpret narrative shows affinities with the use of hymnody in cuneiform narrative literatures.

Most Hebrew inset poetry appears after the main plot tensions have been resolved. It provides thematic commentary on the foregoing action. Hannah's Song (1 Sam. 2:1-10) concludes the Samuel birth narrative by redirecting attention to God's actions in establishing the Davidic monarchy in Israel. David's Lament for Saul and Jonathan (2 Sam. 1:17-27) moves the focus in the opposite direction, from the dynastic implications of Saul's death to the personal and national tragedy it represents. David's Thanksgiving (2 Sam. 22) and Last Words (23:1-7) return to the theme of God's support for David and his dynasty. Though the three blocks of poetry each occupy concluding positions relative to their immediate contexts, together they create a thematic movement from promise (1 Sam. 2) through tragedy (2 Sam. 1) to fulfillment (2 Sam. 22-23). The poems superimpose this overt pattern on narratives with more subtle and complex thematic tendencies. The resulting reinterpretation of the books of Samuel emphasizes God's unstinting support of David and the king's exemplary piety.²⁸

Other inset poems in final positions include the Levitical Medley in 1 Chr. 16,

²⁷J.A. Wilcoxon pointed out that narratives of the Hebrew Bible contain a wide variety of materials which do not contribute to plot development, and called for closer examination of the nature of narrative and its relation to plot ("Narrative," in J.H. Hayes [ed.], *Old Testament Form Criticism* [San Antonio 1974] 95).

²⁸The poems in 1 Sam. 2 and 2 Sam. 22-23 were probably added to the books of Samuel secondarily, along with the prose material in 2 Sam. 21-24. Evidence for such historical development of the text includes text-critical disturbances around Hannah's song and plot disruptions occasioned by the presence of 2 Sam. 21-24 (for more detailed discussion, see my *Psalms and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative* [JSOTS 139; Sheffield 1992] 32-37, 110-115). The addition of the poetry may have been motivated by the desire to prepare the books of Samuel for religious use.

which concludes the account of the ark's transfer to Jerusalem, and the individual thanksgiving at the end of the book of Tobit (Tob. 13).²⁹ In both cases, the psalms bring out praise of God as a major theme within the narrative. In Daniel, a series of four poems (Dan. 2:20-33; 3:33; 4:31-32; 6:27-28) occupy more varied positions relative to the narrative, but similarly emphasize the book's theological message of God's control over nature and history.³⁰

The end of Deuteronomy, like the end of Samuel, consists of two poems (Deut. 32:1-43 and 33:1-29) within a distinctive block of narratives (Deut. 31-34). The juxtaposition of the darkly ominous Song of Moses with the optimistic Blessing of Moses reproduces in poetry the cycles of curse and blessing, warning and hope in Deut. 27-30. They work together in this context to provide a climactic portrayal of the bad and good in Israel's history.

Some poems in final positions within narratives not only provide thematic commentary, but also help actualize the story for the readers.³¹ As songs, the psalms in narrative contexts must have had an especially strong impact on ancient Jewish readers and hearers. The words would have brought to mind musical and cultic associations and aroused a deep emotional response.³² Several poems at the ends of narrative episodes involve readers in celebrating God's favor towards Israel.

Victory songs, such as the songs of Deborah (Judg. 5) and Judith (Jdt. 16), provoke the reader's involvement by enriching the emotions, details, and characterizations provided in the preceding prose accounts of the battles.³³ The Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1-21) goes further in appealing to the reader. Not only does the first half of the song represent the crossing of the sea poetically, the second half continues to depict God's victories through the periods of Israel's wandering in the wilderness and settlement in the land. The psalm moves from the temporal perspective of the story, in which these events lie in the future, to that of the reader, for whom they lie in the past. The Song of the Sea thus invites readers to see all of God's victories encapsulated in the victory at the Reed Sea, and to join in the celebration from their own temporal perspective.³⁴

Though a different genre, Jacob's blessing (Gen. 49) plays a similar role at the end

²⁹On the relation between the psalm and other prayers in Tobit, see P.J. Griffin, *The Theology and Function of Prayer in the Book of Tobit* (Ph.D.diss., Washington, D.C. 1984) and P. Deselaers, *Das Buch Tobit: Studien zu seiner Entstehung, Komposition und Theologie* (OBO 43; Freiburg, Schweiz 1982) 413-475.

³⁰In English Bibles the verse enumeration differs slightly. The poems appear at 2:20-33, 4:3, 4:34-35, and 6:26-27. For a full discussion, see W.S. Towner, "The Poetic Passages of Daniel 1-6," *CBQ* 31 (1969) 317-326.

³¹For a general discussion of literary actualization in the Hebrew Bible, see J.W. Groves, *Actualization and Interpretation in the Old Testament* (SBLDS 86; Atlanta 1987).

³²Nickelsburg, "The Bible Rewritten and Expanded," 151.

³³Several interpreters of Jdt. 16 have emphasized its role in actualizing the story: "The reader must join the choir to share feelings and attitudes" (L. Alonso-Schökel, "Narrative Structures in the Book of Judith," *Colloquy* 11 [Berkeley 1975] 18); "Judith 16 fulfills a liturgical function in the story. . . . The scene suggests a liturgical procession of the people on their way to Jerusalem (cf. 16:18)" (T. Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith* [SBLDS 70; Chico, CA. 1983] 105). On Judg. 5, see Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 82-98.

³⁴The ambiguities of Ex. 15:17's references have caused considerable argument among interpreters over whether the psalm refers to Zion, or merely the conquest of the land, or only the wilderness wanderings. The lack of specificity is due to an overriding emphasis on giving Yahweh sole credit for all of Israel's accomplishments.

of Genesis. The poem mixes statements about Jacob's sons as individuals with sayings about the tribes, thus tying the ancestral narratives to the nation's subsequent history. In this way, the blessing invites that nation's readers to connect their story with that of the ancestors.

Besides concluding narratives with verse, Hebrew writers also placed psalms of thanksgiving in positions immediately *prior* to the resolution of an episode's plot, at points where divine deliverance is expected but not yet accomplished. Thus Hezekiah's Psalm (Is. 38:9-20) appears after the prophet Isaiah has promised him healing (v.5), but before the medicinal paste is applied (v.21);³⁵ Daniel's Praise (Dan. 2:20-23) follows divine revelation of the king's dream but precedes his audience with the king; and the song of the three young men (in the Septuagint additions to Daniel 3) appears on their lips after they have been joined by an angel and protected from the fire but before the furnace doors are opened to let them out. In each case, the psalms help characterize their singers' exemplary faith, showing their trust that God will fulfill the promised deliverance.

These examples suggest that the placement of individual thanksgivings immediately prior to a story's conclusion became a convention of Hebrew narrative. The book of Jonah confirms this observation. Like the heroes of these other stories, Jonah sings a psalm of thanksgiving while in the fish's stomach (Jon. 2:2-9), that is, at a point where his deliverance from drowning has begun but is not yet complete. He reaches dry land only after the song is finished. In the book of Jonah, however, Jonah's rescue does not resolve the larger plot tension, Jonah's rebellion against God, which is not confronted until the end of the book two chapters later. The psalm in ch. 2, along with Jonah's other speeches in chs. 1-3, characterizes Jonah as a pious, orthodox Jew, a characterization undermined by the dialogue in ch. 4. Thus the author of Jonah used expectations aroused by the convention of placing thanksgivings immediately prior to the end of stories about religious heroes to mislead readers as to Jonah's true character. When that character is revealed at the story's real end, readers who have identified with Jonah on the basis of the psalm find themselves the target of the book's irony.

Not all explicitly marked inset poems play discernible narrative roles. The book of Numbers contains several poems (Num. 10:35-36; 21:14-15, 17-18, 27-30) which make little or no contribution to the themes of the larger narrative. Most songs and poems in Hebrew narrative contexts, however, play the structural and thematic roles described above. The similarities between the roles of different poems in separate contexts suggests that the use of hymns and other poetic genres was an established convention of prose composition. The use of inset poetry should therefore be considered part of the generic repertoire of ancient Hebrew narrative.

³⁵Many interpreters have argued that vv.21-22 are out of place, and the psalm should conclude the episode. Hezekiah's request for a sign in v.22 which has already been given in vv.7-8 does disturb the narrative sequence, but v.21 is not problematic and is appropriately placed (so C. Jeremias, "Zu Jes. XXXVIII 21f," *VT* 21 [1971] 104-111; followed by H. Wildberger, *Jesaja, 3. Teilband: Jesaja 28-39* [BKAT X/3; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1982] 1455).

4 The History of Hebrew Inset Poetry

The origins of the practice of placing poetry in Hebrew prose narrative cannot be determined, though the comparative evidence of the use of hymnody in Mesopotamian and Egyptian narratives suggests that the Hebrew practice may be quite old. However, the historical development in the use of some inset genres, such as victory songs and individual thanksgiving psalms, can be traced through Hebrew literature with some precision.

One of the oldest examples of a narratively inset victory song is the Song of Deborah (Judg. 5).³⁶ The song's narrative role is limited to the episode related in Judg. 4. The lack of connections with the wider context suggests that the narrative and song were linked prior to their incorporation within the deuteronomistic framework of the book. Therefore a seventh-century or earlier date for their combination seems likely, roughly contemporaneous with the Egyptian (Nubian) Piye Stela of ca. 734 BCE. The similar combination of restrained prose third person narration with exuberant victory poetry in the mouths of characters suggests that the Hebrew convention may have grown out of a broader, international literary trend in the first millennium BCE. The first millennium Egyptian evidence, however, is too slim to do more than raise the possibility.

The placement of the Song of the Sea in Ex. 15:1–21 presupposes the Exodus narrative in Ex. 1–14 in its present form, which suggests that the song took its place here as part of the book's final redaction.³⁷ Israel's victory song tradition undergoes considerable modification in Ex. 15: the song is voiced by all Israel, rather than just the women, to emphasize that God alone deserves credit for the victory;³⁸ and the song addresses not just the sea event but all God's actions on Israel's behalf in the wilderness and settlement traditions (see above). Hannah's song (1 Sam. 2:1–10) is also a victory song, though it appears in a birth, rather than battle, narrative. The hymn is appropriate in Hannah's mouth because victory songs were traditionally sung by women.³⁹ Its reference to God's support for the king (v.10) establishes the theme which the rest of Samuel develops. Placed in their present contexts during the final redactions of Exodus and Samuel, these victory songs adapt their narrative contexts to serve as religious literature for the exilic or early post-exilic period.

Centuries later, victory songs continue to appear in stories to emphasize religious themes and actualize the narrative. The book of Judith concludes with a victory hymn modeled on Ex. 15 and Judg. 5, thus adding scriptural allusion to its narrative role. Mary's *Magnificat* in Lk. 1:46–55 is modeled on Hannah's song and, together with the other hymns in Lk. 1–2, makes the infancy account sound like the Septuagint, i.e. like

³⁶The chronological comments in this section apply to the combination of poetry and prose, not to the age of the poems alone. In many cases (e.g. Gen. 49, Ex. 15, Judg. 5, etc.), morphological and syntactic evidence suggests that the poems are much older than the narratives which contain them. See W.F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (New York 1969); D.A. Robertson, *Linguistic Evidence in Dating Early Hebrew Poetry* (SBLDS 3; Missoula, MT. 1972); D.N. Freedman, "Early Israelite Poetry and Historical Reconstructions," *Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, IN. 1980) 167–178.

³⁷Watts, *Psalms and Story*, 41–62.

³⁸On the role of women in Israel's victory song tradition, see Poethig, *Victory Song Tradition*.

³⁹If one wishes to find fault with the editor for using this song for Hannah's expression of thanks, it must be for being *too* traditional. On 1 Sam. 2:1–10's connection with the victory song tradition, see Poethig, *Victory Song Tradition*, 148–149.

scripture. Thus inset victory songs developed from actualizing Israelite (and Egyptian) battle narrative to shaping the themes and structure of Hebrew books for their role as religious literature to serving as inter-textual allusions to those earlier texts.

Hymns of praise demonstrate their speakers' piety in many ancient Near Eastern texts.⁴⁰ Individual thanksgivings serve this role in post-exilic Hebrew literature, either by adding poetic praise to a narrative's conclusion (e.g. 2 Sam. 22, Tob. 13) or showing the speaker's faith by appearing where divine deliverance is expected but not yet realized (Is. 38, Jon. 2, Dan. 2:20-23, AddDan). The latter usage must have already been well known by the time the book of Jonah was written, for the reader's recognition of it is presupposed by the book's subversion of the convention. These examples of inset thanksgivings may well illustrate the development in post-exilic Judaism of a "learned psalmography" which depicted the composition of psalms as a devotional practice.⁴¹ The devotional use of psalmody, however, was not the first nor the only influence on the inclusion of psalms in narrative contexts, as the above discussion has shown. Psalmody's popularity as an instrument of devotional piety probably did contribute to increased narrative use of inset psalms in the mid- and late Second Temple periods, both for characterization and other narrative purposes. 1 Maccabees, Pseudo-Philo's *Biblical Antiquities*, and the Apocalypse of John illustrate the expanded use of a variety of poetic genres within prose narratives of this period.

The history of inset poetry in Hebrew narrative does not consist only of unilinear developments. At certain times, inset poetry was used for some distinctive purposes. Deut. 31 depicts the song of Moses (Deut. 32) as a witness against the people parallel to the witness of the law. Song and law perform the same function, but use different means: the law witnesses through written transmission and official promulgation (31:26-28) while the song witnesses through oral transmission and popular recital (31:19-22). In the book's temporal setting at the end of Moses' life, ch. 31 describes a program to be accomplished in the narrative's future. However, when Deuteronomy was completed, most likely in the seventh or sixth centuries BCE, the song of Moses may already have been widely known, though that possibility cannot be demonstrated.⁴² If that was the case, by equating the song with the law, Deut. 31 was enlisting the song's popularity to support the promulgation of deuteronomic law.

Another example of inset poetry used to address prevailing controversies can be found in 1 Chr. 15-16.⁴³ During the inauguration of worship around the ark in

⁴⁰E.g. the encomiums by or to the king which introduce many Egyptian royal inscriptions, such as the Great Sphinx stela of Amen-hotep II (18th Dynasty), the Piye Stela (25th Dynasty), the Naucratis stela of Nectanebo I (30th Dynasty), and the Bentresh Stela (Persian or Ptolemaic periods). See Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. II, 39; vol. III, 38, 87-88, 91.

⁴¹Sigmund Mowinckel, "Psalms and Wisdom," in M. Noth, D.W. Thomas (eds.), *Wisdom in Israel and in the Ancient Near East: Presented to H.H. Rowley* ... (SVT 3; Leiden 1955) 211, 222; see also *idem*, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, vol. II (trans. D.R. Ap-Thomas; Oxford 1962) 115.

⁴²A wide variety of dates for the song's composition have been suggested, ranging from the pre-monarchic to post-exilic periods. For citations of the secondary literature, see Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 77 n.1.

⁴³Interpreters have frequently recognized the influence of priestly controversies and power struggles in these chapters. For a recent discussion which omits the psalm, see P.D. Hanson, "1 Chronicles 15-16 and the Chronicler's Views on the Levites," in M. Fishbane, E. Tov (eds.), *"Sha'arei Talmon": Studies in the Bible, Qumran and the Ancient Near East Presented to*

Jerusalem, Levites voice a medley of psalms (16:8–36) in response to David's direct command to Asaph and his company (16:4, 7). The narrative thus connects the Asaphites with psalmody in the Jerusalem sanctuary on the basis of the cult-founder's authority. Here the authority of a story about the founding of the Jerusalem cult is enlisted to support the role of music and its personnel in the contemporary Temple service.

Songs and poems in narrative contexts of the Hebrew Bible draw on the literary heritage of the ancient Near East, especially Egypt. The use of poetry within narrative became a convention of Hebrew prose literature, and as it developed, included an ever wider assortment of poetic genres and songs. The frequent use of explicit markers of poetic genres, in both the poems and their narrative frames, shows that the writers and editors intended the poetry to be recognized and appreciated on its own terms, but also to influence readings of the surrounding narrative. In this way, Hebrew prose narrative employs the literary potential of poetry for thematic commentary, emotional reaction, and actualization without altering its own basic character as restrained third-person narration.