



PROJECT MUSE®

Through the Kaleidoscope of Literary Imagery in Exodus 15:
Poetics and Historiography in Service to Religious
Exuberance

Pamela Barmash

Hebrew Studies, Volume 58, 2017, pp. 145-172 (Article)

Published by National Association of Professors of Hebrew

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hbr.2017.0007>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/678741>

**THROUGH THE KALEIDOSCOPE
OF LITERARY IMAGERY IN EXODUS 15:
POETICS AND HISTORIOGRAPHY IN SERVICE
TO RELIGIOUS EXUBERANCE**

Pamela Barmash

Washington University in St. Louis

Abstract: *Exodus 15, the Song at the Sea, appears to be triggered by the divine victory over the Egyptians at the Sea, but the poet draws on other literary images of destruction, images that are incompatible, in order to express exuberance over divine victory. This seemingly rudimentary technique is adroitly deployed in tandem with strategies of historical shaping and poetics. Time is retarded and accelerated, events and characters are omitted or transformed, and perspective and emphasis are shifted. Reality contemporary to the poet is mirrored in the distant past. Poetic strategies of endstopping, varying line length, and staircase parallelism work in tandem to heighten emotional intensity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The trigger for Exodus 15, the Song at the Sea, is the motif of the divine victory over the Egyptians at the Sea, but strikingly the poet utilizes other conceptions of God's destroying power in order to portray the demise of God's enemies, conceptions that contradict a watery death for the Egyptians. The poet fashions a kaleidoscope of verbal images of destruction. The agglomeration of images attests to the theological ingenuity of the poet: even though the literary images are stereotypical descriptions of divine actions, the poet weaves them together creatively to affirm and intensify divine power and triumph. The kaleidoscope of images heightens the celebratory language of victory. Far from being a cliché, the depiction of divine triumph attests to the inventiveness and subtlety of how one Israelite poet expressed exuberance over divine victory.¹

1. It may be that determining whether the poetics employed in Exodus 15 is aesthetically successful, either in the time period in which it was composed or at another point in biblical history or in the afterlife of the Bible, is impossible, but the use of poetic mechanisms and rhetorical techniques, such as endstopping and adjustments in rhythm, language composed beyond the needs of conveying information, indicates that verbal artistry is present and is appropriate for analysis.

2. TYPOLOGIES OF DESTRUCTION

The psalm in Exodus 15 is ostensibly a poetic rendition of the prose narrative of Exodus 14: it is placed next to it and seems to impart the same event, the victory over Pharaoh's chariotry at the Sea. Yet even in the first verse, the poem diverges from the prose: while Exod 14:23–28 recounts that Pharaoh's chariots were swept over and engulfed by the returning waters, Exod 15:1 tells of God hurling the chariots into the sea:

אֲשִׁירָה לַיהוָה כִּי־גָאָה גָּאָה
סוֹס וְרֹכְבוֹ רָמָה בַיָּם:

I shall sing of/to/for the LORD for he has ascended triumphantly,²
Horse and driver³ he has hurled into the sea.

The poetry depicts God violently casting Pharaoh's army into the sea. The verticality of movement is emphasized: God ascends in triumph, while horse and driver are hurled down.⁴ By contrast, the prose narrative paints a different picture: God propels the waters aside or divides the waters,⁵ the Israelites escape, the pent-up waters roll back when Pharaoh's

2. The basic meaning of the verbal root גָּאָה is "to be high, grow tall" with the extended connotation of "proud, arrogant." See M. E. J. Richardson, ed. and trans., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1994–2000), p. 168.

3. The horse is mentioned first because it may be more astonishing to throw a horse (and the chariot it is pulling) than its human driver. The larger creature captures an onlooker's attention more.

4. A bilingual pun emphasizing verticality may be present in Exod 15:1–2: the poet expresses that God has cast down the Egyptians, employing the verb רָמָה, in its Aramaic meaning "to hurl," used only once in the Bible, and magnifies God using the root רוּם (אֲרִמְמֵהוּ) "to ascend." See E. L. Greenstein, "Verbal Art and Literary Sensibilities in Ancient Near Eastern Context," in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Ancient Israel* (ed. S. Niditch; Malden: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), p. 470.

5. The narrative in Exodus 14 is composed of multiple sources, and they depict waters impelled by different means. A severely truncated source is reflected in Exod 14:27, where the Egyptians are thrown into the sea, like the poem in Exodus 15 but using a different verb for throwing. However, the other sources offer a more developed picture that differs from the poem. One version (often assigned to the J source) describes God sending an east wind to dry the waters up, and the Egyptians are drowned on the shore when the waters rush back to refill their usual channel (Exod 14:21a, 22aα, 30). Another source (often assigned to P) portrays God cleaving the sea apart, with the waters standing like walls on both sides (Exod 14:16, 21b, 22aβ, 29). The poem may yet incorporate another tradition, in which it is God's breath that causes the waters to congeal (Exod 15:8). See B. S. Childs, "A Traditio-Historical Study of the Reed-Sea Tradition," *VT* 20 (1970): 406–418.

Marc Vervenne argued that the image of congealed waters is not a contradiction of the depiction attributed to the J source in Exodus 14 because it takes the perspective of the Israelites, who would have perceived that the divided waters fell upon the Egyptians after the Israelites had crossed ("Metaphors for Destruction in Exodus 15," *JNSL* 24.2 [1998]: 179–194). However, the picture of the waters standing like walls in Exod 15:29 obviates his argument. A stronger argument may be that the breath from God's nostrils is poetic hyperbole for an east wind. In any case, while the rigid waters may fit Exod 15:8, how does this correspond to Exod 15:4, depicting God hurling the Egyptians into the sea? See G. W. Coats,

army rides through, and the water swells over the chariots, inundating, submerging, and finally smothering them.⁶

The poet juxtaposes the drowning of the Egyptians with the watery depths, not the inundating waters. In the poet's vision, the doom of the Egyptians is the result of being thrown into the abyss (Exod 15:4–5):

מִרְכַּבַּת פְּרָעָה וְחִילוֹ יָרָה בַיָּם
וּמִבְּחַר שְׁלֵשִׁי טָבְעוּ בַיָּם-סוּף
תְּהַמַּת יִכְסִימוּ
יָרְדוּ בְּמִצּוֹלַת כְּמוֹ-אֶבֶן

He has hurled the chariots of Pharaoh and his army in the sea,⁷
The pick of (Pharaoh's) officers have drowned in the sea.
The abyss has covered them,
They went down into the depths like a rock.⁸

“The Traditio-Historical Character of the Reed Sea Motif,” *VT* 17 (1967): 253–265; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 131–142.

For more on the division of Exodus 14 into sources, see J. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), pp. 193–213; A. F. Campbell and M. A. O'Brien, *Sources of the Pentateuch: Texts, Introductions, Annotations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), pp. 40–41, 143, 185–186; R. E. Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2005), pp. 142–144; J. L. Ska, *Introduction to the Reading of the Pentateuch* (trans. P. Dominique; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009 [1998]), pp. 68–75. For a study situating Exodus 15 in a broader horizon, see M. S. Smith, “The Poetics of Exodus 15 and Its Position in the Book,” in *Imagery and Imagination in Biblical Literature: Essays in Honor of Aloysius Fitzgerald, F.S.C.* (ed. L. Boadt and M. S. Smith; CBQMS 32; Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 2001), pp. 23–34.

6. The mythic enemy of God is the sea, as seen from other creation myths in the Bible (Isa 27:1–2; 51:9–10; Pss 74:12–17; 89:1–26), but in Exodus 15 the psalmist has transformed the sea into an inanimate object not capable of resistance to divine control. There is no allusion to the central content of the myth of divine combat with the Sea in the Song at the Sea, and the only prominent element retained is the acclamation of the Deity as king at the conclusion. See N. Ayali-Darshan, “וְדוֹרֵךְ עַל בְּמַתִּי יָם: מִלְחַמַּת אֵל הַסַּעַר בַּיָּם בְּסִפְרוֹת הַמְּזוֹרָה הַקְּדוּם (Treading on the back of sea: The combat between the storm-god and the sea in Ancient Near Eastern literature; Biblical Encyclopedia Library 33; Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 2016), pp. 243–246.

7. Targum Neofiti adds *קִשְׁתָּהּ עֲלֵיהוֹן גִּירִין דְּאִשָּׁא בִימָא*, smoothing the contradiction between death by water and death by fire. On Targum Neofiti's rendition of Exodus 15, see B. B. Levy, *Targum Neofiti I: A Textual Study* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), pp. 376–385.

8. The origin of the noun *שְׁלִישׁ* has been debated. Often taken as originating as the term for the third man in a chariot, then extrapolated to mean adjutant to the king and hence a term employed in biblical texts for a royal official (1 Kgs 9:22; 2 Kgs 7:2, 12, 17, 19; 9:25; 10:25; 15:25; 1 Chr 8:9), its original usage would seem to fit the context of chariotry in Exod 14:7 and 15:4. However, it has been noted that Egyptians did not use a three man team in a chariot, and, therefore, it derives from an Egyptian term for military commander. It is an adaptation of the Egyptian *srs*, a senior military official in Egyptian ranks. See P. C. Craigie, “An Egyptian Expression in the Song of the Sea (Exodus XV 4),” *VT* 20 (1970): 83–86; B. A. Mastin, “Was the *šālīš* the Third Man in the Chariot?” in *Studies in the Historical Books of the Old Testament* (ed. J. A. Emerton; Leiden: Brill, 1979), pp. 125–154; L. Koehler, W. Baumgartner, and J. J. Stamm, “שְׁלִישׁ (3),” *HALOT*, pp. 1525–1527. The modern debate over the rendering of this word is adumbrated in *Mekhilta Beshalah 1* (H. S. Horowitz and I. A. Rabin, *Mekhilta d'Rabbi Ishmael* [Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1960], pp. 89–90).

The waters have not rolled over the Egyptians, as in the prose narrative. Rather, the Egyptians have sunk, descending into the ever deeper waters.

The dissonances between the narrative and the poem in conveying the death of the Egyptians do not end there. The poet utilizes other images of destruction and is not sufficed with only images of watery deaths:

God smashes the Egyptians with his right hand:

Exod 15:6

יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה נֹאדָרִי בַכַּחַ
יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה תִּרְעַץ אוֹיֵב

Your right hand, LORD, is magnificent in power,
Your right hand, LORD, shatters the enemy.

God burns the Egyptians like straw with his incendiary rage:

Exod 15:7

וּבְרַב גְּאוּנְךָ תִּהְרַס קִמְיָךְ
תִּשְׁלַח חֲרֹנְךָ יֵאכְלֵמוּ כֶקֶשׁ

In your splendid triumph you destroy your opponents,
You sent forth your fury: it consumes them like chaff.⁹

*God causes the Egyptians to be swallowed up in an earthquake:*¹⁰

Exod 15:12

נָטִיתָ יְמִינְךָ
תִּבְלַעְמוּ אֶרֶץ

You put forth your right arm,
The earth swallows them up.

What has happened to the Egyptians? Were they shattered, burned up, or swallowed by an earthquake? Each of these ways of dying are mutually contradictory. Why does the poet evoke so many means of divine victory, and how does this relate to death in the watery depths?

The poet fuses diverse images of destruction in order to intensify the depiction of divine power and triumph. The kaleidoscope of images

9. Targum Onkelos renders the clause *שיצינון כנורא לקשא* 'it consumed them like fire does chaff', unpacking what is implied in the metaphor by explicitly mentioning fire.

10. It may be that the opponents of God referenced in this verse are Korah and his allies (R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* [New York: Basic Books, 1985], p. 54). If this is so, the poem employs two images of destruction that do not involve water, rather than three: God's right arm smashing enemies and God's fury burning enemies, two images that nonetheless contradict a watery death.

heightens the celebratory language of victory. The Deity as vanquisher of the Egyptians by hurling them in the sea is one in a series of images of destruction that the poet superimposes. It is no longer just the waters of the Sea that destroy the Egyptians, but the burning fury of God, the mighty right hand of God, the heaving earth. The poet has pushed the victory beyond the narrow limits of a single event at a particular place and time.

Only after the poet has presented the Egyptians as being hurled into the sea, smashed to smithereens, and being consumed in a blaze does he employ an image of defeat corresponding to the prose narrative. The tableau in Exod 15:8–10 dramatizes the waters standing straight like a wall, the enemy eager for spoil, and God causing the wind to blow and the water spreading over them. This set of happenings conforms to (part of) the prose narrative of the splitting of the sea, the pursuing Egyptians, and the inundating waters. But even here, the waters are magnified: the waters in the form of an abyss freeze at God's command. They are not ordinary waters.

Let us unravel these concepts of destruction by formulating a typology of ways in which God destroys his enemies in biblical literature in a set of common motifs:

(1) *Enemies consumed by God's fiery wrath*

Exod 15:7

וּבְרַב גְּאוֹנָךְ תִּהְרַס קִמְיֶיךָ תִּשְׁלַח חֲרֹנְךָ יֹאכְלֵמוּ בְּקֶשׁ

In your splendid triumph you destroy your opponents;
You send forth your fury, it consumes them like straw.

Joel 2:3

לְפָנָיו אֲכָלָה אֵשׁ וְאַחֲרָיו תִּלְהֹט לְהַבָּה, בְּגִן־עֵדֶן הָאָרֶץ לְפָנָיו וְאַחֲרָיו מִדְּבַר
שְׂמָמָה

Their vanguard is a devouring fire,
Their rear guard a blazing flame.
The land was a Garden of Eden before them,
But after them is a desolate waste.

Nah 1:6

לְפָנָיו יַעֲמֹד מִי יַעֲמֹד וּמִי יִקוּם בְּחֵרוֹן אַפּוֹ, חֲמָתוֹ נִתְּכָה כְּאֵשׁ וְהִצְרִים נִתְּצוּ
מִמֶּנּוּ

Who can stand before his wrath?
Who can resist his fury?
His anger pours out like fire,
And rocks are shattered because of him.

(2) *God smashing foes with his right hand*

Exod 15:6

יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה נִאֲדָרִי בַכַּחַ, יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה תִּרְעַץ אוֹיֵב

Your right hand, LORD, is magnificent in power,
Your right hand, LORD, shatters the enemy.

Ps 60:7

לְמַעַן יִחַלְצוּן יְדִידֶיךָ הוֹשִׁיעָה יְמִינְךָ וְעַגְגִּי

So that those whom you love might be rescued,
Deliver with your right hand and answer me.

Ps 118:16

יְמִין יְהוָה רֹמְמָה יְמִין יְהוָה עֲשֵׂה חֵיל

The right hand of the LORD is exalted!
The right hand of the LORD is triumphant!

(3) *The earth swallowing up the rebellious*

Exod 15:12

נָטִיתָ יְמִינְךָ תִּבְלַעְמוּ אֶרֶץ

You put forth your right arm,
The earth swallows them up.

Numbers 16: Korah and his followers are swallowed up in an earthquake.

Ps 60:4

הִרְעַשְׂתָּהּ אֶרֶץ פָּצַמְתָּהּ רָפָה שִׁבְרִיהָ כִּי־מָטָה

You have made the land quake; you have torn it open.
Mend its fissures, for it is collapsing.

(4) *Enemies drowned in waters sent by God*

Exod 15:4–5

מִרְכָּבוֹת פָּרַעַה וְחִילוֹ יָרָה בַיָּם וּמִבְּחַר שְׁלֵשׁוֹ טָבְעוּ בַיָּם-סוּף. תְּהַמַּת
יִכְסִימוּ יָרְדוּ בְּמַצּוֹלַת כְּמוֹ-אֶבֶן

He has hurled the chariots of Pharaoh and his army in the sea,
The pick of (Pharaoh's) officers have drowned in the sea.
The abyss has covered them,
They went down into the depths like a rock.

Isa 8:7

וְלִכְן הִנֵּה אֲדַנִּי מֵעַלָּה עֲלֵיהֶם אֶת־מִי הַנְּהַר הַעֲצוּמִים וְהָרְבִים אֶת־מֶלֶךְ אֲשׁוּר
וְאֶת־כָּל־כְּבוֹדוֹ וְעַלָּה עַל־כָּל־אֲפִיקָיו וְהִלֵּךְ עַל־כָּל־גְּדוֹתָיו. וְחָלַף בִּיהוּדָה שֹׁטֵף
וְעָבַר עַד־צְוֹאֵר יִגִּיעַ...

Assuredly, my Lord will bring up against them the mighty, massive waters
of the Euphrates, that is, the king of Assyria and all his multitude. It shall
rise above all its channels, and flow over all its beds, and swirl through
Judah like a flash flood, reaching up to the neck.

Jer 51:42

עַלָּה עַל־בָּבֶל הַיָּם בְּהִמּוֹן גָּלְיוֹ נִכְסְתָהּ.

The sea has risen over Babylon;
She is covered by its roaring waves.

The poet in Exodus 15 has elaborated on the celebratory language of victory so much so that he has fused together a number of literary images of destruction. It is no longer just the waters of the Sea that destroy the Egyptians, but the burning fury of God, the mighty right hand of God, the earth heaving at God's command. The poet has pushed the event of victory beyond the limits of a particular happening at the Sea. The image of the Deity as vanquishing the Egyptians in the sea has been submerged. The other images converge and swell over it.

The superimposed images express what a single image cannot. When the poet presents one image then replaces it with another, he produces a progressive heightening of language, and the magnificence of the triumph is intensified. The celebration of victory is augmented and heightened by the superimposition of verbal images of destruction.

Because the Egyptians are destroyed in so many ways—drowned, burnt, smashed, and swallowed up—the close connection of the poem to

the victory at the Sea is blurred, but in so doing, the poet expresses exhilaration inspired by divine victories in general. As images of destruction are replaced, as the depiction of the Egyptians' defeat is presented, then obscured and refocused, the perception of a single historical event is eclipsed by the wider scheme of divine victories. A historical account is replaced by poetic articulation of religious exuberance.

A declarative statement that God defeats the enemies of the Israelites is one-dimensional. It might fall flat. By contrast, literary images are visceral and palpable. They amplify language and heighten emotion. They prompt reflection, and by interacting with one another, images shape structure and create meaning. Images use language to evoke and lend power to the poem. The onslaught of images orient, disorient, and reorient.

Employing multiple images of destruction for rhetorical and psychological effect builds on the selection of the image of the Deity as vanquisher through the means of the sea. As noted earlier, the event as retold in Exodus 15 does not correspond to the prose story because the Egyptians in the poem are hurled into the Sea, not covered by it. By foregoing the imagery of drowning, the poet has portrayed a watery death of sinking rather than the one the narrative recounts, the sea rushing over the Egyptians after they have ventured onto the dry sea-bed. This recrystallization allows the sea to be transformed. It is no longer the Sea, a sea composed of ordinary water, but rather the primordial waters of the deep that carry the Egyptians under to their watery grave. The poet has replaced one type of destruction with another. Then other images of destruction are piled on top ever higher.

The use of multiple literary images is the means by which the poet constructs the reality he wants to present.¹¹ The images of destruction used in Exodus 15 are not just ornamentation and decoration: they are essential and are not tangential elements of the passage that can easily be dispensed with. By using these images, the poet evokes a complex of ideas and impressions suggested by those images.

It is useful to unfold the associations that may come into play when an image is evoked.¹² A number of the images of destruction contain similes.

11. This is related to the recent study of metaphor that has emphasized that metaphors are the means by which we construct reality. See G. Lakoff and M. Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (with a new afterward; Chicago; The University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980]). The images of destruction in the Song at the Sea are informed by the metaphor GOD IS A WARRIOR.

12. As suggested for the study of metaphor by E. L. Greenstein, "Some Metaphors in the Poetry of Job," in *Built by Wisdom, Established by Understanding: Essays on Biblical and Near Eastern*

The Egyptians drop into the sea like stone (Exod 15:5) or they plummet like lead (15:10), and they are burned up like straw (15:7). Other objects can fall into water, leaves, branches, and so forth, but they are light and can float. They can bob on the surface and float like flotsam and jetsam. But that is not the case with substances like stone and lead. They are inert objects that cannot resist divine power, and they will fall inexorably to the bottom.¹³ They do not have a chance of opposing divine power. So too the poet avers that the Egyptian and all those who try to oppose the Deity cannot resist divine power.

The poet also portrays Egyptians as being consumed in fire like straw. Straw is used for kindling: it burns up quickly, and by itself, it cannot make a lasting fire. Similarly, the poet asserts that the Egyptians cannot resist God's might.

It is noticeable that there is no storm imagery in Exodus 15, no thunder, no lightning, no clouds, imagery common to the biblical portrayal of theophany. It can only be speculated as to why this is: the superimposition of contradictory images of destruction are more (or equally) evocative and powerful. Hurling into water is closer to the Exodus traditions about the Egyptians' death by water. Raging waters may be indelibly associated in Israelite culture with cosmic turmoil—the seething waters rebel against God's dominance—but in the Song at the Sea, the raging waters are recast as an emanation of God's anger and power.¹⁴

The images of destruction are associated with the power of the natural environment: nature is unleashed against the Egyptians. The waters roil and churn. The earth pitches and heaves. Fire breaks out and consumes. The enemies of the Israelites fall in the tumult.

The poet employs images that are not compatible with each other. Each successive image supplements and augments the prior image. This is so, not because the previous images were inadequate but because a single image cannot express the totality of God's victory and power. A metaphorical domain of images depicting divine triumph is evoked when God is envisioned as a warrior, and the poet of the Song at the Sea superimposes images in order to convey the exuberance of religious exaltation.

Literature in Honor of Adele Berlin (ed. M. L. Grossman: Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2013), pp. 182–183.

13. The premise of the miracle of the axe-head in 2 Kgs 6:1–7 is that the axe-head is made of metal, whose density prevents it from floating. It has sunk irretrievably into the water, and only the prophet's intervention has allowed it to be recovered.

14. W. P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 113.

2.1. Other Examples of the Fusion of Contradictory Images

The superimposing and fusing of contradictory images is not confined to Exodus 15. For example, Ps 50:2–3 combines solar and storm imagery.¹⁵

מְצִיּוֹן מְבִלְלֵי יְפֵי אֱלֹהִים הוֹפִיעַ
יָבֵא אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֵל־יַחְרֹשׁ
אֵשׁ־לִפְנֵי תֹאכֵל וְסִבִּיבּוֹ נִשְׁעָרָה מָאֵד

From Zion, impeccable in beauty,
God is shining forth.
Let our God come and not fail to act.
Consuming fire precedes him;
It storms about him furiously.

The storm imagery does contradict solar imagery—the radiance is obscured by the storm. But the subversion of one image by another advances a major goal of the psalm, depicting the intensity of a divine theophany. God is to appear, ushered in by fire and storm, in order to call his people to account in a lawsuit. Solar imagery expresses the luminescent intensity of the divine presence, and storm imagery conveys the raw force and vigor of the divine presence.¹⁶ They convey the earthly manifestation of a numinous force in radiance and meteorological violence. By placing two types of natural phenomena side-by-side, the poet avers that the nature of the divine transcends the confines of the imagery stemming from a single metaphor.

15. Astral imagery for the Deity is rare in general in biblical religion, and its appearance has provoked discussion as to its origin. Scholars have disagreed whether it is indigenous to ancient Israel or whether it was imported from Neo-Assyrian models, and if the latter, scholars have also disagreed whether it was imposed by religious imperialism or adopted because of the cachet of the culture of the dominant superpower. See M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLMS 19; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974); B. Janowski, “JHWH und der Sonnengott: Aspekte der Solarisierung JHWHs in vorexilischen Zeit,” in *Die Rettende Gerechtigkeit: Beiträge zur Theologie des Alten Testaments 2* (Neukirchen: Neukirchener, 1999), pp. 192–219; J. W. McKay, *Religion under the Assyrians* (SBT 2.26; Napierville: Allenson, 1973); M. S. Smith, “The Near Eastern Background of Solar Language for God,” *JBL* 109 (1990): 29–39; M. S. Smith, “When the Heavens Darkened: Yahweh, El, and the Divine Astral Family in Iron Age II Judah,” in *Symbiosis, Symbolism, and the Power of the Past: Canaan, Ancient Israel, and Their Neighbors from the Late Bronze Age through Roman Palestine* (ed. W. G. Dever and S. Gitin; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), pp. 265–277; H. Spieckermann, *Juda unter Assur in der Sargonidenzeit* (FRLANT 129; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982); H. P. Stahl, *Solare Elemente im Jahwesglauben des Alten Testament* (OBO 66; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1985).

16. W. P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, p. 86.

This phenomenon is not confined to the Bible but is found as well in other ancient Near Eastern texts. Let me offer two examples. In the first, solar and storm imagery are both used. In Gudea cylinder B, the return of Ningirsu is portrayed as follows (V.1–9):

The warrior Ningirsu entered his house.
The owner of the house had come,
(As) an eagle catching sight of (the corpse) of a wild bull.
The warrior's entering his house was a storm roaring into battle.
Ningirsu roamed through the house,
It was (as the sound of) the Apsu temple precincts when festivals are
celebrated.
The owner was ready to come out from his house—
And he was (as) the sun rising over the land of Lagash.¹⁷

Ningirsu is depicted as both a storm god and a solar god. Here too, solar imagery conveys the luminescent power of the divine, and storm imagery manifests divine force and vigor. By combining two types of natural phenomena, the poet attests that the divine nature is beyond identification with a single natural phenomenon.¹⁸ The nature of the divine is more complex and transcends the limits of one metaphor.

The employment of contradictory images may also express the profuse emotion of the poet. The example of the Great Hymn of Ishtar is instructive (lines 31–55):

O splendid lioness of the Igigi-gods,
Who renders furious gods submissive,
Most capable of all sovereigns, who grasps the lead-line of kings,
Who opens the veils of all young women...
Shining torch of heaven and earth,
Brilliance of all inhabited lands,
Furious in irresistible onslaught, hero to the fight,
Fiery glow that blazes against the enemy,
Who wreaks destruction on the fierce...
Irninitum, raging lioness, may your heart be calmed.
Furious wild bull, may your feelings be eased.
May your benevolent eyes rest upon me,

17. D. O. Edzard, *Gudea and his Dynasty* (vol. 3.1 of *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia Early Periods*; Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), p. 91.

18. There is an enameled tile from the reign of a tenth or ninth century Assyrian king—there is debate as to which king it belongs—which depicts the god Assur riding the winged solar disk with a drawn bow aimed at the king's enemies. On either side are storm clouds with rain falling. See M. S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 152.

Look upon me with your beaming features.¹⁹

Here, we have Ishtar as a raging lion, an irresistible fire, furious bull, a shining luminosity. The agglomeration of incompatible images expresses the religious exuberance of the poet.

The fusing of contradictory images in Exodus 15 also conveys similar elements: 1) the poet articulates that divine power transcends a single instance of victory, and 2) the poet expresses religious elation and exhilaration over divine triumph. To be sure, distinctions are to be drawn between Exodus 15 and the Mesopotamian texts. First, the fusion of images in Exodus 15 contradicts the historical account next to which it is placed, whereas the fusion of imagery in these hymns may seem less jarring.²⁰ Second, the incompatible images of destruction in Exodus 15 of the Deity as vanquisher of the Egyptians all derive from one metaphor, GOD IS A WARRIOR. In Gudea cylinder B and the Great Hymn to Ishtar, multiple metaphors and similes prompt the images. But for all of them, the fusion of images serves as language heightened for the purpose of religious expressiveness. The poems illuminate the thought-world and emotions of their poets, and the interweaving of contradictory images attests to how the poets understand the divine realm and how they manifest their experience of the divine.

The images in Exodus 15 are not metaphors themselves but are prompted by an underlying metaphor. George Lakoff argues that what poets do is they take the basic metaphors inherent in how we think and then combine and elaborate them in novel ways.²¹ Masterful poets extend metaphors and employ them in unusual ways. At the same time, they reveal the inadequacies of metaphors for making sense of reality. Our poet has taken a basic set of images about God associated with the metaphor GOD IS A WARRIOR and has combined them and employed them in an unusual way, interweaving them so that the victory goes beyond the drowning of the Egyptians. Those images were conventions widely used, but the psalmist has moved past convention by superimposing and fusing

19. B. R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (3rd ed.; Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), p. 504.

20. This is not to imply in any way that Mesopotamian religion did not perceive the intervention of the gods in historical events. The very opposite is true. See B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods* (Gleerup: Lund, 1967), and H. W. F. Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* (London: Athlone Press, 1978).

21. G. Lakoff and M. Turner, *More Than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 26.

them. He has compressed multiple images in frugal space in contrast to the periphrastic prolixity of prose.²²

The particular metaphor for God employed in Exodus 15, GOD IS A WARRIOR, prompts associations with human warriors. At times, God uses weapons available to human beings (although he wields them in a more powerful manner). He strikes the enemies with his (powerful) right arm.²³ And at times, he uses weapons only available to divine beings. His fury wrath chars the enemy. He hurls chariots. The use of the metaphor GOD IS A WARRIOR is far from unique in the Bible. What accords it vitality in this poem is the interweaving of divine images of destruction, the superimposition of the means of divine conquest. The Song at the Sea gains depth and richness by the intricate interaction of the images. The imagery makes us linger and focuses our attention. Conventional images are joined together in ways they ordinarily would not be, creating a richer and more complex set of connections. The images supplement one another and reinforce one another. The superimposition of images in Exodus 15 creates a depiction of divine power that is more striking and rich than one image alone.

Exodus 15 contains the basic elements of the story of the victory at the Sea—the destruction of the Egyptians by a supernatural drowning. But other images have been placed next to one another so as to render that story into another, amplifying the victory by making us view it through multiple images of destruction. Exodus 15's typology of exaltation via superimposed images constructs a patterning of victory that makes the victory which is its subject more than a one-time limited event. The victory is to be viewed as a far more inclusive array of God's power and glorification. Through heightened language, the events of Israelite history are seen and felt more keenly and vividly.²⁴ The text does not provide us with a historical sequence of events but with something of a radically different nature.²⁵ The poem oscillates between the victory at the Sea and other divine victories because the psalmist seeks not just to express but to

22. G. Lakoff and M. Turner, *More Than Cool Reason*, pp. 54–55.

23. Reference to a mortal king's powerful right arm is made in Ps 45:5.

24. For an evaluation of the historicity of the Exodus and its recrystallization elsewhere in the Bible, see P. Barmash, "Out of the Mists of History: The Exaltation of the Exodus in the Bible," in *Exodus in the Jewish Experience: Echoes and Reverberations* (ed. P. Barmash and W. D. Nelson; Lanham; Lexington Books, 2015), pp. 1–22.

25. Exodus 15 is distinguished from other psalms about the Exodus by its intensification of the battle, a military engagement magnified by the piling up of images of destruction; compare Pss 78, 80, 81.

impart and teach. The set of images has emotional and affective power. The imagery is effusive: the Bible is aniconic materially but iconic verbally.²⁶ The divine nature is beyond identification with a single phenomenon: a single image of destruction cannot convey the scope of God's victory and power. By superimposing images, the poet conveys the exuberance and elation of religious exaltation.

3. THE SHAPING OF HISTORY

The poet moves from the here and now of the victory at the Sea to future victories and triumphs. A narrative impulse moves the poem beyond the confines of a particular victory to encompass a broader scheme of divine triumphs. The poem is embedded at the point of a narrative in which the Israelites have finally (and barely) escaped from the Egyptians, but it pivots beyond that historical point. It embraces the coming events of the wandering in the wilderness and the settlement of Canaan, and it reaches its climax in the construction of the Jerusalem Temple.²⁷

After the onslaught of the plagues on Egypt and the Egyptians, the denouement of the Pharaoh's men in a watery grave might seem anticlimactic and paltry. But the trivial end of the Egyptians is transformed into a cosmic event—they are swept away by the primordial deep, the earth heaves and swallows them, they are ignited like chaff. The death of the Egyptians at the Sea becomes the high point of the Exodus, and the poet omits the earlier wonders, the plagues, in focusing on the events at the Sea. What otherwise could have been one more in a series of plagues inflicted on Egypt becomes the pre-eminent event of the Exodus. The Egyptians seem utterly vanquished and divine power ever more absolute.

At the same time that the poet intensifies the victory over the Egyptians, he rearranges history by making the Egyptians the first of a list of God's enemies to be defeated, not the ultimate enemy. The poet does not name the Egyptians as especially nefarious oppressors of the Israelites—they are ordinary enemies. The role of the Israelites as slaves

26. It must be noted that material remains from Ancient Israel do contain visual imagery, but it is beyond the scope of this essay to address this issue. Important questions about the relationship between visual literacy and figurative language are also not addressed in this essay. See R. P. Bonfiglio, *Reading Images, Seeing Texts: Toward a Visual Hermeneutics for Biblical Studies* (OBO 280; Fribourg: Academic Press, 2016).

27. Mark S. Smith suggested that while the Jerusalem Temple may have the original referent, it may have been taken as a reference to Sinai in the overall structure of the priestly redaction of the Pentateuch ("The Poetics of Exodus 15," pp. 32–33).

to the Egyptians is not mentioned, nor is the prolonged process of liberation. Even the plagues are not touched on.²⁸ Contrary to the prose narrative, the Egyptians are not presented as the most threatening of the Israelites' enemies, but become just the first of a list of enemies overthrown by divine power. In so doing, the psalm amplifies the narrative in the adjacent prose chapters by enhancing it and subverting it at the same time.

The shifting identity of the enemies serves to widen the scope of the psalm. The enemies at the start are definitely the Egyptians (Exod 15:4); the ones at the end are definitely the Canaanites. Who the enemies are in the middle of the psalm is left vague, and the identity of the enemy is suffused. The Egyptians have become the vessel into which all the enemies of Israel are poured: not only are the Egyptians vanquished but the Canaanite nations are already neutralized by the time the final stanza of the poem is reached. The trigger for this poem is the triumph of God over the Egyptians at the Sea, but the typology of exaltation that the poet uses causes the arc of the poem to immediately rush forward with a description of the next events in Israelite history, namely, the settlement of the land of Canaan. The shift in the identity of the enemy is employed as a device for extending the horizon of the poem.

The scope of the psalm is shaped by another shift. Its initial verse foregrounds divine victory by announcing it before mentioning the type of victory:

I shall sing of/to/for the LORD for he has ascended triumphantly,
Horse and driver he has hurled into the sea. (Exod 15:2)

The initial verse does not mention the name of the defeated. This subtle shift in emphasis highlights that the poem will focus on the exaltation of God in victory rather than on a particular instance of victory at the Sea over the Egyptians.

The poet employs a switch in perspective to intensify the depiction of divine victory. The psalm begins from the viewpoint of the hymnist—"I

28. It may be that the tradition of the plagues was unknown to the poet. Exodus 11:1 portrays the plague of the first-born as the climactic plague after which the Egyptians will drive out the Israelites once and for all. The Passover celebration and meal ordained in Exodus 12 is based on the plague of the first-born as the crucial moment of redemption, but the narrative of the victory at the Sea presents it as the most perilous point in the Exodus and the greatest act of salvation. Other traditions do not place the Israelites in Egypt at all: Deut 32:10 portrays the Israelites as found by God in a wilderness.

shall sing of/to/for the LORD”—then switches to focus onto God’s enemies, “horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.” Those enemies are the objects of verbs describing their downfall:

Exod 15:4

מִרְכַּבַּת פָּרְעָה וְחֵילוֹ יָרָה בַיָּם

Pharaoh’s chariotry and army he has cast into the sea.

Exod 15:5

תְּהַמֹּת יִכְסִימוּ

The deeps have covered them

Exod 15:6

יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה תִּרְעַץ אוֹיֵב

Your right hand, O LORD, shatters the foe

Exod 15:7

תִּהְרַס קִמְיָךְ

You break your opponents

Exod 15:10

כָּסְמוּ יָם

The sea covered them

Exod 15:12

תִּבְלַעְמוּ אֲרֶץ

The earth swallowed them

It is ironic that the enemies are the object of verbs that depict their defeat, rather than subjects of verbs whose actions assure their victory. The enemies are depicted as passive and unable to resist. Their ineffectiveness is signaled in another way. Not only is God against them, otherwise inanimate objects assault them: in verse 5, the watery depths cover them; in verse 8, the waters pile up and stand petrified; verse 10, the sea

covers them; verse 12, the earth swallows them. Inanimate objects act against them, manifesting the totality of the enemies' defeat.

Even when the enemies do take action, their actions are of no use and no avail. In Exod 15:9, the enemy seeking spoil is depicted as the subjects of action verbs in the imperfect: he expresses his desire by declaring how he will achieve victory, but it is just empty words. The enemy of the Israelites is given personality with his eagerness to take spoil, an eagerness that quickly melts away. The enemy expresses his intentions in short punctuated verbs, and the enemy's enthusiasm for taking booty is expressed in a series of desires that confuses the sequence of battle as it would need to occur in actuality:

Exod 15:9

אָמַר אוֹיֵב
אֶרְדֹּף
אֶשִׁיג
אֶחְלַק שָׁלַל
תִּמְלֵאמוּ נַפְשֵׁי
אֶרְיֹק חַרְבִּי
תִּזְרִימוּ יָדַי

The enemy said:

I will give chase,
I will distribute spoil,
I will be satisfied.
I will unsheathe my sword.
My hand will dispossess them.

The poet depicts the thirst of the enemy for plunder in the enemy's enthusiastic and unhinged speech, articulated in a staccato rhythm. The drama is enhanced by the disorder of the actions the enemy promises to do: he takes booty before he unsheathes his sword.²⁹ The actions of the enemy are of no avail.

While there is an overall linear impulse to the psalm—it starts with the Egyptian defeat and concludes with the building of the Temple—it possesses a radial organization of images of destruction. It presents a recursive pattern to history with the repetition of death in the sea in the middle (Exod 15:10) and with the repetition of horse and rider hurled into the sea in the narrative summary at the conclusion (Exod 15:19).

29. The tableau of desiring spoils is comparable to a similar scene about Sisera's mother and her companions in Judg 5:28–30.

Narrative elements are deployed for lyric purposes in order to express celebratory language over divine victory, not to convey a historical account, and a distinct rhythm shapes the chronology of events. The poet avoids a strict temporal sequence in order to sustain an expressive stance articulating God’s glorious deeds. The poem lacks the additive granular progression of narrative epic. Time is retarded and accelerated in order to emphasize the divine victory. The initial verse mentions the defeat of chariotry, presumably Egyptian chariotry, but then the poet launches into exuberant praise of God for six lines (Exod 15:2–3) before returning to recount more about the demise of the charioteers. Much space is devoted to the victory at the Sea in verses 4–10, then the poet accelerates the rest of history, playing up certain events and reticent about others. Verse 12, which depicts an earthquake, might refer to the swallowing up of Korah and his cabal, but the identity of those swallowed up is left vague.³⁰

The years in the wilderness and the process of settlement in the land of Canaan are encapsulated in three verbs, verses 12–13, and the compression of time is accelerated further by the alliteration of the verbs נטית, גהלת, גהלת:

Exod 15:13

נְחִיתָ בְּחֶסֶדְךָ עַם־זוֹ גְּאֻלְתָּ
גְּהַלְתָּ בְּעֹזְךָ אֶל־גֵּיהֵן קִדְשְׁךָ

In covenantal love, you lead the people you redeemed,
In your strength you guide them to your holy pasture.

This run of narrative presents a picture of the passage from Egypt (or the wilderness) to the land of Canaan in accelerated timing. It is followed by the reaction of the peoples of Canaan and surrounding countries: they are depicted as in utter fear as they hear of God’s victory over the Egyptians:

Exod 15:14–16

שָׁמְעוּ עַמִּים יִרְגְּזוּן
חֵיל אַחַז יִשְׁבִי פְלֶשֶׁת
אֲז נִבְהָלוּ אֱלֹפֵי אֲדוֹם
אֵילֵי מוֹאָב יֶאֱחָזְמוּ רָעַד

30. The enemies who are the object of תְּבַלְעֵמוּ אֶרֶץ are left unmentioned. Is the implication that this happened to the Egyptians? Perhaps, perhaps not. If this clause is meant to refer to the rebels among of the Israelites, then it may be speculated that no mention is made of Israelite rebels because mentioning them would distract from the divine victories achieved on behalf of the Israelites. See note 10.

נִמְגוּ פֶלֶא יִשְׁבֵי כְנָעַן
 תִּפְּלֵ עֲלֵיהֶם אֵימָתָהּ וּפְחָד
 בְּגֹדֹל זְרוּעֶיךָ יִדְמוּ כְּאֶבֶן
 עַד־יַעֲבֹר עִמָּךָ יְהוָה
 עַד־יַעֲבֹר עִם־זוֹ קְנִיָּתָךְ

The peoples hear,
 They tremble,
 Shuddering grips the inhabitants of Philistia.
 Then the officers of Edom are dismayed,
 The chiefs of Moab—trembling grips them,
 All the dwellers of Canaan have melted away.
 Fear and fright descend on them,
 Through the might of your arm, they are as immobile as stone—
 Till your people cross, O LORD,
 Till your people cross whom you have ransomed.

These short runs of incipient narrativity do not unfold with the granular logic but proceed forward through parallelism to portray the fearful reaction of the other nations who encounter the Israelites.³¹ There is no extended narrative and no expansive sentences of historical prose, but the parallelistic lines present the clauses as modular units, one clause, then another clause, and then another clause. The effect is to delay and retard the action so as to mark and intensify the reactions of consternation and alarm. The enemies are paralyzed with dread and do not resist.

The reaction of the enemies serves as a foil to the response of the Israelites. The position of Exodus 15 in the overall chronological structure of the Pentateuch makes it the first outpouring of praise by the Israelites. The prose frame of the poem heralds a self-reference in the initial line of the poem, “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD” (Exod 15:1), and the initial line incorporates a first-person form consciously articulating an intent to perform the song, “I shall sing of/to/for the LORD” (Exod 15:1).³² The poem is quoted a few verses after its end in a snatch, a poetic fragment, “Miriam the prophet, sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels

31. The concept of “incipient narrativity” was suggested by R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), p. 25.

32. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 59.

and dances.³³ Miriam answered them, ‘Sing to the LORD for he has ascended triumphantly, horse and driver he has hurled into the sea,’” and it is placed in the context of communal acclamation of divine triumph.

Moses appears only as the singer of the hymn. His actions on behalf of the Israelites have disappeared in this retelling. The poet assigns Moses’ act in Exodus 14:26–27, the stretching out of his hand over the waters, to God. The poet transforms the result of the act: the rending asunder of the waters is now the rending apart of the earth. By eclipsing Moses, the poet does not allow any human being to have any part in the victory which in the psalmist’s portrayal are God’s alone.

Other elements are omitted. The angel of God and the pillar of cloud that were stationed between the Israelites and the Egyptians according to Exod 14:19 have also vanished in the Song at the Sea. The pillar of fire and cloud from which God threw the Egyptians into panic in Exod 14:24 are missing. God is portrayed through the conventional images of destruction, not through the signs of divine guidance in the wilderness.

The poem is concise. It is suggestive rather than exhaustive. Epic poetry is usually more long-winded. Although the Song at the Sea implies a historical narrative, it makes the celebration of divine victory more important than plot. It is not a means of conveying a chronological scheme.

History is shaped so that the poem is a celebration of God’s covenant loyalty and providence from the time of the events at the Sea until the present day of the poet, who lived after the settlement in Canaan and the building of the Jerusalem Temple.³⁴ The poem reaches its apex at its culmination with the building of the Jerusalem Temple (or another sanctuary) and an affirmation of God’s dominion. But its placement at the final victory over the Egyptians and in the mouth of arguably the greatest figure in the Pentateuch transforms it into a more comprehensive celebration of divine providence and victory—the saving of the Israelites is so awe-inspiring that Moses and the people are presented as bursting into song.

33. E. L. Greenstein, “Signs of Poetry Past: Literariness in Pre-Biblical Hebrew Literature,” lecture, p. 5; E. L. Greenstein, “What was the Book of Yashar?” *Maarav* 21.1–2 (2014): 28, 31; F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, p. 75. The text does not indicate any guidelines for performance. It is possible that the repetition of the initial verse in the mouth of Miriam reflects a repetition of some sort. See *b. Sotah* 30b for a number of possibilities.

34. The dating of Exodus 15 has been linked to the possible presence of Archaic Biblical Hebrew in it; see P. Korchin, “Glimpsing Archaic Biblical Hebrew through Thetical Grammar,” *HS* 58 (2017); T. Notarius, “Lexical Isoglosses of Proto-Hebrew: פְּלִילִים (Deut 32:31) and קָ (Judges 5:15) as Case Studies,” *HS* 58 (2017); B. D. Russell, *The Song of the Sea: The Date of Composition and Influence of Exodus 15:1–21* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 59–73, 146–150; I. Young, “Starting at the Beginning with Archaic Biblical Hebrew,” *HS* 58 (2017).

The placement of the poem in the overall structure of the Pentateuch immediately after the divine victory at the Sea presents a quandary for translation. The verbs in Exod 15:5–8 are describing past events, and the use of verbs in prefixing form intermingled with verbs in the perfect (in suffixing form) is not unusual.³⁵ The verbs in prefixing form in Exod 15:12, 14, and 15 are also used in parallelism with verbs in the perfect. But the verbs in Exod 15:16 and 17 are in prefixing form (with one exception). Should they be construed in past time, as they would have been intended when they were composed, or does the placement of the poem *in medias res* mean these verbs should be rendered in future time?³⁶ The solution is to recognize that both past time and future time are valid, even simultaneously.

The peoples hear [heard],
 They tremble [trembled],
 Shuddering grips [gripped] the inhabitants of Philistia.
 Then the officers of Edom are [were] dismayed,
 The chiefs of Moab—trembling grips [gripped] them,
 All the dwellers of Canaan [have] melted away.
 Fear and fright descend [descended] on them,
 Through the might of your arm, they are [were] as immobile as stone—
 Till your people cross [crossed], O LORD,
 Till your people cross [crossed] whom you have ransomed.
 You will bring them and plant them on the mountain of your possession.
 [You have brought them and planted them on the mountain of your possession.]
 The place you made to dwell in, O LORD,
 The sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands established.

The poet originally meant those verbs in prefixing form to be in past time, but the poem's placement in the Pentateuch causes their time value to pivot. In a sense, they are both in the past and the future at the same time. The poem has been transfigured and reimagined. It has been infused with new significance as a poem in the time of Moses as well as in the time of the poet. It is a representation of reality contemporary to the poet as both embedded and mirrored in the distant past.

35. See M. Held, "The YQTL-QTL (QTL-YQTL) Sequence of Identical Verbs in Biblical Hebrew and Ugaritic," in *Studies in Honor of Abraham A. Newman* (ed. M. Ben-Horin, B. D. Weinryb, and S. Zeitlin; Leiden: Brill, 1962), pp. 281–290.

36. See J. Huehnergard, "The Early Hebrew Prefix-Conjugations," *HS* 29 (1988): 19–23.

4. POETICS AT THE SERVICE OF EMOTIONAL INTENSITY

The poetics of Exodus 15 are arranged to heighten emotional intensity and to magnify the divine victory. The poetics operate in tandem with the use of typologies of destruction and the shaping of history, and all three interact and enhance one another.

Like other poets, the poet in Exodus 15 uses patterning in excess of what is necessary for prose meaning.³⁷ One means of patterning acts out an insight that the poet has about the history and experience of the Israelites by creating an equality between divine victories. A concluding formula, “like x,” is employed to equate triumphs: in verse 5, “they sink in the depths like stone”; verse 7, “(your anger) consumes them like straw”; verse 10, “they sink like lead in mighty waters”; verse 16, “in the immensity of your strength they are silent like stone.” The “like x” pattern serves to fix a strong end to a set of lines, forming a stanza.³⁸ The particular rhythm of the recurrent end-stopping serves to place an emphasis on each stanza, and the linking of lines into groups serves to equate the divine victories, heightening the scope of divine triumph and affirming what the fusion of images of destruction and the shaping of history seeks to convey.

The poem employs three doxologies as a means of patterning in verses 2–3, 11, and 18, a pattern in content that weaves the composition together from beginning to end:

Exod 15:2–3

עֲזִי וְזִמְרַת יְהוָה לִי לִישׁוּעָה
זֶה אֱלֹהֵי וְאֵנֹהוּ אֱלֹהֵי אָבִי וְאַרְמְמָנָהוּ
יְהוָה אִישׁ מִלְחָמָה יְהוָה שְׁמוֹ

My strength and protector is the LORD,³⁹

37. According to rabbinic texts, there is a special layout for Exodus 15 (and Judges 5): it is formulated as “small brick over large brick, large brick over small,” based on the interlocking format of ashlar masonry (J. L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981], p. 121); see *b. Megillah* 16b; *y. Megillah* 3:7, 74b; *b. Menahot* 31a; *Sof.* 12:8–12.

38. The concluding formula in verse 10 varies the pattern by not having “like lead” as the final word in the clause: it has the addition “in mighty waters.”

39. This couplet has been a *crux interpretum* over which scholars have spilled much ink. The first word עֲזִי should properly be vocalized as עָזִי, if it means “my strength.” Rashbam doubted that the possessive suffix is the case and rendered it, “The Lord is the strength and the praise of Israel” positing that there is an extra *yod* in עֲזִי, with an implied absolute noun governed by bound forms, that is, with

And he is my salvation.
The LORD is a warrior,
The LORD is his name.

עָזִי וְזַמְרָתִי, which are in construct. However, while the *yod* can imply a vestigial case ending for a noun in construct, the implied absolute noun seems unlikely.

Furthermore, it is telling that this line repeats elsewhere in the same vocalization for this word (Isa 12:2; Ps 118:4 [LXX 117:4]). It has been suggested that the word עָזִי is derived from Arabic *g*āzī* ‘warrior’, *g*āzā* ‘to go forth to war’, (J. Barr, *Comparative Philology and the Text of the Old Testament* [Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1987 (1968)]: 29–30), and while this root is otherwise unattested in Biblical Hebrew, it does fit the overall context of a hymn glorifying divine victory. However, the metaphor GOD IS KING is frequently associated with strength, and among the different Hebrew words employed for this royal quality of God is עָז Ps 93:1; Isa 45:24; 1 Chr 16:27–28; Isa 19:4; Ps 62:12; 59:18; 89:11; Isa 51:9, and more (M. Z. Brettler, *God is King: Understanding an Israelite Metaphor* [JSOTSup 76; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989], pp. 63–64). So it seems likely that the meaning here is “strength.”

It appears that the two lines עָזִי וְזַמְרָתִי יְהוָה וְיְהוָה לִישׁוּעָה has become a fixed quotation, whether its appearance in the Song of the Sea is its original appearance and then it became a line from a classic poem that was quoted or whether the hymnist is employing an already known classic line. (E. L. Greenstein, “Signs of Poetry Past,” p. 11). The first line became part of a fixed couplet, while the second line is used freely elsewhere, for example, Ps 118:21; Job 13:16; 2 Sam 10:11.

The word זַמְרָתִי poses a large number of challenges. Its morphology appears to manifest the rare feminine ending *h*ā-* (E. Kautzsch, ed., *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1910], §80g). But there is another consideration: did the word originally have first person common possessive suffix, זַמְרָתִי? Furthermore, there is some evidence that there may have been an abbreviation for the divine name in this verse (S. Talmon, “A Case of Abbreviation Resulting in Double Readings,” *VT* 4 [1954]: 206–208). In Isa 12:2, the line is rendered עָזִי וְזַמְרָתִי יְהוָה וְיְהוָה לִישׁוּעָה, with the *hā* retained along with the Tetragrammaton. The Samaritan Pentateuch reads עָזִי וְזַמְרָתִי, and the Great Isaiah scroll reads עוֹזִי וְזַמְרָתִי יְהוָה הִיא לִי לִישׁוּעָה. The divine name may have been transmitted in four different ways: ה, י, יה, יהוה. The original line may have been עָזִי וְזַמְרָתִי יְהוָה, then appeared with an abbreviation, עָזִי וְזַמְרָתִי ה, which was re-analyzed as *hā* זַמְרָתִי.

The root of the word זַמְרָתִי is זָמַר, and a number of meanings for the word have been proposed. The meaning “song” also appears in Isa 51:3; Amos 5:23; Pss 81:3/2; 98:5. An objection to this meaning is that זַמְרָתִי never appears as זַמְרָתִי, but if the reconstruction of the process of abbreviation and re-analysis is correct, then this objection is moot. Loewenstamm’s contention that זָמַר always denotes praise of God in song and playing of instruments, therefore it is to be defined as “praise of God in cultic music” is not correct (S. E. Loewenstamm, “The Lord is My Strength and My Glory,” *VT* 19 [1969]: 464–470). His argument that עָז and זַמְרָתִי have an affinity that is not felt in translation and that the reciprocity between God and worshipper yields spiritualization of the term to “glory” is unwarranted.

Another meaning for this root is “to prune,” and Rashi thought the word is derived from this root and understood the noun as meaning “vengeance” from the idea of lopping down and cutting off. It has also been proposed that the word is derived from a meaning not otherwise attested in Biblical Hebrew. The root *ḏ-m-r* ‘to protect, guard’ appears in Ugaritic (G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* [HO 67; Leiden: Brill, 2003], p. 2870). The root also means this in Arabic and possibly Old South Arabian (M. Barré, “‘My Strength and My Song’ in Exodus 15.2,” *CBQ* 54 [1993]: 624–625; S. E. Loewenstamm, “The Lord is My Strength and My Glory,” p. 466; J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-west Semitic Inscriptions* [HO 21; Leiden: Brill, 1995], 1:254, 332). Parker noted that עָז and יְשׁוּעָה are parallel in Ps 21:2; Isa 26:1; also Ps 86:16 and argued that עָז and זַמְרָתִי are legitimately a synonymous pair of words, like synonymous pairs joined with *vāw*, so זַמְרָתִי means “strength” or “protection,” excluding “glory” (S. B. Parker, “Exodus XV 2 Again,” *VT* 21 [1971]: 373–379). It is intriguing to note that in one Ugaritic text, the root appears next to ‘z: RS 24.252, rev. 9 (= KTU 1.108 rev. 20), “your strength, your protective force, your l..., your authority, your divine power.” The LXX has *καὶ σκεπαστής* = זַמְרָתִי. Compare Deut 32:38, which has סִתְרָה.

Exod 15:11

מִי־כְמֹכָהּ בָּאֱלֹהִים יְהוָה מִי כְּמֹכָהּ נִאֲדָר בְּקִדְשׁ
נִזְרָא תְהִלַּת עֲשֵׂה פִלְא

Who is like you among the gods, O LORD,
Who is like you exalted in holiness,
Awesome in glorious deeds, working wonders.

Exod 15:18

יְהוָה יִמְלֹךְ לְעֹלָם וָעֶד

The LORD reigns forever and ever.

The doxology in verse 11, the longest of the three, receives extra emphasis because the additional words give it more weight: this doxology serves as a high point of the psalm. The three doxologies add punctuation to the overall trajectory of the poem. Divine triumphs are equated through the doxologies, again affirming what the superimposition of contradictory images of destruction and the shaping of history aspired to impart, exuberance over divine triumph.

Another poetic maneuver, variations in line length and in the number of lines in a set, is employed in the poem. The binary beat of parallelism is the dominant overall rhythm of the poem. The trajectory pulses forward. But lines with different matching patterns are interspersed in the text, and non-couplet groupings of lines vary the rhythm and accentuate certain lines.⁴⁰ As the movement becomes routine, then lengthens and shortens, the bursts of energy in the variation serves to intensify its content.

The poet uses staircase (or climactic) parallelism as a structure of intensification: it stands out because of its distinct matching pattern. A line is started, only to be interrupted by an epithet or vocative, then the line is repeated, without the epithet or vocative, to be completed in the second line.⁴¹ The lines of staircase parallelism attract attention by retarding and lengthening the verse, and the incompleteness of the initial line creates suspense until the verse reaches its climax in the next line.⁴² The first instance of staircase parallelism in Exodus 15 is at a turn, when the psalmist

40. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, p. 149.
41. W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (London: T & T Clark, 1984), p. 150.
42. E. L. Greenstein, "How Does Parallelism Mean?" in *A Sense of Text: The Art of Language in the Study of Biblical Literature* (Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1982), pp. 54–55.

makes a momentary switch, incorporating brief praise of God in a depiction of divine victories:

Exod 15:6

יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה נֹאדָרִי בַכֹּחַ
יְמִינְךָ יְהוָה תִּרְעַץ אוֹיֵב

Your right hand, LORD, is magnificent in power,
Your right hand, LORD, shatters the enemy.

The psalmist then resumes the account of divine victories until he uses staircase parallelism once again to address God directly in a doxology

Exod 15:11

מִי־כַמְכָּה בְּאֵלִים יְהוָה
מִי כַמְכָּה נֹאדָר בְּקִדְשׁ
נִזְרָא תְהִלַּת עֲשֵׂה פִלְא

Who is like you among the gods, LORD,
Who is like you exalted in holiness,
Awesome in glorious deeds, working wonders.

The use of staircase parallelism and switch in addressee intensify the exaltation of God. The initial line uses the vocative (“Who is like you among the gods, LORD”), the second line repeats the initial line without the vocative but including a phrase of praise (“Who is like you exalted in holiness”), then the third line extends the divine praise and the set of lines reaches its apogee.

Usually a set of lines is composed of a couplet, but the occasional longer or shorter set may emphasize a key idea. In a triplet, a set of three lines, the tugging across the usual boundary of a couplet creates a surprise and, thereby, an emphasis.⁴³ The shift away from the parallelism of the first two lines so that the sense and syntax persists into the third line marks a pronounced stop. The three triplets in Exodus 15 vary one of the lines:

Exod 15:11

מִי־כַמְכָּה בְּאֵלִים יְהוָה
מִי כַמְכָּה נֹאדָר בְּקִדְשׁ
נִזְרָא תְהִלַּת עֲשֵׂה פִלְא

43. F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, *On Biblical Poetry*, pp. 45, 129.

Who is like you among the gods, LORD,
Who is like you exalted in holiness,
Venerated in praises, working wonders.

The first two lines exhibit staircase parallelism, and the third and fourth lines, *אִז נִבְהָלוּ אֱלֹפֵי אֲדוֹם*, employ different syntax, building on the phrase of doxology, *נִאֲדָר בְּקֹדֶשׁ*, at the close of the second line. The poet weaves the composition together with this doxology, one of three strategically placed in the poem serving as a point of intensification with staircase parallelism and its additional punctive final line.

The next triplet has the variant in the middle of the lines:

Exod 15:15

אִז נִבְהָלוּ אֱלֹפֵי אֲדוֹם
אֵילֵי מוֹאָב יֶאֱחָזְמוּ רַעַד
נִמְגְּוּ כָּל יֹשְׁבֵי כְּנָעַן

Then the officers of Edom are [were] dismayed,
The chiefs of Moab—trembling grips [gripped] them,
All the dwellers of Canaan [have] melted away.

The first and third lines are in the form of a *niphal* verb-subject, while the second line begins with a noun phrase in *casus pendans* followed by a *qal* verb-subject. The triplet creates a pause: the poetry lingers, making more vivid the consternation of the Canaanites.

The third triplet has the variant in the first line:

Exod 15:17

תְּבִיאֵמוּ וְתִטְעֵמוּ בְּהַר נַחֲלֹתֵךְ
מִכּוֹן לְשִׁבְתֵּךְ פְּעֵלֶת יְהוָה
מִקְדָּשׁ אֲדֹנָי כּוֹנֵן יְדִידֵךְ

You will bring them and plant them on the mountain of your possession.
[You have brought them and planted them on the mountain of your possession.]
The place you made to dwell in, O LORD,
The sanctuary, O Lord, that your hands established.

The recurrent syntax of the final two lines effects prominent end-fixing, just before the final line of the poem, setting up for its ending.

The last line of the poem is an isolated line, bringing the trajectory of the poem to an emphatic conclusion:

Exod 15:18

יְהוָה יִמְלֹךְ לְעֹלָם וָעֶד

The LORD reigns forever and ever.

The change in rhythm, staccato-like, after the double final beats of the triplet marks a pronounced ending to the poem. The permutations in groupings of lines and rhythm serve to label emphasis: the strong tendency in the biblical poetic tradition is for couplets, and the triplet followed by a single line signal the end of the poem. By dispelling the expectation to return to a couplet after the triplet, the single line marks the final peak of the poem. The content of the closing line sums up the exultation over divine triumph that is the theme of the psalm, and the doxology serves as a final structure of intensification weaving the poem together. The movement of the poem comes to a resounding close.

The final two verses of the poem are informed by two metaphors for God that have not been used earlier but are closely related to the metaphor, GOD IS A WARRIOR, that has been expanded at length in the poem. The metaphor GOD IS KING unfolds the numerous associations between God and a human king: among the deeds usually presumed of a human king are building activities and military actions on behalf of his country. GOD IS A ROYAL BUILDER is explored in the second to last verse (Exod 15:17), and the metaphor GOD IS KING is expressly articulated in the final verse, summing up the exuberance over divine triumph that is the theme of the psalm.⁴⁴

5. CONCLUSION

The Song at the Sea conveys an intense experience of venerating the divine, and it opens up the inner world of a human being in a way that the laconic nature of biblical narrative does not.⁴⁵ The language of the poem is ardent and evocative. The poem is exuberant and extravagant: emotion sweeps through it. It evokes celebratory language and praise, and it is woven together with structures of intensification and interlocking poetic devices. All of these are mutually informing and enhancing and come together to intensify the exaltation of the Deity.

44. See M. Z. Brettler, *God is King*, p. 118.

45. T. Linafelt, "On Biblical Style," *St. Johns Review* 54.1 (2012): 39.

The concatenation of contradictory literary images of divine victory moves the triumph beyond the boundaries of a single place and time. The defeat of the Egyptians at the Sea becomes infused into a broader span of divine victories. The horizon is boldly extended: God's covenant loyalty and providence for the Israelites through the journey through the wilderness, the settlement in Canaan, and the building of the Temple is celebrated. Time is retarded and accelerated, and events and characters are omitted or transformed. History is shaped for theological ends.

The poem has a primary and obvious purpose in communicating praise and homage to the supra-human addressee, but it is also composed in order to instruct and influence people.⁴⁶ It conveys theological values through poetics and the shaping of history. Its artistry encodes the words with greater meaning and affirms the theological and historical message of the poem.

The poem illuminates the thought-world and emotional life of its persona as projected by an Israelite poet. The poet fuses divergent imagery of destruction in order to pull the victory at the Sea into his present day: he has reached back into the past to link the events of his time to the Exodus, and in so doing, the divine triumph becomes part of the larger pattern of the relationship between God and the Israelites.

46. S. Gill, "Prayer," *Encyclopedia of Religion* 11:490.