Oral Register in the Biblical Libretto:
Towards a Biblical Poetic

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With the publication of A. B. Lord's *The Singer of Tales* in 1960, students of the ancient literatures of the Hebrew Bible, like their colleagues in Old English, medieval French, and Old Icelandic, were intrigued with the possibility that the corpus they studied reflected the work of composers in an oral tradition. Biblicists began to think in terms of bards who composed their literature extemporaneously without the aid of writing through the fresh manipulation of traditional patterns in language and content. Continuing and refining the work of his teacher Milman Parry, Albert Lord had suggested that such an oral compositional process lay behind the elegant and complex epics in classical Greek that are attributed to Homer. Lord and Parry's studies were comparative, grounded in the collection and analysis of numerous examples of the live oral traditions of the former Yugoslavia. Lord demonstrated that the literary creations of the Serbo-Croatian singers of tales who could neither read nor write were characterized by certain traits: 1) a specific metrical scheme; 2) "disenjambement" so that the thought is complete at the end of each line; 3) a high degree of formulicity with the bard expressing essential ideas and images with particular appropriate sets of words, patterns of words that could be varied to suit metrical requirements and the interests of the context but that were conventionalized and traditional even in variation; and 4) an equally traditional set of themes, stretches of plot or patterns of content created by the formulaic language. Lord was then able to demonstrate that the very same traits characterized the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Hence, for Lord these works too must have been orally composed. He believed that in the classical Greek case as in the Serbo-Croatian, the oral mode of composition virtually required illiteracy on the part of the composer. What was entailed was a special mode of literary creativity that was somehow contaminated or transformed once the singer had access to writing and

reading.   For Lord, of course, this was not to say the singer was unsophisticated or simple-minded; rather it was to draw a clear demarcation between oral and literate styles and the cultures that support them.

The metrical evidence analyzed by Lord tended to support, for biblicists, the notion espoused by Hermann Gunkel that an oral stage of any biblical composition would be poetic (1966:38-39). Thus John Kselman sought to recover poetic, orally based fragments in the so-called Priestly stratum of Genesis. Stanley Gevirtz (1963), William Whallon (1969), and Perry Yoder (1971) saw in the parallel constructions typical of Israelite poetic and non-poetic compositions a key to Israelite oral composition,[1] while I explored formula patterns used by biblical prophets, entertaining the possibility that an oracle such as Isa 1:4-26 was orally and extemporaneously performed by the prophet (1980a). He might have created and combined traditional formulas to produce blocks of content or "literary forms" that also suggest the stuff of oral composition. The most complete study of poetic formulas in the Bible is that of Robert Culley (1967).   After assessing the formulicity of the poems in the Psalms according to his criteria of repeated phrase and "free substitution," Culley concludes cautiously and, I think, correctly that the amount of material available in the Hebrew Bible is too limited from which to draw definite conclusions about oral composition in the biblical psalms.

All of these studies of biblical material lead one to conclusions about oral composition far less sanguine than those of Lord and Parry concerning the use of formulaic language in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, a corpus that evidences a very high degree of formulicity. And yet these studies begin to suggest something very special about modes of expressing content in Israelite literature, prose, and poetry. Biblical authors of various periods and persuasions composing in a variety of genres share a set of traditional ways to express particular ideas or to create particular images. We cannot link these seeming formulas with systematic metrical and prosodic patterns, nor with strictly poetic texts at all,[2] but the language of the Bible is much more stylized and conventionalized, than, for example, the writing in a

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[1] See also O'Connor's comments on oral composition as it relates to his complex classification of Israelite poetics (1980:42-48, 96-109, 159-63).

[2] See formulas in tales of the successful wise heroes in Genesis 41, Ahiqar, and Daniel (Niditch and Doran 1977:189-90), and in the story of Joseph and Esther (Niditch 1987:126-28).

modern novel or poem and involves variations on certain formulaic patterns of language.

We do well to study biblical literature on its own terms. James Kugel suggests, in fact, that scholars have superimposed their notions of poetry upon the biblical corpus, "reconstructing" to make lines more even, visually aligning the text, and drawing prosodic distinctions in the way we print manuscripts or translate them, creating a false distinction between "prose" and "poetry" (1981:69-70). He suggests implicitly, as the folklorist Dan Ben-Amos does explicitly (1976), that we need to be attuned to the ethnic genres of the culture itself. Kugel's observation encourages one to reject altogether the search for poetic fragments in what now appear in our terms to be prose texts. More importantly, however, he implicitly urges us to explore the nuances of these ancient Israelite compositions in terms of their culture and social contexts, their authors and audiences. While biblical works cannot be proven in any instance to have been orally composed, the written works of the Hebrew Bible evidence traits typically associated with ascertainably orally composed works. They belong somewhere in an "oral register." This phrase refers not to modes of composition but to the style of compositions whether the works were created orally or in writing, whether they are performed or read to oneself (see Foley 1995:15-17).

"Oral register" applies also to the patterns of content that are the plots of biblical narrative and to various recurring literary forms, employed by a range of biblical authors. Robert Alter's studies of biblical type-scenes (1981) testify to this traditional style though, in some misconception about the depth and sophistication of traditional literatures, Alter himself never associates biblical modes of composition with an oral style. Many other studies of biblical patterns of content point to the Bible's oral register. These include my own work with tales of unlikely heroes and tricksters (1987, 1990); Dorothy Irvin's study of the "birth of the hero pattern" in which biblical authors craft tales of Moses (1977); Ronald Hendel's analysis of the lives of the patriarchs (1987); A. B. Lord's study of patterns of the hero in biblical narrative (1990); David Gunn's careful studies of biblical battle reports (1974a, b); Robert Doran's and my study of Genesis 41, Ahiqar, and Daniel 7 as examples of a particular topos about the success of the wise courtier (1977); my studies of various recurring prophetic forms including the symbolic vision form (1980b), the woe oracle, the cult polemic, and the lawsuit (1980a), and of patterns of creation in the Hebrew Bible (1984, 1986).

In the Hebrew Bible traditional style or oral register emerges in the following features. 1) Repetition is present in one passage, particularly in narrative but in other forms as well. The repetition serves to unify the work and to reiterate essential messages or themes that the author wishes to emphasize and that are important in the larger tradition. As Lord has noted (1987:57-62), such repetition is not merely a mnemonic device for the illiterate performer and his listening audience who have no recourse to writing. Rather, repetition has to do with matters of meaning and stylistic preferences. While this style is typical of orally composed works, it also characterizes works composed in writing that participate in the same aesthetic as do orally composed works. 2) Formulas and formula patterns are used to express similar ideas or images throughout the tradition. When a prophet describes God's power in nature or a storyteller wishes to create the image of an autocratic king, he or she has available certain phrases, vocabulary, and patterns of syntax. The composer can endow the formula with his or her own special nuance, but the phrase will nevertheless be conventionalized to mean in shorthand terms "king who is autocratic" or "God-power." 3) The use of conventionalized patterns of content recur throughout the tradition. In the field of biblical studies, such patterns are called literary forms. In traditional cultures there may be ways to describe the preparation for war or the birth of a hero. Each culture has its own favorite recurring literary patterns and ways of combining them into larger wholes.

All of these stylistic characteristics fall under the heading of an aesthetic that John Foley has described in detail in *Immanent Art* (1991). The term that best sums up this aesthetic is *metonymy*, "a mode of signification wherein the part stands for the whole" and the

> text or version is enriched by an unspoken context that dwarfs the textual artifact, in which the experience is filled out—and made traditional—by what the conventionality attracts to itself from that context (7-8).

> Submerged beneath the surface of the single tale or element lies a wealth of associations accessible only under the agreement of metonymic representation and interpretation (11).

> Catalán's formula (and all phraseological and narrative metonyms) conveys its meaning by an institutionalized association, its denotative concreteness standing by prior agreement for a richer and more resonant reality (13).

Thus for Foley, the formulaic phrase is no mere convenience for a bard who works extemporaneously, seeking to maintain a certain meter while providing a piece of content. Rather, the formula is a signifier rich in inherent cultural meanings, that draws upon the wider related literary tradition, a template of the tradition and an indicator of worldview. Formulas bring the larger tradition to bear on the passage, allowing a few words to evoke a wider and deeper range of settings, events, characters, emotions, and meanings than the immediate textual context of the phrase might suggest.[3]

In a careful discussion of one noun-epithet formula translated "the malefactor" used for the monster Grendel in *Beowulf* and for other malevolent figures in Anglo-Saxon literature, Foley shows how this particular phrase "adds to the atmosphere of dread that permeates this part of the poem" because "it resonates with a meaning beyond its semantic formulaic, and literary-critical content" (32-33). The phraseology that combines terms for "dark," "night," and "stalking" similarly "encodes" a "terror" that "springs into the narrative": "the referential meaning of this group of words is much greater than the sum of their individual denotations and connotations, and it enriches each instance with a greater than situational impact" (30, 33).

Similarly, an epithet for Achilles used in one context "promotes the interpretation of a hero's specific and present actions against his overall mythic identity, in other words his whole, extrasituational character" (141). This metonymic quality applies not only to phrases but also to larger structures that "carry with them traditional connotations that are active in the smaller situational compass of individual occurrences" (33).

Foley provides a meaning-rich context in which to understand the repetitions, formulaic language, and motif clusters that characterize works in the oral register. He shows further how this technique of "immanent referentiality" (1991:95) is found not only in works that are orally composed such as those collected by Parry and others but also in works that we have only in libretto form whose mode of composition can never be ascertained with absolute certainty. The relevance of his work on *Beowulf* to biblical material is especially strong.

Foley also beautifully shows how traditional-style works vary in their adherence to this aesthetic of metonymy, with the Moslem epics of the

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[3] See especially 33, 133, 217, 252.

former Yugoslavia, for example, being more fully informed by the "aesthetics of traditional referentiality" (70), "by poetically sanctioned reference to inherent meanings embodied in traditional forms" (*idem*; see also 111-18), than Christian epic songs that blend oral traditional aesthetics with "a more textual orientation" in which the phrase derives more meaning from immediate context. In such works "too metonymic" a reference may be regarded as Homer's nodding and be "corrected." This too becomes relevant to the biblical process, and to our understanding of styles in ancient Israelite literature.

Foley's work encourages us to think deeply about the role of recurring language in the biblical corpus, about epithets and larger formulaic phrases of varying sorts of content, and about the literary forms that unify the corpus. This approach leads us also to question some basic scholarly text-critical and source-critical assumptions about the formation of the Bible that are grounded in the perspective of modern-style literacy and textuality.

Repetition

Examples of purposeful repetition within individual pericopes abound in the Hebrew Bible. The repetition is sometimes of the framing variety found in the first chapter of Genesis with a "fill in the blank" quality (e.g., "And the Lord said let there be x," "And the Lord called the 'x' 'y,' and it was evening and it was morning of the nth day"). Other times, repetition involves full sentences whereby, for example, news is delivered to someone and then is received or overheard by a second character, then repeated perhaps several times as it is passed on to other characters, for example the news that the old man Isaac plans to pass on his blessing to his eldest son Esau and the father's instructions to his son overheard by Rebecca and repeated to her favorite son, the younger Jacob, who then pretends he is his brother by following the instructions (Gen 27:2-4; 7; 9-10; 31; 33). The language recurs in the uncovering of the deception. A similar passing on of news about Tiamat's plot to destroy the gods who had killed her husband is found in the Mesopotamian creation epic *Enuma elish*. A third variety of repetition involves play on a particular *Leitwort*, or key word, a phenomenon noted by Martin Buber and more recently explored by Michael Fishbane (1979:xii, 50-54), Joel Rosenberg (1984:38), and others. In

Genesis 27 such key words are ’*kl* "to eat" and *brk* "to bless," terms that invoke hospitality, ingratiation, and fertility.

Scholars with a taste for a particular sort of literate aesthetic have sneered at repetition. One thinks, for example, of G. S. Kirk's depiction of repetitions in the Akkadian *Enuma elish* as boring and tedious (1970:120). Kirk is simply not appreciative of the rhythms, tastes, and modes of creating meaning that are found in many traditional contexts.

Repetition is not a simple-minded stylistic device that allows an audience to follow a story that is heard rather than read or that provides a composer a quick way to create content without varying the vocabulary or that merely provides the syntax. Repetition is a means of emphasizing metonymically key messages and moods in a work of literature as in a musical composition. The repeated frames in Genesis 1, for example, create the impression of a magisterial and in-charge deity whose word is all-powerful, whose creations are firmly rooted, solid, and integrated. The process of creation and the overturning of chaos is inevitable and builds surely and confidently to the creation of humanity, the capstone of the process. Repetition itself is metonymic for the process of becoming.

Similarly, the refrain "It was good" emphasizes the underlying goodness of the cosmos, a world which comes to include murder and theft, violence, and deception. This is a key theme to an important line of biblical thinkers in the tradition and the repeated phrase serves simply and elegantly to weave the notion of cosmic goodness into the very fabric of creation. In a tale such as Genesis 27, repetitions in the father's words to Esau, the mother's words to Jacob, and Jacob's actions build drama and beautifully highlight complex triangles of family relationships and tensions, as the various characters stand in relation to the words that are repeated. The repetition about the father's anticipated death and about obtaining the food that he loves in exchange for blessing, points implicitly and via shorthand to parental preferences for one child over another, to causes for sibling rivalries, and to Jacob and Rebecca's roles as tricksters as the same words become a source of deception and manipulation. The words, immanently and indirectly referential, create strong impressions of the characters' psychologies and personalities.

The single repeated word can also be a powerful source of immanent referentiality within a work, unifying and deepening the meanings of a composition in ways that are paradoxically more subtle than variation in language. The term "eat" in Genesis 27, for example, serves to juxtapose

Isaac and Esau's physicality—the old man's desire to eat and satisfy his appetite and the young man's willingness to hunt to obtain food—with Rebecca and Jacob's more hidden plans—the woman's work of food preparation that allows her to influence the male (so Abigail, so Esther) and the young man's participation in the act of domesticity as deception. This word not only works metonymically in this tale but evokes a whole range of eating men and food-preparing women in the biblical tradition and sets up the constellation of men to be influenced, lulled, calmed, or as in this case deceived.

Repetition is thus one of the features of the Hebrew Scripture's aesthetic of metonymy. It is important to note, however, that not every traditional-style author represented in the Bible employs the varieties of repetition described above. Such repetitions are a marker of traditional style, an important indicator of a particular traditional style, but not all traditional-style works exhibit this particular feature.

Formulas

Works that exhibit the aesthetic of metonymy will always employ a different sort of repetition, namely the use of certain kinds of language to convey an essential image or idea, to import into a passage of literature a particular mood or characterization or expectation of events because these terms are regularly employed in the tradition to communicate this mood or to introduce certain kinds of events. Such familiar phrases bring with them a meaning beyond the immediate content of the literary context, enriching the passage with the larger implications of the tradition and with essential denotators of a culture's worldviews.

Epithets

Some of the briefest and most basic recurring phrases of the Hebrew Bible are noun-epithets comparable to those Foley explores in Serbo-Croatian, Anglo-Saxon, and classical Greek sources. An archaic epithet for Yahweh, god of the Israelites, provides an interesting case study:*'ăbîr ya'ăqōb*. The translation for this phrase in RSV, the NRSV, and others is "The Mighty One of Jacob." This translation is itself counter-metonymic, a

theologically motivated attempt to invoke only one aspect of the phrase's meaning. More basically and literally the *'ăbîr* in Northwest Semitic languages means "bull," as P. D. Miller has shown in a classic study and as poetic texts such as Isa 10:13; Ps 22:13 (v. 12 in English) and Ps 50:13 strongly confirm. In the latter two passages in particular the "bull" is in synchronic parallelism with the "cow" (Ps 22:13) and the "he-goat" (Ps 50:13).

The horned bull includes implications of strength (hence the translation "Mighty One"), youth, warrior skills, and fertility with a particular sort of machismo. An American of a particular generation might speak similarly of a "young buck" or a "stud." Ancient Canaanite religion is rich in tales of the god Baal imaged as the bull. In fact, horned crowns were important symbols of god-power throughout the ancient Near East. As metonymic symbols of various deities, such crowns were set upon thrones in temples representing and assuring divine indwelling presence. [4]

In part because of the association of the bull with Canaanite and other ancient Near Eastern deities, not all Israelites were comfortable with bull iconography or the related mythology—hence the condemnations in Exodus 32 and 1 Kings 13—and yet for many, perhaps most Yahweh worshipers, the bull symbol invoked a range of positive aspects of the deity as powerful, youthful bringer of plenty, rescuer from enemies. When in Exodus 32 the Israelites shout toward bull icons, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt," it is the power symbolically and metonymically represented by the Bull that captures their imagination. This bull is not Baal or El or Marduk, but the God of Jacob Israel, bound to this people in a shared history of experience, in a narrative tradition that creates, preserves, and maintains the relationship. The Israelite tradition no doubt contained many additional references to the Bull of Jacob beyond the few found in Hebrew Bible—stories, proverbs, longer formulas—but even the limited biblical references are instructive. Each time the epithet is used, a larger tradition of associations is brought to bear on the context at hand that may deal in an immediate way with only certain aspects of the Bull of Jacob.

Thus in Gen 49:24, the literary setting is Jacob's testament, his old-age blessing to each son, considered in the tradition to be ancestor hero of a

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[4] See Niditch 1980b:121-24 on the horn as a metonymic symbol in Zechariah 4 and 2 Kings 22.

particular tribe or tribes. Joseph, father of Ephraim and Manasseh, the northern Israelites, is described in a warrior context. Archers have a grudge against him but his bow stays firm, his arms agile. The translation at vv. 23-24 is difficult but the phrase employing the bull epithet follows these indications of fortitude in battle with a phrase meaning literally "from the hands of the bull of Jacob." In other words, Yahweh, Bull of Jacob, supports his charges in battle like an Athena or a Zeus supports a favorite warrior. The image of the bull brings this agonistic power to bear. So too at Isa 1:24 and Isa 49:26. The latter describes the victory over oppressors in the ghoulish language of a cannibalistic post-victory banquet: "I will cause those who oppress you to eat their own flesh/As with sweet wine they will become drunk on their blood. All flesh will know that I Yahweh am your savior/Your redeemer is the Bull of Jacob." As I have discussed for Ezekiel 38-39 (Niditch 1987), the victory of Israel over her enemies takes the cosmogonic form of the victory-enthronement pattern, the victorious banquet motif intertwining with the blood-soaked imagery of the battlefield —in this case of the enemies' self-consumption in defeat. The "savior" and "redeemer" who makes that possible is the Bull of Jacob. Warrior is also world-maker, establisher of cosmos after chaos, destroyer and builder, wager of battles and peacemaker, guarantor of fertility. All of these nuances are contained in the bull.

Isa 60:16 in context emphasizes the paradise aspect of the bull, the plenty and fertility he brings in the victory over enemies as Israel sucks the milk of nations/the breast of kings. Instead of a cannibalistic self-consumption, there is an image of absorbing the enemies' strength as a baby would drink nurturing milk at its mother's breast—an image of ultimate security and freedom from oppression. This too is within the power of the Bull of Jacob. And yet this epithet emphasizing fecundity, complete security, and peace, also metonymically references the warrior, the aggressive male power.

As Foley has pointed out, such an epithet brings to a passage a full range of a character's personality in the tradition, qualities beyond those emphasized in the context at hand. Psalm 132 is a pro-Davidic, pro-Jerusalem, pro-temple hymn, in which the worldview is similar to that of 1 and 2 Chronicles. David is imagined as an ideal ruler who establishes Yahweh's holy city and prepares for God's dwelling place on earth (132:3-7). The covenant with the Davidic dynasty is emphasized (132:11, 12) as is the role of the priests (132:9, 16) and the eternal bond between God and an

inviolable Zion (132:13-15).   This passage neither deals directly with war (v. 8 contains only hints of the warrior enthroned, returned from battle) nor employs overt fertility imagery, but Yahweh is addressed as Bull of Jacob (v. 2).   David seeks a dwelling place for the Bull of Jacob (v. 5).   This epithet introduces into the passage the full mythology of the bull, the special sort of male power and fecundity, all of which contribute to the message of security under the eternal rule of David in Zion blessed by Yahweh, but the contribution is of the immanently referential or metonymic variety.

A similar sort of metonymy applies to other biblical epithets. When Yahweh is called "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob," the context does not always overtly and directly deal with covenant or genealogy, but this epithet metonymically brings these key themes to bear on a context for those who share the tradition.   The epithet is a template of the larger tradition.

Longer Formulas

The Bible is also rich in more complex and longer formulas, as studies by Culley, Whallon, myself, and others have indicated.   The metonymic quality applies to these phrases as well.   For example, when a biblical figure at court has a difficult problem to solve, he "sends for" or "calls to" a formulaic chain of advisors and assistants.

The chain of wisemen can include any number of wizards, magicians, advisors, officials, and other members of the royal entourage (see, e.g., Gen 41:8; Ex 7:11; Dan 1:20; 2:2; Jer 50:35). These terms may then be used in a variety of stylized expressions.   In Jer 50:35, for example, the prophet intones a virtual incantation over the inhabitants of Babylon, predicting that kingdom's downfall and helping to bring it about: "A sword against the Chaldeans says the Lord and against the inhabitants of Babylon, against her officials, and against her wisemen."   In three other locations (Gen 41:8; Dan 2:2; Ex 7:11) items from this chain are used with the verb "to call" when a king facing a difficult problem calls to members of his bureaucracy to help him address the difficulty.   The formulaic chain appears also at Dan 1:20 to indicate that exiled Jewish wisemen at the Babylonian court were worth ten times more than the local counterparts.

In each case, through the use of a combination of these key terms, the storyteller is able to bring into his context the aura of the foreign court and the notion of contest between those in power and those who are in a more marginal political position but who are backed by God. The longer formula "call to" + "chain of bureaucrats" is a shorthand notice that the Israelite wiseman is involved in some version of a court contest while the author of Jer 50:35, 51:57 is able to use the list of officials formula to describe the undermining of Babylon's government, her seat of power. Such a list is more than a convenience for oral-style storytelling, more than an indication of an aesthetic in which there is a marked preference for describing the same piece of content in the same language. The list is also a means of including an essential idea in a passage, of creating the proper image in the minds of members of an audience, a means of making sure everyone shares the same setting, nuances, and ranges of meaning offered by the tradition.

Quotation of a Specific Text or Traditional Referentiality

In Ex 2:2 the mother of Moses is described: "The woman became pregnant and she gave birth to a son and saw he was good (*wattēre' ōtô kî tôb hû'*)." Many including myself have suggested that the author here echoes the very language of God's creation in Genesis 1 (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), thereby setting in motion in the reader's mind a pattern of cosmogony that will lead to the establishment of a new and free people, the Israelites (Niditch 1993:49).

Implicit in this suggestion is often the assumption that the tale in Genesis 1, in its written form, is being quoted. World-creation is thus a model for other creations. This, of course, assumes a relative chronology in which Genesis 1 is earlier than Exodus 2, a problem for those who would assign these passages to a sixth-century "P" source and a tenth-century "J" source respectively. Within a framework that is more attuned to an oral traditional aesthetic, one might suggest that the creation account of Genesis 1 was known, was popular, had become a part of the culture whatever its origins in writing or speech, and that the author of the birth story of Exodus 2 had available the words of world-creation to introduce a new creation. One does not suggest a rigid process of copying or quotation, but rather that Genesis 1 had become a part of the tradition, the refrain "it was good" had become formulaic.

And yet, perhaps even this framework does not allow adequately for the role of metonymy in assessing the relationship between the passages. In fact, the "see and was good" phrase is found in one additional biblical passage and the phrase "it was good" in numerous others (see Kugel 1980).

In Gen 49:14-15 in the testament of Jacob the saying comes to Issachar:

> Issachar is a strong (bony) ass
> dwelling (lying down) among the encampments (cattle pens)
> He saw a resting place that it was good
> And the land that it was pleasant
> And he bent his shoulder to bear
> And became a slaving labor band.

The various sayings in Genesis 49 provide brief overviews of the various tribes, their strengths or weaknesses, the myths or traditional stories associated with them, and their geographic settings; comparisons to animals or other natural features are common. This piece of tradition characterizes the tribe of Issachar through a donkey metaphor: their brawny animal strength, their stubborn will and endurance, their subjugation. The metaphor works beautifully and is no doubt related to a perception of Issachar's status at some point in Israelite history or to an actual sociological/historical situation for one of the early Israelite groups.[5] As we seek to understand the use of the "see and it was good" phrase in this and the other contexts, we note that once again the phrase is associated with founding or beginning, for Gen 49:14-15 is a founding myth that addresses Issachar's settling into a particular portion of land. The resting place is beheld to be good by one who will work and husband it, reshaping it through his labor.

Thus the phrase "to see and it was good" has to do with creation, procreation, and beginnings. Exodus 2 need not be reliant on Genesis 1 or vice-versa, but all three passages may reflect the sort of metonymic or traditional referentiality that so aptly described the workings of epithets. The smaller phrase "it was good" may also trigger related cosmological themes, for it is frequently used in biblical contexts to describe God, the

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[5] Note the double-entendres and see the discussion in Westermann 1986:233-34.

quintessential and eternal creator.[6] The good land, the good lad, and the good earth all reflect the great goodness that is God.

This approach to recurring biblical language not only challenges the scholar to look in new ways at biblical intertextuality but also raises questions about the whole source-critical enterprise. Many scholars, for example, have seen the woman of Tekoa's description of her sons' fratricidal conflict—a tale she spins at Joab's urging to lead David to rehabilitate his fratricidal son, Absalom—as a case of a Davidic court writer's echoing the mythic tale of Cain and Abel (2 Sam 14:6; Gen 4:8). Both descriptions describe the killing as taking place in an open space (*śādeh*). In fact, the language in each is quite different—different words are used for the conflict and the killing (e.g., *hrg* "to kill" [Gen 4:8] vs. a hiph. of *mwt*: lit. "to cause to die" [2 Sam 14:6]). Other scholars suggest that the courtly tale predates Genesis 4 and that a later writer echoes the woman of Tekoa in his telling of an early cosmogonic myth, perhaps in order to remind readers of Absalom's lack of worthiness and the rightness of the choice of Solomon as David's successor in the dynasty.

One who is attuned to the aesthetics of traditional literatures might view such questions as the wrong ones, the argument itself imaging the proverbial question about the chicken and the egg. Rather, the field, the open spaces, are places where subversion traditionally can take place, where social mores can be overturned. It is the world of nature: Esau's world (Gen 25:27); or the place where Jonathan assists David's escape from King Saul (1 Sam 20:35) when the latter as political authority rules David to be a rebel, an enemy of the state; or the place where a woman can be attacked with no one to hear her screams for help (Deut 22:27). Is it not possible that the open spaces are the ideal setting for various acts of subversion including fratricide, and that references in tales of Cain and Abel and Amnon and Absalom refer to a wider field of tradition that includes not only these scenes from the tradition, these tellings of stories, but other scenes as well?

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[6] Jer 33:11; Ps 34:9 (v.8 in English); 54:8 (v.6 in English); 69:17 (v.16 in English); 100:5; 109:21.

Patterns of Content

In the study of patterns of content the field of folklore overlaps with the biblical sub-field of form-criticism. As briefly noted above, scholars have uncovered scores of recurring *topoi* in the biblical corpus, constellations of motifs or clusters of content that serve authors who present their own versions of the various traditional forms. Under these traditional *topoi* we would include particular sorts of narratives, such as the tales of the hero explored by Hendel (1987); the battle reports explored by Gunn (1974b); varieties of prophetic speech, e.g., the woe oracle and the symbolic vision (Niditch 1980a, b); and the various types of traditional sayings explored by Fontaine (1982).

Complex issues of genre and definition are raised by the mention of these traditional forms. How, for example, does one specify content (Niditch 1987:ch.2)?   Is each variety of traditional narrative a separate genre or form?   How can we be faithful to Israelites' own notions of literary form without superimposing our own notions of structure and content upon the ancient material? It is, after all, an Israelite aesthetic we seek to uncover. However one specifies the content, be it via my overlay map or via Culley's Propp-influenced action sequences or via Alter's type scenes, it becomes clear that the Israelite literary tradition preserved in the Hebrew Bible is characterized by what Culley has called "themes and variations" (1992).

The attempt to identify Israelite ethnic genres—that is, the literary forms that Israelite authors and audiences would recognize by a specific term, context, content, and form—is an important topic for ongoing work. For our purposes, the recognition of the use of themes and variations is essential to understanding the larger aesthetic concept behind the tradition as a whole. Work by Culley, myself, and others proves that the Bible is rich in recurring patterns of content, and, as with the use of formulaic phrases, such clusters partake of a traditional aesthetic of metonymy.

The Victory-Enthronement Pattern

One of the most pervasive traditional patterns in the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East is the victory-enthronement pattern.   This narrative thread is associated with cosmogonic narratives, tales of creation

and re-creation, and is related to human patterns of war. The narrative sequence at its fullest can contain: 1) a challenge to a male warrior, frequently the young powerful deity who is involved in the world-creating pattern; 2) the preparation of weapons, sometimes via magical help; 3) the battle; 4) the victory of the hero; 5) a victory shout; 6) procession; 7) house-building (which in Israelite tradition is frequently associated with the founding or rescue of Zion, the building of the temple in Jerusalem, or taking possession of the land of Israel); 8) a banquet/gathering in the house; and 9) the young warrior's enthronement.

This pattern is found in the Canaanite tale of Baal and Anat, in the Mesopotamian creation tale *Enuma elish*, and frequently describes Yahweh's victories for his people Israel as well as the more universal world-creation (see, for example, Hanson 1973 and Cross 1973:99-104). In some passages many of the motifs that belong to this cluster appear. Few if any biblical texts, however, include all of the motifs listed above, a set of motifs found in the epic of Baal and Anat, which itself has been reconstructed by modern scholars from extant fragmentary ancient texts. None of these examples of the use of the victory-enthronement pattern need in any one case exhibit all the motifs available in the tradition in order for the metonymic force of the cluster to be invoked and experienced. As Foley shows, it is our challenge as modern readers to try to identify with the ancient Israelite receiver of or participant in this material who does have an ongoing connection with this essential mythic pattern and who would be sensitive to the parts as triggers or markers of the larger whole.

A fine example of the way in which Foley's insights lead us to read the ancient traditional material with new eyes is offered by an exegesis of the opening verses of Isaiah 55, one of the works in the sixth-century BCE corpus attributed to the pseudonymous prophet called Deutero-Isaiah by modern scholars. The first two verses are an invitation to all to drink and eat. Reference is then made to the covenant with David (3-5), the call to repent (6-7), the uniqueness of God (8-9), and the inevitability of God's word (10-11). The passage concludes with the imagery of fertility and peace that betoken a sort of reversal of the loss of paradise (12-13). In terms of context, the welcome to eat and drink rich foods, wine, and milk for free can be seen as an *inclusio* with paradise imagery at the end of the pericope. God's salvation brings fullness and plenty. But if one reads more widely in the 2 Isaiah tradition, and in the Israelite tradition as a whole, 55:1-2 can be perceived to invoke the banquet motif of the victory-

enthronement pattern (see Cross 1973:108, 144). A similar invitation to eat and drink is offered by Woman Wisdom in Prov 9:5. A figure closely associated with creation in Proverbs 8, God's "master-builder," a virtual divine consort, Woman Wisdom existed before there were depths, before mountains were dug out. She builds her house at 9:1 and prepares a feast in another biblical example of the victory-enthronement pattern.

Pieces and parts of this pattern ramify through the fifteen chapters attributed to Deutero-Isaiah. In this way salvation becomes liberated from one specific historical event, hoped for and contextualized, and becomes part and parcel of the re-creation of the world, Israel's rescue a new beginning of the cosmos. The warrior and the battle/victory are found in 42:10-17, battle-victory/procession in 51:9-10, procession in 49:8-11, city or world-building and -ordering in 45:11-13 and 45:18-19. As Foley notes for Christian South Slavic epic, the metonymic referentiality of traditional-style immanent art combines with the more immediately contextualized referentiality of non-traditional literatures.

The skilled biblical author at home in the oral world and aware of his audience's expectations within the tradition can quite consciously invoke traditional patterns to manipulate them in recognizably less than traditional ways in order to shock and to make those who receive his message take notice (see Foley 1995:39-40). Amos, for example, invokes the motifs of light and brightness by mentioning "the Day of the Lord," associated with God's liberating acts on Israel's behalf, and instead with dramatic irony declares that for a sinful Israel the day of the Lord means punishment and devastation, darkness and not light (Amos 5:18-20).[7] The power of the traditional pattern thus operates in a transformed capacity. The pattern also plays a role in the biblical tradition in the redaction process itself.

The victory-enthronement pattern, for example, holds together important portions of the Hebrew Bible that probably originally circulated quite separately or that at least admit of different sorts of style, content, and concerns. The last ten chapters of Ezekiel include at least two collections: 1) the apocalyptic battle with Gog of Magog in chs. 38-39, probably the work of a post-exilic writer who expects an overturning of Israel's current situation with a final world-shaking battle; and 2) Ezekiel's plans for the rebuilt temple in chs. 40-48, a visionary excursus that I have compared to

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[7] See Culley on the importance of shared themes and individual variations upon them (1992:47, 169-71).

the mandala visions of the Hindu and Buddhist tradition, as the holy man reports in great architectural detail his vision of God's temple on earth (Niditch 1986). The temple is a new center of the cosmos that mirrors the heavenly realm but that is of this earth, inhabited by priests, princes, and people who now participate in a reinvigorated covenant with God. Holding this disparate material together is the pattern of victory enthronement. Within 38-39 comes the battle (ch. 38:1-16), the victory (38:17-39:16), and the banquet (39:17-20), and in chapters 40-48 the house-building, the building of the dwelling place of the victorious deity that is a cleansed Edenesque cosmos, where all is ordered according to God's plan, peaceful and plentiful in accordance with God's peace.

Similarly, Exodus 1-15 includes the epic of Israel's escape from slavery in Egypt into the wilderness. Chs. 20-40 contain legal and ritual material albeit presented within the narrative context of the exodus. Exodus 15 includes motifs of challenge (15:9); battle/victory (15:1, 4-8, 10-12); procession (15:13; 16), and enthronement (15:17-18). Then comes the world-ordering via law, culminating with directions for the building of the tabernacle, the moveable tent shrine that like the later temple is the locus for God's indwelling presence on earth. Thus, as in Ezekiel 38-48, the cosmogonic victory-enthronement pattern serves as a connecting web in Exodus.

The traditional victory-enthronement is extremely important in shaping the slice of the Israelite tradition we call the Hebrew Bible. Its force is not superorganic without reference to actual people who constitute real cultures, but rather is testimony to the power of "immanent art" in the mind and work of redactors, for people at home in an oral culture have determined the form of what ultimately became the written words of Scripture. Quite late in the final formation of the biblical tradition redactors compiled materials that were by then perhaps quite fixed either orally or in writing, influenced by an orally derived sense of what sorts of themes or motifs belong together.

The important message from our study of formulaic patterns of language and content in the literature of the Hebrew Bible is not that the Bible is derived from orally composed literature in some simple evolutionary process. Certainly some works may have been composed extemporaneously, but the crucial conclusion is that the oral aesthetic infuses Hebrew Scripture as it now stands. Without an understanding of

this aesthetic and the world that provided its context, we cannot fully appreciate the literature of ancient Israel preserved in the Bible.

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