How the Bible Is Written

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See also: *How the Bible Is Written* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019).

By Gary A. Rendsburg
Rutgers University
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The first paragraph of my new book reads as follows: "Learned colleagues have written books entitled *Who Wrote the Bible?*, *How to Read the Bible*, *How the Bible Became a Book*, and *How the Bible Became Holy*.[1] The present volume poses a different question, *How the Bible Is Written*. My goal in this book is to reveal the manner in which language is used to produce exquisite literature, no less for the ancient Israelite literati who crafted the compositions that eventually were canonized as the Bible than for William Shakespeare or Jane Austen or J. R. R. Tolkien or any other writer whose literature we admire and continue to enjoy. Which is to say, in the most simple of terms: there are many books on what the Bible says; this is a book on how the Bible says it."

Per this introductory statement, in the ensuing 600+ pages, I set out to reveal how the ancient Israelite authors were master wordsmiths, who time and again used the Hebrew language in the most creative ways, in order to produce the

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[1] See, for example, Friedman 1987; Brettler 2005; Brettler 2007; Kugel 2007; Schniedewind 2004; Satlow 2014. [As my book was going to press, yet another relevant book appeared: Knohl 2018.]

national literature of their people, eventually to be canonized as the Bible of Judaism and then at a later date as the Old Testament of Christianity.

The Bible continues to inspire contemporary Jews and Christians, mainly due to its overarching message, theology, worldview, and humanity. But I also want modern readers of the Bible to appreciate the manner in which the ancient authors were able to convey these ideas. They were not just prophets and lawmakers and storytellers, seeking to guide the people of ancient Israel (and through them their religious heirs via the two streams of Judaism and Christianity), but they also were superb literati. The message is sublime, but when it is conveyed via the wonder of literary delight and linguistic brilliance, the message is all the more enhanced.

As with many other scholars of my generation, I was an English major as an undergraduate, plus I love language. Throughout my career, accordingly, I have been naturally drawn to the nexus of language and literature: whether it be in Chaucer, in Shakespeare, in Tolkien, or in the Bible. Over the years I have published articles on such subjects as wordplay, alliteration, style-switching, confused syntax, marking closure, and repetition with variation – until the time arrived, almost ten years ago, when I decided to write a sustained book on the subject, incorporating these and other features found in the biblical text.

That said, the book is not a volume of collected studies, but rather a coherent statement about the smallest building blocks of biblical literature. The devices that receive the most attention are alliteration and repetition with variation, on which see further below. Most of my analyses focus on the prose narratives, and most of my examples come from familiar texts such as Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, Judges, and Samuel.[2] In general, individual chapters are devoted to specific features (such as wordplay, alliteration, marking closure, etc.), though I also have included two chapters which proceed verse-by-verse through two well-known stories: Genesis 1 (the story of creation) and Genesis 29 (the story of Jacob and Rachel). On occasion, I turn to poetry or to the prophets, though as indicated, most of the book is devoted to prose storytelling.

In a desire to make the book accessible both to scholars and to educated lay people, every passage, phrase, and word appears both in the original Hebrew and

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[2] Indeed, in this essay, I will treat passages from the book of Genesis only.

in English translation, and, when applicable, in simplified transliteration. Thus, for example, when discussing the alliteration present in two key words in Genesis 27, I present them as מְתַעְתֵּעַ *məta'tea'* 'mocker' (v. 12) and מַטְעַמִּים *maṭ'ammim* 'delicacies' (6x: vv. 4, 7, 9, 14, 17, 31). I further note that both are rare words in Hebrew, so that the author of this account must have reached deep into the Hebrew lexis to pluck them in order to create the desired auditory effect. Finally, I even suggest that an English translation may wish to capture the similar sounds through such English words as 'derider' or 'disdainer' for the former (instead of 'mocker') and either 'dainties' or 'delicacies' for the latter.

Throughout the book, I use analogues from English literature, in order to set the stage, so that readers of the book will have a greater awareness of the particular literary device before they reach the Hebrew examples. In the case of alliteration, I am able to present all manner of examples, such as Fluellen's description of the Duke of Exeter in Shakespeare's *Henry V*, "as magnanimous as Agamemnon." There are many other heroic and magnanimous figures from the ancient past, all or most of whom would have been well known to Shakespeare's audiences, but only Agamemnon fits the bill *alliterationis causa*.

Or, take the final stanza of Robert Louis Stevenson's "Sing Me a Song of a Lad that is Gone," which employs the phrase "billow and breeze" to evoke the experience of sailing from the Scottish mainland to Skye – not "wind and squall" or "gust and wind" or any other possible combination, but rather the alliterative "billow and breeze."

For a master American stylist, consider the alliterations employed by Henry David Thoreau in his classic work *Walden*, with such phrases as "rippled but not ruffled," "guided and guarded," "as a dervis in the desert," and "the *shore* is *shorn*."[3] For a longer strike of similar sounds, this sentence serves us well: "I am no more lonely than the loon in the pond that laughs so loud, or than Walden Pond itself" – with the repeated /l/ sounds, which to my ear evoke the sound of the lapping of the water at Walden Pond's edge (which the current writer has himself enjoyed).

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[3] In this last instance, the italics appear in the original printing and in all subsequent editions.

Let me present one more instance of alliteration in a Hebrew text. Exodus 19:21 includes the following unusual expression פֶּן־יֶהֶרְסוּ אֶל־יְהוָה לִרְאֹות *pɛn yɛhɛrsu ʾɛl yhwh lirʾot* 'lest they penetrate unto Yʜᴡʜ to see'. Now, anyone who knows Hebrew well will realize that the verbal root ה-ר-ס *h-r-s* means 'destroy', not 'penetrate'. The former meaning would not be appropriate here ('lest they destroy unto Yʜᴡʜ'?), and thus most translations render the word as 'break through', though I have opted for 'penetrate'. But why use the word at all? The answer lies in noticing the alliteration produced with the key two-word phrase הַר סִינַי *har sinay* 'Mount Sinai', which occurs four times in close proximity (vv. 11, 18, 20, 23). Note how the three consonants that comprise the root ה-ר-ס *h-r-s* 'destroy, penetrate' appear in the same order at the beginning of the phrase הַר סִינַי *har sinay* 'Mount Sinai'. The author of this text extended the meaning of the verb ה-ר-ס *h-r-s* from 'destroy' to 'penetrate' for the purposes of alliteration. In fact, there is more, for the Hebrew phrase actually begins with פֶּן־יֶהֶרְסוּ *pɛn yɛhɛrsu* 'lest they penetrate' (see above) with /n/ and /y/ (after skipping the /p/), two additional consonants that appear in הַר סִינַי *har sinay* 'Mount Sinai'. In other words, the /p/ aside, the two two-word phrases analyzed here share all five consonants. Ah, that is why the writer used the root ה-ר-ס *h-r-s*!

In treating alliteration throughout the book, I remind the reader that in antiquity literature was presented aloud. Silent reading did not exist, so that a text was *heard*, through the oral-aural effect, 'from the mouth' 'to the ear'. Robert Alter has conjured the setting of the shepherds around the campfire at night, with one person reciting the text, and the others listening attentively. In a more urban context, I have suggested the same in the piazza or public square just inside the city gates. However and wherever these texts were presented, the oral-aural effect will explain why the authors who prepared these compositions peppered their prose and poetry with sound patterns, prettily produced for the pleasure of the people paying heed to the performance.

As indicated above, the second common building block in biblical literature is repetition with variation. Readers of the Bible are keenly aware that passages often repeat. Thus, for example, the narrator narrates Pharaoh's dreams in Gen

41:1–7, and then Pharaoh relates his dreams to Joseph in Gen 41:17–24. But the repetition is not verbatim, for slight variations in the wording abound in the two tellings. To highlight one such change, in Gen 41:2 the good cows are described as יְפוֹת מַרְאֶה וּבְרִיאֹת בָּשָׂר *yəpot marʾɛ u-briʾut baśar* 'beautiful of visage and healthy of flesh', while in Gen 41:18 they are described as בְּרִיאוֹת בָּשָׂר וִיפֹת תֹּאַר *bəriʾut baśar w-ipot toʾar* 'healthy of flesh and beautiful of form'. Note the reversal in the order of the two phrases, along with the change in one word, מַרְאֶה *marʾɛ* 'visage' to תֹּאַר *toʾar* 'form'. There appears to be no reason for these modulations other than for the sake of variation, so that the author can demonstrate his literary virtuosity.[4]

For much greater variation, consider the two verses that narrate the sexual encounters between Lot and his two daughters:

Gen 19:33

וַתַּשְׁקֶיןָ אֶת־אֲבִיהֶן יַיִן בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא וַתָּבֹא הַבְּכִירָה וַתִּשְׁכַּב אֶת־אָבִיהָ וְלֹא־יָדַע בְּשִׁכְבָהּ וּבְקוּמָהּ:
And they plied their father with wine that night, and the elder came and she lay with her father, though he did not know her lying down and her rising up.

Gen 19:35

וַתַּשְׁקֶיןָ גַּם בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא אֶת־אֲבִיהֶן יָיִן וַתָּקָם הַצְּעִירָה וַתִּשְׁכַּב עִמּוֹ וְלֹא־יָדַע בְּשִׁכְבָהּ וּבְקֻמָהּ:
And they plied even that night their father with wine, and the younger arose and she lay with him, though he did not know her lying down and her rising up.

The two verses begin with the same word, וַתַּשְׁקֶיןָ *wattašqɛna* 'and they plied', but then they quickly depart from one another: (a) v. 33 follows immediately with אֶת־אֲבִיהֶן *ɛt ʾabihɛn* 'their father', while v. 35 places this expression slightly later;

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[4] I hasten to add, though, that at times the variations do reflect a greater purpose, including in this chapter. Most famously, the narrator's version of the dreams are described in the most dispassionate of terms, while Pharaoh's retelling of them to Joseph includes some very subjective, indeed emotional, comments, such as (re the bad cows) "I had not seen their like in all the land of Egypt for foulness" (Gen 41:19) (adopting here the translation of Alter 2019:1.158).

(b) the former uses the more archaic בַּלַּיְלָה הוּא *bal-layla hu* 'on that night' (note the lack of the definite article on the demonstrative pronoun), while the latter uses the more standard בַּלַּיְלָה הַהוּא *bal-layla ha-hu* 'on that night' (with the definite article on the demonstrative pronoun); (c) v. 33 uses the verb ב-ו-א *b-w-* 'come', whereas v. 35 uses the verb ק-ו-ם *q-w-m* 'arise'; and (d) in the first instance we read וַתִּשְׁכַּב אֶת־אָבִיהָ *wattiškab* *ʾet* *ʾabiha* 'and she lay with her father', with the object expressed as a noun, while in the second case we read וַתִּשְׁכַּב עִמּוֹ *wattiškab* *ʿimmo* 'and she lay with him', with the object expressed as a pronoun – and note, moreover, the use of different synonymous prepositions (both אֶת *ʾet* and עִם *ʿim* mean 'with') in these phrases.

This last difference, moreover, offers a subtle adumbration of the names of the two respective sons (see vv. 37–38), with the former phrase anticipating מוֹאָב *moʾab* 'Moab', the name of the first daughter's son (note the common element אָב *ʾab* 'father'), and with the latter phrase anticipating בֶּן־עַמִּי *bɛn* *ʿammi*, lit., 'son of my people', the second daughter's son and the ancestor of עַמּוֹן *ʿammon* 'Ammon' (note the common element created by the *ʿayin-mem* combination).[5]

In sum, far from a simple 'here we go again', the author introduces variation at every possible turn in v. 35. Once again, we must keep in mind that all of this literature was *heard*, so that the ancient listener to this text needed to apprehend all these variations on the spot, in the moment, for there was no returning to the prior iteration. We today, who read silently and access a text visually, have the advantage of comparing and contrasting passages in easier fashion, including juxtaposed side-by-side, as I have done above. To repeat, for the ancient listener, this was not an option; rather, he/she needed to remain attentive at all times to the oral presentation in order to appreciate the text to its fullest.

In light of the various alternations in Gen 19:33, 19:35, I further would submit that the *defectiva* spelling וּבְקֻמָהּ [WBQMH] *u-bqumah* 'and her rising up' in v. 35 (the only case in the Bible of *defectiva* spelling with the infinitive construct

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[5] I am indebted to Roni Shweka (Hebrew University) for this very insightful observation.

of ק-ו-ם *q-w-m* 'arise'[6]) represents another slight modification, in contrast to the expected *plene* spelling וּבְקוּמָהּ [WBQWMH] *u-bqumah* 'and her rising up' in v. 33.[7] Obviously, this orthographic matter would be sensed only by the reader holding the written text and not by the listener enjoying the recitation (for the two forms are pronounced the same) – and yet I would appeal to variation for the sake of variation here as well,[8] especially when one realizes that the final clause of both iterations is otherwise identical. Indeed, this most likely explains the supralinear dot over the *waw* in וּבְקוּמָהּ in v. 33, alerting the scribe to pay heed, to write the form in v. 33 with *waw* and then the form in v. 35 without.[9]

In the above two illustrations (Genesis 19 and Genesis 41), the two lines appear in close proximity to one another, and such is the case with most instances of variation with repetition. I invite the reader to study, for example, the two verses that comprise the command-and-fulfillment pattern in Gen 1:11–12, regarding the creation of vegetation, containing numerous minor variations in wording. In this case, however, a third iteration appears, though at some distance, in Gen 1:29, when God provides the diet for humankind. Still further changes occur here: (a) In vv. 11–12 we encounter the phrase אֲשֶׁר זַרְעוֹ־בוֹ *ʾašεr zarʿo bo* 'with its seed in it', while in v. 29 we read אֲשֶׁר־בּוֹ פְרִי־עֵץ *ʾašεr bo pəri ʿeṣ* 'that have in it the fruit of the tree', with both a varied word order (that is, regarding the placement of בּוֹ *bo* 'in it') and lexical substitution ('its seed' > 'fruit of the tree'); and b) In vv. 11–12 we read מַזְרִיעַ זֶרַע *mazriaʿ zεraʿ* 'seed', using the Hiphʿil

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[6] See the Masoretic note in the St. Petersburg (Leningrad) Codex and other manuscripts.

[7] The terms *plene* (full) and *defectiva* (lacking) refer to different manners of spelling Hebrew words, with especial reference to the vowels /i/, /o/, and /u/, especially when long. For example, does one represent the long /i/ vowel with the letter *yod* (= /y/), or not? Similarly, does one represent the long /u/ vowel with the letter *waw* (= /w/), or not? For the non-Hebraist, analogies such as American *color*, *humor*, *labor*, etc., vs. British *colour*, *humour*, *labour*, etc., may help – even if the analogy is not perfect.

[8] I thus accept the approach of Rahlfs 1916 and Barr 1989: 186–95 concerning the variant spellings in the Bible.

[9] On the supralinear dots in the Torah, see Diamond 2019, esp. pp. 29–74, with our passage discussed on pp. 44–49.

participle' (once in each verse), while in v. 29 we read זֹרֵעַ זֶרַע *zoreaʿ zɛraʿ* 'seed', using the Qal participle (2x),[10] apparently without any lexical distinction, but simply for the sake of variation.[11]

At an even further distance from each other one finds these two passages:

Gen 25:24   וַיִּמְלְאוּ יָמֶיהָ לָלֶדֶת וְהִנֵּה תוֹמִם בְּבִטְנָהּ׃

And her days to give birth were fulfilled, and behold, twins in her womb.

Gen 38:27   וַיְהִי בְּעֵת לִדְתָּהּ וְהִנֵּה תְאוֹמִים בְּבִטְנָהּ׃

And it was, at the time of her giving birth, and behold, twins in her womb.

At first glance – or better, at first hearing – the three-word phrases that end these two verses may look and sound exactly alike (and indeed their English translations are precisely the same), but upon closer inspection one realizes that the form of the noun 'twins' is slightly different in the two versions: תוֹמִם *tomim* in the first instance, תְאוֹמִים in the second. And yes, I believe that all this is intentional; and yes, I further believe that the trained listener to a reading of the book of Genesis would recall that she heard the former in 25:24 upon hearing the latter in 38:27.

The first of these verses also affords us another opportunity to see alliteration at work, especially once we include the preceding verse:[12]

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[10] The terms Qal and Hiphʿil refer to different verbal stems within the system of ancient Hebrew grammar. The former is the base stem, while the latter is typically the causative stem. Thus, for example, the verbal root א-כ-ל *ʾ-k-l* means 'eat' in the Qal (a basic verb), but 'cause to eat' > 'feed' in the Hiphʿil. Which is to say, almost always the two stems connote different (albeit related) meanings, though in Genesis 1, regardless of which stem is used, the same meaning 'seed' obtains.

[11] In my translations here, I have rendered the phrases rather literally, as is my wont, with the first 'seed' as the verb and the second 'seed' as the noun.

[12] In the presentation of the Hebrew, I place square brackets around the Ketiv form and an asterisk following the Qeri form.

Gen 25:23-24

23 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לָהּ שְׁנֵי [גיים] גוֹיִם* בְּבִטְנֵךְ וּשְׁנֵי לְאֻמִּים מִמֵּעַיִךְ יִפָּרֵדוּ
וּלְאֹם מִלְאֹם יֶאֱמָץ וְרַב יַעֲבֹד צָעִיר:

24 וַיִּמְלְאוּ יָמֶיהָ לָלֶדֶת וְהִנֵּה תוֹמִם בְּבִטְנָהּ:

[23] And Yhwh said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from your innards shall divide; and (one) people will be stronger than the (other) people, and the greater shall serve the younger."
[24] And her days of bearing were fulfilled; and behold, twins in her womb.

Immediately we are struck by the three-fold use of לְאֹם *ləʾom* 'people' in v. 23, within the oracle spoken by God to Rebekah. The word occurs in Biblical Hebrew prose only here and in its echo in Gen 27:29. Otherwise the noun appears 27x more, all in poetry and prophecy (Isaiah 11x, Jeremiah 1x, Habakkuk 1x, Psalms 10x, Proverbs 4x). It is true that within narrative prose God's words often are expressed as poetry, or at least in a higher register, so that approach may help. But still we must ask why here specifically does לְאֹם *ləʾom* 'people' occur three times. The answer is revealed in the first word of the next verse, וַיִּמְלְאוּ *wayyimləʾu* 'and were fulfilled', from the root מ-ל-א *m-l-ʾ*, an anagram of the three consonants found in לְאֹם *ləʾom* 'people'. Which is to say, the ears of the listener to this story would have rung with the word לְאֹם *ləʾom* 'people', and/or an inquisitive look may have emerged from her face – all to be satisfied upon hearing the word וַיִּמְלְאוּ *wayyimləʾu* 'and were fulfilled' at the head of the next verse.

While on the topic of phrases at some distance from one another (per our example of Gen 25:24, 38:27 above), for our final illustration of "How the Bible Is Written," let us inspect another such pair, though with a different purpose in mind. The same phrase יָמִים אֲחָדִים *yamim ʾaḥadim* 'a few days' occurs twice in Genesis: a) in Gen 27:44, where Rebekah instructs Jacob to flee to her brother Laban יָמִים אֲחָדִים *yamim ʾaḥadim* '(for) a few days', until Esau's anger subsides; and b) in Gen 29:20, where the seven years that Jacob labors to gain Rachel are in his eyes

כְּיָמִים אֲחָדִ֗ים *kə-yamim ʾaḥadim* 'as a few days'. As we read on, we realize that the 'few days' were in fact not just seven years, but another seven years, and then eventually another six years, for a total of twenty years (Gen 31:38, 31:41). All this as a reflection of Rebekah's original comment that Jacob should flee the household and live with Laban for a 'few days'. Clearly, as any unified reading of the story would admit, the two occurrences of the phrase are interconnected, but – and here is the key point – the Documentary Hypothesis will have none of this,[13] for Gen 27:44 is assigned to 'J' and Gen 29:20 is 'E', as if the shared phrase in the two passages is simply a coincidence.[14] My book was not written as a salvo at the usual source-critical division of the narratives, but this and many other passages are presented in a chapter entitled, "A Challenge to the Documentary Hypothesis" (ch. 22).

As I hope to have demonstrated in this short essay, with only a limited number of examples, the biblical text demands that the reader pay close attention to each and every word, which individually and collectively serve the nexus between language and literature. These small building blocks of the literary composition, in turn, guide the reader to fully comprehend not only the Bible's message, but also how the Bible delivers that message.

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[13] The Documentary Hypothesis refers to the theory that the books of the Torah are comprised of four main sources. I agree wholeheartedly that the legal-cultic texts embodied in the Priestly material, stretching from Exodus 25 through Numbers 10 (including all of Leviticus), constitute one source, and that the legal-cultic texts comprising most of the book of Deuteronomy constitute another. But the narratives are to be read holistically and are not to be divided into separate sources.

[14] The sigla 'J' and 'E' refer to two of the main narrative sources supposedly underlying the final form of the Torah. The single letters are abbreviations for the Yahwist source (indicated by 'J', not 'Y', due to the origins of the theory within German biblical scholarship) and the Elohist source, respectively. The names, in turn, are based on the assumption that the former uses YHWH 'LORD' to refer to the deity, while the latter uses Elohim 'God'.

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