The American humorist Mark Twain once remarked that history may not repeat itself, but it certainly does rhyme. Although he expressed the idea cleverly, he is not the first person to have observed the human tendency to look for patterns in history and to reason by means of them. As universal as this tendency may be, it does not find expression in the same way in every culture, nor is the concern to discern such patterning equally intense. But one cannot read the literature of Second Temple Judaism, both canonical and noncanonical, without being struck by the frequency of what one can call “historical résumés,” that is, schematic narratives that recount the major events in history, often in ways that highlight the “rhyming” quality of history. While some of the most remarkable examples occur in apocalypses (e.g., the Apocalypse of Weeks and the Animal Apocalypse in 1 Enoch or the Cloud Vision in Syriac Baruch), the phenomenon is much more widespread, occurring in liturgical and prayer texts (e.g., Psalm 106 and Nehemiah 9), in narrative fiction (Achior’s recitation of Israelite history in Judith), and in Jewish Hellenistic historiography (Josephus’ speech before the walls of Jerusalem in the Jewish War). Though extremely popular in the Second Temple period, such historical résumés are also found in earlier Israelite literature, in the Deuteronomistic History (e.g., Joshua 24, 1 Samuel 12) and in prophetic texts (Ezekiel 20). Although I will not be able to explore the question of the origin of this phenomenon in this paper, I think it most likely that it developed in liturgical contexts, perhaps along the lines of the recitations cited in Deuteronomy 6:20–23 and 26:5b–9. My concern here is rather with the baroque variety of the developed phenomenon. Indeed, the extraordinary literary variety of such texts prevents one from speaking of the historical résumé as a genre. Nevertheless, the use of the résumé as a principle of composition in such diverse texts suggests that it was an important cultural mode of cognition. And it is that—the historical résumé as a mode of cognition—that is my focus. What I mean is simply that narrating history is a way
of thinking, a way of constructing meaning from events by casting them in narrative or story form.

The relationship between narrative and cognition has attracted considerable interest in several fields in recent years. Cognitive science, for instance, has argued that narrative is fundamental to human cognition per se. The brain organizes spatio-temporal phenomena in narrative patterns. Through narrative, coherence is produced. But narrative does not merely organize—it also explores and creates. The human mind thinks by projecting one story onto another and blending them in ways that produce new insight—and this is the source of symbolic thinking. Indeed, as cognitive theorist Mark Turner observes, “Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought. Rational capacities depend upon it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining.”

Though the insights of cognitive science are directly helpful at points, their focus tends to be on the basic processes of thought themselves.

More immediately relevant to my purposes is the lively discussion that has taken place in recent years among theorists of historiography concerning the relationship between narrative and history. Increasingly, the claim is made that narrative plays an essential role, not only in conceptualizing and recounting history but even in the structure of historical events themselves. (See, among others, historians Louis Mink, Hayden White, Allen Megill, Reinhart Koselleck, and philosopher Paul Ricoeur.) One might think that, if I am interested in the relationships among narrative, history, and cognition, that I should turn to the great historiographies of the Hebrew Bible, the Deuteronomistic History and the Chronicler’s. But the historical résumés offer certain advantages.

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4 Hayden White, The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).