

Songs, Prayers, and Poems in the Narratives of the Hebrew Bible

A Strategy for Closer Examination

Throughout the Hebrew Bible we find smaller and larger pieces of poetry embedded in the narrative literature. One of the most intriguing questions we are confronted with is whether such passages are to be regarded as secondarily inserted or as being composed from the outset along with the surrounding text and integral to it. The great majority of biblical scholars do not consider such poems to be integral to the surrounding text, but understand them as imported from elsewhere and inserted, as a whole or reworked, into their present context. Consulting the introductions to the books of the Old Testament, or the commentaries on the books containing such ‘inset poetry’, or studies on the latter, one finds a great measure of consensus of opinion.

In his recent review article of the research into the so-called ‘inset hymns’,¹ James W. Watts observes that the last two decades there has been a change in the approach to this material. Up till then, scholars focused on the study of the individual poems as to their internal structure, time of origin, and original message. But now the focus is more and more on such poems in their literary contexts. Watts himself does not adhere to the traditional view of this material as *secondarily* inserted into their present contexts. In his original work on the subject, *Psalms and Story* (1992), he concluded that the psalms in Jonah 2 and 1 Chronicles 16 were inserted by the authors of the surrounding narratives and thus original to their contexts, and that the compositional history of other inset psalms in relation to their contexts was highly complex and often ambiguous.

My recent investigations into the numerical features and the structure of such passages in their literary contexts have convinced me of the urgent need to study them primarily as part and parcel of their setting. This means that we have to rethink the term ‘inset poems’, which is mostly understood as ‘secondarily inserted’. In fact, the word ‘inset’ suggests ‘insertion’.² Therefore, I would propose to employ the more neutral term ‘embedded poetry’, which has already been used by some scholars, though they use ‘inset’ and ‘embedded’ indiscriminately. Embedding need not necessarily imply insertion, for it simply means giving something which is formally divergent a place within a larger whole.³

And this is exactly what can be said of most (if not all) of the poetic passages in the narrative prose of the Hebrew Bible, particularly the smaller ones, but this also holds true for the larger compositions. In my opinion, the difference between an *inset* poem and an *embedded* poem is that the former is inserted as a whole secondarily by an author or a later editor into an existing text, while an embedded poem is integrated by the author of the text in question as an essential component of it. Therefore, in my judgement, the term ‘inset poem’ is not suitable for such poetic passages. It would be safer to consider them *contemporary embedded* poems in the sense described above. It concerns primarily the Hymns outside the Book of Psalms and the Blessings and Laments, which I shall survey below.

In the rubric “The Song/Prayer...in its Literary Context” in my analyses of these texts I address the question of their positioning and function in their literary context. It will be shown to what extent they are contemporary with, and integral to, the surrounding narrative as an ingrained and essential part of it, irrespective whether they were new compositions or reworked compositions imported from outside where they had an earlier *Sitz im Leben*. Most of them are without doubt totally new compositions, but others may have been existent texts that were adapted and recycled. We know that the biblical writers often used existent material, which they edited and adapted to accommodate them in a new literary context. Historical questions regarding the antiquity and pre-history of such texts are for the most part irrelevant to the understanding of their function and the role they play in their present setting.

¹ James W. Watts, “Biblical Psalms outside the Psalter”, in: *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, edited by Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (VTSuppl 99), Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2005, 288-309.

² According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, the noun **inset** is defined as: “a thing that is put in or inserted... a small picture or map inserted within the border of a larger one; a section of fabric or needlework inserted into the material of a garment...” (my italics).

³ The Oxford Dictionary again: “(often **be embedded**) fix (an object) firmly and deeply in a surrounding mass; *figurative* implant (an idea or feeling) within something else so it becomes an ingrained or essential characteristic of it; *linguistics* place (a phrase or clause) within another clause or sentence.”

Let us now trace the embedded poetry, realising, however, that it is not always easy to assess precisely what is poetry and what is not.⁴ In selecting the material I left out of consideration passages that are not easily recognizable as poetry, e.g., material described as ‘narrative poetry’ or ‘prose shown to be verse’.⁵ The list in the following survey contains items that clearly stand out in their literary context as formally divergent.

The first chapter, “**Hymns Outside the Book of Psalms**”, contains the logotechnical analyses of ten hymns/prayers in their literary context:

1. The Song at the Reed Sea in Exodus 15
- 2a. The Framework to the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy
- 2b. The Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32
3. The Song of Deborah in Judges 5
4. The Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2
5. The Song of David in 2 Samuel 22
6. The Letter-Prayer of Hezekiah in Isaiah 38
7. The Prayer of Jonah in Jonah 2
8. The Prayer of Habakkuk in Habakkuk 3
9. Daniel’s Song of Praise in Daniel 2
10. The Song of Praise Ordained by David in 1 Chronicles 16

In a second chapter, “**Blessings and Laments**”, are to be found my analyses of the Blessings in the Torah, the Last Words of David, two Laments of David, and last but not least, the impressive Alphabetic Acrostic in the Book of Lamentations:

1. The Last Words of Jacob in Genesis 47-49
2. The Blessing of Moses in Deuteronomy 33
3. The Blessings of Balaam in Numbers 22-24
4. The Priestly Blessing in Numbers 6
5. The Last Words of David in 2 Samuel 23
6. David’s Lament for Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1
7. The Book of Lamentations

In a third rubric, “**Miscellaneous Texts**”, I study the numerical features of a number of interesting texts, such as the Story of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, the Story of Moses at Mount Horeb in Exodus 1-4, the Story of the Cloud and the Tabernacle in Exodus 40 and Numbers 9, the Battle against Amalek in Exodus 17, the Framework to the Book of Job, and various other texts, e.g., the two versions of the Decalogue, the material in Exodus 23 and Exodus 33, Joshua 1-7, Isaiah 59, etc.

Poetic Passages in the Narratives of the Hebrew Bible

The substantial hymns and poems that will be analysed in detail are in **bold face**.

The smaller poetic passages will only be mentioned, and their numerical features registered, that is to say, more particularly the use of the two divine name numbers **17** and **26** to give prominence to certain sections of the text.

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| Genesis 1:26-27 | The Creation of Human Beings (32 words: 2 in the introduction, 17 in God’s speech, and 13 in the poem describing their creation). |
| Genesis 2:23-24 | Words Spoken by the Man after the Creation of the Woman (28 words: 2 in the introduction and 26 (13 + 13) in the poetic speech). |

⁴ Compare J.C. de Moor, “Poetic Fragments in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History”, in *Studies in Deuteronomy in Honour of C.J. Labuschagne on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, edited by F. García Martínez, A. Hilhorst, J.T.A.G.M. van Ruiten, A.S. van der Woude, Leiden – New York – Köln: E.J. Brill, 1994, 183-196.

⁵ Compare the collection of essays specifically dealing with the appearance of poetry in a variety of Near Eastern prose texts in: J.C. de Moor – W.G.E. Watson (eds.) *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose* (AOAT 42, Neukirchen Vluyn, 1993). See also De Moor’s article in the preceding note, pp. 183f., and especially James W. Watts’ article cited in note 1 above.

Genesis 4:23-24	The Oath of Lamech (24 words: 3 in the intro and 21 in the Oath).
Genesis 8:22 + 9:6	Two quotations in God's Speech (altogether 26 words: 14 and 12)
Genesis 16:11-12	Oracle to Hagar (28 words: 2 in the introduction and 26 in the oracle).
Genesis 21:17-18	Oracle to Hagar (26 words in total, with 14 in v. 17 and 12 in v. 18).
Genesis 24:59-60	The Family of Rebecca bid her Farewell (26 words: 11 (=WH) dealing with the farewell in v. 59, and 15 (=YH) with the blessing in v. 60).
Genesis 25:23	Oracle to Rebecca (altogether 16 words: 3 in the introduction and 13 in the oracle).
Genesis 27:26-29	Isaac's Blessing of Jacob (altogether 52 (2 x 26) words: 18 in the introduction (17 in narrative and 1 in intro formula), and 34 (2 x 17) in the blessing).
Genesis 27:39-40	Isaac's Blessing of Esau (altogether 26 words: 5 in the introduction and 21 in the blessing; moreover, in terms of the use of the <i>atnach</i> , the 26 words are divided into 11 (=WH) and 15 (=YH) after the <i>atnach</i>).
Genesis 49	The Last Words of Jacob (in: Blessings and Laments).
Exodus 15	The Song at the Reed Sea (in: Outside Hymns).
Numbers 6:22-27	The Priestly Blessing (in: Blessings and Laments - altogether 41 words: 26 words spoken by Yahweh commanding it (18 in vs. 22-23 and 8 in v. 27) and 15 in the blessing itself (vs. 24-26), which was obviously an existent liturgical formula).
Numbers 10:34-36	The Exhortation to the Ark, when the Israelites set out from the camp (altogether 26 words: 14 in the narrative and 12 in the two liturgical sayings; compare also Pss. 68:2 and 132:8, and 1 Chron. 6:41).
Numbers 21:14-18	Two Songs about the Amorite territories (the first is a quotation from the Book of the Wars of Yahweh, the second is sung by the Israelites at Be-er): altogether 55 words, with 26 (6 + 20) in the introductions and 29 (14 + 15) in the two songs.
Numbers 21:27-31	The Victory Song of Hesbon (a quotation from 'the reciters of taunt songs', or 'ballad singers' (partly cited in Jer. 48:45-46), and originally an Amorite song): together with its framework has of 52 (2 x 26) words, with 4 in the introduction, 44 in the Song, and 4 in the concluding note (v. 31) stating that the Israelites occupied the territory of the Amorites.
Numbers 21:34-35	YHWH's last words before the Balaam passage: 26 words altogether.
Numbers 22-24	The Blessings of Balaam (in: Blessings and Laments).
Deuteronomy 32	The Song of Moses (in: Outside Hymns).
Deuteronomy 33	The Blessing of Moses (in: Blessings and Laments).
Judges 5	The Song of Deborah (in: Outside Hymns).
2 Sam. 1:17-27	David's Lament for Saul and Jonathan (in: Blessings and Laments).
2 Sam. 3:33-34	David's Lament for Abner (26 words: 17a + 9b).
2 Samuel 22	The Song of David (in: Outside Hymns).
2 Samuel 23:1-7	The Last Words of David (in: Blessings and Laments).
2 Kings 19:14-31	Hezekiah's Prayer during the Assyrian Threat and Yahweh's Response have altogether 272 (16 x 17) words, with 234 (9 x 26) in vs. 14-28 and 38 in vs. 29-31. Significantly enough, there are 17 words in v. 16 and 9 in v. 17, giving altogether 26 words in vs. 16-17. The prayer in vs. 15b-19 is a remarkable mix of prose and poetry. ⁶
2 Kings 20:1-11	Hezekiah's Prayer for Recovery from Illness and Yahweh's Response (with 185 words) is throughout composed as prose, but the 14-word prayer in v. 3 has 8 words

⁶ For the prayer (vs. 15-19) and its introduction (v. 14), see W.T.W. Cloete, "Distinguishing Prose and Verse in 2 Ki. 19:14-19", in: J.C. de Moor – W.G.E. Watson (eds.) *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose* (AOAT 42, Neukirchen Vluyn, 1993), 31-40. He regards v. 14 and the first 6 words of v. 15, as well as vs. 17-18 as prose. The remaining **18** words of v. 15 and the **17** words of v. 16, as well as the **15** (or 14?) words of v. 19, are taken as verse.

phrased as prose and 6 as poetry. The same applies to Yahweh's 47-word response in vs. 5 and 6 (26 and 21 words respectively), which has the first 12 words in prose and the remaining 35 in verse. What is significant is that the narrative in vs. 4-7, including Yahweh's speech, is made up of exactly 68 (4 x 17) words. Moreover, both vs. 1-3 and vs. 4-7 have 26 words after *atnach* and the 185 words of the entire section have 102 (6 x 17) before the *atnach*.

The parallel text in Isaiah 38:1-8 (123 words) is a shorter version of the text in 2 Kings, and is followed by a prayer of thanksgiving put on the lips of Hezekiah (vs. 10-20 in Isaiah 38:9-22). I shall analyse this prayer in more detail.

Isaiah 38: 9-20 Hezekiah's Letter-Prayer (in: [Outside Hymns](#)).

Amos 4:13 Doxology (21 words: 17a + 4b).

Amos 5:8-9 Doxology (26 words: 13a + 13b).

Amos 9:5-6 Doxology (32 words: 17a + 15b).

Jonah 2:1-11 The Prayer of Jonah (in: [Outside Hymns](#)).

Habakkuk 3:1-19 The Prayer of Habakkuk (in: [Outside Hymns](#)).

1 Chronicles 16 The Song of Praise Ordained by David (in: [Outside Hymns](#)).

Daniel 2:19-23 Daniel's Song of Praise (in: [Outside Hymns](#)).

The striking numerical aspects surveyed above, in which the two divine name numbers 17 and 26 feature prominently in a very conspicuous way, should be viewed in the light of similar numerical features of the divine speeches in the Pentateuch. Important texts appear to have been 'sealed' with the name of Yahweh by means of its numerical values. Let me give more examples:

The eleven divine monologues in the Pentateuch (Gen. 1:26; 2:18; 3:22; 6:3; 6:7; 8:21-22; 11:6-7; 18:17-19; Exod. 3:17; 13:17, and Deut. 32:20-27) have altogether 315 words, divided into:

26 words altogether in the introductory formulae
289 (17x17) words altogether in the monologues.

A closer examination of the other divine speeches reveals that the Primeval History is divided into three sections:⁷

⁷ What follows is a quotation from my book *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, North Richlands Hills, Texas: Bibal Press, 2000. For information about the book, click [here](#).

a)	The creation of human beings:		
	creation of male and female	Genesis 1:26	17 words
	creation of Eve	Genesis 2:18	9 words
		<i>Total:</i>	26 words.
b)	Crucial decisions before the Flood:		
	to banish Adam and Eve	Genesis 3:22	19 words
	to limit human life span	Genesis 6:3	13 words
	to wipe out the human race	Genesis 6:7	20 words
		<i>Total:</i>	52 (2x26)
		<i>Grand total before the Flood:</i>	78 (3x26).
c)	Crucial decisions after the Flood:		
	to spare the earth	Genesis 8:21-22	23 words
	to confuse language	Genesis 11:6-7	28 words
		<i>Grand total after the Flood:</i>	51 (3x17).

The results of my inventory of the numerical aspects of the other divine addresses in the Pentateuch revealed an extraordinary high frequency of the numbers **17** and **26**, which is so conspicuous that one can detect it easily without the help of statistical analysis.

The preliminary results of these investigations have been published in a number of articles in which I did not have the pretension to offer a comprehensive survey of this complicated material. I merely intended to offer biblical scholars some insight in the use of these numbers as a structuring principle in this particular literary category.⁸

In addition to the figures already mentioned above I shall now give a rough survey of the occurrence of these two numbers in the divine speeches in the Pentateuch. Far from claiming to treat the material exhaustively, my purpose is to give the reader an impression of their profuse use. These are the total numbers of words in:

all divine speeches in Genesis 1:26 - 2:25	104	(4x 26)
all divine speech formulas using “to say” in Genesis 1-2	26	
all divine speech formulas in Genesis 3	26	
all divine speeches in Genesis 3-4	208	(8x 26)
all divine speeches in the Story of the Flood	494	(19x 26)
all divine speeches in Genesis 9:8 - 11:9	156	(6x 26)
all formulas and speeches in Genesis 4 (12 + 66)	78	(3x 26)
all introductory divine speech formulas in Genesis 1-11	102	(6x 17)
the angel’s address to Hagar in Genesis 16:11-12	26	
the angel’s address to Hagar in Genesis 21:17-18	26	
in all divine speech formulas in Genesis 20-24	51	(3x 17)
in all divine speeches together in Genesis 20-24	204	(12x 17)
in all divine speeches together in Genesis 25-31 likewise	204	(12x 17)
in the divine address to Rebecca in Genesis 25:23	13	
in the divine address to Isaac in Genesis 26:2-5	55	
<i>Divine words spoken to Rebecca and Isaac:</i>	68	(4x 17)

⁸ See the following articles: “The Literary and Theological Function of Divine Speech in the Pentateuch,” in *Congress Volume: Salamanca 1983* (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 36; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), pp. 154-173; “Divine Speech in Deuteronomy,” in Norbert Lohfink (editor), *Das Deuteronomium. Entstehung, Gestalt und Botschaft*. (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologiarum Lovaniensium 68; Leuven, 1985), pp. 111-126; and “Neue Wege und Perspektiven in der Pentateuchforschung,” *Vetus Testamentum* 36 (1986), pp. 146-162.

in the address to Jacob in his dream (Genesis 28:13-15)	52	(2x 26)
in all divine speech formulas together in Genesis 25-28	17	
words spoken to Jacob in Mesopotamia (Genesis 31:3,11-13)	51	(3x 17)
words spoken to and quoted by Laban in Genesis 31:24 and 29	17	
words quoted by Jacob as spoken by God (Gen. 32:10(9)-13(12))	17	
divine oracle given to Jacob in Genesis 35:10-12	26	
divine oracle given to Jacob in Genesis 46:3-4	26	

For examples of the spectacular use of the numbers **17** and **26** in the divine speeches in the rest of the Pentateuch, see my *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, pp. 79-85.

The present analyses of the embedded poems will speak for themselves, showing how these two numbers are woven into the fabric of the poems and their immediate literary context. Moreover, as regards the seven embedded poems in the Story of Ancient Israel (Genesis-Kings), I shall adduce evidence to demonstrate their coherence and interrelationship in terms of key themes, and to show that they are poetic high points functioning as stepping-stones from the exodus towards the occupation of the land and the establishment of the kingdom of David.

Embedding and Framing Techniques

As a rule, embedded poetry is clearly indicated and marked with introductory formulae and concluding demarcating remarks to differentiate them from their contexts. In some cases we find more extensive framing material surrounding the poetic passages, e.g., the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 (framed by 31:14-30 and what follows in 32:44-52), and the poetic body of the book of Job (framed by the prose narrative in 1:1-3:1 and 42:7-17).

Sometimes labels are used, such as ‘song/singing’, ‘prayer’, ‘blessing’, ‘lament’, and ‘letter’.

A very striking embedding and framing technique used by the biblical writers is to make space available within a narrative to accommodate the poem as an integral part of the narrative. I call this the ‘split-and-embed’ technique, also known as dovetailing. The use of this device is not limited to the embedding of poetic passages, but is also employed to accommodate other pieces of literature. This ingenious technique was undoubtedly already employed by the primary authors to *embed* their divergent material, but later editors also used it to *insert* additional material of their choice.

It is of paramount importance to differentiate clearly between the two kinds of accommodating divergent material. In each individual case, we shall have to decide whether we have to do with an embedding by the author or an insertion by a later editor.

Two clear examples of the ‘split-and-embed’ technique are to be found in the book of Genesis. First, the Story of the Sons of God and the Daughters of Humans followed by the Story of the Flood (Gen. 6:1-9:27), which is embedded into the Genealogy of Noah (between Gen. 5:32 and Gen. 9:28-28). And second, the Story of the Death of Sarah, the Marriage of Isaac, and the Death of Abraham (Gen. 23:1-25:11), which is embedded into the two text blocks dealing with Abraham’s Progeny: the Sons of Milcah (Gen. 22:20-24), and the Sons of Ishmael (Gen. 25:12-18). Another example, among others, is to be found in the book of Exodus: the Instructions for the Tabernacle (Exod. 25:1-31:17) is embedded into the Story of Israel at Mount Sinai, between 24:18 and 31:18, which evidently belong together.

A very similar instance is the embedding of the Song of Deborah in Judges 5, where 4:23-24 and 5:31c, which clearly belong together, are split to accommodate the Song.

One of the examples in the book of Deuteronomy is the embedding of the divergent passage, Deut. 4:1-43, into the narrative between Deut. 1:1-3:29 and 4:44-49, two passages that belong closely together, of which the latter is the epilogue to the former.

And finally, there is the special case of Habakkuk 3, where the traditional Psalm heading is split into two parts to function as an including device to embed the Prayer of Habakkuk.

Embedding and Framing Techniques in Select Poems

Poetic Passage	Preceding Context	Introductory Formula	Demarcation at End
Exodus 15:1b-18	Exod. 13:17-14:31	Exod. 15:1a	Exod. 15:19-21
Deuteronomy 32:1-43	Deut. 31:14-29	Deut. 31:30	Deut. 32:44
Judges 5:2-31b	Judg. 4:1-24	Judg. 5:1a	Judg. 5:31c
1 Samuel 2:1-10	1 Samuel 1	1 Sam. 2:1a	1 Sam. 2:11
2 Samuel 22:2b-51	2 Samuel 1-21	2 Sam. 22:1-2a	2 Sam. 23:1-7
Isaiah 38:9-20	Isa. 38:1-8	Isa. 38:9	Isa. 38:21-22
Jonah 2:3-10	Jonah 2:1-2	Jonah 2:3 ^{first word:intro}	Jonah 2:11
Habakkuk 3:2-19c	Hab. 3:1a	Hab. 3:1b	Hab. 3:19d
1 Chronicles 16:8-36	1 Chron. 15:1-16:6	1 Chron. 16:7	1 Chron. 16:36c-d
Daniel 2:20-23	Dan. 2: 16-19	Dan. 2:20a	Continuation of Story
Genesis 49:3-27	Gen. 47:1-49:1a ^{+intro}	Gen. 49:2b	Gen. 49:28, 29-33
Deut. 33:1-29	Deut. 32:48-52	Deut. 33:1-2 ^{intro}	Deuteronomy 34
Balaam's Blessings: Numbers 23:7-10	Num. 22:1-23:6	Num. 23:7a	Num. 23:11-12
Numbers 23:18b-24	Num. 23:13-17	Num. 23:18a	Num. 23:25-30
Numbers 24:3b-9	Num. 24:1-2	Num. 24:3a	Num. 24:10-14
Numbers 24:15b-24	Num. 24:10-14	Num. 24:15a	Num. 24:25
2 Samuel 23:1b-7	2 Samuel 22	2 Sam. 23:1a	2 Sam. 23:8-39
2 Samuel 1:19-27	2 Sam. 1:1-16	2 Sam. 1:17-18	Continuation of Story
Lamentations 1-5	Separate Book	Alphabetic Acrostic	

Bibliography

See James W. Watts, "Biblical Psalms outside the Psalter", in: *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, edited by Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Jr. (VTSuppl 99), Leiden - Boston: Brill, 2005, pp. 288-309, for a comprehensive well-documented review of research and a select bibliography.

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