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Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who Is Seconding Whom?

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MODERN SCHOLARS HAVE long been fascinated by the repetition in Exod 15:1 and 15:21 of the poetic couplet:

(I will) sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.

For those concerned to reconstruct the literary prehistory of the text, this repetition has been of at least twofold interest. In the first place, it has been taken as possibly reflecting the fusion of two forms (J and E) of the old epic tradition; and in the second place it has entered into discussions of the history of Israelite poetry, whether as indicating the earlier and shorter form from which the later hymn in 15:1 was developed, or as reflecting a practice of referring to longer poems by a "title" consisting of their opening lines.¹

More recently, this repetition has been studied under the aegis of a concern to reconstruct a history in which women occupied more prominent positions in Israelite society than appears in the final form of the Hebrew Bible. As Phyllis Trible asserts, "Patriarchal storytellers have done their work well. They have suppressed the women—yet without total success. Bits and

¹ For summary discussion and reference to previous literature, see Rita J. Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken Only Through Moses? A Study of the Biblical Portrait of Miriam (SBLDS 84; Atlanta: Scholars, 1987) 11-40.
pieces from the buried story surface at the conclusion of the Exodus narrative.” 2 Though the focus of the concern here has shifted, the method remains the same: (1) to identify telltale features of unevenness, awkwardness, and difference in linguistic usage and point of view, amounting at times to tension or outright contradiction between parts of the text; (2) to construe these features as evidence for multiplicity of sources behind the final form of the text; (3) to reconstruct the history and character of these sources; and (4) to reconstruct the social and religious history reflected in the production of these diverse sources.

The studies of Exod 15:20–21 by Rita Burns and Phyllis Trible contribute fresh perspectives on a host of topics, and will be pondered carefully by any who seek to move behind the present form of the text. In the present article, however, I will concentrate on the text as it stands, in an attempt to see just what it is that the final “storytellers have done.” In reference to 15:1–18 Brevard Childs has written, “Although it is a legitimate task of the traditio-historical method to trace . . . earlier stages before the development of its present literary role, an equally important and usually neglected exegetical task is to analyze the composition in its final stage.” He goes on to say, “regardless of its pre-history, the fundamental issue is to determine the effect of joining the poem to the preceding narrative.” 3 Curiously, Childs does not consider the effect of joining 15:19–21 to that narrative. Nor, for that matter, does Burns, who focuses only on vv 20–21 and ignores their present introduction in v 19. 4 I shall begin with the question of the relation of the latter verse to the larger narrative.

The exodus story comes to its climactic conclusion in chap. 14 as follows:

26 Then the LORD said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.” 27 So Moses stretched forth his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its wonted flow when the morning appeared; and the Egyptians fled into it, and the LORD routed the Egyptians in the midst of the sea. 28 The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen and all the hosts of Pharaoh

4 In the preface to The Book of the Torah: The Narrative Integrity of the Pentateuch (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988), Thomas W. Mann notes that he will attempt “to understand the Pentateuch both in terms of its final form . . . and its internal complexity . . . ,” where by “internal complexity” he refers to compositional history. His treatment of Exod 13:17–15:21, as of the Pentateuch as a whole, is exemplary; but (perhaps for reasons of space) he leaves 15:19–21 unremarked.
that had followed them into the sea; not so much as one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.

This narrated climax is followed by a summary statement of what the LORD thus accomplished (v 30a); and this summary in turn is followed by an indication of what Israel “saw” physically (v 30b) and meaningfully (v 31aa), and how Israel responded to this seeing (v 31ab,b). Thus, whereas a short while ago their seeing had led them to fear Pharaoh (14:10), their two-dimensional seeing led them now to fear the LORD; and they “believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.” In passing, we may note the shift from 14:31 to 15:1 in the presentation of Moses. In 14:31 the people are on one side of the verb “believed in,” while Moses stands alongside the LORD as second object of the people’s belief (compare 19:9). In 15:1, however, Moses stands alongside the people on one side of the verb “sang,” while the LORD is the sole object of that action of worship. Whereas elsewhere in the Book of Exodus there is no hesitation in attributing the deliverance of Israel from Egypt to Moses as well as to the LORD (e.g., 3:10; 32:1,7; cf. 3:8,17; 32:11), in the song of 15:1-18 there is no reference to Moses’ actions, for the focus is entirely on the actions of the LORD. If Moses is present in the song at all, it is as one of the people who respectively refer to themselves as “I” in the seven 1st-pers. sg. pronouns of vv 1-2.5

Immediately after the hymn, the narrative continues (v 19):

For when the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea upon them; but the people of Israel walked on dry ground in the midst of the sea.

While the first two clauses clearly are built out of (or resume) elements in 14:26-28, the italicized third clause exactly repeats part of 14:29. Noting this, Phyllis Tribble writes, “The recapitulation jars. It seems awkward, repetitious and misplaced. An attentive reader begins to suspect tampering with the text.”6 Here we face one of the dilemmas that confronts the reader sensitized to narrative technique in the Bible—a sensitization to which Tribble has contributed greatly in other studies. The dilemma is whether the textual feature that has snagged the attentive reader’s eye is or is not part of the narrative

5 In 3:10 and in 32:1,7, Moses’ involvement in Israel’s deliverance is identified as his “bringing them out of Egypt.” The seven pronouns in the Hebrew text of 15:1-2 are made up of the pronominal element in the three 1st-pers. sg. verbs ʾāḇāḏā /ʾānāwēhā/ ʾārōmēmenhā (“I will sing/I will praise him/I will exalt him”), plus pronoun suffixes in the following four expressions: ʾozzī wēzīmrā /wayēhō l tīsāḏā /ʾētī /ʾēlōhē ʾāḇl (“my strength and song/my salvation/my God/my father’s God”).

technique employed in giving the text its final shape. Assuming the present form of the text to have been constructed out of a variety of earlier sources, we are left to wonder in a given instance whether a so-called "jarring" effect is a telltale sign of imperfectly edited materials, and thereby of the limitations of the (final) narrator's art, or whether it is part of what the narrative seeks to do to us. In the present instance I propose that the recapitulation in 15:19 should not jar us so much as arrest us, and indeed that it should throw us back behind the hymn to position us once more at 14:29.

Taken in this way, what we have here is the narrative device sometimes called "analepsis"—the temporary withholding of vital information in favor of its belated introduction later for one effect or another. For an example that is similar in the way it is introduced into the narrative, one might compare the story of Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 20. The crisis there arises when Abimelech takes Sarah into his household (v 2). When God appears to Abimelech in a dream and tells him, "you are a dead man" (v 3), this king answers, "wilt thou slay an innocent people?" (v 4). It is not until the crisis of Sarah's captivity is resolved that we are told in an analepsis precisely what God had meant by saying, "you are a dead man." The analepsis reads, "For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife." Not surprisingly, but for our purposes still noteworthy, the analepsis is introduced by the particle "for." I propose that the same particle "for" at the beginning of Exod 15:19 likewise introduces an analepsis. The effect of this particle, introducing as it does the summary of 14:26-28 and the exact quotation from 14:29, is to reposition us at 14:29 and to provide us with additional information as to what happened then. What actually happened at that point is now supplied in 15:20-21.

The NRSV translation of 15:20, by the way it begins with "then," allows the possible inference that v 19 by itself recapitulates 14:26-29, and that Miriam's action is to be understood as following chronologically from 15:1-18.

7 As Alan R. Culpepper tells us, an analepsis is an allusion to a previous event, more precisely "any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment" (Alan R. Culpepper, Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design [FFNT; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983] 56, quoting Gerard Genette, Narrative Discourse: An Essay on Method [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1980] 40).

8 Compare also Jonah 1:10 where the narrator informs the reader, in an analepsis introduced by "for," that at some earlier point Jonah had told the sailors that he was fleeing from the presence of the LORD. Shimon Bar-Efrat cites this passage in a section devoted to what he calls "flashback" (Narrative Art in the Bible [JSOTSup 70; Sheffield: Almond, 1989] 175-83). On p. 166 he begins to discuss "the relation between the order of narrated time and that of narration time in biblical narratives."
But in the Hebrew text the conjunction and verb that open v 19 continue the waw-consecutive syntactic pattern by which narrative normally flows unbroken. The effect may be represented by the following rendition of the verbs in vv 19-20: "For the horses of Pharaoh went in . . . and the LORD brought back . . . but the children of Israel walked . . . and Miriam . . . took." This presentation of consecutive action suggests that we are to read 15:20-21 in unbroken sequence upon 15:19. But by the way in which 15:19 recapitulates 14:26-29, we are belatedly bidden to appreciate that the next thing to happen at that earlier point was the action of Miriam now finally presented:

And Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them [masc. pl]:

"Sing [masc. pl.] to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea."

It seems clear, then, that the song of Moses and the people of Israel, in 15:1-18, comes in response to the song of Miriam and the other women. In such a case, three elements in the text come into a new focus.

(1) As Rita Burns recognizes, the pronoun in "Miriam sang to them" is a masculine plural. This would most naturally indicate a plurality of male—or male and female—addressees. But Burns appeals to the fact that in biblical Hebrew on occasion a female noun is referred to by a masculine pronoun, and on this basis she takes Miriam to be calling upon the women with her to sing to Yahweh. Such a reading is certainly plausible but, as we shall see, is not compelling. (2) The plural imperative that opens Miriam's song likewise is masculine in gender, normally signifying that the people thereby summoned to worship are either male, or male and female. Again, one might invoke the above-mentioned occasional Hebrew usage to maintain that nevertheless Miriam still is calling upon the women who follow her. But it should be noted that the linguistic practice Burns refers to is only occasional, and that routinely, explicitly female addressees are indicated by the use of appropriate feminine markers. Methodologically, it may be suggested, one can be sure of identifying an instance of the occasional use only where the context provides no plausible masculine plural antecedent. Such an antecedent, however, is not far away: "the people of Israel" (literally, "the sons of Israel") in 15:19/14:29. How shall one decide, then, whether Miriam is calling to the women who follow her, or to the children of Israel in whose presence she leads these women? If 15:19-21 is indeed an analepsis, positioning us at

9 See Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art, 166.
10 Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 12-13 n. 4, referring to GKC §135o.
14:29, then the people’s response in 14:31, and especially in 15:1-18, suggests that it is the people as a whole to whom Miriam sings and whom she bids sing. (3) One may contrast the narrative rubrics in 15:1 and 15:21 in two respects: (a) Whereas Miriam sang “to them,” Moses and the people of Israel “sang this song to the LORD.” (b) Whereas in 15:1 “sang this song” translates verb and noun cognates of *ṣyr* (the verb with which the song itself opens), in 15:21 “sang” translates the verb ‘*nh*. As Burns notes, the latter verb, by its apparent connection to the Hebrew verb ‘*nh*, “answer,” may indicate antiphononal singing. She notes further, in agreement with some other scholars, that “the fact that Miriam’s part in the celebration is clearly distinguished from that of the rest of the women might well reflect an antiphonal recitation of the song.”11 Burns has in mind, of course, that such antiphonal recitation goes on between Miriam and the other women. In my view, it is Moses and the children of Israel—led by the dancing women—who are called upon to respond antiphonally to Miriam’s lead. In such a reading, one may suppose that Miriam led the congregation through the whole hymn in the fashion explicitly indicated for its first two lines. Thus, for example, her opening call to “sing” is met by the responsive “I will sing.”

Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman titled their ground-breaking study of 15:1-18 “The Song of Miriam,” on the ground that “[i]t is easy to understand the ascription of the hymn to the great leader. It would be more difficult to explain the association of Miriam with the song as a secondary development.”12 If, however, 15:19-21 is an analepsis, the present form of the text does not after all ascribe the hymn to Moses, but to Miriam. Thus by any analysis—diachronic or synchronic—the Song at the Sea is the Song of Miriam, and its performance as narrated in 15:1-18 comes as Moses and his fellow Israelites “second” her hymnic initiative.

This hymnic celebration of Yahweh’s act of deliverance displays a hymnic pattern which we may exemplify from Ps 40:2-4 (Eng. 1-3):

2 I waited patiently for the LORD;  
he inclined to me and heard my cry.  
3 He drew me up from the desolate pit,  
out of the miry bog,  
and set my feet upon a rock,  
making my steps secure.

11 In addition to the scholars Burns cites (*Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 13 n. 7*), see R. N. Whybray’s similar analysis of this verb in Exodus 32:18, in “*annor* in Exodus 32:18,” *VT* 17 (1967) 122 (also my discussion in the article cited in n. 18 below).

4He put a new song in my mouth,
a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear,
and put their trust in the LORD.

The formal correspondence between these lines, and elements in the exodus story, is striking and yet after all not surprising. One might indeed wonder whether the narrator has not shaped Exod 2:23-25 and 14:10-15:21 on the basis of the sort of liturgical form instanced in Ps 40:2-4 and traceable elsewhere in the Psalter. The correspondent elements are: (1) the cry to God (\textit{\textit{saw}d}, v 2; cf. Exod 2:23-24); (2) God's saving response (v 3, esp. the verb \textit{he\textit{\textit{\u0113l\text{"u}}}}, "he drew me up," which occurs frequently in connection with the exodus, as in Exod 3:8; 32:1,4,7); (3) the celebration of God's deliverance in songs of praise (v 4a; cf. Exod 15:19-21); and (4) the effect upon those who hear the praise: "many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD" (v 4b). Once the recognition of the analepsis allows us to appreciate that Exod 15:19-21 lies behind 14:30-31, the correspondence in the latter passage becomes particularly striking: Israel saw the great work which the LORD did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the LORD; and they believed in the LORD. . . ."

The pattern thus instanced in Exodus 14–15 and Psalm 40 invites reflection on what one might call its revelational logic. In the psalm, the song of praise is not simply the psalmist's response to God's action, but, as the three \textit{\textit{waw}}-consecutive verbs suggest, at the same time a continuation of God's saving action: "He drew me up . . . He set my feet . . . He put a new song in my mouth." The song that arises in the throat is experienced by the singer as part of the very energy of deliverance that is the action of God. In this sense, divine action and human hymnic response are dimensions of one and the same complex event of divine redemption and revelation, in which the human response has the character of entry into and participation in the divine action. When, then, others hear the hymn, they too may be drawn by its mediation into the event, making in their turn the perceptual responses to that event enabled by the hymn. Thus the meaning of the event is disclosed in the language of response that the event evokes. That is to say, "seeing" and "fearing" and "trusting in the LORD" are occasioned by divine actions which include the new song which those actions evoke. What all this may suggest is that the women's celebration of the LORD's triumph is what gives Israel's eyes their discernment (contrast Isa 6:9), so that, seeing the Egyptians dead on the seashore, the people see this as the great work which the LORD did, fear the LORD, and believe in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

The general point I am making is perhaps reflected also in Ps 68:12 (Eng. 11): "Yahweh gives the word; the women who bear the tidings are a
great host.” Commenting that “victories were commonly celebrated by the Israelite women with song and dance,” A. F. Kirkpatrick takes it that the divine word is the sovereign command that issues in the victory: “It is a less satisfactory explanation to regard the word as the song of triumph which God puts in the mouth of the singers.” But he overlooks Psalm 40 (see also Ps 4:8 [Eng. 7]). If Ps 68:12 has a characteristic celebratory practice in view, this only underscores my suggestion that the song of praise in response to God’s beneficent action is itself a gift of God and as such is part of that action. What the song does is to focus the meaning of the event through words that are part of the event.

This relation between saving event and its cultic celebration, in which the celebration is not merely a response to the event but part of the event itself—the part of God’s action that provides the meaning of the event—is reminiscent of the way the first Passover is part of the event of the deliverance and departure from Egypt. Commenting on the theological significance of this redactional placement, Terence Fretheim writes, “[R]edactionally the passover is represented as shaping the event itself. . . . The historical event is at one and the same time a liturgical event. . . . Liturgical material flows into the event and away from it.” To be sure, the Passover in chap. 12 does not relate to the departure from Egypt in precisely the same way that the hymn in chap. 15 relates to the event of the sea-crossing; for the observance of the Passover, at least in its initial stages, precedes the death of Egypt’s firstborn and the Israelites’ hasty departure, while the singing of the hymn follows immediately upon the sea-crossing and the drowning of the Egyptians. Nevertheless, by virtue of the above-identified analepsis, the people’s seeing, fearing Yahweh, and believing do not follow simply upon the sea-crossing, but upon that event as celebrated in Miriam’s song. As Fretheim implies, in both instances the liturgical celebration is so closely interwoven as part of the total event that it cannot be separated from it without changing the experienced character of the event. In each instance the liturgical aspect of the event gives Israel the means to understand its meaning.

13 The Book of Psalms (Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1927) 383.
14 For a modern secular analogue, compare these lines from Wallace Stevens’s poem, “An Ordinary Evening In New Haven” (The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens [New York: Knopf, 1954] 473): “The poem is the cry of its occasion,/Part of the res itself and not about it./The poet speaks the poem as it is,/Not as it was: part of the reverberation/Of a windy night as it is, when the marble statues/Are like windy newspapers blown by the wind.”
15 Terence E. Fretheim, Exodus (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991) 133, 136 (italics in original).
All this may help us to appreciate in part the significance of Miriam's presence in Mic 6:4: "For I brought you up [he'elitka] from the land of Egypt,/and redeemed you from the house of bondage;/and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam." If, as noted above, God's redemptive action can include Moses' action of "bringing the people up," it can include also Miriam's action of singing the song that God has put in her mouth and that she calls upon Israel to sing. Her participation in the total event gives redemption its revelatory voice.

Whereas, then, Trible's hermeneutics of suspicion leads her to seek Miriam buried under the work of patriarchal storytellers, I propose to have come to her conclusion concerning Miriam's role in the celebration of the Exodus by taking the narrative at face value. To be sure, by its unexpected use of analepsis the ostensibly straight-faced narrative suddenly winks over its shoulder, provoking the attentive reader to do a double-take.

But why the initial narrative silence, and the belated impartation of this information through the analepsis in 15:19-21? Here I believe Trible is right in observing (apropos chaps. 1-2) that "humanly speaking, the Exodus story owes its beginning not to Moses but to Miriam and other women," and that "like the beginning, the ending of the Exodus story belongs to women. They are the alpha and omega, the aleph and taw of deliverance."16 In terms of narrative structure, 15:19-21 forms an "inclusion" with the stories in Exodus 1 and 2 that feature the strategic role of various women on behalf of the Hebrews. To have placed 15:20-21 immediately after 14:29 and before 14:30-15:1-18 would have obscured this pattern. As it is, the girl who was instrumental in Moses' rescue from the waters of the Nile now instrumentally and vocally leads Moses and Israel in celebration of their rescue through the waters of the sea; and like the women who served as midwives at the birth of Hebrew children in Egypt, she and her sisters bring to birth Israel's new exodus-centered hymnody.

But if 15:19-21 looks backward to chaps. 1-2, it also looks forward to a later episode in the Exodus story—or at least may in retrospect be seen to do so. In her discussion of cultic dancing with timbrels and singing, Rita Burns draws attention to the parallels between 15:20-21 and what goes on in Exodus 32. The burden of her discussion at this point is to suggest that "[t]he celebration before the calf, . . . like the one which Miriam led, commemorated Yahweh's victory over the Egyptians."17 In an earlier issue of this journal I have argued toward a similar conclusion—that the cultic activity in Exodus 32 is not (as has been widely held) a fertility ritual, but centers on the

17 Burns, Has the Lord Indeed Spoken, 20.
divine warrior—and I am happy to think that our analyses support each other.\textsuperscript{18} In the present context I would only underscore the one fateful respect in which the celebrations in chaps. 15 and 32 are not alike: the introduction of the calf in the latter instance. As is well known, the presence of this calf in the cult of the northern kingdom came to be viewed as a grave and chronic symptom of the limits of loyalty to Yahweh.\textsuperscript{19} Indeed, allowing for the difference in scope of the two narratives, the one encompassing all humankind and the other encompassing only Israel, Exodus 32 may be taken to be analogous to Genesis 3 as an etiology of sin.\textsuperscript{20}

In view of the amount of attention that has been given to the role of Eve, as a woman, in Genesis 3, and in view of Trible’s concern for the \textit{Tendenz} of the "patriarchal storytellers" in Exodus, the following interpretive proposal is perhaps not amiss: if the narrative arising in Genesis 1 and 2 is abruptly derailed by an action in Genesis 3 attributed in the first instance to a woman, in the Book of Exodus the story of liberation, covenant, and entry into the promised land (cf. 6:3-8) is abruptly derailed by a cultic action presided over by a man the character of whose leadership throws Miriam’s definitively Yahwistic cultic leadership into bold relief, as, so to speak, a true Ezer kēnegdō (or “fit help,” Gen 2:25) to Israel. If we view synoptically these two portrayals of the rise of sin—each in its own way primal—we may take it that the biblical narrative tradition is capable of assigning primal sin to leading characters of both genders.

Moreover, if Miriam and Aaron are the first two cultic leaders in Israel’s celebrations of the exodus, then Israel’s centuries-long tendency to accommodate cultic idolatry is given its exemplar in Aaron the priest, while the countervailing impulse for true worship of the God of the exodus is given its exemplar and prototype in Miriam, who in such a context is, significantly, identified as “the prophetess.” If the prophetic word that comes to Israel thereafter in critique of its cult is conveyed in the main through prophets, it is intriguing that the deuteronomistic history has a final such word come through a prophetess, Huldah (2 Kgs 22:11-20). Whatever editorial intention may lie behind this fact, the reader cannot help reflecting on the possible significance of the way these two prophetesses “bracket” the exodus from Egypt and the history in the land of the community that celebrates it.

\textsuperscript{19} See 1 Kgs 12:28-30 and frequently thereafter; also Hos 8:5-6; 10:5.
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