

PRESERVING TRADITIONS OF “THEM” AND THE CREATION OF “US”: FORMULAIC LANGUAGE, HISTORIOGRAPHY, MYTHOLOGY, AND SELF-DEFINITION*

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IN MANY WAYS, the course of John Miles Foley’s scholarly interests parallels developments in the field of biblical studies concerning the relationship of ancient Israelite writings to oral-traditional literature. As his earliest published work closely analyzed the formulaic qualities of *Beowulf*,¹ grappling with questions about modes of composition, earlier work in biblical studies explored the possibility of formulaic composition in biblical texts. At the heart of Foley’s larger career, however, are deeper questions about meaning, message, and worldview, an engagement with matters of reception, and thoughtful explorations of the nature of cultural traditions.² This essay briefly explores the way in which the field of oral literature has interwoven with the field of biblical studies in the past and some of the misconceptions and misapplications that have shaped biblicalists’ approaches to and attitudes towards oral literature and oral literary studies. We then turn to a set of case studies that point to the continued relevance of oral-traditional studies to an appreciation and interpretation of the culture and literature of ancient Israel.

The traditional biblical texts explored below describe ancestor heroes of one of Israel’s neighbouring peoples and key events in their history. These texts curiously claim not to preserve a thread in the history of ancient Israel itself but a piece of tradition pertaining to an adversary. Some of these peoples are said to be related to Israel in ancient genealogical traditions, and all of them are said to be encountered by Israel in its own earliest history, a part of its foundation myth. I hope to show how and why modern translations sometimes misrepresent or obscure the surprisingly positive nuances of the texts’ representations of enemies. I will examine the relationship between formulaicity, historiography, and mythology and explore how attention to the qualities of formulaic language and the matters of genre and context that engaged Foley enriches our understanding of the literature as a source and reflection of certain aspects of ancient Israelite worldview and identity.

* A shorter version of this essay was presented at conference at Harvard University, held in December 2010 in honour of the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of Lord’s *Singer of Tales*. The last time I saw my friend John Miles Foley was at this event. As always, I learned much from him and dedicate this article to his memory.

1 Foley, “Scansion of *Beowulf*.”

2 Foley, *Immanent Art; Singer of Tales in Performance; How to Read an Oral Poem; and Oral Tradition and the Internet*.

Albert Bates Lord, one of Foley's mentors and his most influential precursor, grappled with the style, content, and contexts of traditional literatures in nuanced and complex ways. He noted that the formula is not a mechanical device used to create lines of proper length and rhythm but a formative component of characterization, tone, and message, a means of thematic emphasis and a reflection of aesthetics. Repetition is richness if one understands the register, as Foley has also emphasized,³ nor is there just one oral register. Switches of register create and reflect content and meaning. The choices made in the use of these flexible compositional devices matter. Lord pointed to formula patterns that could be filled in various ways. He was attuned to the artistry of composers, some of whom were more aesthetically gifted than others. Variations matter and what is not repeated is as important as what is. Lord's work has often been misrepresented by his critics and inflexibly applied to various works of traditional literature by his fans.

In *Homeric Questions*, classicist Gregory Nagy provides a list of the ten most misunderstood things about Lord's theory of oral composition, some of which we have alluded to above. Nagy notes that oral works can become quite fixed and written works can be quite open to variation, while scribes engage in performance-like activity in the very act of writing—what Paul Zumthor calls “composition-in-performance”—as a work, quoting Nagy, “is regenerated in each act of copying.”⁴

Lord's work has led to a host of searches for “oral roots” of biblical works. The authors, however, express disappointment with their results, for the degree of formulaicity is not high enough to “prove” oral composition. The contributions of all these excellent scholars, including Robert Culley, John Kselman, and David Gunn, are nevertheless very valuable in revealing the traditional style textures of Israelite literature.⁵ The aesthetic to which these colleagues point is integrally related to matters of worldview and cultural context. It turns out that questions about provable oral composition may not be the most useful questions. Lord himself later wrote of “transitional works” somewhat refining the notion of a “Great Divide” between oral worlds and literate worlds, oral composition and works created in writing.⁶

Biblicists have offered their own view of the “Great Divide,” insisting upon an evolution of written from oral works. The form-critical approach is grounded in the notion that early, oral, simpler works are eventually written down and complicated by more sophisticated, literate writers. In fact, orally composed works can be long or short, created by people who can read and write or by those who can read but not write. Written traditional-style literature can be meant to be read aloud while orally composed works are set in writing by means of dictation or recreated in writing through memory. Writers can imitate oral style. Once writing and reading are available to some, even if

³ Foley, *Singer of Tales in Performance*, 15–17, 49–53.

⁴ G. Nagy, *Homeric Questions*, 69.

⁵ See Culley, “*Oral-Formulaic Language*”; Kselman, “*Recovery of Poetic Fragments*”; Gunn, “*“Battle Report”*”; Gunn, “*Narrative Patterns*”; and Gunn, “*Threading the Labyrinth*.”

⁶ Lord, *Singer Resumes the Tale*, 105, 212–37; see also the comments, 113–16, 183–86, of Mary Louise Lord, the skilful and scholarly editor of this posthumous volume.

only practised by elites, the two ways of imagining and creating literature influence one another and belong on a sliding scale or continuum as Ruth Finnegan has shown.⁷ Oral style, moreover, is not an unequivocal indicator of relative chronology. Oral works and oral-style works are created and re-created even when writing is common. It is, in fact, no easy matter to distinguish between orally composed works and written works that imitate orally composed works. Indeed, in the Hebrew Bible it is impossible to do so. The Hebrew Bible is now written, and yet the compositions therein partake of varying traditional-style registers.

If one reads Foley’s many works or the essays published in the last decade in the journal *Oral Tradition*, one finds scholarly attention to the interplay between oral and written. Increasingly, one also finds an emphasis on the role of memory in the oral-literate interplay as it affects the composition, preservation, and reception of traditional-style literatures, topics explored by biblicist David Carr. A number of excellent recent works wrestle in various original and complex ways with the relationship between the oral and the written in the genesis of the biblical tradition. Books by Carr, Raymond Person, William Schniedewind, and Martin Jaffee, and essays in volume 18 of *Oral Tradition* all point to this complex interplay.⁸

Emphasizing the ways in which traditional-style works create meaning, Foley points to the “metonymic” quality of certain recurring phrases or images. These parts invoke a whole. That is, a simple recurring phrase or motif has the capacity to bring to bear on a scene or characterization a full range of associations invoked by it. Such traditional elements have this capacity because the composers and receivers of the narrative, scene, or description are familiar with the wider range of associations invoked by the epithet or formula, the colour, or the image.⁹ They share the wider tradition of which it is a constituent part. An Israelite example of such an “aesthetic of traditional referentiality,”¹⁰ to use a phrase of Foley’s, is provided by the epithet for Yahweh, “the bull of Jacob.”¹¹ It brings to bear on a Psalm or a legal text the full range of notions of Yahweh as virile, macho, fecund creator. The victory-enthronement pattern is implicit in the phrase with all that it implies. Traditional-style literatures in this sense are quintessentially economical and telegraphic in communication. Thus Foley entitles one of his books *Immanent Art*.

Having explored the theoretical approaches of Lord and Foley, older ideas about orality and the Bible and new approaches that emphasize the interplay between oral and written and concepts of metonymy and register, we come to applications. In translating and interpreting biblical texts—their textures, content, and contexts—do we notice, appreciate, and emphasize certain features because we are sensitive to the oral-

7 Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*.

8 Carr, *Writing on the Tablet*; Person, *Deuteronomic School*; Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*; Jaffee, *Torah in the Mouth*. See also Horsley, “Oral Tradition”; Jaffe, “Oral Tradition”; Kelber, “Oral Tradition”; and Niditch, “Oral Tradition.”

9 Foley, *Immanent Art*, 11, 13, 33.

10 To use a phrase of Foley’s from *Immanent Art*, 95.

11 See also Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word*, 15–17, for a further discussion on the bull of Jacob.

traditional qualities of these written works? How do we interpret and what do we see that we might have otherwise missed were we unaware of oral-literary studies?

Judges 5, a victory song, clearly displays qualities of an Israelite oral-traditional register. Lord's studies of formula patterns and compositional technique and Foley's emphasis on metonymy provide a theoretical framework in which to assess the recurring vocabulary in this beautiful ancient piece, the role of refrains, and more specifically to re-assess the catalogue in 5:16–17 which has been misunderstood. Judges 5 has a chiasmic structure of content that juxtaposes the activities of the divine warrior and his heavenly host with the conduct of human heroes. At the centre of the piece is a catalogue of Israelite warriors somewhat reminiscent of *Iliad* 3:160–244 where Helen describes to Priam the Achaian warriors on the field of battle.¹² Translators have tended to offer forced translations of Judges 5:16–17 that do not take into account the traditional qualities of the material.

The opening phrase of 5:16 begins with a word of three letters, *lamed, mem, heh* that is usually translated “why,” the typical meaning of this term in the Hebrew Bible. This usual understanding of the word, however, leads most translators to render the verbs that follow in awkward and forced ways, describing some tribes as cowardly, unwilling to fight. The New Revised Standard Version (henceforth NRSV) translation pictures the singer asking Reuben, the tribe mentioned in v. 15, “Why did you tarry among the sheepfolds to hear the piping for flocks?” (Judg. 5:16 [NRSV]). The translator continues at v. 17, “Gilead stayed beyond the Jordan, and Dan, why did he abide with the ships. Asher sat still at the coast of the sea, settling down by the landings” (Judg. 5:17 [NRSV]). The verbs in vv. 16 and 17, however, most commonly do not convey delaying or tarrying or sitting still but rather residing, dwelling, and literally “plying one's tent.” The NRSV translation suits the final entry in the description of warriors poorly at v. 18 in which Zebulon's and Naphtali's bravery is described and upsets the structure of the surrounding song in which a condemnatory cursing of those who do not participate in the battle appears at v. 23, a later point in the passage.

The seminal biblical scholar Frank Moore Cross suggested, however, that *lmh* is best read in this context not as “why,” albeit a common meaning in biblical Hebrew, but as an example of the “emphatic *lamed* extended by *-ma* known from Ugaritic,”¹³ and so translates it as “verily.” Cross's innovative idea was followed by biblicist Baruch Halpern,¹⁴ and was further developed by Cross himself.¹⁵ The many scholarly discussions explaining why Reuben, Gilead, Dan, and Asher supposedly hold back from the fighting¹⁶ and the forced translations that accompany them become unnecessary.¹⁷ Cross's elegant solution to this translation issue is informed by sensitivity to traditional-style media.

The catalogue in Judges 5 partakes of a traditional form found several times in ancient Hebrew literature in genealogies, testaments, and other settings. Brief, for-

¹² Fitzgerald, *Iliad*.

¹³ Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 235n74.

¹⁴ Baruch Halpern, “Resourceful Israelite Historian,” 383.

¹⁵ Cross, *From Epic to Canon*, 54–55n7.

¹⁶ Stager, “Song of Deborah.”

¹⁷ Cf. Zobel, *Stammespruch und Geschichte*, 62–63.

mulaic notices about heroes or groups make critical assertions about cultural identity, essentially declaring how we are constituted and who our ancestor heroes are. The material functions as a “charter,”¹⁸ a self-defining slice of shared group history. In Judges 5, various tribal entities are described, where they live, what their occupations are, and how courageous they are:

Verily you dwell between the settlements
to hear the whistling for the flocks.
Concerning the divisions in Reuben,
great are the stout of heart.¹⁹
Gilead in the Transjordan plies his tent,
and Dan, verily, he resides in ships.
Asher dwells on the shore of the sea
and on its promontories, he plies his tent.
Zebulun is a people whose soul taunts Death
and Naphtali on the heights of the open country.²⁰
(Judg. 5:16–18)

Comparisons can be drawn between Judges 5:16–17 and Genesis 49:13 and 16:12. A traditional formula pattern “tribe + location + tenting/residing” characterizes heroes in Genesis as it does Gilead, Dan, and Asher in Judges 5:17. These descriptive formulas function as building blocks of tradition.

This formula leads to a set of case studies concerning portrayals of “the Other.” The first involves Ishmael, the brother of Isaac, son of Abraham, and ancestor hero of the Ishmaelites. Hagar, Ishmael’s mother-to-be, has fled from her abusive mistress Sarah. The latter resents the concubine who has gained new status by conceiving Abraham’s child in an ancient version of surrogate motherhood. The deity speaks to Hagar, who is marginalized and alone, and declares in traditional-style language that her son will be a hero. As listeners to this story know, such tales about unusual conception or infancy are typical in the biographies of heroes:

He will be a wild ass of a man,
his hand will be in everything
and everyone’s hand will be in his,²¹
and next to his kin he will ply his tent.
(Gen. 16:12)

Once again, Genesis 16:12 has generally been translated to create a forced and negative portrait of Ishmael, but the verse simply refers to his whereabouts and occupation, as is usual in this formula pattern. NRSV is typical of such translations: “He shall be a wild ass

18 Michalowski, “History as Charter,” 237–48.

19 MT (Masoretic Text) Judg. 5:16 reads the root *hqr*, “searchings of heart” (so Vatican, Codex Vaticanus 1209, and Old Latin). Given the refraining style of the poem, it seems likely that the same phrase appears here as in v. 15.

20 All translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

21 When “hand” is used with a verb of motion, for example “to send a hand,” the preposition “in” means “against” as in Gen. 37:22 and 1 Sam. 24:11. Minus the verb of motion, the neutral and literal translation is appropriate.

of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with his kin" (Gen. 16:12 [NRSV]). Implied is that being like a "wild ass" is bad, that Ishmael and his kin are violent, anti-social aggressors and troublemakers. The modern translators expect the ancient Israelite writers to frame Ishmaelites in negative ways in order to draw differences between themselves as good citizens and their neighbours as marauding wildmen, the dangerous "Other." Biblical heroes, however, are regularly compared to fecund, wild animals such as bulls, strong donkeys,²² and ravenous wolves.²³ Such metaphors are meant to be positive.

The word "wild ass" connotes fertility and sexual liveliness. In an admittedly negative context, the prophet Jeremiah uses the female wild ass to develop the metaphor of Israel as a loose woman who deserts her husband Yahweh to seek lovers, that is, other gods. She never tires.²⁴ In the message to Hagar about her son, however, such sexual connotations imply machismo, a positive trait from the composer and the culture's perspectives. The deity himself is known by the epithet "the bull of Jacob," frequently translated "the Mighty One of Jacob" (Gen. 49:24 [NRSV]). As Patrick D. Miller has shown, however, Yahweh as divine warrior, like his Canaanite counterpart Baal, is iconically pictured as a horned, virile bull.²⁵ In Deuteronomy 33:17, Joseph is also positively compared to a first-born bull/a horned wild ox in images of warrior prowess. Similarly, in the Blessing of Jacob, the tribe/hero Issachar is described as a strong or bony donkey.²⁶ The catalogue concerning Issachar is similar in content and structure to Genesis 16:12, describing his manly quality via an animal metaphor, the location where he dwells, and the kind of work he does.

The manly Ishmael and hence future Ishmaelites are traders and make their dwelling place nearby Israel. In biblical material, the Ishmaelites are portrayed as traders par excellence; hence their role in the tale of Joseph. The imagery of Genesis 16:12 thus belongs to a wider tradition about Ishmaelites and comports with the descriptions of the heroes/tribes in Judges 5:15–17 that contain expected constituent components: the hero's name/ethnic identity, location, and occupation. Variations upon this formula may be a part of a catalogue of heroes as in Judges 5, serve as an annunciation of a hero to be born as in Genesis 16, or belong to a prophetic testament. In his testament scene, the patriarch Jacob is said to bless his sons before his death and thereby predict and describe the future roles of the groups descended from them. Such works have significance for political outlook and worldview. Those who deploy these formula patterns reveal views of Israelite identity and share conventions of pan-Israelite traditional literature. In short, the founding hero of the Ishmaelites is presented positively. Here and in Genesis 21, another scene of divine rescue for the future hero and his mother, it appears that the national literature of Israel preserves another group's foundation myth. Before offering some suggestions as to why this material was included in the Hebrew Scrip-

²² Gen. 49:14.

²³ Gen. 49:27.

²⁴ Jer. 2:24.

²⁵ P. Miller, "Animal Names."

²⁶ Gen. 49:14–15.

tures, we look at another example of the positive biblical portrayal of people neighbouring and competing with ancient Israel.

This piece of tradition in Numbers 21:27–29 is introduced by the biblical writer as a “*mashal*”: “For this reason *mashal*-makers say” (Num. 21:27). This ethnic genre sometimes translated as “proverb” or “parable” actually has both meanings in Hebrew Scriptures and can also be a person who serves as an exemplar, an oracle, a fable, an icon, a symbolic action, or another form. The key is that a comparison is drawn, an analogy made between an item, event, or image and a real-life setting. In this case, the “*mashal*” is associated with the Amorite Sihon’s successful capture of the land of Moab in which his inheritance was established, an inheritance which, in the framing main narrative of Numbers, has now been conquered by Israel. It is not certain whether the “*mashal*” is the first line of this piece and the rest a commentary by the biblical author or if the entire little section might be considered part of the “*mashal*.” In either event, it is all positive concerning the victory and heroic prowess of Israel’s enemy.

This material begins, “Come to Heshbon, let it be built; let the city of Sihon be established” (Num. 21:27). The saying about this city relies on the audience’s knowledge about the history, characteristics, and traditions surrounding a place, perhaps like the sayings “Rome wasn’t built in a day” or “Don’t bring coals to Newcastle.” Of course, the saying can become detached from the backstory too. At the heart of the biblical saying about Heshbon seems to be a model of action in high gear. From a formal perspective, the saying is made from parallel items, the verbs “come/build/establish” and the objects “Heshbon/city of Sihon.” These and other terms of foundation used in parallelism are found in a variety of formulaic patterns throughout Hebrew Scriptures²⁷ to suggest rulership, power, capacity to shape a world, found a nation, build a city: an important part of the repertoire of the hero. The “*mashal*” in Numbers continues with a description of the hero King Sihon: “For a fire has gone forth from Heshbon / A flame from the city of Sihon / It has devoured the city of Moab / Swallowed up the heights of Arnon” (Num. 21:28). The conqueror, god-like, is associated with fire; like Death itself in ancient Near Eastern mythological tradition, he swallows his enemy or its territory. Subsequent lines continue with parallelistic poetry to describe the defeat of Moab, the routing of its people.

There is an intended irony here to be sure as those who were so victorious in their own epic history and foundation tales are now taken over and defeated by Israel. This is the larger context of the “*mashal*.” Such is the typical pattern of epic histories in which the former winner becomes the current loser. The contextualization is thus a powerful and self-promoting statement for the people of Yahweh. Nevertheless, the writer does preserve a very positive comment on Sihon’s prowess and his people’s victory over Moab. The allusion to Sihon’s former greatness need not have been preserved this way. This piece, which exemplifies traditional forms and formulaic patterning, ultimately is a slice of Amorite tradition and again raises questions about the preservation of others’ traditions within the foundation stories of ancient Israel.

27 Hab. 2:12; 2 Sam. 7:13; and Ps. 24:2.

The same could be said for our third case, the lengthy collection of material about the Edomites in Genesis 36 that traces the genealogy of Jacob's brother Esau, ancestor hero of one of Israel's neighbouring peoples, concluding with a lengthy list of Edomite kings. The framework of this material is thoroughly formulaic, including introductory language, "these are the descendants of [...]." This phrase commences many biblical genealogies of Israelites²⁸ and is usually attributed by scholars to priestly writers and considered one of their signature identifying markers of authorship.²⁹ The language of "bearing," "taking wives," and "naming" is familiar from the genealogies in Genesis 4, 5, and 11, as is the type of content found in Genesis 36 describing a leader's activities, characteristics, place of origin or settling, and reference to his demise. In this respect, genealogical material overlaps with the sort of annals of heroes found in Judges and 1 and 2 Samuel, and with the formulas discussed above concerning the heroes Ishmael and the various sons of Jacob.

A few excerpts from this lengthy genealogical collection are instructive in exploring questions about the inclusion, presence, function, and qualities of non-Israelite peoples' lore in the midst of Israel's national history. Some of this information provided in formulaic frames might be described as historical data, simple chronicles, or entries. Within a list of Edomite kings, for example, is the following entry:

And reign in Edom did Bela son of Beor,
and the name of his city was Dinhabah,
and die did Belah,
and reign after him did Jobab son of Zerah of Bozrah.
(Gen. 36:32–33)

Other entries are a bit more detailed, for example Genesis 36:39, which includes a notice of one king's death, the name of his successor, the name of his city, his wife's name, and her genealogy, listing her mother and her mother's genealogy. The matrilineal interest in this material is fascinating in and of itself, but such details about the queen and her forbears also emphasize the peculiarity of having such information about Edomite kings so carefully preserved in the anthology of Israelite literature.

One more example at v. 24 provides an especially exquisite little vignette that might be compared with 2 Samuel 23:20 or Judges 3:31. In these cases the hero is described with reference to a deed for which he is known:

These are the sons of Zibeon
Aiah and Anah.
It was Anah who found the water in the wilderness
while pasturing the donkeys of Zibeon, his father.
(Gen. 36:24)

As Beniah is known for striking down a lion in a pit on the day of the snow,³⁰ and Shamgar is known for killing six hundred Philistines with an ox goad,³¹ Anah is known

²⁸ For example Gen. 11:10.

²⁹ Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 301–4.

³⁰ 2 Sam. 23:20.

³¹ Judg. 3:31.

for finding water in a wilderness at a particular time, but Anah is not an Israelite hero, a judge, or one of David's mighty men. He is a descendent of Seir, a Horite. What is this seemingly non-Israelite material doing in the Hebrew Scriptures and what is its larger cultural context?

John W. Wright, who studies the Persian period Judaism reflected in late biblical literature, has explored the ways in which the genealogies of 1 Chronicles present Yehud or Judah as a "familial/patronage system [...] an ethnos, with power distributed by real or fictitious familial/kinship ties."³² Wright approaches the role of genealogies with the important awareness that traditional polities are not to be confused with modern states, demarcated by clear geographic boundaries. Among such "traditional states, borders per se did not demarcate, or create, a sole sovereign state; territoriality instead was bounded by the much more porous concept of frontiers [...] in which multiple powers [...] make various claims over particular bodies in different situations."³³ The fictional links created by genealogies, reinforced by traditional catalogues or predictions about future heroes and by the inclusion of praise-songs to neighbouring peoples' victories, help to map an Israelite sense of its own ethnicity, a view of Israelites' place within a geographic setting, their historical location, and their identity. Catalogues of heroes in Genesis, Deuteronomy, and Judges, the annunciation concerning Ishmael, the king list of the Edomites,³⁴ and the epic reference to Sihon³⁵ define Israel by incorporating neighbouring peoples into its own family or history.

The case studies explored above testify to the vibrancy, persistence, and continuity of particular formula patterns in the librettos of ancient Israelite tradition and underscore the ongoing interest of biblical composers in preserving epic-style content pertaining to their neighbours. On the one hand, these threads in the Hebrew Bible suggest respect for neighbouring peoples, an acknowledgement of historical relationships between them and between them and ancient Israel. The framing of these pieces of tradition also, however, speaks to an ancient reception history that allows Israelites to control their competitors' image and to treat other groups' successes as a feature of the past. In this way, the inclusion of this material in Israelite tradition not only portrays and preserves the "Other," but in the process creates and reinforces Israel's own positive identity.

³² Wright, "Remapping Yehud," 73.

³³ Wright, "Remapping Yehud," 72.

³⁴ Gen. 36.

³⁵ Num. 21:27–31.

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