

The Poem of the Covenant?
Poetic and Prosaic Strata in Genesis 17

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2013 Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature

ABSTRACT

Though the narrative of God's circumcision and inheritance covenant with Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17 is entirely Priestly, scholars have long identified "seams" in the text that point to multiple compositional strata: the chapter is redundant, verbal and pronominal forms are inconsistent, and the grammar is sometimes illogical. I show that the text of Genesis 17 divides into two style categories: lines that contain an abundance of poetic features (such as parallelism, marked diction and phrasing, chiasmus, and rhythm), and sentences or clauses that do not. Differentiating between poetic and prosaic Priestly material and separating the two reveals a self-contained poetic stratum; the prosaic sentences supplement the poetry and do not form a complete text. None of the widely observed textual inconsistencies or problems occur within the poetic stratum; instead, they are only found between the poetic and the prosaic verses. I argue that Genesis 17 contains two strata, which I label Poetic-P and Prosaic-P, and that these works extend throughout the Priestly Source. The poetic and prosaic strata have different focuses and viewpoints in Genesis 17, as God's promise granting the land of Canaan to Abraham and his children only occurs in the poetic texts, and the deity's promise to "be God to you" is limited to the prosaic material. Many commentators have noted that Genesis 17 takes its structure and some of its vocabulary from non-P/Yahwistic narratives in Genesis 15 and 18. Comparing the three chapters reveals that all points of contact between Genesis 15, 18, and 17 occur only in the latter's poetic stratum.