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Looking in the Old Testament for the Epic Genre

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Abstract

This article considers the question of what may qualify as "epic" in the Hebrew Bible. Against Cross, we argue that certain prose narratives can be termed epic in themselves, although Judges 5 and Exodus 15 show that Israel could produce epic poetry. Hector and Nora Chadwick claimed that epic is a cultural rather than literary phenomenon and does not demand poetic form. For Parry and Lord, epic poetry has its origin in oral singing of tales, with no *Urtext* ever existing since every performance was a new creation. Israel's epic must be considered secondary, in C. S. Lewis's terminology, because it does not look back to a heroic past, but assumes a progression in history.

Keywords

Epic, *epos*, epic poetry, Frank Moore Cross, C. S. Lewis, Parry/Lord

Sing, O Muse, of that man of many twists and turns
who labored long and ventured far
In search of truth for life and true translation, Roger son of Oman,
Who graces now the country of the bluegrass
and makes Kentucky his Ithaca.

Since the article offered here deals with the theme of epic poetry I thought it would be appropriate to introduce it with an epic flourish to our friend and colleague Roger Omanson, regretful only that I can't do it in the stately iambic pentameter that an epic with Roger as hero deserves. When I was translating Sirach for the TEV and came to 38.24–27, I had not yet met Roger, but the sage's words there well describe his career. Now that I have

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come to know him, I wish we had met much earlier. My life would have been the richer. So here are my best wishes to him whom I call Roger the Greater, a modest offering from one who compared with him must ever remain Roger the Lesser.

Biblical scholars have given much attention in recent years to the question of genre, seeking to define the contours of the larger literary types found in the Bible. This is form criticism writ large; we have moved from discussions of pronouncement stories, miracle stories, taunt songs, and such classifications of short passages to studies of what it is that makes apocalyptic, or a Gospel. Genres may overlap. Suppose a library cataloguer must assign a classification number to John Bright's *History of Israel*, or Martin Noth's, for a library using the Dewey Decimal Classification. She could put the book in the 220s (Old Testament), or 296 (Judaism), or 930 (Near Eastern history). She would probably decide on the basis of where patrons of that particularly library would be most likely to go browsing for what they wanted. Neither Bright nor Noth had such a pigeonhole in mind, nor do readers particularly wonder about it while reading the books, but the cataloguer has to put it somewhere. But if one were to judge Bright's history as an Old Testament introduction, it might come off poorly. The reader cannot judge a book on the basis of where a librarian might have catalogued it. It is alien to the author's intent.

In music, is Edouard Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole* a real symphony or is it a violin concerto? What about Berlioz's *Harold in Italy*? Is it a concerto for viola or a suite for orchestra that has a prominent place for a viola? If we decide to listen to either work as simply an example of a genre, we run the risk of misinterpreting, judging the piece on the basis of irrelevant considerations. Musical scores as well as literary texts can defy our neat classifications.

In discussing the application of genre criteria to biblical poetry, Luís Alonso Schökel gives four specific warnings:

> First, reductionism should be avoided, the effort to reduce any text to a typical form. Secondly, subdivisions should not be multiplied. Thirdly, one should remember that the poet is using the conventions without being dominated by them. Fourthly, in addition to the social context one should remember the literary context of private reading. With these safeguards the classification of the literary genres can be very useful for a first contact with the work: knowledge of the genre orients the reader. (Alonso Schökel 1988, 10–11)

In this article we are concerned with the genre known as epic, but epic as a genre of its own is not discussed in the standard Bible dictionaries, encyclopedias, or handbooks. Wider ranging reference works in the general field

of religion, such as *The Encyclopedia of Religion* or *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, do have such entries, but they contain little if any reference to biblical material. The term "epic," however, has been used in biblical scholarship for well over a century. A survey of the use of the term and its development can be found in Conroy (1980). Conroy observes that those who speak of "epic" in the Hebrew Bible fall into two groups: those who refer to whole sections of the Bible as epics, and those such as F. M. Cross who believe that epic poems underlie portions of the Bible. Cross (1983) is particularly known for his idea of a poetic epic as the *Grundlage* for the so-called JE material.

Part of the problem Conroy is dealing with, and part of our whole problem here, is that it is ferociously difficult to define epic. One seeks a description exact enough to be meaningful, yet elastic enough to cover what is necessary. As Atsuhiko Yoshida points out, if we involve the idea of heroic action or national heritage in our definition of epic, we immediately exclude such writers of epic poetry as Dante and Milton (1973, 4428).

Hardly a better illustration can be afforded of the way our modern categories can intrude on how we view an ancient text than the range of difficulties found in various modern languages in attempting to deal with the concept. French scholarship deals with distinctions among the terms *poème épique, poème héroïque, épos, épopée*, to say nothing of *chansons de geste* (Madelénat 1986, 17–21). German can distinguish between *Epik* and *Epos, Epik* being a general term for fictive narration in verse or prose, embodying, perhaps, legends, sagas, and tales as well as art forms, with *Epos* reserved as a specific term for any of the great epic poems themselves. Spanish makes a useful distinction between *la épica*, the epic poem, and *lo épico*, that which is epic.

Here is a sampling of definitions of "epic":

> From the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1997, 4:521): "A long narrative poem in an elevated style celebrating heroic achievement and treating themes of historical, national, religious, or legendary significance."
>
> From the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1835): "Il se dit d'une grande composition en vers, où le poëte raconte quelque action héroïque qu'il embellit d'épisodes, de fictions et d'événements merveilleux."
>
> Here is David Knipe (1987, 127) in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*: "Extended narrative poems which establish for hearers and/or readers a particular universe of the imagination by means of cosmogonic and sacrificial mythologies, chronicles of kings and nobles, religious and philosophical teachings, heroic exploits of a past age."

Within the definitions a further distinction is usually made between primary and secondary epics. Primary epics are those which come to us from essentially nameless tradition (Homer, *Beowulf*). Secondary epics are those which were composed as literature by a poet of some sophistication (Virgil's *Aeneid*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*).

This terminology goes back to C. S. Lewis in his *Preface to Paradise Lost* (1942). Earlier, the distinction was made between primitive and artificial epic. Lewis rejected this on the grounds that no surviving ancient poetry is primitive and that all poetry is artificial. The terms "primary" and "secondary" are in common use today, although one does come across classifications of epics as classical, literary, and folk, with Christian epic sometimes thrown in. These seem less useful and more problematic than Lewis's two terms.

All of these definitions refer to a poem. Yet the word "epic" is often used by good scholars with reference to prose. Eric Auerbach, for instance, writes of the Abraham stories in Genesis, comparing them to Homer, as "an equally ancient and equally epic style from a different world of forms" (1957, 5). D. F. Rauber (1970) speaks of the Saul and David material as epic. Alonso Schökel, while denying that there are epic poems in the Bible, goes on to say that we do have there epic tales (1988, 11). Arthur B. Lord speaks of J and E as containing the epics and myths of the Hebrew people (1960, 156). Lord is not speaking of poetry, as we shall see later.

One problem in English is essentially that we are taking a word which is properly an adjective, "epic," and using it as a noun, thus blurring the distinction between ἔπος, a narrative poem by definition, and τὸ ἐπικόν, that which resembles an ἔπος or shares some characteristics of an ἔπος. What Cross is claiming and Conroy is denying is the existence of an ἔπος behind the biblical story.

What are some characteristics of *epos* that could be so evident in a prose text that it might be called epic? Among literary characteristics, capable of being expressed in prose as well as poetry, are (1) characters that tend to be ideal and heroic rather than lifelike and historical; (2) the celebration of human characters by showing what they are capable of, even though deities may be active; (3) a narrative line which is assumed to be historically true;[1] (4) an expansive quality to the narrative space, to be distinguished from the cramped space which comedy accepts and is used by tragedy to narrow the focus (Greene 1963, 12); (5) its being designed for hearing rather than for

[1] Page Dubois points this out in advancing the thesis that epic poetry is a form of history (1982, 1).

reading; and (6) use of formulas and multiple names for the same person or place. As far as subject matter is concerned, epic deals with (1) a heroic age, a hero, and heroic actions, and (2) a people's interpretation of their past, embodying their ideals and aspirations. Referring back to what has been said earlier, not all of these characteristics need be found in any single example of *epos*, let alone epic material in prose.

But let us return to Cross, who claims, in our terms, that an *epos* lies behind JE. Cross's chief work is *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (1973), but this work is really a series of essays that touch on the question here and there. A more concentrated statement, and one written in the light of published criticism of his position[2] is his article "The Epic Traditions of Early Israel: Epic Narrative and the Reconstruction of Early Israelite Institutions" (1983). Cross begins by pointing out that the earliest traditions of the Tetrateuch resemble historical narrative in some ways, but a mythic cycle in other ways. The narrative is "composed to reveal the meaning of Israel's past, and therewith to define the identity and destiny of the nation" (1983, 12). But the hero here is the Divine Warrior, marching through the sea, leading his people in triumph to his holy mountain, establishing his sanctuary, and founding his kingdom.

After dealing briefly with some criticisms of his position, Cross determines that he will continue to use the term "epic" to include four elements that apply as well to Homeric style as to early Israelite traditional narrative: (1) oral composition in formulae and themes of traditional literature, (2) narrative in which acts of God or gods and humans form a double level of action, (3) a composition describing traditional events of an age conceived of as normative or glorious, and (4) a "national" composition, especially one recited at pilgrimage festivals (1983, 19). That latter phrase becomes especially important for his thesis.

Cross sees P as a systematic reworking of JE, not an independent narrative source. JE in turn rests on an older cycle, which he believes was at least partially poetic at climactic moments. But he really thinks that Hebrew society continued the tradition of what he calls the old Canaanite epic singers. (1) He finds the same poetic techniques in old Canaanite and early Hebrew poetry. (2) The subject matter of the Keret epic has vivid parallels in Genesis. (3) If epic (*epos*, he means) was the creation of a league and had a special function in the cultus of its shrine, we would expect it to be poetic. Cross insists that Israel did not hesitate to use poetry for the telling of Yahweh's deeds, and points to the obvious examples of Judg 5, the Song of Deborah, and Exod 15, the Song of the Sea.

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[2] See Conroy 1980; Alter 1981; Talmon 1978.

To demonstrate that one might recover some of the ancient *epos*, Cross takes Exod 19.3–6, strips from it "a few prose particles," and produces a reconstructed text that he calls "exquisite poetry in epic style" (1983, 21). He obviously believes that it might be possible to reconstruct this *epos*, at least in part, but to my knowledge he did not actually do this for any extended passage.

This Yahwistic epic, as Cross calls it, derives from the prose propaganda of the United Monarchy. At this time the old league, the original locus of poetic recitations, was gone, and the epic tradition was loosed from its primary setting and function. The epic had told of the journey of the patriarchs from land given their ancestors, and their return to this ancestral land. (Cross does not think that the so-called Primeval History constituted part of the epic.) The epic had served the social function of legitimizing the land claims of the league. After the original function was lost with the establishment of the monarchy, the traditions were recast in prose form. But Cross believes that the epic traditions of Israel presented accurate reflections of the social and religious institutions of the olden time.

Cross's paper is more technical than this summary, but this covers the points in which we are interested. Others have taken a different tack toward the same end. C. Schedl (1965a, 1965b, 1965c), for instance, has argued that the prose additions to the older epic poem have been made in such a way that they can be removed to reveal the poem, consisting of discrete strophes, each with seven verses and forty-nine words. This seems highly unlikely on the face of it, and Schedl's thesis has met with harsh criticism.[3]

Three questions follow after looking at the general idea, whether from Cross or others, that an epic poem, an *epos*, underlies part of the Old Testament.

First and most obviously, was there actually an Israelite *epos* that has been lost or recast as the prose of the extant text?

To begin with, the suggestion that there was an Israelite *epos* is ultimately unfalsifiable. Even if one were to demolish the arguments made by Cross, the notion is still conceivable. Certainly there *could* have been such a work. To say that there never was is a falsifiable statement, since theoretically the black swan could turn up somewhere. But we cannot wait for such a momentous archaeological breakthrough, and must simply note that Cross's arguments have slender underpinnings. (1) Finding the same poetic techniques in Canaanite and Hebrew poetry says nothing about the genre of

[3] See Schmid 1965; Hoffmann 1966. Conroy cites these criticism in his discussion (1980, 6).

epic poetry. (2) The similarity of the Keret epic to the Abraham cycle is open to other interpretations.[4] (3) Much of Cross's theory depends on the existence of a tribal league. Thus the hypothesis is based on another hypothesis. (4) In the same light, we must posit the existence of cultic occasions under this league, and assume that on these occasions poetry was recited or sung. (5) No methodologically consistent attempt to reconstruct any of the presumed poetic source has been forthcoming, thus not allowing for criticism and falsification of the method.

The most crucial point, however, is the matter of Judg 5 and Exod 15. These poems, with their prose parallels, seem at first to provide, if not proof, at least examples of what Cross is claiming. Here perhaps we actually may have the archaic stuff of an *epos*, surviving side by side, for whatever reason, with prose recountings of the same incidents. The work of C. M. Bowra provides some insight into this situation. Bowra identifies two subforms of narrative poetry closely related to epic: (1) the panegyric, praise of a great person during his or her life, and (2) the lament, praise after the person's death. The panegyric never attains any great length. It is close to the heroic, but without the independence and ostensible objectivity of the heroic. Panegyrics and laments (cf. 2 Sam 1.19–27) are earlier than the *epos*, not because they are simpler, but because they exist in some societies where heroic poetry is lacking, as in Israel. Judges 5 "tells its story with brilliant realism and a fine sense of adventure, but remains a panegyric" (Bowra 1961, 8–10).[5] Bowra does not discuss Exod 15, but it easily fits into the same category. It is a panegyric to the Divine Warrior as hero.[6]

Further, the hypothetical *epos* has undergone considerable transformation in becoming prose if it shared the heroic aspects of other epics. Abraham and Jacob are credited with deeds of superhuman strength, but nothing is made of them. Jacob, all by himself, raises a *maṣṣēbah*, rolls away a stone from the mouth of a well, and fights off a band of shepherds. Abraham, in his old age yet, wrestles down a full-grown ram, hauls it up on an altar and kills it. Quite a man. No wonder he could go on to have six more children. In fact, in the Samson material, the one biblical narrative where the theme of great physical strength is dwelt upon, the hero is more of an anti-hero. The most consistent feature of all of these figures is not that they are heroes as much as tricksters. In an oppressed society, this *is* heroism. As for warfare, it is present in Gen 14, but it is certainly not epic in scope and the

[4] See, for instance, Van Seters 1983, 201.
[5] For a thorough study of the Song of Deborah as epic, see Echols 2008, esp. 135–64.
[6] It might be interesting for someone to investigate how Nahum fits into this picture.

chapter is peculiar in more ways than one. One can clearly see the Divine Warrior in Exod 15, but where one finds extended battle sequences, as in Joshua, there is nothing theophanic.

What Cross has done is conceive an interesting idea with a possible scenario, but the arguments are short of being convincing.

But a second question arises. If it could be established that a poetic epic is the *Grundlage* of JE, can it be reconstructed? Most attempts in biblical scholarship to reconstruct underlying sources, such as Q, have not been noticeably successful.

But there is precedent for this kind of thing. Cross cites the work of Ramón Menéndez-Pidal. Menéndez-Pidal was a remarkable man. For well over seventy years he devoted himself to the study of the Spanish *cantares de gesta, romanceros*, and related literature. He died in 1969, a few days short of 100 years old, active to the end. He found that medieval prose texts left traces of poetic sources that he and his followers were able to reconstruct in a way that others found convincing.[7] I have not been able to track this down in print, but I have it on good authority from Sharon Montano, a colleague of mine who did some of her work under Menéndez-Pidal, that some of the ancient epic sources were preserved among the Sephardic Jews in Ladino.

The answer to the second question must be, again, only possibly. Given the right material to work with, reconstruction of such a text could conceivably be done.

But then the crucial third question presents itself. Given such a poetic source, and given the possibility of reconstructing it, has anything, in fact, been reconstructed? Cross's attempts along this line are suitably modest, but modesty does not describe Umberto Cassuto, who claims, "I have proved the existence of epic poetry among the Israelites on subjects pertaining to the beginning of the world's history, and I attempted to give a detailed reconstruction of the content of one of the Israelite epic poems" (1973, 10).

In tracing evidence for a poetic "saga," as he also calls it, in the early sections of Exodus, Cassuto cites five categories of evidence, but each of them fails to convince.

1. Whole or fragmentary verses that stand out in the prose narrative by their poetic characteristics. As an example, he cites Exod 9.23: "the Lord sent thunders [literally, "gave voices"] and hail." The phrase *nātan qôl* to represent thunder is common, he says, in poetic diction,

[7] See Simmons 1978.

coming from Canaanite poetry. Obviously, however, a nice turn of phrase doesn't have to be found only in poetry.

2. Topics appropriate to folk epic, but inconsistent with the spirit of Torah. Moses' staff is sometimes called a shepherd's staff, but sometimes called "the rod of God." Using midrashic interpretation as a tool for isolating sources is indeed a dubious principle. Besides, the argument really has nothing to do with poetry.
3. Unimportant details found in the text must come from a more extensive account which the Torah did not incorporate. For instance, in Exod 18.2, Jethro takes Moses' wife Zipporah after he had sent her away. There is no allusion to this incident elsewhere, so it must have come from the fuller epic. Again, the argument has nothing to do with poetry. It is a source-critical conjecture.
4. Indirect "proof" of remaining traces of the influence exerted by an ancient source. In Exod 17.13 we have "Joshua disabled (*wayyaḥălōš*) Amalek with the edge of the sword." In Deut 25.18, another passage dealing with Amalek, we read "and cut down all the stragglers (*hanneḥĕšālîm*) on your rear." This could perhaps be a wordplay, but since the two examples are so far apart, the wordplay must have existed in the source from which both derive. This is truly far-fetched.
5. Clear reference to an ancient version. Deuteronomy 25.14 reads, "Write this as a memorial and recite it in the ears of Joshua." This is how poems were handed down. The reference then is to the ancient poem which told of the battle with Amalek.

This is the reasoning that enables Cassuto to say, "I have proved . . . " It does not inspire confidence in the method. In answer then to the third question, in my opinion, nothing has been demonstrably reconstructed.

Two particularly significant advances were made in the study of epic in the twentieth century (Dorson 1978, 1). One of these we owe to H. Munro Chadwick and Nora K. Chadwick, in the first several chapters of their three-volume *The Growth of Literature* (1932–1940). They saw epic less as a literary than a cultural phenomenon. Epics came forth from suitable cultural traditions, with a heroic age bridging the nomadic and sedentary types of civilizations, where semi-civilized people long influenced by more advanced cultures broke across frontiers and occupied partially or completely the land of a more sophisticated society. Such a society is highly fluid, with perpetual warfare.[8] H. Munro Chadwick developed this idea in his *The Heroic Age*

[8] For a summary see Rauber 1970.

(1926). Although there he was discussing Germanic epic, the situation applies well to Israel's age of conquest or peasant revolt, or even to the wars of David. Assuming that we can know this much about Israel's history, we find here a possible locus for a heroic age. But if epic of the primary type had developed in Israel from this age, it would have had to originate during or at least shortly after the time. This is presumably the kind of thing Cross imagines the *Grundlage* of JE to have been, thus reflecting accurate information about conditions in the time to which it was so close. But again, there is no evidence that such an *epos* ever existed.

A second revolution in the study of epic was brought about by Milman Parry and his student Albert B. Lord. Parry insisted that epic poetry must be studied in the context of ancient oral singers, and that access to their craft could be had through field study of their modern-day counterparts. Lord did extensive study of the bardic tradition in Yugoslavia. His influential book, *The Singer of Tales* (1960), deals with his field work in the Balkans, but the latter half of the book makes an extensive and influential application of his findings to Homer. The bards learned their craft as a child learns language, from youth up. Their skill lay not so much in memorization as in reliance upon structural patterns (syntactic, metrical, acoustical), formulaic repetition, and so on, to provide the redundancy against which the information would appear. These traditions were not written down, certainly not by the singers themselves, to whom the notion would probably not have occurred. Each singing was new. There was no *Urtext.* But this leads Lord to ask a significant question. Just why were the Homeric traditions written down? Why was Homer committed to writing?

But first, a prior question. Since Israel had a heroic age in a classical sense, and since passages like the Song of Deborah show that the Hebrews had the facility to develop a tradition of heroic or epic poetry, why did they not? Something certainly held them back.

Cross finds his answer in the demise of the tribal league, but Bowra has a somewhat different approach. "Even though they honored great figures in their judges and kings, they did not make the most of their opportunities, and after that the growth of priestly rule would certainly have discouraged an art that gave too great an emphasis to the individual hero" (1961, 15). Bowra points to certain other cultures—Africa, China, Egypt—where conditions also precluded the development of this genre. The Hebrews had panegyric and lament, but no heroic poem. Its place was filled by prose narrative. S. Talmon, a critic of Cassuto, seems to pursue this:

> I would propose that the ancient Hebrew writers purposefully nurtured and developed prose narration to take the place of the epic genre which by its content

> was intimately bound up with the world of paganism and appears to have had a special standing in the polytheistic cults. (1978, 354)

So then, there is no hero but Yahweh, and the *epos* as a literary form is too associated with paganisms to be put to use in a society worshipping Yahweh alone. This implies, of course, that the Israelites knew something about the epic traditions of some: Mesopotamia, perhaps, or Canaanites, or even Greeks.

So for the narration of material dealing with epic themes—the hero and the embodiment of national ideals and aspirations—prose was developed in Israelite society rather than poetry. And this Hebrew prose certainly differs from the *epos* in respects other than the formal. The characteristics of Hebrew prose are more lifelike and historical than ideal and heroic. Human action is more in the forefront than in Greek epic. But there are similarities. The narratives are for hearing more than reading. They operate in a world of expansive rather than confined space. They are scenic rather than panoramic. Historicity is assumed. And they interpret the people's past, voicing their ideals and aspirations.

For the causes intuited by Bowra and suspected by Talmon, or for other reasons, Israel appears never to have developed a tradition of epic or heroic poetry. There is no trace of an *epos*. But the prose that passes on the sacred traditions is indeed epic. But what kind of epic? Primary or secondary? It has to be secondary, for the reason C. S. Lewis gives in defining secondary epic. For a "great subject" to exist (and he does not see primary epic as dealing with "great subjects")—a large national or cosmic subject of superpersonal interest—"history must have some degree of pattern, some design" (1942, 29). But this runs counter to the very notion of a heroic age as described by Bowra, or as Lewis puts it, "constant aimless alternation of glory and misery ... the terrible phenomenon called a Heroic Age" (1942, 30).

When we find this prose narration in the Bible, the history is told from the viewpoint of one seeing direction in history, from promise to fulfillment under the guidance of Yahweh, directly or indirectly; from homelessness to home; restlessness to rest; landlessness to land. This is not the perspective of a heroic age. It is the product of more sophisticated reflection. Old traditions, perhaps even ancient traditions, are here, but in the final form of a folk epic. There is no *epos*. It is epic prose, but it is not the parallel to Homer, but rather to Virgil.

And now, back to Lord's question. Since among the Greek singers of tales there would have been no impetus for reducing the songs to writing, why were they eventually written down? What was the precedent? Where

was it to be found? Why, in Israel. Lord invites us to look around 700 B.C.E. and find people with whom the Greeks could have come in contact who were already recording their literature. We think, he says, of Palestine's J and E, which "contained the epics and myths of these people," and we think of the library of Nineveh. "The Greeks and the Hebrews were reliving in their own terms the cultural experiences of older civilizations. The scribe who wrote down the Homeric poems was doing for the Greeks what the scribes of Sumer had done for their people many centuries before" (Lord 1960, 156–57) and what the Israelite scribes were doing about the same time.

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