Linguistic and Philological Studies of the Hebrew Bible and its Manuscripts

Edited by Vincent D. Beiler & Aaron D. Rubin
Linguistic and Philological Studies of the Hebrew Bible and its Manuscripts

in Honor of Gary A. Rendsburg

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CHAPTER 15

Hidden Waters: The Sounds of Sinking in the Song of the Sea

Scott B. Noegel

It is an honor to dedicate this article to my Doktorvater, colleague, and friend Gary Rendsburg, from whom I have learned so much. My contribution brings together a number of our honoree's interests as demonstrated in a variety of publications, including paronomasia, linguistic registers, visual poetics, and the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18).

Indeed, the Song of the Sea will be my focus here. It has been the object of intense study for many years, yet it continues to resist scholarly consensus concerning how to divide the poem's units, how to define its genre, or when to date it, though all generally agree that the structure is sophisticated and that the poet has loaded the poem with archaic poetic features, whether truly archaic or not.¹

¹ For a useful survey of proposals, see Brian D. Russell, The Song of the Sea: The Date of Composition and Influence of Exodus 15:1–21 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), who concludes that the poem dates to the 12th century B.C.E.

² Proposalshaveincludedahymn, thanksgiving psalm, and victory song.


Commenting on the later Masoretic stichography of the poem, our honoree observed that the end-frame visually depicts the division of the sea in line 19, and thus provides compositional reinforcement for the poem’s central theme. The line break is placed after the word יֵמָה ‘waters of’, after which we read:

יֵמָה הָעָלָם ְלֹאָו יָשֶׁרֶאָם ָהָלָּךְ ְהָיָּבָּשָּׁבָּיָּ ְבִּצְעָה בְּהוּדָּק
hay-yām u-ḇnē yišrā’ēl hālḵū hay-yabāšā bətōḵ ‘... the sea, and the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of the sea’

As he explains, “The effect is to give a visual image of the Israelites walking in the midst of the sea.”

The interest in visually rendering the sea via its compositional form is not restricted to the later stichography. Pieter van der Lugt has argued that the poem’s original compositional structure possesses a linearly alternating design that imitates a wave-like motion, another example of the poet’s “form follows content” approach.

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6 Gary A. Rendsburg, “Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible: An Eclectic Collection,” in Scott B. Noegel (ed.), *Puns and Pundits: Wordplay in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2000), pp. 137–162 (159). Miller, “The Oral-Written Textuality of Stichographic Poetry,” has examined the Exodus fragments from Qumran and has concluded that though the stichography is slightly different from the later Masoretic system, at Exod 15:19 it also included *vacats* after each ‘sea’. Though this passage marks the narrative end-frame of the poem, it demonstrates an ancient interest in visually emphasizing the word ‘sea’. As Miller adds (p. 171): “The Song of the Sea attests that later Masoretic scribes did not create the special layout from a carte blanche, but were heirs to an earlier inchoate system.” Rabbinic texts prescribe that one should write the Song of the Sea stichographically according to the principle “one-half brick over whole brick, whole brick over one-half brick” (b. Meg 16b; y. Meg 3:8 [74b]; Sotah 129). Other texts requiring special stichography include the Song of Moses (Deut 32:1–43), the list of Canaanite kings (Josh 12:9), the Song of Deborah (Judg 5:1–31), and the list of Haman’s sons (Esth 9:7–9).

7 Pieter van der Lugt, “The Wave-like Motion of the Song of the Sea (Ex 15:1–18) and the People of Israel as a Worshipping Community,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 128 (2016), pp. 49–63, argues that “the poem consists of three 6-line cantos, vv. 1–5, 6–10 and 11–16b, which are concluded by a canto consisting of three lines of poetry (vv. 16c–18)” (p. 54). Thus, he delineates the structure of the poem as ll. 1–2, 3–5 | 6–8, 9–10 | 11–13, 14–16b | 16c–18 > A.B | A’B’ | A”B” | A”. The structure reveals some parallels between the strophes, including the enemies sinking like a stone (l. 5), sinking like lead (l. 10), and being still as stone (l. 16b).
While such studies have demonstrated the poet’s mastery of poetic structures, it is my contention that the poet’s equal dexterity with devices of sound has gone largely unappreciated. Thus, in what follows, I should like to demonstrate that the poet has bolstered the theme of sinking in the sea by employing paronomasia and grammatical features that imitate the sounds of water. The majority of these exploit the alliterative effect of repeated \( m \)-sounds. Recall that the alphabetic letter \( m \) itself represents ‘water’, and that in a literary context that describes the drowning forces of the sea, it takes on added conspicuousness, especially when appearing frequently. Particularly productive in this regard is the poet’s use of so-called ‘poetic’ or ‘archaic’ 3 m.pl. forms (i.e., \( miłom \)), prepositions with enclitic \( mem \) (e.g., \( b_{mem} \) \( kamō \)), and other words containing \( mem \) that echo the word \( m_{ayīm} \) ‘water’ (or its construct forms \( m_{ēmē} \) or \( mē \) or \( mō \); cf. Isa 25:10; Job 9:30). Elsewhere the poet has artfully employed lexemes that reverberate the word \( yām \) ‘sea’. Other passages feature voiceless sibilants and gutturals that imitate the sound of rushing water. The abundant use of the poetic plural and enclitic \( mem \), and the imitation of water sounds both constitute types of paronomasia. The former serves an appellative function, since it recalls the words for ‘water’ and ‘sea’; the second possesses an onomatopoeic function. The former can operate both aurally and visually, especially in the pre-Masoretic text, while the second works only aurally. The devices combine to create an accompanying “sound effect” for the poem’s contents and wave-like structure that makes readers feel as if the text is drowning in references to water.

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10 Compare the apposite observation of Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984/1986), p. 236, who suggests that Isa 5:10 employs onomatopoeia to imitate the sound of the sea: \( y_{n̄h̄m} ȳm_{̄l̄w} b_{ȳm̄} n̄̄m_{̄̄h̄} b_{ȳm̄} n̄̄m_{̄̄h̄} w̄̄n̄̄h̄̄m_{̄̄d̄̄w} b_{ȳm̄} h_{̄̄m̄} b_{ȳm̄} n̄̄m_{̄̄h̄} ȳm_{̄̄} \) ‘a roaring will resound on him on that day like the roaring of the sea’. Note the four-fold repetition of \( mem \) including in the word \( yām \), and the paronomastic evocation of ‘sea’ in the word \( yōm \).


Opening the poem are the words: אֲשִׁרֵה לָּהָמ קִי גַּּאֹ וָּסֹם וַּּרְּוַּקְּבֹ הָּרוּמָּ הָּבַּי-יַם ‘Let me sing to Yah-weh for he has triumphed gloriously. Horse and rider he has hurled into the sea’ (Exod 15:1). The reference to the יָם ‘sea’ establishes the poem’s setting, while the hurling of the horse and rider initiates the theme of drowning. Joining the setting to the theme is the syllable הָמ in רָמָּה, which subtly resounds the singular form of the word יָם ‘water’\textsuperscript{13}. Though the biblical term for water always occurs in the plural, cognate data makes it clear that the singular (and in some cases the plural) was conceived quite widely as comprising a mem and yod or waw, and usually with an a-vowel (cf. Ugaritic my [sg.], mym [pl.]; Akkadian mû; Egyptian my [sg.], mw [pl.]; Aramaic mayyā’; Sabaic mw(y); and Ge’ez māy). While the verb हָמ rāmā would normally not evoke the word ‘water’, the literary context here encourages it, as does the fact that it is followed immediately by יָם. Moreover, the voiceless sibilant and rhythm of the very first word of the poem, אֲשִׁרֵה ‘let me sing’, resound the crashing of a wave. Again, the cohortative form typically would not suggest the sound of rushing water. It is the literary context in which we find it that suggests onomatopoeia.

The poet then proclaims יֵבָּאֵו לָּל ל-יִהְיַוהָּיתָרְמִזְויִזָּﬠ וּהְנֶמְמֹרֲא וּזֶנַּא ל-יִּבָּאֵו אֲבָּא יִבָּאֵו לָּל ‘Yah is my strength and song/power. 14 He is become my deliverance. This is my God and I will elevate him; the God of my father, and I will exalt him’ (15:2). Here again we hear water in the poet’s clever use of יֵבָּאֵו ל-יִּבָּאֵו אֲבָּא יִבָּאֵו לָּל ‘I will exalt him’ (i.e., יֵבָּאֵו ל-יִּבָּאֵו אֲבָּא יִבָּאֵו לָּל), a polel form of the root ר-ו-מ.\textsuperscript{15} The addition of the archaic suffix pronoun only adds to the alliterative effect by drawing out the e-vowel following the second mem. Also demonstrating the poet’s literary talent is that the second half of the verse contains a repetition of five words starting with א.\textsuperscript{16} Given the context of surging waves, it is difficult not to hear in this rhythmic repetition and the expression ל-יִּבָּאֵו ‘deliverance’ the sound of rushing wind and water.

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{13} William H.C. Propp, \textit{Exodus 1–18} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 511, characterizes this as a case of ‘vocalic assonance’. Some of the cases of paronomasia were observed by Fokkelman, \textit{Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible}, pp. 37–38.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} The meaning of \textit{זָיִם} zimrāt depends on whether one reads it as ps \textit{d-m-r} ‘strength’ or ps \textit{z-m-r} ‘song’. We may classify it as a case of unidirectional polysemy. See Noegel, \textit{“Word-play” in Ancient Near Eastern Texts}, p. 173.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Both verbs in this passage also suggest the building or establishing of habitations. See Propp, \textit{Exodus 1–18}, pp. 514–515.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Observed by Brenner, \textit{The Song of the Sea: Ex. 15:1–21}, p. 28.
\end{itemize}
The poet then declares: 'Yahweh is a man of war, Yahweh is his name' (15:3).\(^{17}\) The repeated sibilant声 of אמש 'Yahweh Man of War is his name' and his name’ also denotes ‘his fame’.

The next verse reads: 'Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea, and the chosen of his officers are drowned into the Sea of Reeds' (15:4). This passage twice employs the term ים 'sea', which both embodies water and paronomastically recalls מי. Assisting the paronomasia is the repetition of the consonant ש in שמש 'sea' and שמש 'chosen', both of which front their respective stichs.\(^{19}\)

Immediately afterwards we hear: 'The deeps covered them. They descended to the depths like a stone' (15:5). Observe the four-fold repetition of the ש. It appears in the noun תיהם 'deeps', and then in the verb יקשה 'covered them'. The former takes advantage of the pluralis intensivus form in order to follow the consonant with an o-vowel (cf. ומש).\(^{20}\) The latter employs the unparalleled poetic plural ומש in an uncontracted verbal formation, which allows יקשה to echo both 'water' and 'sea'. The mem then occurs in the plural noun תמי and the preposition with enclitic mem כמש. All of this occurs in a literary context that Martin Brenner describes as "dominated by water terms".\(^{21}\)

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17 Propp, Exodus 1–18, p. 515, advanced the intriguing proposal that the passage simply means ‘Yahweh Man of War is his name’ and that ‘his name’ also denotes ‘his fame.’

18 Propp, Exodus 1–18, p. 516, observes the paronomasia between the ש and ש in יש밀חמ and ושמש.

19 See the observation by Fokkelman, Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible, p. 43: "Finally, I note that kemo in 1.8b echoes both -mot and kaph + mu in 8a, and that the labials mem and Beth occur frequently throughout the strophe (7 and 8 times respectively, for instance in the alliterations מ兒-מאחר)."


21 Brenner, The Song of the Sea, p. 27.
The suggestion of water appears again in the next line: יָמִינוֹךְ יִהוּדָה נַעֲרֵי בֵּית יָמִינוֹךְ YHWH ne‘dāri bak-koah yomínkā YHWH tir‘as oyēḇ ‘Your right hand, O Yahweh, is glorious in power, your right hand, O Yahweh, crushes (the) enemy’ (15:6). Twice יָמִינוֹךְ ‘your right hand’ echoes the word יָمָן yām.

The following passage reads: נַבֵּל בָּאָרָחָה הָאָרָחָה לָיָלוֹת נַבְּלָו יְמִינֵךְ נַבֵּל נַבְּל נַבֵּל Navel ba-ārāḥah tāḥārōs qāmekā tōsallāh ḥārōnḵā yōklemō qā-qāṣ ‘In your great majesty you trample your foes, you send forth your fury, it consumes them like straw’ (15:7).22 Again we hear water, this time in the noun יָמָן yām ‘sea’ and the poetic plural suffix in יֹקְלֶמּוֹ yōklemō ‘it consumes them.’ In addition, the poet has reproduced the sounds of crashing water by employing the voiceless sibilants s and sh, in נַבֵּל Navel ‘you trample’, נַבְּלָו Navelō ‘your enemies’, נַבֵּלָו Navelōv ‘you trample them’, נַבְּלָו יָמִינוֹךְ Navelō yomínkā ‘your right hand’, and the voiceless fricative h in נַבֵּל Navel ‘you trample’. The poet has used a voiceless guttural fricative h in נַבֵּל Navel ‘you trample’ and a voiceless palatal fricative k in יָמִינוֹךְ yomínkā ‘your right hand’ and יָמִינוֹךְ yomínkā ‘your right hand’. The sound of crashing water is reproduced by the voiceless fricatives in יָמִינוֹךְ yomínkā and הָאָרָחָה tāḥārōs ‘your enemies’, יָמִינוֹךְ yomínkā ‘your right hand’, יָמִינוֹךְ yomínkā ‘your right hand’ and יֹקְלֶמּוֹ yōklemō ‘it consumes them’. For instance, the word יָמָן yām ‘sea’ is naturalized.

The device continues in 15:8: נַבֵּל בָּרָעָה ‘At the blast of your nostrils, the waters piled up. The floods stood like a heap of streams. The deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.’

Supporting the direct references to יָמִים mayīm and יָמָן yām is the verb נְרֹעַ mērōa ‘piled up’, this time exploiting the final radical of the root ר-מ nē‘erōa in the 1 pl. niphal form instead of a poetic plural suffix. Note also the preposition with enclitic mem יִנְמוֹ mērōa ‘piled up’, this time exploiting the final radical of the root ר-מ nē‘erōa in the 1 pl. niphal form instead of a poetic plural suffix. Note also the preposition with enclitic mem יִנְמוֹ mērōa ‘like’, and the pluralis intensivus form נְרֹעַ nē‘erōa ‘piled up’, which again allows the poet to use the consonant with an o-vowel (cf. יִנְמוֹ mērōa). The masculine plural with mem in the watery lexeme נְרֹעַ nē‘erōa ‘streams’ amplifies the alliterative effect.23 Moreover, the masculine plural naturally contains the word יָמָן yām ‘sea’.

Even the words placed into the enemy’s mouth contain the device: אָרֶם הָאָרָחָה אָרֶם הָאָרָחָה נַבֵּל בָּרָעָה ‘Arermāh tāḥārōs yēḇdār aṣṣīq ‘ēḥallēq šālāt timlāqēmō nāṣāt iāʾīr ḥarbī tōsīmēmō yādī ‘The enemy said, “I will pursue, I will overtake, I will despoil. My appetite will have its fill of them.’

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22 On Exod 15:6–7a as a case of staircase parallelism, see Cohen, “Studies in Early Israelite Poetry 1,” pp. 13–17. Fokkelman, Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible, pp. 43, 45, also notes the alliterative repetition of the consonant nun and a chiasm of terms involving water that links the passage to v. 10.

23 Van der Westhuizen, “Literary Device in Exodus 15:1–18,” p. 58, notes the paronomastic use of the repeated consonant nun in this passage.
I will unsheathe my sword. My hand will disinherit them”’ (15:9). Once again
the poetic plurals in תומלם ‘will have its fill of them’ and תורישמו ‘disinherit them’ resound water, find support in the repeated mem and a-vowel in the verbs אMAR and מMAL. One also hears the rushing of water in the sibilants in אסג ‘I will pursue’ שץ ‘spoil’, נפש ‘my appetite’, and תורישמו ‘disinherit them’. To these I add the voice-
less guttural ה in אהلغ ‘I will overtake’ and הרב ‘my sword’. Moreover, the poet has again employed a repetition of five words starting with א ’, this time in the first half of the verse, to create the rhythm of ebb and flow.24

The poet then continues by recalling:

The poems then continue by recalling: דע ה文化传播 כשמו ידالجزائر חכמה חכמה הכש מוביא בימים שאר
משתא הרוחה כשדר א-FSNN דסח פנזי יברח חרא תורישמו יד סחי
Overwhelmed by Yahweh’s power, the poet then rhetorically asks: דע ה文化传播 כשמו ידالجزائر חכמה חכמה הכש מוביא בימים שאר
משתא הרוחה כשדר א-FSNN דסח פנזי יברח חרא תורישמו יד סחי

Overwhelmed by Yahweh’s power, the poet then rhetorically asks: Who is like you among the gods, Yahweh? Who is like you in holiness, awesome in praiseworthy actions, per-

24 Brenner, The Song of the Sea, p. 28. Propp, Exodus 1–18, p. 524, posits that the alliterative
effect “conveys terror”.
26 Noted by Propp, Exodus 1–18, p. 526. On anagrammatic paronomasia, see Noegel, Word-
forming wonders?’ (15:11). Here the allusion to water occurs in the repetition of the interrogative pronoun יִמ (cf. יֵמ) and the repeated preposition with enclitic mem in קרֵמַקָא. Abetting the alliterative effect is the masculine plural ending in מִלֵא ‘gods’.

The abbreviated next verse continues with the device: יִמְיָתָא יָמִינָקָא תִּבְלָאָמּוֹ תוֹרֶש ‘You extended your right hand. The underworld swallowed them’ (15:12).27 Here we hear ‘sea’ in יָמִינָקָא ‘your right hand’ and ‘water’ in the poetic plural on תִּבְלָאָמּוayo ‘it swallowed them’.

Beginning in the next verse, the poet turns his attention to Yahweh’s guidance and the fear of the nations who learn about Yahweh’s wonders. Nevertheless, despite the movement away from the Reed Sea, we still hear an echo of יָמ in יָמ ‘am ‘people’ (15:13) and יָמ ‘am ‘people heard’ (15:14).28

The survey of reactions among the nations then continues: יֵפוּלַּאָלוֹהְבִנַּא תֶאֹגֶּנֶדָא אָצְמִיֵל יֵלְﬠוּפָה יִטָּנ ‘Now the tribes of Edom are dismayed, the clans of Moab, trembling seize them. All the dwellers of Canaan despair’ (15:15). One hears ‘water’ (cf. יָמ) in the name מֹאָב ‘Moab’, the poetic suffix form on יָהָאָמּו ‘seizes them’, and the verb נָמוּג ‘they despair’. These obtain additional support from the mem in מִלֵא ‘gods’.

The description of the nations then concludes: לֹדְגִבְדַּחַפָוהָתָמיֵאםֶהיֵלְﬠוּפָה יִטָּנ ‘Terror and dread descend upon them. By means of the might of your arm they are still as stone. Until your people cross over, O Yahweh. Until your people cross over whom you have ransomed’ (15:16). We hear subtle references to water here in the verb יַדְדֵמָע ‘they are still’, while the two-fold reference to יָמ ‘am ‘people’ again in this context resounds יָמ ‘sea’. The noun יָמָה ‘sea’ echoes both ‘water’ (cf. מִי מְאֹד) and visually contains the word ‘sea’ (יָמ). Though the prepositional phrase מֹאָב ‘upon them’ stands out for not containing the archaic suffix מֹא in מַﬠ ‘sea’. Though the prepositional phrase מֹאָב ‘upon them’ stands out for not containing the archaic suffix מֹא in מַﬠ ‘sea’. Though the prepositional phrase מֹאָב ‘upon them’ stands out for not containing the archaic suffix מֹא in מַﬠ ‘sea’. Though the prepositional phrase מֹאָב ‘upon them’ stands out for not containing the archaic suffix מֹא in מַﬠ ‘sea'.

27 Propp, Exodus 1–18, pp. 529–530.
28 VanderLugt, “The Wave-like Motion of the Song of the Sea,” p. 56, notes that this strophe (ll. 11–13) contains 26 words, the numerical value of the Tetragrammaton. Thus, the reference to Yahweh’s guidance in the last verse fits the gematria of the strophe. On gematria (more specifically, isopsephy), see Noegel, “Wordplay” in Ancient Near Eastern Texts, pp. 211–215.
The poem’s penultimate line promises to place the people on their holy mountain:

ךָיֶדָיוּנְנוֹכּיָנֹדֲאשָׁדְקִּמהָוהְיָתְּלַﬠָפּךְָתְּבִשְׁלןוֹכָמֵﬠָטִּתְוֹמֵאִבְתּ

tǝḇiʾēmō wǝ-ṯiṭṭāʿēmō bǝ-har naḥălāṯḵā māḵōn lǝ-šiḇtǝḵā pāʿaltā Y hwh miqdāš ʾăḏōnāy kōnǝnū yāḏɛḵā ‘You will bring them and you will plant them in your hereditary mountain, the place you made to dwell in, O Yahweh, the sanctuary, O Yahweh, which your hands established’ (15:17). The poet again employs the poetic suffixes in tǝḇiʾēmō ‘you will bring them’ and wǝ-ṯiṭṭāʿēmō ‘and you will plant them’, and the noun māḵōn ‘place’ (cf. yām māy) to evoke water. Moreover, while tǝḇiʾēmō ‘you will bring them’ and wǝ-ṯiṭṭāʿēmō ‘and you will plant them’, and the noun māḵōn ‘place’ (cf. yām māy) to evoke water. Moreover, while tǝḇiʾēmō ‘you will bring them’ and wǝ-ṯiṭṭāʿēmō ‘and you will plant them’, and then noun nahālat ‘hereditary’.

Concluding the Song of the Sea is the poet’s praise:

דֶﬠָוםָלֹעְלךְלְֹמִיהָוהְי

Yhwh yimlōḵ lǝ-ʿōlām wā-ʿɛḏ ‘Yahweh will reign forever and ever’ (15:18). Though the final statement is highly formulaic, it still constitutes paronomasia on yām ‘sea’. Note especially the first syllable in yimlōḵ ‘will reign’ and the last syllable in olām ‘forever’.

The combined evidence demonstrates that the poet has matched the work’s artistry of structure and content with a sophisticated use of sound. If the device occurred in just a few passages, one might write it off as coincidence, but it appears in every verse. In fact, not a single line in the entire poem is devoid of a mō.

It has long been observed that the poem’s numerous poetic verbal plural forms are a deliberate and artificial contrivance. Of the 23 appearances of the suffix mō in the Hebrew Bible, nine of them appear in this poem. Brian Russell argues that the suffixes offer strong evidence for the archaic nature of the text. Brenner offers a contrary opinion.Dating the Song of the Sea to the post-exilic period, he remarks: “Moreover, the multiple occurrences of this ending has nothing to do with dating: it is a matter of literary style.” However, Brenner

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29 The two readings would be distinguished in speech as the first represents *n-h-l and the second *n-x-l.
30 Jewish tradition, in particular Ibn Ezra, sees Exod 15:19 as the last line of the poem. If this is the case, then I note that each stich of the passage ends with a water reference: יבּ bay-yām ‘in the sea’, יִמּ mē hay-yām ‘waters of the sea’, and יָמִי hay-yām ‘the sea’. The repeated שָׁbishwayāš ‘his horsemen’, יָאֵשׁ way-yāšɛḇ ‘and he returned’, and יַבּ bay-yabhāša ‘on dry land’, also suggests the sound of crashing waves. Moreover, as discussed above, the Masoretic division of the line structurally recreates the division of the sea.
31 See already E. Kautzsch (ed.), *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A.E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), p. 258: “That they are consciously and artificially used is shown by the evidently intentional accumulation of them.”
33 Brenner, *The Song of the Sea*, p. 34.
does not comment on what the suffix contributes in terms of style. What the evidence amassed here demonstrates is that regardless of whether the poetic suffixes represent true archaisms, the poet has exploited them to invoke the roiling waters of the sea.34

I suggest we consider the frequent use of the enclitic mem in a similar light. Chaim Cohen has shown that the enclitic mem has three functions in biblical texts: 1) to separate a construct from its dependent genitive; 2) to offer variation when passages are repeated; and 3) in order to serve the needs of polysemy (e.g., Isa 51:11; Hos 14:3).35 To his list we now may add a fourth function: to serve the needs of paronomasia with appellative and onomatopoeic functions. The numerous allusions to water and the sea match the observation of William Propp concerning the poem's clever use of verbs:

(The poem) features many verbs connoting elevation and depression, rising and falling ... Egypt descends—literally from shore to Sea to underworld, metaphorically from glory to ignominy—while Israel ascends—from slavery, Egypt and Sea to secure habitation on Yahweh's mountain. The more imaginative reader might feel the up and down of the Sea's waves.36

A final comment is in order. The paronomastic devices examined here belong more generally to a poetic strategy of clustering found throughout the poem.37 Not only does the song contain clusters of verbal repetitions, as noted by van der Lugt,38 but its abundant use of the poetic suffix and enclitic mem comprises a cluster. Thus, the paronomastic devices here provide additional evidence for the phenomenon of clustering as found with a variety of other literary devices.39

34 The recollection of the splitting of the Reed Sea in Ps 78:13 also follows references to yām and mayim with an enclitic mem on a preposition (kōm): bāqa‘ yām way-yaʿāḇīrēm way-yaṣṣēḇ mayim kōmō nēḏ ‘He split the sea and made them pass through it. He made the waters stand like a heap.’ Assisting the alliterative effect is the plural suffix on way-yaʿāḇīrēm.
36 Propp, Exodus 1–18, p. 510.
37 For additional cases of appellative paronomasia involving the Sea of Reeds that take us beyond the poem, see Scott B. Noegel, “From Rebellion and Death to Victory: On Appellative Paronomasia in Numbers 20–21,” in Advances in Ancient Biblical and Near Eastern Research (forthcoming, 2023).
Hebraists have long recognized the Song of the Sea as a literary masterpiece. However, they primarily have pointed to the poem’s elaborate structure, use of special types of parallelism, and its dramatic similes and metaphors. This study finds that the poet has equipped the song with an equally sophisticated soundscape that similarly evokes the seething sea, stich by stich.

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This volume honors the extraordinary scholarship of Prof. Gary A. Rendsburg, whose work and friendship have influenced so many in the last five decades. Twenty-five prominent scholars from the United States, Europe, Israel, and Australia have contributed significant original studies in three of Rendsburg’s areas of interest and expertise: Hebrew language, Hebrew Bible, and Hebrew manuscripts. These linguistic, philological, literary, epigraphic, and historical approaches to the study of Hebrew and its textual traditions serve as a worthy tribute to such an accomplished scholar, and also as an illustration how all of these approaches can complement one another in the fields of Hebrew and Biblical Studies.


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