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Hearing the Voice of Biblical Poetry

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In a series of studies published in the early 1990s, James W. Watts made an observation about poetry in biblical narrative, one that had gone un-recognized. Once stated, however, this observation was obvious and per-plexing: poems in biblical narrative are "placed in the mouths" of char-acters.[1] Watts' point was obvious in the sense that inset poetry has always been a distinctive feature of biblical narrative, even if the phe-nomenon had escaped sustained attention by scholars. In Exod 15, the Song of the Sea is preceded by a narrator's description of its singing, that "Moses and the Israelites sang this song" (Exod 15:1). In Judg 5, Deborah's Song concludes a victory, "Then Deborah and Barak, son of Abinoam, sang on that day," and the deaths of Saul and Jonathan are marked in the story by a lament, which the narrator quotes as David's

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[1] James W. Watts, "'This Song': Conspicuous Poetry in Hebrew Prose," in *Verse in Ancient Near Eastern Prose*, edited by Johannes C. de Moor and Wilfred G. E. Watson, AOAT 42 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1993), 345–358 (348). There he writes, "Biblical Hebrew narrative always places inset poems into the mouths of characters." The quotation "placed in the mouths," which in context refers to how certain ancient Egyptian literary texts follow a similar practice, comes from James W. Watts, *Psalm and Story: Inset Hymns in Hebrew Narrative*, JSOTSup 139 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1992), 213. See also his essay "Psalmody in Prophecy: Habakkuk 3 in Context," in *Forming Prophetic Literature: Essays on Isaiah and the Twelve in Honor of John D. W. Watts*, edited by James W. Watts and Paul R. House, JSOTSup 235 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1996), 209–223. For his subsequent development on the topic, see "Biblical Psalms outside the Psalter," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, edited by Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller Jr., VTSup 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 288–310.

words (2 Sam 1:17). But Watts' observation was perplexing in its signifi-
cance. What does such an observation tell us about biblical poetics and
textual composition? In his studies, he noted important points of
comparison in the ancient Near Eastern literary record and focused on
how such comparisons can shed light on biblical compositional
techniques.

Around the same time, Steven Weitzman published his own study of
inset poetry, *Song and Story in Biblical Narrative*, explaining "that those
who inserted the songs into biblical narrative were themselves readers
who imposed their own literary standards and expectations onto the
songs through the act of inserting them within a narrative setting."[2]
Weitzman probed the literary logic of this distinct manner of composi-
tion, noting that this would only be possible by "recogniz[ing] the 'oth-
erness' of the biblical text, its resistance to … presuppositions" of biblical
text composition.[3] He framed the phenomenon as one of textual reuse,
suggesting that in many cases the poetry appeared on linguistic grounds
to chronologically precede the prose, "some songs … were evidently
added to already existent episodes, and perhaps others … composed by
the author of the surrounding story."[4] But more accurately, Weitzman's
observations, while at times taking a diachronic approach, did not de-
pend upon one: the poetry stood on its own as a "coherent … indepen-
dent document" and was subsequently embedded in the prose narra-
tion.[5] In view of the comparative data, "the art of storytelling in the
ancient Near East often lies in how preexisting materials and traditions
have been recycled and recombined into new compositions."[6]

Indeed, to study the compositional logic of poetry inset in biblical
narrative, one does not need to make an argument for the relative dat-

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[2] Steven Weitzman, *Song and Story in Biblical Narrative: The History of a Literary Convention* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 4.

[3] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 4.

[4] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 5.

[5] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 4–5.

[6] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 125.

ing of the poetry and its prose frame. One need only advance the claim that the poetry exists coherently apart from the prose. The question of when one account arose relative to the other seems to be both a more difficult question to answer and perhaps a less productive one. Depending on the given text, the poetry might well have developed contemporaneously with the prose, subsequently, or prior to it. How one decides to configure the timeline of literary composition does not impinge on the claim that the poetry could, and likely did, exist independently of the prose. The central inquiry regarding inset poetry for Weitzman, as well as Watts, then, was how to account for the compositional logic and how this logic shapes the interpretation of the framing narrative. As Weitzman notes,

> [i]t is precisely because many of the songs were not created for use in their present literary settings that we ... rely ... on what the surrounding prose says— or implies—about the songs as our main source of information about their narrative roles.[7]

The literary effect of song in story is an important, if overlooked, dimension of biblical narratives. All the more so if the stories have incorporated and reused potentially ill-fitting poems as the words the characters speak out in reaction to the drama of their stories. Why, indeed, is the "prayer" that Hannah performs following her struggle with infertility a battle victory song (1 Sam 2)? Why does Jonah utter a psalm of thanksgiving to Yahweh *before* the deity commands the fish expel him (Jonah 2)? These are fascinating and intractable problems of biblical composition and final-form interpretation, ones which have been more recently examined through the lens of performance criticism.[8]

But what if there is more to the phenomenon of biblical poetry as inset speech than its effect on the framing story? Here, I return to the initial observations of Watts and Weitzman, as well as more recent work

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[7] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 6.

[8] Terry Giles and William J. Doan, *Twice Used Songs: Performance Criticism of the Songs of Ancient Israel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009).

in this area that expands the observation beyond narrative. In an essay entitled "Direct Discourse and Parallelism," Edward Greenstein notes that "[b]iblical verse is virtually all direct discourse," and anthological works like Psalms, Proverbs, and the prophets are implicitly spoken; likewise, "throughout biblical narrative longer and shorter poems are embedded, and in nearly every instance the text represents the *ipsissima verba* of a named speaker."[9] Greenstein's observation is important because he creates a more encompassing observation that brings together poetry in both narrative as well as in anthological works in the biblical corpus. In what follows, I explore the phenomenon more deeply, considering poetry-as-speech as a manifestation of aesthetic, social, and epistemological principles. I will argue that this feature of biblical narrative—poetry framed as character speech—reveals a set of principles that guided biblical composition more generally. Chief among these principles in the framing and presentation of biblical poetry is the uniquely authenticating potential of the named and embodied speaking voice.

Beyond A Literary Convention

Biblical narrative seems rather unusual in how it incorporates verse, seemingly taking the form of a musical, with song interrupting—or more accurately, concluding—narrative episodes with expressions of characters that linger and arrest the plot if for a moment.[10] This form, however, is not without precedent in the neighborhood of ancient Israel. Watts was the first to account for how other ancient Near Eastern literary traditions, notably some Mesopotamian works, occasionally "[incorporate] inset genres," for example, by embedding a prayer or lament

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[9] Edward L. Greenstein, "Direct Discourse and Parallelism," in *Discourse, Dialogue, and Debate in the Bible: Essays in Honour of Frank H. Polak*, edited by Athalya Brenner-Idan, HBM 63 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2014), 79–91 (79–80).

[10] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 7, 148 n. 24, who credits Watts, *Psalm and Story*, 187, 215–216, with the musical analogy.

into a prose account.[11] Such is also the case in the Ugaritic narratives, which are entirely in parallelistic verse but nevertheless embed the characters' orations or songs within the stories. The "filial duties" speech in the Ugaritic tale of Aqhat is one such example. Within the story itself, the speech is recycled four times, spoken by a different character at each instance.[12] The poem's reuse within the story itself may have led scholars to speculate as to its prior life outside the story.[13] Significantly though, and unlike Ugaritic narrative, biblical texts maintain their storytelling in prose with only the characters speaking in verse.[14] Watts suggests that a close point of comparison might be found in some ancient Egyptian narratives, such as in the account of Horus and Seth that concludes in song.[15]

An important lesson from Weitzman's study is that for such comparisons to be helpful, they must ultimately lead us back to making sense of the biblical compositions. Speaking of the phenomenon of lyric insertion in medieval French narrative, he notes, "[l]ike the songs in biblical narrative, the lyrics ... appear repeatedly in the story at key moments in the plot; they are often attributed to figures within the story; and sometimes they appear to have been drawn from preexisting lyric collections."[16] This particular comparison finds its limitations, since the insertion of lyric in medieval French narrative

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[11] Watts, "'This Song,'" 349.

[12] See Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Transmission and Mortal Anxiety in the Tale of Aqhat," in *Like 'Ilu Are You Wise: Studies in Northwest Semitic Languages and Literature in Honor of Dennis G. Pardee*, edited by H. H. Hardy II, Joseph Lam, and Eric D. Reymond (Chicago: Oriental Institute Publications, forthcoming).

[13] See J. F. Healey, "The Pietas of an Ideal Son in Ugarit," *UF* 11 (1979): 353–356 (356); Y. Avishur, "The 'Duties of the Son' in the 'Story of Aqhat' and Ezekiel's Prophecy on Idolatry (Ch. 8)," *UF* 17 (1986): 49–60 (57–58).

[14] Watts, "'This Song,'" 349.

[15] Watts, "'This Song,'" 350.

[16] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 7.

was actually quite a variegated phenomenon in its own right. In some texts the poetry is imputed to characters within the story; in others it is woven into the fabric of the narration. In some texts the poetry is drawn from preexisting sources; in others it is invented anew.[17]

We learn much from this comparison, namely, what is not shared between these two literary traditions. In biblical narrative, the poetry is rarely "woven into the fabric of the narration." It is always speech "placed in the mouths" of characters. This may seem a trivial point. But when one considers how biblical poetry has been organized and presented within narrative—and even in nonnarrative collections—it becomes clear that biblical poems are always in some way associated with the explicit or implicit speech of characters.[18]

Through a poem's association with its speaker in the story we can begin to sketch the contours of this ancient Israelite literary practice. According to Weitzman, Watts found yet another parallel in the Late Period Egyptian Piye stela, a lengthy prose narrative that "[features] several songs within the course of its narrative which it attributes to figures within the narrated world."[19] Weitzman presents a close study of the Piye stela and Exod 14–15, eliciting a new understanding of the placement of song in narrative: the insertion of songs functioned as a "speech coda," a form of narrative closure.[20] Specifically, he observed that poetry-as-performance, when concluding episodes, "reflect[ed] the narrative's strategy of using character testimony" to make the narrator's claims explicit and concrete.[21] It is not merely that character speech concludes narrative episodes. They serve a testimonial function: the words, set in the mouths of the story's heroes and heroines, are fused with their voice,

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[17] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 7.

[18] See Jacqueline Vayntrub, *Beyond Orality: Biblical Poetry on Its Own Terms* (New York: Routledge, 2019); idem, "Before Authorship: Solomon and Prov. 1:1," *BibInt* 26 (2018): 182–206.

[19] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 17.

[20] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 35–36, 57–58.

[21] Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 27.

name, deeds, and stylized memory. For all intents and purposes, their words, configured thus, become authoritative and authenticated for the reader. The claims that the characters make relieve the epistemological burden generated by the narrator's storytelling, as they come "straight from the horse's mouth."

The speaking voice of biblical poetry in its textual presentation provides a fleshy, embodied dimension to what would be otherwise decontextualized verse. Biblical poems are often directly linked to speaking characters that appear in the framing story (as in Jonah's prayer), or they are more indirectly linked through their "attribution" (the Songs of Solomon), which alludes to and evokes a broader biographical tradition of characters. Weitzman observes that this literary practice persisted in early Jewish composition, with "works such as *Tobit*, *Judith*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the *Testament of Job*, and the Gospel of Luke ... attribut[ing] songs of praise to biblical heroes or to characters modeled on biblical heroes."[22] Similarly, Eva Mroczek in her study of collection and attribution practices in collections of Psalms in the Dead Sea Scrolls understands the literary practice of attributing works to a figure from lore as giving the character something to say.[23] She writes,

> [i]t is the desire to reflect and elaborate on particularly compelling aspects of David's character ... that is behind the creation of the expanded headings. Put simply, dramatizing the psalms in his voice gives this David more things to say.[24]

In Weitzman's evaluation, poetry-as-performance became a distinctly biblical aesthetic, one

> that regarded the form of the Hebrew Bible ... as a model of literary expression ... transforming an assortment of literary practices shared by Israel with other ancient Near Eastern cultures into a self-conscious literary convention.[25]

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22 Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 127.

23 Eva Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 63.

24 Mroczek, *The Literary Imagination*, 63.

25 Weitzman, *Song and Story*, 127–128.

This is not *just* a literary convention, though. It is my contention that so-called inset poetry in biblical narrative worked aesthetically because it drew upon powerful social principles embedded in the practice of instruction and knowledge transmission. Framing knowledge as voiced speech connects deeply to distinct ways of relating socially and transmitting knowledge in the broader literary culture. Beyond simply enlivening the text, the attachment of names and characters—a known speaking voice—to songs, prayers, laments, and instructions is a crucial element of the presentation of testimonial knowledge. What I mean by "testimonial" knowledge is those words transmitted from a speaker to a hearer: a father giving advice to his children, a victor in battle telling of their triumph, the bereaved lamenting over their deceased. The characters who give voice to verse in the biblical text are not only linked to their names but also to their deeds and their reputation within a biographical tradition. And in a culture that relies upon transmitted knowledge, presenting knowledge and words in this way relieves the burden of the hearer.[26] A hero or heroine's association with such words contextualizes, authorizes, and authenticates the knowledge claims.

Hebrew Poetry's Speaking Voice

If reading the Hebrew Bible in its currently compiled state from the beginning, Lemech's speech is one of the first encounters one has with poetry. Incidentally, in this speech, the speaker's call to attention provides an outline for how voice is configured in the openings of biblical poems:

> Adah and Zillah, hear (שמעֶן) my voice
>   O wives of Lemech, lend an ear (האזנה) to my speech. (Gen 4:23)

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[26] For a recent account of transmission, testimonial knowledge, and its epistemological burdens, see John Greco, *The Transmission of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 4–5.

In his study of the poem, Stanley Gevirtz comments that Lemech opens "his song in conventional manner ... address[ing] his wives."[27] What here is conventional? Surely not that the song is addressed to wives but rather that it is addressed by a speaker to a hearer in a very specific manner, identifying the speaker's audience and drawing attention to the words as speech: identifying the speaker's audience (Adah and Zillah // wives of Lemech) and drawing attention to the words as speech (hear // give ear; voice // speech).[28] The poem's opening call to instruction aptly highlights how biblical poetry situates, stylizes, and ultimately allows for a coherent concept of the speaking voice of named and famed characters.

Biblical poetry explicitly situates speech in the voice of a personage, as in Lemech's call to his wives, and elsewhere. Balaam's second instruction speech (משל), in Num 23:18–24, opens likewise:

> Arise, Balak, and hear (שמע),
> Give ear (האזינה) unto me, O son of Zippor

In Isa 1:10, this call to attention describes the speech to come as an actual instruction (תורת אלהינו). We see the same call to attention in the words of Moses in *Haʾazinu*, Deut 32, a song traditionally named for the first-appearing member of the "to hear and give ear" word pair, here reversed:

> Give ear (האזינו), O heavens, and I shall speak,
> Let the earth hear (תשמע) the words of my mouth. (Deut 32:1)

Like in Deut 32:1, the speaker near the beginning of Judg 5:2–31 articulates a call to listen, followed by the speaker's announcement of performance:

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[27] Stanley Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*, SAOC 32 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 26.

[28] Gevirtz, *Patterns*, 26.

Hear (שמעו), O kings!
Give ear (האזינו), O princes!

I will, for Yahweh, I will sing (אשירה)!
I will pronounce (אזמר) for Yahweh, the God of Israel. (Judg 5:3)

In Gen 49, Jacob calls his sons to attend his final testament, here with a variation on that often encountered pair "to hear and give ear," allowing the poetry to highlight the verb's sense "to listen (passively)" and "to listen and thereby do," that is, "to obey":[29]

Come together and hear (שמעו), O sons of Jacob,
Obey (שמעו) Israel, your father. (Gen 49:2)

Simply put, the call to listen, followed by the announcement of voiced performance, establishes the scene and sets the actors in what can often seem, at least in reportorial discourse, a musical interlude. This word pair, "to hear and give ear," addresses an audience directly—the immediate audience of the narrative world and the more removed readers of the text—inviting them to be present in character speech. The often accompanied self-referential "I will now sing a song/cry a lament/speak an instruction" connects the named character to their performance, linking their voice to their words. Lemech instructs his wives, Balaam speaks a lesson to Balak, Deborah and Barak proclaim to the world's leaders, Jacob commands his sons, and Moses lectures Israel, calling the entire world as witness.

Why does this observation matter for understanding biblical poetry? The openings of these poems, nearly all situated within reportorial discourse, not only indicate that what we understand to be poetry and heightened patterned language comes packaged in the voice of a named character. These calls to attention draw in an audience to listen immediately, in a way that the framing texts do not. This orientation toward the addressee, articulated in the unmarked vocative ("Adah and Zillah, O

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[29] On the connection between "hear" and "obey," compare the use of *šmʿ* in the Mesha Stele, KAI 181 28.

wives of Lemech"), is what Roman Jakobson, twentieth-century literary theorist and structural linguist, would identify as the conative function of verbal communication.[30] The conative function grabs the attention of the listener, persuading her to heed the speaker. As such, vocatives and imperatives characterize the the conative, in the sense of, "Hey! Listen to me!" In other words, while all poems stage a communicative act, in the case of these "hear and give ear" openings as well as in many other biblical poems, the speaker assumes and emphasizes the presence of an internal audience. Such poems set within narrative brings the narrative world inside of its staged performance of song.

But something else is happening here, beyond characters breaking into song, beyond the identification of the poem's speaker (Lemech) and addressees (his wives). Here is where biblical poetry establishes itself as a different mode of expression than reportorial narration: the poem draws attention to itself as an expression of the voice. And in replicating and representing deeply familiar ways of communicating—the social hierarchies of speaker and hearer, and the rhythms of spoken language—biblical poetry radically breaks from this shared knowledge of speech to elicit a concept of speech itself.

Because biblical poetry meditates on the act of characters speaking out, its delineation focuses on those aspects of a communication act that would otherwise be taken for granted: the establishment of contact. By doing so, the poem makes explicit the fact that *here there is speech*. This is what Jakobson would identify as the *phatic* function of verbal communication: "[a] physical channel and psychological connection between the addresser and the addressee, enabling both of them to enter and stay in communication."[31] The speaker's voice and the hearer's ears link this physical channel. It is not yet the message, only the establishment of the connection itself. Writing about medieval English literature,

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[30] Roman Jakobson, *Language in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 67.

[31] Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, 66.

Julie Orlemansky explains that the voice of the text is "a metaphor that cannot be defiguralized. Like the legs of a table or the face of a clock, a text's voice names something with no proper or literal name."[32] But in Hebrew poetry the voice that occasions speech is not so distant: it is explicit, and part of its self-presentation is as a discrete system of language.

From our own literate perspective, the voice "provide[s] no more than a transitory and precarious translation" of sound into written works.[33] If we are to think of speech as merely a medium for communication, we easily fall into the modern developmental opposition of the oral and the written. As such, these signals of speech in the Hebrew text allows for a historicist argument where the texts have been corrupted or adapted from an originally oral composition and performance situation. Or, more recently and with distrust of those modern binaries of oral and written, the scheme is reformulated to include a "more encompassing category within ... the opposition between script and speech."[34] Yet, it is possible to move beyond questions of the text's origins and the role of orality in composition. Hebrew poetry establishes itself and its system of language with staged performances of a speaking voice, calling attention to the "bodily presence" of speaker and hearer.

Now, consider another occurrence of the "hear and ear" word pair in Hebrew, in David's song after his deliverance from Saul in 2 Sam 22:2–51 (cf. Ps 18):

In my troubles I called (אקרא) for Yahweh,
to my God I called out (אקרא).

He heard (וישמע), from his temple, my voice,
My cry, in his ears. (2 Sam 22:7)

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[32] Julie Orlemanski, *Symptomatic Subjects: Bodies, Medicine, and Causation in the Literature of Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 249.

[33] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2002), 38.

[34] Rosalind C. Morris, "Legacies of Derrida: ~~Anthropology~~," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 36 (2007): 355–389 (357).

This is not a call to attention but to the speaker's description of his performance. The passage nevertheless illuminates for us an underlying notion of biblical poetry's speech-making. Hebrew poetry establishes itself within the framework of conventional meaning and intentional expression, that is, of human speech.

If the referent of Hebrew poetry is the speaker's embodied voice—attached to a name, a reputation, a biography, a rich set of associations within a literary tradition—then its sign is the cry, the shout, the squeal, the *tsk tsk*, the head-nodding and hand-clapping, the hissing and spitting and gnashing of teeth. In Eagleton's account of the formalist idea of the "poetic," "the sign is dislocated from its object: the usual relation ... is disturbed, which allows the sign a certain independence as an object of value in itself."[35] From this perspective, Hebrew poetry in fact draws attention to the "usual relation" of the speaking voice to its embodied speaker, disturbing this relation by its very dislocation from a fleshy, embodied performance in its textualized form rather than in its oral performance. This fractured association is both highlighted by and reconstituted through its representation in a text—through its various compositional and paratextual elements, like speech performance frames and attributions. Hebrew poetry, in its representation of voice, ties together the sign and the object—the speaking voice and the speaker—through frames and attributions, in a way that runs counter to Eagleton's account.

As we see here in Lamentations, as elsewhere in the prophetic texts, failure and social death elicit such visceral gestures by onlookers, marking disapproval, disgust, and schadenfreude:

> All your passersby clap back at you,
> they hiss and shake their heads at Maiden Jerusalem:

> "Is this the city they called The Perfect Beauty,
> The Joy of All the Earth?"

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[35] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 85.

All your enemies scoff at you,
they hiss and gnash their teeth,

Saying: "We swallowed (them up)!
Ah, this is the day we've waited for,
We got to see it!" (Lam 2:15–16)

So too in Ezek 27:32–36, as above, where the testament of witnesses—onlookers to the destruction who can speak to the utter failure they observe—completes the lament of verses 3b–36:

In their wailing they spoke out (ונשאו) in lament,
And they lamented (וקוננו) over you:

"Who is like Tyre,
silenced in the midst of the sea?

When your wares were brought in from the seas,
many were gratified,

through your wealth and abundance
you enriched rulers of the land.

When wrecked by the seas in deep waters,
your merchandise and all the crew within you sank.

All the coast-dwellers are stunned by you,
their kings aghast,
their faces contorted.

Merchants among the peoples hiss at you,
you have become a terror,
you have disappeared forever." (Ezek 27:32–36)

The performance of triumph or failure is with the voice, an emission of the body. And when Hannah announces her speech of triumph over childlessness ("Hannah *prayed* and said ...") in 1 Sam 2, it is not as "song," as Moses in Exod 15 or Deborah and Barak in Judg 5, but a term—often translated "to exult"—evoking a more visceral type of performance:

My mind exults (רמה), thanks to Yahweh,
my might is great, thanks to Yahweh.

My mouth opens (רחב) wide against my enemies,
I indeed rejoice (שמחתי) in my victory. (1 Sam 2:1)

Likewise, personified Jerusalem in Lamentations "bitterly weeps through the night, her tears are upon her cheek" (1:2), and then in her voice a call to the deity to attend her embodied voice: "See, O Yahweh, my wretchedness" (1:9b), "See, O Yahweh, and look at how pathetic I have become" (1:11b). She invites "all passersby"—a call to both the embedded and the externalized audience of the poem—to "look and see such a disgrace like mine" (1:12). She fulfills the promise of performance in that she "bitterly weeps" in verse 16: "For these things I cry my eyes out, (bodies of) water flow from my eyes."

In Proverbs, personified Wisdom is also announced through her voice:

Wisdom exults (תרנה) in the street,
in the squares she brings forth her voice (תתן קולה).

From the most bustling place she cries out (תקרא),
At the entrance of the city gates she speaks (תאמר). (Prov 1:20–21)

Modeled upon ancient Near Eastern instruction frames, throughout the instructions of Prov 1–9 the father commands his son to hear his lesson, claiming that hearing the words themselves will endow the listening son with their life-saving properties. The "hear and ear" word pair is found at nearly every instance of instruction here, not only in the positive sense that one is encouraged to attend but also that the disregard of instruction results in death and bodily decay:

And at your life's end you groan,
when your flesh and your body are consumed.

You then say, "Oh how I rejected discipline,
(how) my mind despised reproof!

For I did not hear (שמעתי) my teacher's voice,
I did not incline my ear (הטיתי אזני) to my instructors." (Prov 5:11–13)

But even more striking is how abstract concepts of wisdom and folly are personified as speaking voices—and indeed embodied voices—them-

selves. It is Wisdom's breasts, not those of a strange woman, that should
"satisfy you at all times" (Prov 5:19). At this point in the poetry of
Prov 5, the erotic fleshes out an extended metaphor of wisdom or folly
as a young man's choice of a fully embodied woman he might pursue.
These bodies of personified Wisdom or Folly begin and end their work
in the text as voices crying out:

> Does not Wisdom call (תקרא),
> (does not) understanding give forth her voice (תתן קולה)? (Prov 8:1)

Now in Wisdom's call to attention, the poetry is structured such that a
verb is omitted in the second half, thereby rendering the message as the
voice itself:

> To you, O people, I call (אקרא),
> my voice, to all mortals. (Prov 8:4)

If Wisdom cries out in the streets, her rival is also introduced by the
noise she produces: "She is rumblings" (Prov 7:11), and she persuades
him—"sways," as one does with one's ear when listening, with an in-
struction of her own, "with the slipperiness of her lips" (7:21). The fa-
ther implores his sons to listen to *him*, the words of *his* mouth—not
hers (7:24).

THE VOICE HAS A NAME

In his study of voice in ancient Greek poetry, Simon Goldhill notably
begins with the conspicuous absence of the hero's name in the *Odyssey*—
paradoxical for a work "centred on the representation of a man who is
striving to achieve recognition in his society, a man ... repeatedly likened
to a poet."[36] The riddle of *Odyssey's* anonymous "man" recalls the book of
Ecclesiastes in the voice and personage of Qohelet, whose identity is
withheld from the reader indefinitely.[37] The phenomenon of Qohelet's

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[36] Simon Goldhill, *The Poet's Voice: Essays on Poetics and Greek Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 1.

voice, which shifts between the repertorial discourse of a narrator and the patterned speech characteristic of Hebrew instruction poetry, is one we will consider in due course. But that Goldhill begins his study of the poet's voice with the puzzle of Odysseus' nameless introduction in the text is illuminating, for it is the case in biblical speech-making that the speaker's voice is inextricably linked to their identity, name, deeds, and backstories in the wider literary tradition. How else are we to make sense of Moses' instruction in Deut 32 or Jacob's testament in Gen 49? Without a name and character to house the speech, the words float out to sea in search of a speaker—at least in the absence of an addressee, the reader can stand in as audience, but without a speaker their application remains unclear, perhaps dangerous. Such a fate befalls unnamed, unmoored speech in Jub 8:2–3:

> When the boy [Kainan] grew up, his father taught him (the art of) writing. He went to look for a place of his own where he could possess his own city. He found an inscription in which the ancients had incised in a rock. He read what was in it, copied it, and sinned on the basis of what was in it, since in it was the watchers' teaching by which they used to observe the omens of the sun, moon, and stars, and every heavenly sign.[38]

Commenting on this passage, Hindy Najman writes that

> [f]or Jubilees, writing not only signifies the severity of a prohibition and explains why heroes are able to resist temptation, it also explains why weaker characters succumb to temptation and are led astray.[39]

She concludes, "Kainan took it," that is, writing, "to be an authoritative record"—the fact that it was written text was enough to make it authoritative. Among her incisive points in interpreting this passage in the

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[37] Thomas M. Bolin, *Ecclesiastes and the Riddle of Authorship* (London: Routledge, 2019).

[38] Translation from James C. VanderKam, *Jubilees 1–21*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 358.

[39] Hindy Najman, "Interpretation as Primordial Writing: Jubilees and Its Authority Conferring Strategies," *JSJ* 30 (1999): 379–410 (383).

broader context of what Jubilees does with writing is that the inscribed poses the danger here. In her words, "writing is inextricably linked to its authoritative function," that in addition to Scripture, that is, "divinely sanctioned texts, there are also dangerous texts, which may claim a certain authority on the basis of their status as ancient writings, and these may lead the reader astray."[40] But let us press the case further. We might ask, what is it about the written in this case that leads astray? One can only hypothesize, but here in the passage in Jubilees we find a discussion of not merely "writing" but the phenomenon of truly disembodied speech. What he had found in the inscriptions were utterances detached from a named, embodied, authoritative figure—a source. In an earlier essay about Ecclesiastes and its complex discourse on the transmission of knowledge and instruction, I mused about the common interpretation of the famous passage in Plato's *Phaedrus* in which Socrates addresses the notion of written instruction as one that sets the "written" against the "oral":

> While at first blush the discussion about writing ... could refer to the stability of *written* text, one might look elsewhere in the dialogues where Plato has Socrates criticizing an interlocutor for using the words of someone else and not their own words ... We start to see that the written is merely a single medium that poses the problems of disembodied words.[41]

In Plato's account of Socrates' evaluation of the written instruction vs. the oral one, as in Jubilees, the issue at hand is deceptively about medium. But this is only a secondary concern. The primary concern is one of the stability, authenticity, and veracity of sources. A named source is authoritative because it is attached to the reputation of its attributed speaker. A knowledge claim which is detached from its embodied, speaking source is less reliable. In its complex integration of the written

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[40] Najman, "Interpretation," 384.

[41] Jacqueline Vayntrub, "Ecclesiastes and the Problem of Transmission in Biblical Literature," in *Scribes and Scribalism*, edited by Mark Leuchter (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 79–93 (92).

in Israel's prehistory, a narrative account notably marked in the biblical text by performed speech, Jubilees extends a biblical theory of authoritative, named speech in its reverse: if the named speech leads the way, the unnamed leads astray.

Conclusions

Biblical poetry represents or imitates speech not only in how it is built into texts—two-dimensional, atemporal arrangements of language that conjure three-dimensional and narrativized experiences in space. Biblical poetry's representation of speech is not merely translated by our insertion of quotation marks on the page. It is accompanied by a coherent set of ideas of the voice, its embodied nature, how this embodied voice identifies itself, how it makes contact with others and communicates, how that communication functions in a literary system, and its limitations. The frame explicitly stages a voice, and this voice, whether it is the quoted speech of a character or part of an anthology related to a character's name and reputation, works together with the composition's internal patterns to advance its messages. If we bracket questions such as whether the Bible's poetry is poetry—if its prosody is recognizable from the perspective of other ancient and modern poetic traditions—we begin to see other aspects of Hebrew poetry, not only its prosody or forms, but its framing as speech and the communicative world through which it generates meaning.