Unless some one guide me...
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COLLAPSING THE NARRATIVE BRIDGE[1]

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Among commonly accepted scholarly ideas, the opinion that the great historical work contained in the first books of the Bible, Genesis through 2 Kings, nowadays usually designated as 'Primary History', has been composed from various sources, is accepted by nearly all scholars and laymen with great confidence. Even outspoken literary scholars pay at least some lip-service to it. There are good reasons for this. Firstly, the books and their major subsections are often very different in literary and, to a lesser degree, in linguistic character. Secondly, these books contain variant traditions about one event, duplications of episodes, discontinuities of style and contents and even outright contradictions, which one cannot readily imagine to have been penned down by one author. It would seem, however, that the appearance of the text is deceptive. It turns out that the differences between the books are to a large degree deliberate, as the entire work appears to be an expert imitation and emulation of the Greek *Histories* of Herodotus of Halicarnassus (completed circa 440 BCE), with especially the narrative line of the first six books and the Table of Contents of the entire work having been derived faithfully, as I recently demonstrated.[2]

The second foundation-stone of the historical criticism of Primary History will be dealt with here. I will attempt to show that in the linear sequence of the biblical text, in a number of cases – all of them celebrated instances where supposedly only diachronic models can explain the text as it is now – certain discontinuities are present which, while not entirely excluding an equally linear reading and understanding of the entire text, strongly suggest two different courses of events. Each of these can be read separately, is sufficient to explain the further course of events, and seems to be resumed several times further on in the text.

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[1] For reasons of space, I have given hardly any references to the abundant secondary literature about each of the passages discussed here; I hope to return to them elsewhere. Biblical texts are quoted according to the *Revised Standard Version.*

[2] 'Discontinuity, Congruence and the Making of the Hebrew Bible', *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 13 (1999), 24-77.

The result of this procedure is a text which can be characterized as a brilliant combination of a literary dossier, where the reader is informed through a series of potentially independent documents, and a linear history, in this case from the creation of the world to some decades after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BCE.

The proof that this observation does not rest on accident only, or would be a mere figment of the imagination, will be provided by the fact that such pairs of narrated episodes in continual tension between separate and combined reading exhibit a great likeness and are integral parts of larger literary units, and as such seem to represent an accepted and identifiable literary technique.

In this article, I will discuss three cases which have been discussed extensively in the scholarly literature, especially because of the evident discontinuities exhibited by them. The latter have usually been explained as resulting from the history of the text, with the contradictory traits going back on originally separate sources. By contrast, I will attempt to show that a purely literary explanation is readily available.[3]

God's patience with King Saul has run out at the beginning of 1 Samuel 16. The prophet Samuel is sent to Bethlehem to anoint the youngest son of Jesse, David, to become king in his stead. Directly afterwards we are told how David came to stay at Saul's court: in his God-less state, Saul suffered depressions which could only be alleviated by the music made by David. To our great surprise, however, the story of 1 Samuel 17, the famous episode of David and Goliath, does not refer to the preceding chapter, apart from a somewhat unusual statement about David's father, 'Now David was the son of that Ephrathite (*RSV* an Ephrathite) of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons' (17:12). David is shown to be at home with his father, rather than at the court, indicated with an ambiguous statement, 'but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep in Bethlehem' (17:15, of course it is not clear whether his position at court is meant or his going to the army and back again). It is even stressed that Saul did not recognize David or even know his name (17:31-39 and 55-58). These discontinuities, combined with the fact that the Septuagint contains an

entirely different and much shorter version of chapter 17, have led many to suppose that the Masoretic text of this chapter is not the original one. It can be observed that 1 Samuel 18 seems to continue the theme of David as a warrior, whereas in the further episodes we find attachments both for this (*passim* throughout the rest of 1 Sam. and 2 Sam.) and for the theme of David as a musician (esp. 1 Sam. 18:11 and 19:9-10). More importantly, a specific reference to David's fight with Goliath is to be found in the episode in 1 Samuel 21, where Ahimelech, the officiating priest in the sanctuary of Shiloh, says to David: 'The sword of Goliath the Philistine, whom you killed in the valley of Elah, behold, it is here wrapped in a cloth behind the ephod' (21:9).

Returning to the two versions of 1 Samuel 16-17 we see that they are closely associated by the use of the same words in both: Jesse has eight sons, the names of the first three and of the last one, David himself, are given and are the same in both versions (16:6-9 and 11-13; 17:13-14); Jesse is an old man at the time of the story (16:4; 17:12); and David is described in remarkably similar terms (16:12, 'Now he was ruddy, and had beautiful eyes, and was good to behold ('handsome' *RSV*)'; 17:42, 'for he was but a youth, ruddy and beautiful ('comely' *RSV*) in appearance'; in the Hebrew text the agreement is even more striking). Whereas the passages mentioned above merely continue each of the two versions, near the end of the story of King David we first find a puzzling reference to Michal, Saul's daughter who had been given in marriage to David as a reward for his victories on the Philistines, namely, a reference to her sons by a certain Adriel son of Barzillai the Meholathite (2 Sam. 21:8). While we still hesitate what value to attach to this in view of Michal's lifelong childlessness according to 2 Samuel 6:21, our reliance on the version which represents David as the warrior who killed Goliath is completely destroyed when we read that a certain Goliath from Gath, who, just as in 1 Samuel 17:7, is described with the words 'the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver's beam', was killed by Elhanan from Bethlehem, one of David's heroes (2 Sam. 21:19).

When Joseph's half-brothers want to kill him in Genesis 37:19-20, Reuben proposes that they throw him into a hole in the ground, from whence, the narrator tells us, he wants to save him and to return him to his father Jacob. They act according to his words, but once they sit down to eat, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites passing by on their way to Egypt. Then Judah proposes that, instead of letting Joseph die from exposure, they should sell

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3   It is interesting to note that R. Alter in his classic, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York 1981), already noted the agreement between two of these cases (David and the Creation), calling it 'composite narrative', although without relinquishing the historical explanation: 141-142.

him as a slave to the Ishmaelites. The sentence which follows is ambiguous: 'Then Midianite traders passed by; and they (the Midianites or the brothers?) drew Joseph up and lifted him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver; and they took Joseph to Egypt' (37:28). Thus Joseph is either found by Midianites in the pit where his brothers had put him and sold by these Midianites to the Ishmaelites, who took him there, or sold by his half-brothers to a group of merchants, alternatively called Midianites and Ishmaelites, who then brought him to Egypt. Returning to the advice given by Reuben and by Judah, we now see that they do not refer to each other, and that each of them would be sufficient to explain one of the two interpretations of 37:28, though the point of departure for Judah's words seems to be that the brothers followed Reuben's advice and threw Joseph into the pit alive, instead of killing him first as planned in 37:20. Our puzzlement is reinforced when Reuben is said to have come to the pit to rescue Joseph, but does not find him there and complains to his brothers – without an answer being recorded. Did he go away before the brothers sold Joseph? Did they not deign to answer him? Though it is certainly possible to explain away these points of friction, it would seem that we are here also dealing with two potentially parallel and alternative versions of narrated reality.

The deception with Joseph's beautiful robe would clearly be much more useful as a cover-up for an act committed by the brothers which might be exposed through a search action, than for Joseph lying dead at the bottom of a pit. It has often been noted, already in the classical rabbinic commentaries, that Genesis 38, the story about Judah and Tamar, is closely connected with Genesis 37 through the apparent agreement between 37:32-33 and 38:25-26. So Genesis 38 is really a continuation of the second version of the brothers' actions against Joseph with Judah's prominent role. Of course all of this touches on the famous problem of the special position of Genesis 38 within the Life of Joseph in Genesis 37-50, but from a new angle: the interruption is the direct continuation of one of the alternative versions of Joseph's abduction. Later on, Joseph himself supports the second version, saying to his brothers: 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt' (45:4, compare vs. 5), and Jacob refers to it, or rather to the deception which was to conceal it, in 'for his (Benjamin's) brother is dead' (42:38). Likewise, Judah says to Joseph, 'and his (Benjamin's) brother is dead' (44:20) and, quoting Jacob's words, 'one left me, and I said, Surely he has been torn to pieces; and I have never seen him since' (44:28).

In contrast, Joseph also gives credit to the first one, where the Midianites sell him, in 'For I was indeed stolen from the land of the Hebrews' (40:15), Reuben berates his brothers, 'Did I not tell you not to sin against the lad? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood' (42:22, note the apparent duplicate in the preceding verse), and the threefold repetition of איננו, 'he is/was not' in the same chapter (42:13,32,36) seems to refer back to the use of the same word in 37:30 (compare also vs. 29).

It should also be noted that the two versions are closely connected through the congruence of Reuben's and Judah's advice in 37:21-22 and 37:26-27:

[21]But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.'
[22]And Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood;
    cast him into this pit here in the wilderness,
but lay no hand upon him'
that he might deliver (*RSV* rescue) him out of their hand, to restore him to his father.

[26]Then Judah said to his brothers, 'What profit is it if we slay our brother
    and conceal his blood?
[27]Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites,
    and let not our hand be upon him,
for he is our brother, our own flesh.'

Note, for example, the inclusion in both speeches (the use of the verb הצל, 'to deliver', with Reuben and the word , אחינו 'our brother', with Judah) and the position of the mention of the blood and the (laying of the) hand, framing, the advice.

Genesis 46 contains a list of the descendants of Jacob who went with him to Egypt. Its interpretation is beset with problems, but two passages in it seem to bear directly on the issue which we are discussing here. Firstly, the verse which deals with Reuben's offspring is puzzling, as it ascribes four sons to him (46:10), whereas he himself mentioned 'his two sons' in the same year (42:37). While this merely serves to raise our suspicion, as it is not difficult to find some sort of solution, the offspring of Judah in verse 12 presents us with insoluble problems: 'The sons of Judah: Er, Onan, Shelah, Perez and Zerah (but Er and Onan died in the land of Canaan); and the sons of Perez were Hezron and Hamul'. After all, at this point we are only

twenty-two years after the events of Genesis 37 (thirteen until Joseph's rising to power according to 41:46, seven years of plenty and two years of famine), which leaves us barely enough time to let Perez grow up and have two children of his own, but certainly not to have Er and Onan grow up before Perez' birth, as has often been noted. So 46:12 unambiguously contradicts the second version of Joseph's abduction.

Our third example is the most complicated of the three, and the most rewarding at the same time. One of the starting points of historical criticism has been the presence right at the beginning of Genesis of two stories of origin, both announced as dealing with the creation of earth and heaven (1:1; 2:4). One describes the work of creation through the first six days (1:1-2:3 or 4a), with man being created male and female on the sixth day, and the other has man being created before anything else, and being for the time being male only (2:4/4b-2:7). The verse which links the two versions is somewhat ambiguous: 'These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens...' (2:4), the first part either referring back to the first version or forward to the second one. The first story indicates the God of Israel with the generic title אלהים, 'God', only, the second one uses a combination of this title with his own name יהוה אלהים, 'the Lord God'. The second version is continued in 2:8 with the episode of the garden of Eden, when man receives a female partner (2:20-23), and with the following chapters, which finally lead through various genealogies to Abram.

The main difference from the previous two cases is that the indirect sequels of the two versions are provided through the divine names which are used, rather than through aspects of the action itself. The exclusive use of אלהים, 'God', as a personal designation of the God of Israel is characteristic of a number of passages and chapters in Genesis and Exodus. Otherwise we find יהוה אלהים, 'The Lord God', יהוה alone, or יהוה interchanging with אלהים. The latter usually occurs according to the patterns already recognized by the classical rabbis, the first standing for the merciful and the second for the just aspect of God, for example, in Genesis 22, where יהוה first appears when God orders Abraham to spare his son (22:11). Note that the classic example of the need to suppose various sources – the duplications in the story of Noah and the Flood – is easily explained by the continuation of the two versions of Genesis 1-2, in the same manner in which historical criticism could assign sections to the Jahwist and Elohist sources. Likewise, each of

the well-known duplications in the life of Abraham can be subsumed under one of the two divine names: in the story about Abram presenting Sarai as his sister to Pharaoh in 12:10-20, יהוה is used (17); in the comparable episode about Abimelech, we usually find אלהים (20:1-18:3,6,11,13,17, but note יהוה in verse 18). When the pregnant Hagar flees from Sarai (16:5-14), we have יהוה (7,9,10,11,13); when she is chased away with her child by Abraham (21:8-21), we see אלהים (12,17,19,20). Note especially the comparable roles of the מלאך יהוה (16:7,9,11) and of the מלאך אלהים (21:17). The announcement of Isaac's birth in 17:15-22 has אלהים (15,18,19,22), in the next chapter we have יהוה in the second announcement (18:10-15:13,14).

In Exodus 3:13-15 and 6:2 we are told, somewhat to our surprise, that the God of Israel's own name יהוה, mentioned frequently in Genesis, had not been known to the Israelites previously. The doubt about this is suddenly turned into a firm rejection of the second account of creation, when God himself confirms the first version: 'for in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it' (Ex. 20:11).

Of course, a lot of work needs to be done in order to make the picture complete, but one conclusion seems warranted. For the history related in Genesis and the beginning of Exodus, the author apparently provided two different scenarios, partly overlapping and partly sequential, but never disallowing a linear reading of the entire text. In view of the agreement with the two examples mentioned above, a text-historical explanation of this situation seems highly unlikely, or perhaps we should rather say that this explanation becomes irrelevant for our understanding of the intentions of the author or final redactor.

We can, therefore, say that with some confidence that the supposed Jahwist and the Elohist of Genesis are mere literary *personae* in a work which was to be at the same time a composed dossier and a linear narrative.

In the three cases studied above (see also the Table below), we can discern one common literary pattern. At or near the beginning of a long major episode, two versions of events, which exhibit a striking literary congruence, are provided to the reader one after another. They can, if necessary, be read in linear order and be regarded as complementary, but evince clear signs of discontinuity and contradiction, which leave us the

option of reading them as alternative versions of narrated reality. The second version is followed by a story which in substance is its sequel, though there are attachments to both versions in the following stories. Finally, in a context which is not connected to the two variant versions, the reader is provided with a key for the incorrectness of the second version or the resolute confirmation of the first one.

Of course, there are differences between these three cases. Like life itself, literature cannot be caught in fixed and formal rules alone. Still, the striking agreement in literary means and forms makes it impossible that this would be anything but the result of a deliberate literary strategy.

The conscientious reader is kept on a string by the narrator with contradictory and ambiguous pieces of information, constantly puzzling about the correctness of the two versions and their relation, until he or she is finally robbed of all vestiges of certainty by a seemingly unobtrusive note which discounts the second version. This is especially serious because the narrative continues the second version: as faithful readers we see the role of Judah in Genesis 43-45 in the light of Genesis 38, the life of David in the light of his role as warrior, and the genealogy of the people of Israel as deriving from Adam and Eve. The bridge which the reader walked upon is collapsed behind him or her.

What the narrator attempted to do – and apparently he did it so well that modern scholarship claimed its recognition as a major achievement – is to let various, not infrequently contradictory, voices sound through the text without giving up its linear and unitary character. The well-known, much discussed and very real discontinuities, irregularities and duplications in Primary History are the result of a conscious literary strategy, not of a historical process. The Documentary Hypothesis is dead.

TABLE

THREE INSTANCES OF ALTERNATIVE VERSIONS AND COLLAPSE OF THE NARRATIVE

	Creation	Joseph sold	David to court
Larger unit	Creation - Sinai	Life of Joseph	Life of David
Version no. 1	Gen. 1:1-2:3	Gen. 37:21-22	1 Sam. 16
Version no. 2	2:4-7	37:26-27	1 Sam. 17
Apparent point of contact	2:4	Sequence of events	'That Ephrathite' (17:12)
Point of friction	Woman made from man (2:21-22)	Reuben is looking for Joseph (37:29-30)	Saul does not know David (17:31-39 and 55-58)
Ambiguous statement	'In the day that the Lord God made the earth and the heavens' (2:4)	'They drew Joseph up...' (37:28)	David going to and from Saul (17:15)
Direct sequel of version 2	Gen. 3	Gen. 38	1 Sam. 18
Indirect sequel of version 2	Gen. 4-11 etc.	'you sold' (45:4-5); 'his brother is dead' (42:38 and 44:20)	Various exploits; sword of Goliath (21:9)
Indirect sequel of version 1	5:1-2; Flood; Abimelech; Hagar etc.	'He is not' (42:13, 32, 36); 'stolen' (40:15); Reuben's reproach (42:22)	David as musician
Resemblance of the two versions	'create'; 'earth and heaven' (2:4); duplications in stories of Flood and Abraham	Congruence, 'blood', 'hand' (37:21-27)	Eight brothers and names of the first three; description of Jesse; description of David
Disquieting information	Name not known previously (Ex. 3:13-15; 6:2)	4 sons of Reuben (46:10)	Merab, Michal (2 Sam. 21:8)
Confirmation of version 1 / rejection of version 2	'For in six days...' (Ex. 20:11)	Genealogy of Judah (46:12)	Killing of Goliath by Elhanan (21:19)