

# UNIT 27

## THE SONG OF THE SEA

### (Exodus 15:1-21)

#### INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

#### Text and Textual Notes

**15:1** Then Moses and the Israelites sang<sup>2</sup> this song to Yahweh, saying,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is a song of praise sung by Moses and the people right after the deliverance from the Sea. The song itself is verses 1b-18; it falls into three sections--praise to God (1b-3), the cause for the praise (4-13), and the conclusion (14-18). The point of the first section is that God's saving acts inspire praise from His people; the second is that God's powerful acts deliver His people from the forces of evil; and the third section is that God's demonstrations of His sovereignty inspire confidence in Him by His people. So the Victory Song is very much like the other declarative praise psalms--the resolve to praise, the power of God, the victory over the enemies, the incomparability of God in His redemption, and the fear of the people. See also, C. Cohen, "Studies in Early Israelite Poetry I: An Unrecognized Case of Three Line Staircase Parallelism in the Song of the Sea," *JANES* 7 (1975):13-17; D. N. Freedman, "Strophe and Meter in Exodus 15," in *A Light Unto My Path: Studies in Honor of J. M. Myers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1974), pp. 163-203; E. Levine, "Neofiti I: A Study of Exodus 15," *Biblica* 54 (1973):301-330; T. C. Butler, "'The Song of the Sea': Exodus 15:1-18: A Study in the Exegesis of Hebrew Poetry," *Dissertation Abstracts* 32 (1971):2782-A; and J. P. Van der Westhuizen, "Literary Device in Exodus 15:1-18 and Deut. 32:1-43," *OTWSA* 17/18 (1974/1975):57-73.

<sup>2</sup> The verb is *yashir*, a normal imperfect tense form. But after the adverb "then" this form is to be treated as a preterite (see GKC, par. 107c)..

<sup>3</sup> The text has a pleonastic construction: "and they said, saying,"

I will sing<sup>4</sup> to Yahweh for he has triumphed gloriously,<sup>5</sup>  
the horse and its rider<sup>6</sup> has he thrown into the sea.  
**15:2** Yah is my strength and my song,<sup>7</sup>  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God and I will praise him,<sup>8</sup>  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.  
**15:3** Yahweh is a man of war,<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The form is the singular cohortative, expressing the resolution of Moses to sing the song of praise ("I will" being stronger than "I shall").

<sup>5</sup> This causal clause gives the reason for and summary of the praise. The Hebrew expression has *ki ga'oh ga'ah*. The basic idea of the verb is "rise up loftily" or "proudly." But derivatives of the root carry the nuance of majesty or pride (Driver, p. 132). So the idea of the perfect tense with its infinitive absolute may mean "he is highly exalted" or "he has done majestically" or "he is gloriously glorious."

<sup>6</sup> The common understanding is that Egypt did not have people riding horses at this time, and so the line is either viewed as an anachronism or is interpreted to mean charioteers. The word "to ride" can mean on a horse or in a chariot. Some have suggested changing "rider" to "chariot" (re-vocalization) to read "the horse and its chariot."

<sup>7</sup> The word *w<sup>e</sup>zimrat* is problematic. It probably had a suffix *yod* that was accidentally dropped because of the *yod* on the divine name following. Most scholars posit another meaning for the word. A meaning of "power" fits the line fairly well, forming a hendiadys with strength--"strength and power" becoming "strong power." Similar lines are in Isaiah 12:2 and Psalm 118:14. Others suggest "protection" (Freedman) or "glory" (E. M. Good). Kaiser opts for "protection" and forms a hendiadys out of that. However, there is nothing substantially wrong with "my song" in the line--only that it would be a nicer match if it had something to do with strength.

<sup>8</sup> The word *nawah* occurs only here. It may mean "beautify, adorn" with praises (see BDB). Driver proposes a slight change to make it read "thank." See also Mitchell Dahood, "Exodus 15:2: *'anwehu* and Ugaritic *snwt*," *Biblica* 59 (1979):260-261; and Michael Klein, "The Targumic Tosefta to Exodus 15:2," *JJS* 26 (1975):61-67; and S. B. Parker, "Exodus 15:2 Again," *VT* 21 (1971):373-379.

<sup>9</sup> The expression "man of war" indicates that Yahweh is one who understands how to fight and defeat the enemy. The word "war" modifies "man" to reveal that Yahweh is a warrior. Other passages use similar descriptions: Isa. 42:13 has "man of wars"; Ps. 24:8 has "mighty man of battle." See Frank Cross, "The Divine Warrior in Israel's Early Cult," in *Biblical Motifs*, ed. by A. Altman (Cambridge: University Press, 1966), pp. 11-30.

Yahweh is his name.

- 15:4** The chariots of Pharaoh<sup>10</sup> and his army  
has he thrown into the sea,  
and his chosen<sup>11</sup> officers were drowned<sup>12</sup>  
in the Sea of Reeds;
- 15:5** The depths have covered over them,<sup>13</sup>  
they went down to the bottom<sup>14</sup> like a stone.
- 15:6** Your right hand, O Yahweh, was majestic<sup>15</sup> in power,  
your right hand, O Yahweh, shattered the enemy.
- 15:7** And in the greatness of your majesty<sup>16</sup>  
you have overthrown<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Gesenius notes that the sign of the accusative, often omitted in poetry, is not found in this entire song (GKC, par. 117b).

<sup>11</sup> The word is a substantive, “choice, selection”; it is here used in the construct state to convey an attribute before a partitive genitive--“the choice of his officers” means his “choice officers” (see GKC, par. 128r).

<sup>12</sup> The form is a *qal* passive rather than a *pual*, for there is no *piel* form or meaning.

<sup>13</sup> The verb form *y<sup>e</sup>kasyumu* is the *piel* preterite. Normally a *waw* consecutive is used with the preterite, but in some ancient poems the form without the *waw* appears, as is the case frequently in this poem. That such an archaic form is used should come as no surprise, because the word also uses the *yod* of the root (GKC, par. 75dd), and the archaic suffix form (GKC, par. 91 /). These all indicate the antiquity of the poem

<sup>14</sup> The parasynonyms here are *t<sup>e</sup>homot*, “deep, ocean depths, deep waters,” and *m<sup>e</sup>tsulot*, “the depths” (Driver says properly the “gurgling places” [p. 134]).

<sup>15</sup> The form *ne’dari* may be an archaic infinitive with the old ending *i* used in place of the verb, and meaning “awesome” (Cross and Freedman, “Song of Miriam,” cited by Kaiser, p. 397). Gesenius says that the vowel ending may be an old case ending, especially when a preposition is inserted between the word and its genitive (GKC, par. 90 /); but he suggests a reconstruction of the form.

<sup>16</sup> This expression is cognate with the words in verse 1. Here that same greatness or majesty is extolled as in abundance.

<sup>17</sup> Here, and throughout the song, these verbs are the prefixed conjugation that may look like the imperfect but are actually historic preterites. This verb is to “overthrow” or “throw down”--like a wall, leaving it in shattered pieces.

those who rise up against you,<sup>18</sup>  
 You sent forth<sup>19</sup> your wrath;<sup>20</sup>  
 it consumed them<sup>21</sup> like stubble.  
**15:8** And by the blast of your nostrils<sup>22</sup>  
 the waters were piled up,  
 the waters stood upright like a heap,<sup>23</sup>  
 and the deep water was congealed  
 in the heart of the sea.  
**15:9** The enemy said, “I will chase,<sup>24</sup> I will overtake,  
 I will divide the spoil;  
 my desire<sup>25</sup> will be satisfied upon them

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<sup>18</sup> The form *qameyka* is the active participle with a pronominal suffix. The participle is the accusative of the verb; but the suffix is the genitive of nearer definition (see GKC, par. 116 i).

<sup>19</sup> The verb is the *piel* of *shalakh*, the same verb used throughout for the demand on Pharaoh to release Israel. Here, in some irony, God released His wrath on them.

<sup>20</sup> The word “wrath” is a metonymy of cause; the effect--the judgment--is meant.

<sup>21</sup> The verb is the prefixed conjugation, the preterite, without the consecutive.

<sup>22</sup> This is a bold anthropomorphic expression for the wind that came in and dried up the waters.

<sup>23</sup> The word “heap” describes the walls of the water in the Sea. The waters, which are naturally fluid, stood up as though they were a heap, a mound of earth. Likewise, the flowing waters deep in the ocean congealed--as though they were turned to ice (Cassuto, p. 175).

<sup>24</sup> Kaiser observes the staccato phrases that almost imitate the heavy, breathless heaving of the Egyptians as, with what reserve of strength they have left, they vow, “I will . . . , I will . . . , I will . . . ” (p. 395).

<sup>25</sup> The form is *napshi*, “my soul.” But this word refers to the whole person, the body and the soul, or better, a bundle of appetites in a body. It therefore can figuratively refer to the desires or appetites (Deut. 12:15; 14:26; 23:24). Here, with the verb “to be full” means “to be satisfied”; the whole expression might indicate “I will be sated with them” or “I will gorge myself.” The greedy appetite was to destroy.

I will draw<sup>26</sup> my sword, my hand shall destroy them.”<sup>27</sup>  
**15:10** But<sup>28</sup> you blew with your breath,  
and<sup>29</sup> the sea covered them;  
they sank<sup>30</sup> like lead in the mighty waters.

**15:11** Who is like you<sup>31</sup>, O Yahweh, among the gods?<sup>32</sup>  
Who is like you?--majestic in holiness,  
fearful in praises,<sup>33</sup> working wonders?

**15:12** You stretched out your right hand,  
the earth swallowed them.<sup>34</sup>

**15:13** By your loyal love you will lead<sup>35</sup> the people

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<sup>26</sup> The verb *riq* means “to be empty” in the *qal*, and in the *hiphil* “to empty.” Here the idea is to unsheathe a sword.

<sup>27</sup> The verb is *yarash*, which in the *hiphil* means “to dispossess” or “root out.” The meaning “destroy” is a general interpretation.

<sup>28</sup> “But” added

<sup>29</sup> “and” added

<sup>30</sup> The verb may have the idea of sinking with a gurgling sound, like water going into a whirlpool (Cole, p. 124; Driver, p. 136). See F. M. Cross and D. N. Freedman, “The Song of Miriam,” *JNES* 14 (1955):243-247.

<sup>31</sup> The question is of course rhetorical; it is a way of affirming that no one is comparable to God. See Labuschagne, *Incomparability of Yahweh*, pp. 22, 66-67, and 94-97.

<sup>32</sup> Verses 11-17 will now focus on Yahweh as the incomparable One who was able to save Israel from her foes, and afterwards lead them to the promised land.

<sup>33</sup> Driver suggests “praiseworthy acts” as the translation (p. 137).

<sup>34</sup> The verb is the prefixed conjugation, the preterite without the *waw* consecutive. The subject, the “earth,” must be inclusive of the sea, or it may indicate the grave or Sheol; the sea drowned them. Some scholars wish to see this as a reference to Dathan and Abiram, and therefore evidence of a later addition or compilation. It fits this passage well, however.

<sup>35</sup> The verbs in the next two verses are perfect tenses, but can be interpreted as a prophetic perfect, looking to the future.

whom<sup>36</sup> you have redeemed;  
You will guide<sup>37</sup> them by your strength  
to your holy habitation.

**15:14** The people will hear<sup>38</sup> and be afraid,  
anguish<sup>39</sup> will take hold<sup>40</sup> of the inhabitants of Philistia.

**15:15** Then the chiefs of Edom will be terrified,<sup>41</sup>  
the leaders of Moab will be seized<sup>42</sup> with trembling,  
and the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away.

**15:16** Fear and dread<sup>43</sup> shall fall<sup>44</sup> on them,  
by the greatness<sup>45</sup> of your arm they will be as still as stone<sup>46</sup>  
until<sup>47</sup> your people pass over, O Yahweh,

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<sup>36</sup> The particle *zu* is a relative pronoun, subordinating the next verb to the preceding.

<sup>37</sup> This verb seems to mean “to guide to a watering-place (See Ps. 23:2).

<sup>38</sup> This verb is a prophetic perfect, assuming that the text means what it said and this song was sung at the Sea. So all these countries were yet to hear of the victory.

<sup>39</sup> The word properly refers to “pangs” of childbirth, or of a woman in travail. When the nations hear about this, they will be terrified.

<sup>40</sup> The verb is again the prophetic perfect.

<sup>41</sup> This is the prophetic perfect.

<sup>42</sup> This verb is now the imperfect tense.

<sup>43</sup> The two words can form a nominal hendiadys, “a dreadful fear.”

<sup>44</sup> The form is the imperfect.

<sup>45</sup> The adjective is in the construct and governs the noun. But it means “by Your great arm” (“arm” being the anthropomorphic expression for what God did). See GKC, par. 132c.

<sup>46</sup> For a study of the words for fear, see Nahum Waldman, “A Comparative Note on Exodus 15:14-16,” *JQR* 66 (1976/76), pp.189-192.

<sup>47</sup> Clauses beginning with *‘ad* express a limit which is not absolute, but only relative, beyond which the action continues (GKC, par. 138g).

until the people pass over, which you have bought.<sup>48</sup>  
**15:17** You shall bring them in,<sup>49</sup>  
and plant them in the mountain<sup>50</sup> of your inheritance,  
in the place, O Yahweh, you made<sup>51</sup> for your dwelling,  
the sanctuary, O Lord, your hands have established.

**15:18** Yahweh will reign for ever and ever!

**15:19** For the horse of Pharaoh went in  
with his chariots, and his footmen into the seas;  
and Yahweh brought again the waters of the sea upon them,  
but the Israelites went on dry land in the midst of the sea.

**15:20** Then Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a hand-drum in her hand, and all the women went out after her with hand-drums and with dances.<sup>52</sup>

**5:21** And Miriam sang antiphonally<sup>53</sup> to them, “Sing to Yahweh, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and its rider has He thrown into the sea.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> The verb *qanah* here would be the verb “acquire, purchase,” and probably not the homonym “to create, make” (see Gen. 4:1; Deut. 32:6; and Prov. 8:22).

<sup>49</sup> The verb is imperfect.

<sup>50</sup> The “mountain” and the “place” would be wherever Yahweh met with His people. It will here refer to Canaan, the land promised to the patriarchs.

<sup>51</sup> The verb is perfect tense, referring to Yahweh’s previous choice of the holy place.

<sup>52</sup> See John N. Easton, “Dancing in the Old Testament,” *ExT* 86 (1975):136-140.

<sup>53</sup> The verb *‘anah* normally means “to answer”; but it can mean to sing antiphonally in Hebrew and in Ugaritic.

<sup>54</sup> This song of the sea is, then, a great song of praise for Yahweh’s deliverance of Israel at the Sea, and His preparation to lead them to the promised land, much to the (anticipated) dread of the nations. The principle here, and elsewhere in Scripture, is that the people of God naturally respond to God in praise for His great acts of deliverance. Few will match the powerful acts that were exhibited in Egypt, but these nonetheless set the tone. The song is certainly typological of the song of the saints in heaven who praise God for delivering them from the bondage of this world by judging the world. The focus of the praise, though, still is on the person (attributes) and works of God.

## EXPOSITORY DEVELOPMENT

### *Introduction*

Chapter 15 affords the exegete the opportunity of working with a different literary genre in the book, poetry. This section is the Song of Praise that Moses and Israel sang after the victory at the Red Sea. Since it is in the context of the Book of Exodus we have the historical setting. Poetry does not always have that advantage, for poetic discourse is by nature general and figurative, easily applicable to many similar situations.

One of the problems you will have to solve in this chapter is just how much of the chapter will be the exposition. Verse 1b through 18 form the song; 1a is an introduction. I would probably treat this much. Verses 19, 20, and 21 should then be dealt with in the **introduction** (do not simply add a few comments about the verses at the end of the exposition and distract the reader/listener). When you discuss that Moses sang, then discuss Miriam's dancing and answering line singing. The reason I would do this is because exegesis of verses 20 and 21 yields the idea that Miriam's singing was antiphonal. *Anah*, to answer, is used in Hebrew and Ugaritic for antiphonal singing. Moreover, verse 21 records her words as being identical to the beginning of Moses' song, suggesting that throughout the song she and the women responded line by line with singing and dancing.

The song had to have been written fairly quickly after the event. No doubt Gevirtz is correct in his discussion of *The Patterns of Early Poetry*, when he says they had familiar parallelisms that could be worked into various songs.

The song of Moses is a Victory Song, very much like other declarative praise psalms. However, its complex nature makes it rather difficult to order along such lines. But true to such types the song begins with the resolve to praise God for his triumph (v. 1). This is the theme and substance of the song, as verse 19 will restate in explaining the occasion for the song.

The substance of the praise now follows. I would divide the song into the resolve to praise (1b), the mighty power of the LORD (vv. 2, 3), the victory over the enemy (vv. 4-10), the incomparability of the LORD in his redemption (vv. 11-13), the fear of the people at the prospect of the conquest (vv. 14-17), and the closing acclamation (v. 18). To put this in a form a little easier to handle in exposition, I would arrange it as follows:

*I. Praise to God: God's saving acts inspire praise from his people (1b-3).*

*A. Those who realize God's intervention in their lives spontaneously praise him (1b).*

*B. They praise the nature of God and vow loyalty to him (2, 3).*

Naturally, there are a lot of words to be studied in this first section, and they should be discussed, even at the cost of making the subsequent exposition brief. After all, this section is the conclusion he draws from

the intervention. (Ga ah, he has triumphed, would be a good starting study. *Oz*, strength, and *ish milkhamah*, a man of war, are also to the point. But the syntax and figures of speech need clarification as well. It is common for people to describe the nature of God in their praise for his works. This song should be compared with other Songs of Victory, notably songs like Psalms 18 and 24. We may summarize this praise as follows: *God is triumphant because of his great power, prompting praise and dedication in those who are delivered.*

*II. Cause for praise: God's powerful acts deliver his people from the forces of evil in the world (4-13).*

*A. The LORD displays the greatness of his power when he destroys the forces of evil (4-10).*

*B. The LORD displays his incomparable holiness and mercy when he delivers his people (11-13).*

The exposition here would address the attributes of God displayed in the historical event (glorious power, great, triumphant, glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders, mercy, strength), as well as the acts of this event (dashing and destroying the wicked, redeeming and leading forth the people). The exposition can function on several levels, not just on a military one, for these attributes and acts are displayed in various interventions in the Bible, including the eschatological victory.

*III. Conclusion: God's demonstrations of his sovereignty inspire confidence in him by his people (14-18).*

*A. The people of God anticipate how the world will acknowledge his power (14-17).*

*B. The people of God anticipate his sovereign reign (18).*

By wording the points this way I am able to describe theologically what the passage meant then, and enable the modern audience to see the forthcoming application rather easily. But in making the modern application I shall have to give specific examples of the triumphant power of God in delivering his people from their enemies. What would help would be to give a quick walk through the Old Testament and Acts (as well as allusions in Paul to such), along the lines of Hebrews 11, to show again and again how God did this. Then mention could be made of events in church history that are similar. Naturally the purpose is to develop faith in the LORD for help in times of danger and crisis. You will need to go into the New Testament to show who our spiritual foes are (not other Christians), and how God promises protection and deliverance. All of these lead up to the events anticipated in Revelation, the final deliverance and judgment and the Song of the Redeemed in heaven.

## CONCLUSION

But since this is a song of praise, the direction of the message must be on praising God for his great deliverances, not just a study of

the nature of God. The action that you want to inspire is musical praise. If we say it means that *God's redeemed people respond in praise to his great redemption*, we need to clarify whether they do this spontaneously or should do it; and we need to have in mind the primary point of reference for deliverance, whether it is our salvation, any deliverance, or the final victory. I would prefer the second, any great deliverance, because it is the closest correspondence. But in dealing with this, I would use the event (first in Exodus, then the correspondent) to portray God's attributes. They never change. They must come to the fore in praise.