

Parashah B'Shallah
January 26, 2013

G-d Delivers G-d's People at the Reed Sea
15 Shevat 5773

by Nancy and Peter Gossels

The laudatory hymn to G-d, the Song at the Sea, is the first instance of such a composition in the Torah, according to Nahum M. Sarna.

Many scholars believe that the hymn may have been inserted into the Torah after the prose account had been written, even though it appears to have been composed at least a century or so before.

James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, (1998).

“The language of the hymn is thoroughly archaic employing several features commonly found in Canaanite poetry . . . and the definite article (“the” or “ha”) never once appears with a noun.”

Nahum Sarna, the *JPS Torah Commentary*, (1991).

Ibn Ezra believed that, “Moses himself composed this hymn and taught it to Israel, and that everyone chanted responsively “I will sing unto the L-rd”.

Abrabanel agrees but elaborates that after each stanza the people would respond:

I will sing to the L-rd
Though He is gloriously glorified
Horse and its rider
He hurled into the sea.

Philo in the 1st Century CE wrote that men and women sang the song antiphonally. “The wonderful sight and experience, an act transcending word and

thought and hope, so filled with ecstasy both men and women that, forming a single choir, they sang hymns of thanksgiving to G-d, their Savior, the men led by the prophet Moses and the women by the prophetess Miriam.”

Rabbi Akiba compared the arrangement of this hymn to the ancient mode of reciting the Hallel where the people would respond with Hallaluyah after each verse chanted by the cantor.

The editors of *The Torah, A Women's Commentary* tell us that many scholars believe that the Song at the Sea, though attributed to Moses, was actually composed by Miriam because it was common practice for women to compose songs of praise when the warriors returned triumphantly from battle. References in Judges ch. 11:34 and 1 Samuel 18:6 cite women going forth with music and dance hailing the return of the victorious warriors.

The Song at the Sea “closes with an exaltation of G-d, now expressed in terms of kingship, the earliest biblical use of this metaphor . . .” Nahum Sarna, the *JPS Torah Commentary*.

Moses is referred to as G-d's servant for the first time in Exodus 14:31.

“Hence the poignancy of the testimony at the Sea of Reeds. Israel now trusted Moses no less than G-d, accepting him as G-d's servant. He had overcome his sense of inadequacy to win their absolute confidence. G-d's unfathomable intervention had vindicated Moses' loyalty and fortitude, and he burst into a song of jubilation that reverberates through the ages.”

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch (Chancellor of JTS, 1994)

This is a drama with but a single actor, bespeaking an overwhelming sense of G-d's active, steadfast presence. G-d orchestrated the emergence of Israel as a nation to form an alternative social order. But history proved to be recalcitrant and exile became the locus of Jewish life. Accordingly, when the rabbis integrated "The Song at the Sea" into the prayerbook, they doubled verse 18, as if it were another transition, and added three messianic verses from elsewhere in Scripture (Psalm 22:29, Obadiah 1:21, and Zechariah 14:9) holding out the promise of eventual redemption. Such muted messianism fortified and frustrated Jews as they endured the imperfections of their historical experience.

Rabbi Ismar Schorsch

The second part of the hymn contains a number of controversial passages; namely, the reference to "Thy Holy habitation". Ibn Ezra thinks that it refers to Mount Sinai, while Rashbam sees it as the land of Israel.

B.S. Jacobson, *Meditations on the Torah*

The Torah, A Women's Commentary suggests that "The holy abode" contains a prophesy concerning the temple in Jerusalem, which was built centuries later or else refers to G-d's heavenly habitation.

Each of the things I have recounted just as they are told in Sacred Scriptures. And let no one wonder at the astonishing nature of this thing, that a road to safety was found through the sea itself - whether this happened by G-d's will or simply through happenstance - on behalf of an ancient people innocent of all wrongdoing. For indeed, it was but a short while ago that the Pamphilian Sea moved backwards for those who were accompanying Alexander, King of Macedonia, thus offering them a path through it when no other way out existed, and so allowing them to overcome, as was G-d's will,

the Persian empire. All those who have written down Alexander's doings are in agreement on this. However, each person may decide on his own concerning such matters.

Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 2:347-48 (written about 90 CE)

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The splitting of the Reed Sea by which Israel is redeemed by G-d from slavery and saved from slaughter by Pharaoh's Egyptian army is one of the seminal events in Jewish history. You all know that it is recalled in the Micha Mocha that we sing every Shabbat. The miraculous event is referred to throughout our literature in other sections of the Torah and Tanach, such as Psalms 77 and 106, in Hosea, Isaiah, and Nehemiah, to name a few. And, of course, our Passover Haggadah, but most of the Biblical references do not speak of the destruction of the Egyptians, only of G-d's power.

What we'd like to do this morning is to read through the prose account and the Song at the Sea, which is the triumphant hymn to G-d and see how they differ. The hymn is one of the oldest writings in the Torah and is thought to have been written before the prose account. Its form is closely related to ancient Canaanite verse.

Can you find where the splitting of the sea is actually mentioned in the hymn? Because it doesn't mention that the sea was split apart as the Israelites waited on dry land. Yet, the power seems to reside in its immediacy, in the strong connection between the people and G-d. What's missing in the prose account: there are no intermediaries between the Israelites and G-d: like the cloud, angels or Moses – it's just G-d.

The hymns can be divided into four components:

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| Verses 1-10: | G-d as Warrior (G-d's great triumph over Egypt) |
| Verses 11-13: | Failure of Egyptians to cross the Sea (G-d is incomparable) |
| Verses 14-16: | Revelation at Sinai and panic of nations at G-d's wondrous deeds. |
| Verses 17-18: | Israel on G-d's holy mountain in his sanctuary (looking forward to future) |

Most scholars agree that Verse 19 is not part of the hymn.

We are told that Moses and the children of Israel sang this song to Adonai, but there is much disagreement about who actually sang the hymn and how it was sung.

The Jews of Rome (probably around 100 CE) incorporated the entire song into their service, a practice that was followed for centuries thereafter, according to Nahum Sarna.

What is our own sea crossing today? How would we enter it?