Introduction to the Embedded Poetry

Embedded Poetry in the Prose of the Hebrew Bible

Throughout the Hebrew Bible we find smaller and larger pieces of poetry embedded in the narrative and prophetic literature. One of the most intriguing questions we are confronted with is whether such embedded 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’, 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, Psalm 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’. 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.

And this is exactly what can be said of most (if not all) 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 characteristic 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 characteristic of it, irrespective whether they were new compositions or reworked compositions imported from outside where they had an earlier Sitz im Leben.

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.”

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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. 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. 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’. The list in the following survey contains items that clearly stand out in their literary context as formally divergent from it.

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.

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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.
Survey of the Embedded Poetry in 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.

**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).

**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 *atnach*, the **26** words are divided into **11** (=WH) and **15** (=YH) after the *atnach*.

**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 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**).
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: 6

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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.

a) **The creation of human beings:**

- creation of male and female: Genesis 1:26, 17 words
- creation of Eve: Genesis 2:18, 9 words

**Total:** 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

**Total:** 52 (2x26)

**Grand total before the Flood:** 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

**Grand total after the Flood:** 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. 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Total Words</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All divine speeches in Genesis 1:26 - 2:25</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>(4x26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All divine speech formulas using “to say” in Genesis 1-2</td>
<td>26</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>All divine speech formulas in Genesis 3</td>
<td>26</td>
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<tr>
<td>All divine speeches in Genesis 3-4</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>(8x26)</td>
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<tr>
<td>All divine speeches in the Story of the Flood</td>
<td>494</td>
<td>(19x26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All divine speeches in Genesis 9:8 - 11:9</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>(6x26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All formulas and speeches in Genesis 4 (12 + 66)</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>(3x26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All introductory divine speech formulas in Genesis 1-11</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>(6x17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The angel’s address to Hagar in Genesis 16:11-12</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The angel’s address to Hagar in Genesis 21:17-18</td>
<td>26</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>In all divine speech formulas in Genesis 20-24</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>(3x17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In all divine speeches together in Genesis 20-24</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>(12x17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In all divine speeches together in Genesis 25-31 likewise</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>(12x17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the divine address to Rebecca in Genesis 25:23</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the divine address to Isaac in Genesis 26:2-5</td>
<td>55</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Divine words spoken to Rebecca and Isaac:** 68 (4x17)

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in the address to Jacob in his dream (Genesis 28:13-15) 52 (2x26)
in all divine speech formulas together in Genesis 25-28 17
words spoken to Jacob in Mesopotamia (Genesis 31:3,11-13) 51 (3x17)
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 five embedded poems in the Deuteronomistic History, 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

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<tr>
<th>Poetic Passage</th>
<th>Preceding Context</th>
<th>Introductory Formula</th>
<th>Demarcation at End</th>
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<tr>
<td>Exodus 15:1b-18</td>
<td>Exod. 13:17-14:31</td>
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<td>Judges 5:2-31b</td>
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<td>Judg. 5:1a</td>
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<td>1 Samuel 2:1-10</td>
<td>1 Samuel 1</td>
<td>1 Sam. 2:1a</td>
<td>1 Sam. 2:11</td>
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<td>Habakkuk 3:2-19c</td>
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<td>Hab. 3:1b</td>
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<td>1 Chronicles 16:8-36</td>
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<td>Dan. 2: 16-19</td>
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<td>2 Samuel 1:19-27</td>
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<td>2 Sam. 1:17-18</td>
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