

# Form and Rhetoric in Biblical Song: Ramban's Commentary on the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1-18)

Modern literary scholarship on biblical poetry has systematically defined its formal structure, which distinguishes it from narrative prose texts. Although there is no definitive description of this genre, scholars have delineated certain characteristic stylistic elements that identify a text as poetry in the Bible.

As Adele Berlin stipulates:

Biblical poetry is a type of elevated discourse, composed of terse lines, and employing a high degree of parallelism and imagery. Other tropes and figures may also be present, most commonly, word and sound repetition and patterning.<sup>1</sup>

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This is an expanded version of my paper delivered in Hebrew at the 16<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Jewish Studies, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel (August 2013), titled, "Omanut U-Mashma'ut Ha-Shirah Ha-Mikra'it Be-Peirusho shel Ha-Ramban."

1. Adele Berlin, "Reading Biblical Poetry," in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 2098; see also her discussion, *ibid.*, 2097-2104. Compare *idem*, "Introduction to Hebrew Poetry," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 4:301-15. On the definition of biblical poetry, see also Andrea L. Weiss, "Poetry," *Encyclopedia Judaica, EncJud on CD-ROM*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 16:254-62; Lynell Zogbo and Ernst R. Wende-

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While many of these features appear in biblical prose as well, scholars have observed that their density, high rate of occurrence, and predominance within a compact unit mark a biblical text as being poetic.<sup>2</sup>

With regard to the structural organization of the biblical poem, the marked poetic feature of parallelism— in which two (or sometimes three and, less often, four) poetic lines are paired in a balanced grammatical structure, style, and/or mirroring of ideas—creates a strong sense of proportion and consistency in the presentation of the poem’s design and lends a rhythmic awareness to the composition.<sup>3</sup>

From a broader perspective, scholars have also noted that in order to fully appreciate the form and rhetoric of a biblical poem, it is essential to delimit its parameters, marking its clear beginning and end, as well as to divide its contents into larger structural segments—stanzas (and their subdivisions, strophes)—“that share a combination of common theme, style, imagery, vocabulary, metrical pattern, or like elements,” so that one may discern “the elegant *structural balance of compositional units . . . through which the poetic masterbuilder creates the architecture of his poem*” (emphasis in the original).<sup>4</sup>

As a tightly structured composition, in terms of its individual related lines and larger groupings of lines, the poem can only be fully

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land, *Hebrew Poetry in the Bible: A Guide for Understanding and for Translating* (New York: United Bible Societies, 2000), 19–60; Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); and Murray H. Lichtenstein, “Biblical Poetry,” in *Back To The Sources: Reading the Classic Jewish Texts*, ed. Barry W. Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), 105–27.

2. See Berlin’s observation, “Reading Biblical Poetry,” 2097, and compare Weiss, “Poetry,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 16:262. Although James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 69, 83, 85, maintains that there is no clear dividing line between “prose” and “poetry” in the Bible, scholars such as Adele Berlin (*The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. and Dearborn, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 2008; originally published Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985], 4–6) and Alter (*Art of Biblical Poetry*, 4–5) argue that one can and should classify certain biblical passages as “poetry,” a categorization that reflects their particular style and meaning.

3. See Lichtenstein, “Biblical Poetry,” 115–16, who focuses on the element of “balance” that is the characteristic feature of biblical poetry. This is particularly evident on a narrow, internal level in the technique of parallelism, in which there is “the resulting *parallelism of thought*, the echoing of a single sentiment . . . everything expressed in its first half is balanced by some counterpart in the second, be it specific word or general idea.” See also *ibid.*, 117–18, where he notes that parallelism in biblical poetry is thus viewed as “*the qualitative balance of sense units* (be they specific words, grammatical forms or constructions, concepts or images). . . .”

4. Lichtenstein, “Biblical Poetry,” 118.

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understood when the parts are then integrated into a coherent whole, revealing how the poem develops and advances its primary content and themes from inception to conclusion.<sup>5</sup> As Andrea Weiss observes:

Appreciating the artistry of biblical poetry and the depth of its meaning requires being a skillful reader, one who can unpack the language, structure, and imagery of a poetic passage and then *piece everything back together* [my emphasis] in a way that gives voice to the ideas conveyed in the elevated discourse of poetry.<sup>6</sup>

In the present study, I will illustrate how the commentary of the pre-eminent Andalusian exegete, R. Moshe ben Nahman (Ramban) (c. 1194-1270), offers a noteworthy medieval contribution to the study of the genre of biblical poetry in his interpretation of the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:1-18). This study builds on the scholarship on Ramban's commentary to this biblical song, which has focused on how Ramban is insightfully aware of specific poetic features, such as the distinctive technique of parallelism and the song's chronological ordering of events. The primary goal of the present analysis is to apply this scholarship to develop a comprehensive, holistic investigation of Ramban's perceptive *peshat*-reading of this song in its entirety. This study aims to elucidate how Ramban coheres all of the parts of the song into a cohesive whole, discerning its sophisticated, intricate structure from beginning to end and creating an elaborate text that interweaves its individual components into a tightly organized composition.

This broad view of Ramban's commentary on the complete Song will demonstrate how he succeeds in eliciting the main thematic motifs developed and elaborated as the song progresses from one stanza to the next to its climactic conclusion. We will see that Ramban's integrated reading discerns the expressive force of biblical song as a literary means to convey its rhetorical potency and theological pedagogy.<sup>7</sup>

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5. On this general approach to the analysis of biblical poetry, see the seminal work of Wilfred G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to its Techniques* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995; originally published JSOT Press, 1984), 14-35, in which he delineates a step by step procedure for interpreting a biblical poem, involving two angles of investigation: analysis of the poem's individual components and features and synthesis of these separate elements in order to demonstrate how they merge to create the literary product.

6. Weiss, "Poetry," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 16:262. Compare the observations of Ernst R. Wendland, "The Discourse Analysis of Hebrew Poetry: A Procedural Outline," in *Discourse Perspectives on Hebrew Poetry in the Scriptures*, UBS Monograph Series 7, ed. Ernst R. Wendland (Reading, UK/New York: United Bible Societies, 1994), 1, 7, and Lichtenstein, "Biblical Poetry," 126.

7. It is noteworthy that a number of important works on Jewish biblical exegesis of

Before proceeding to Ramban's commentary on Exodus 15, some general observations about his view on the literary composition of biblical song are in order. In delineating the qualifying features of Scriptural *shirah* with regard to the song of *Ha'azinu* (Deut. 32), Ramban writes:

And [Scripture] designates it [*Ha'azinu*] as *shirah* because Israel will recite it regularly with song and with music (בשיר וביזמרה) Therefore, it is written like a song/poem (כשירה), for the songs are written with pauses in them in the places for the melody (כי השירים יכתבו בהם הפסיק במקומות הנעימה).<sup>8</sup>

According to Ramban, *shirah* in the Bible is distinguished in its primary meaning by its oral mode of recitation.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps prompted by the

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biblical poetry do not examine Ramban's commentary on biblical song: Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*; Adele Berlin, *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991); and Amira Meir, "Medieval Jewish Interpretation of Pentateuchal Poetry" (Ph.D dissertation, McGill University, 1994) (Hebrew). I plan to develop Ramban's analysis of biblical poetic texts in further publications, based on the following papers delivered at academic conferences: "Israel on Trial: Nahmanides' Commentary on the Poetic Testimony of *Ha'azinu* (Deut. 32)," International Annual Conference of the National Association of the Professors of Hebrew Language and Literature (NAPH), Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island (June 2016); and "The Literary and Thematic Unity of Balaam's Prophecies in Ramban's Biblical Commentary," The 17<sup>th</sup> World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, Israel (August 2017).

8. Ramban, commentary to Deut. 31:19 in *Mikra'ot Gedolot Ha-Keter—Deuteronomy*, ed. Menachem Cohen (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011), 213. Translations of biblical verses and commentaries are my own.

9. Ramban's focus on the melodic, oral feature of biblical *shirah* is echoed among earlier and later exegetes on biblical poetry. See, for example, Yehudah ha-Levi, *Sefer ha-Kuzari*, trans. and annotated by Yehudah Even Shmuel (Tel Aviv: Dvir Pub., 1972), 2:70–72 (pp. 87–88). On ha-Levi's approach, see Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 190–91, and Berlin, *Biblical Poetry through Medieval Jewish Eyes*, 39, 45–46, 64–65. Compare the view of Abravanel in his introduction to Exodus 15 (*Peirush Ha-Torah Le-Rabbenu Yizḥak Abravanel*, ed. Avishai Shutland [Jerusalem: Chorev Pub., 1997], Exodus, 2:210–13). Abravanel delineates three types of poetry: metrical poems; non-metrical poems that deal with metaphysical matters, which are set to music with defined melodic arrangements; and poems classified by their figurative language. Concluding that the first type does not exist in the Bible, Abravanel determines that the song of Exodus 15 fits the second and third categories. On Abravanel's discussion, see Kugel, *ibid.* 193–4, and Berlin, *ibid.* 120–28. In contrast to ha-Levi, however, Abravanel claims that the words and their number correspond to the demands of the melodic arrangement; see Berlin, *ibid.* 45, 120. Compare, among modern scholars, J.P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry: An Introductory Guide*, trans. Ineke Smit (Louisville/London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 34, who observes that in ancient times, the poet was frequently a singer, such that the poetic lines "take up singing time . . . and the proportions of cola and verses, of strophes and stanzas lend structure both to this singing, and to meaning and content of the song=poem." See also Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, 76–82; Luis Alonso-Schökel, *A Manual of Hebrew Poetics* (Rome: Editrice Pontificio

anomalous assignation of this term to the context of Deut. 32, which is replete with rebuke and predictions of sin and punishment, Ramban infers that the title “*shirah*” does not classify a text based on its content of praise or celebration,<sup>10</sup> but rather specifies a distinct form of expression: a text set to a musical tune, which is meant to be sung, not merely read or spoken.<sup>11</sup> Its oral form of communication is also emphasized in God’s command to Moses to “teach it to the Israelites, *place it in their mouths. . .*” (Deut. 31:19). As Ramban interprets, Moses is instructed to teach the song to his nation so that they will fully memorize its words.<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Ramban correlates the acoustic mode of biblical *shirah* with its structural presentation in written form, which facili-

Instituto Bíblico, 1988), 20; and William H.C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary, The Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 504, on the oral, performative aspect of biblical poetry.

10. See, however, Elhanan Samet, *Iyyunim Be-Parashot Ha-Shavu'a: Sidrah Sheniyah, Vayikra-Bemidbar-Devarim*, ed. Eyal Fishler and Ariel Shaveh (Jerusalem: Makhon Ma'aliyot, 2005), 474–75, who proposes that Ramban questions the designation of Deut. 32 as *shirah*, since “song” usually originates from human initiative, assisted by the Holy Spirit (*ruah ha-kodesh*), whereas the text of *Ha'azinu* is a prophetic communication. In this regard, note that Ramban (Ex. 15:1,19) focuses on the spontaneity of the composition of the Song of the Sea; he also maintains that Moses inserts a prayer into the Song of the Sea (Ex. 15:16,18). Yet, one must keep in mind how Ramban, introduction to the Book of Genesis, maintains that Moses received the Torah from “the mouth of God,” describing Moses as “a scribe copying and transcribing from an ancient book.” This premise suggests that the unique poetic style of *shirah* is part of the divine revelation communicated to Moses. On this latter point, see Malkah Shenvald, “*Kefel Lashon Ve-Kefel Inyan she-ba-Torah u-be-Iyov be-Peirush Ramban*,” *Beit Mikra* 60, 2 (2015): 283–84. Samet (*ibid.*, 475 n.23) also considers the possibility that Ramban is defining *shirah* based on form, not content.

11. Lichtenstein, “Biblical Poetry,” 107, also observes that the Hebrew term “*shir*” denotes in a limited sense its oral quality—that it is sung to a melody—in contrast to the broader literary English term, “poetry.” Nevertheless, it will become apparent that Ramban distinguishes this text as being marked by characteristic stylistic features that exhibit its poetic mode and that he correlates its oral recitation with its written medium.

12. See Ramban, Num. 23:5, with regard to a similar phrasing: “God put a word in Balaam’s mouth,” in *Mikra’ot Gedolot Ha-Keter—Numbers*, ed. Menachem Cohen (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2011), 157. Compare Abravanel, introduction to Ex. 15 (ed. Shutland, 212), who notes that singing and music facilitate memory and enhance attentiveness to the deep messages of a biblical *shirah*, in contrast to prose (“*ha-sippurim ve-ha-dibburim ha-peshutim*”), which is often forgotten. See also Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York/London: W.W. Norton and Co., 2004), 1035, notes to Deut. 31:19, who associates the command to memorize the song with its literary genre as poetry, which is structurally arranged through parallel phrases to assist in this endeavor. As will be discussed, Ramban’s comment also connects the structure of biblical *shirah* with its mode of articulation.

tates memorization. Noting the stichographic formatting of Deut. 32, Ramban maintains that this biblical section has the structural look of a *shirah* in that it is organized with clear pauses to allow for its proper and measured melodic performance.<sup>13</sup> Significantly, his formulation of this defining feature correlates biblical *shirah*'s written format with "songs/poems (*shirim*)" in general, reflecting his view that this compositional mode has various qualities in common with a broad literary category.

Taking into consideration that Ramban himself composed poetry and liturgical *piyyutim*,<sup>14</sup> it is of interest that he maintains that the Bible classifies a biblical portion as *shirah* in order to set it apart from other surrounding texts based on its performative mode, which in turn is integrally associated with its complementary written formatting that facilitates its melodic recitation and accommodates its memorization.<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, in his commentary on *Ha'azinu* (Deut. 32), Ramban notes that this song is written in a condensed manner, *ketannah be-dibbur*, encapsulating many ideas within its brevity.<sup>16</sup> Similarly,

13. Ramban presumably bases his analysis on the talmudic tradition regarding the stichography of Deut. 32, which is written in a series of broken lines. See *Soferim* 12:8–9 on Deut. 32; compare b. *Megillah* 16b; *Yerushalmi Megillah* 3:7; and *Soferim* 12:10–12, regarding other songs, such as the Song of the Sea and the Song of Deborah (Jud. 5), which are designated by their stichographic writing. Notably, however, this scribal tradition is also applied to texts, such as Josh. 12:9–24, that would not be classified in modern terms as "poetry." On these writing patterns, see Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 119–27; compare Berlin, *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes*, 7–8.

14. Ramban's poems have been collected in *Kitvei Rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman*, ed. Hayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1963), 1:392–439. See also Bernard Septimus, "'Open Rebuke and Concealed Love': Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides (Ramban): Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1983), 27–30; Ezra Fleisher, "'The Gerona School' of Hebrew Poetry," in Twersky, *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides*, 35–49; Hayyim Schirmann, *Toledot ha-Shirah ha-Ivrit be-Sefarad ha-Nohrit u-ve-Darom Zarfat*, rev. and ed. Ezra Fleisher (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Magnes Press, 1997), 322–29; and Peter Cole (ed. and trans.), *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950–1492* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 233–39.

15. Compare the important insight of Samuel David Luzzatto, Ex. 15:2, in *Peirush Shadal*, R. Shmuel David Luzzatto *Al Hamishah Hummeshei Torah*, ed. P. Schlesinger (Tel Aviv: Dvir Pub., 1965), 278, who writes that a predominant feature of biblical *shirah* is its binary organization, referring to the medieval conception of "the repetition of ideas in different words" (*kefel inyan be-milot shonot*) as well as his more modern conception of parallelism (*tikbolet*). In his view, this poetic device divides the literary composition into small segments, "so that it will make a greater impression on the listener *and also so that it is made fit to sing it* (בָּו גַּם כִּי שְׁכַשֵּׁר לְשֹׁרֶר בָּו)."

16. Ramban, Deut. 32:40–41, on v. 44 (*Ha-Keter Deut.*, 235), based on *Sifrei Ha'azinu*, *piska* 333, analyzing the emphasis that Moses spoke "*all* of the words of this song," even though it is only 43 verses.

he observes in another context, that songs/poems (*shirot*) are communicated in brief language (*lashon kazar*).<sup>17</sup> As one modern scholar observes, “Poetry is the most compact and concentrated form of speech possible.”<sup>18</sup>

Accordingly, readers of Ramban’s commentary on the Song of the Sea will anticipate that Ramban will draw out the full meaning of this poetic text through careful and close examination of its condensed language and measured structure.

In his commentary on Ex. 15, Ramban further discerns that biblical song may be distinguished by its language (*lashon*), which differentiates it from the surrounding context through characteristic linguistic and stylistic features.<sup>19</sup> Responding to Abraham Ibn Ezra, who maintains that the verse, . . . כי בא סוס פרעה ברכבו ובפרשיו בים (Ex. 15:19), is part of the Song,<sup>20</sup> Ramban asserts, “But this is not like the language of the song and the prophecies (וְאַנְנוּ בְּלָשׁוֹן הַשִּׁירָה וְהַנְּבּוֹאות).”<sup>21</sup> Here, Ramban

17. Ramban, Num. 21:18-20 (*Ha-Keter* Num., 141, 143). This comment is an addendum that Ramban supplemented to his commentary, as noted in Yosef Ofer and Yehonatan Jacobs, *Tosafot Ramban le-Peirusho la-Torah she-Nikhtevu be-Erez Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Herzog Academic College, World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013), 463-64.

18. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 15. See also Berlin, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 4:303, on terseness as a defining feature of biblical poetry.

19. The versions for Ramban’s commentary, as well as those of the medieval commentators Rashi, Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, and Bekhor Shor, to Ex. 15, derive from *Mikra’ot Gedolot ha-Keter—Exodus*, part I, ed. Menachem Cohen (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012). Ḥizkuni’s biblical commentary derives from *Ḥizkuni: Peirushei ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Ḥizkiyyah b’r Manoah*, ed. Hayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1981). Regarding Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Exodus, this study follows the conclusions of Yehonatan Jacobs, “Ramban u-Shenei Peirushei R. Avraham Ibn Ezra le-Sefer Shemot,” *Hispania Judaica* 13 (2017): 51-70, Hebrew section, that Ramban had access only to Ibn Ezra’s long commentary and not his short commentary on the Book of Exodus. Additionally, Yehonatan Jacobs, “Ha-im Hikkir Ramban et Peirush Rashbam La-Torah?” *Madda’ei ha-Yahadut* 46 (2009):85-108, surmises that Ramban did not have direct access to Rashbam’s Torah commentary. Nevertheless, Rashbam’s readings will be cited in the notes for comparative analysis to Ramban’s own interpretations.

20. See the long commentary of Ibn Ezra, Ex. 15:19, who renders the word *ki* in this verse as “for,” connecting this verse with the previous one as part of the song. Presumably, Ibn Ezra assigns this verse to the song due to its stichography; see *Soferim* 12:11 and Maimonides, *Hilkhot Sefer Torah*, end of ch. 8.

21. Ramban, Ex. 15:19. The wording of this comment is based on Cohen, *ha-Keter*, Exodus, part I, 127. See, however, the version in Hayyim Dov Chavel, *Peirushei ha-Torah le-Rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1959), 1:358, which reads, “וְאַנְנוּ בְּלָשׁוֹן הַשִּׁירָה וְהַנְּבּוֹאות”. This is the only place in his biblical commentary that Ramban demarcates the phrase, “language of the song.” Compare Yosef Nitzan, “Le-Mashma’utah shel ‘Shirat Ha-yam’ Ve-hora’atah,” *Shema’atin* 147-148 (2002): 14-15, who also notes Ramban’s disagreement with Ibn Ezra about the

does not qualify the particular “*lashon*” that distinguishes this biblical song from other texts.<sup>22</sup> Referring to Ramban’s analysis, Shmuel David Luzzatto, a nineteenth-century Italian exegete, explains, “The language (*lashon*) of this verse (v. 19) is not like the language of the *shirah*, but the manner of a straightforward narrative (*derekh sippur pashut*).”<sup>23</sup> According to Luzzatto’s reading of Ramban’s interpretation, the language of *shirah* is distinguished from the plain style of narrative prose, implying that the language of a *shirah* is more complex, with a loftier style, which makes a different impression on the listener than that of narrative. Having defined biblical song based on its structured style, formatted with clear pauses, and having pointed out that it is noteworthy for its compact mode of communication, Ramban directs his readers to how he is attuned to the unique linguistic and stylistic features of biblical song in order to elicit its particular message and meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Significantly, in his argument against Ibn Ezra, Ramban references two apparently different literary modes of composition in the Bible: song (הַרְמֵשׁ) and prophecies (נִבּוֹאֹת), the latter classification noted as a distinct

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parameters of this biblical song.

22. The term *lashon*, which appears frequently in Ramban’s commentary, is applied broadly to philological matters (grammatical, etymological, or indicative of voice), as well as stylistic matters (repetition, style and tone of expression, choice of words, and word order); it is not used to denote subject matter or context. There are numerous references in Ramban’s commentary to the view of *ba’alei ha-lashon*, in which he focuses on grammar and linguistic issues; see, for example, his commentary to Gen. 6:4; Ex. 4:9, 13:16. Ramban uses the phrase *minhag ha-lashon* or *mishpat ha-lashon* with reference to grammatical matters (Ex. 15:1) and stylistic repetition (Gen. 12:1). He uses the phrase *derekh ha-lashon* with reference to certain choices of phrasing and expressions (Gen. 23:9; Lev. 4:14, 25). He uses the term *lashon* when defining words (Gen 1:1, 7; 14:22; 17:17; 19:2; 20:17; 45:1), and he also employs this term when delving into the language in relation to its meaning; note how he juxtaposes *lashon* with *inyan* in his commentary to Gen. 49:6. Furthermore, he uses the term *lashon* to refer to a manner of speaking and the voice in which it is spoken (Gen. 27:12, 31:46, 32:21, 37:17; Ex. 1:10, 14:10).

23. Luzzatto, Ex. 15:19 (ed. Schlesinger, 293).

24. Compare Shenvald, “*Kefel Lashon ve-Kefel Inyan*,” 282 and 282 n. 43, who infers that Ramban is distinguishing the “language” of song based on its stylistic feature of “doubling,” that is, in modern terms, parallelism. In this regard, note that Luzzatto, *ibid.*, Ex. 15:2 (ed. Schlesinger, 278-279), distinguishes biblical songs’ characteristic stylistic feature as the doubling of ideas in the mode of parallelism. As will be discussed, Ramban’s sensitivity to parallelism is a key aspect of his analysis of the “language” of biblical song, but it is also correlated to his perception of other stylistic poetic features such as the song’s condensed style and its larger structure and organization in addition to its use of figurative language.

form of discourse by Ibn Ezra.<sup>25</sup> Juxtaposing these literary modes, Ramban appears to assign them a common “language” (*lashon*), although in his commentary on Ex. 15, he indicates that biblical song does not always adhere to all of the grammatical practices of the literary mode of prophecies.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps we might qualify that in this context, Ramban is associating “song” and “prophecies” as belonging to the same broad mode of discourse of “poetry,” based on characteristic stylistic features and method of communication, while distinguishing between them in their form of recitation; “song” is oral in origin and meant to be sung, whereas “prophecies” are spoken and/or written.<sup>27</sup>

It is important to note what Ramban does not include in his definition of biblical *shirah*. First, considerations of meter and rhyme are not taken into account. This may be because Ramban realizes that this criterion is not a basic component of this biblical literary genre.<sup>28</sup> While Jewish exegetes of Muslim Spain were preoccupied with evaluating biblical texts as “poetry” based on the standards of medieval Arabic poetry, particularly defined by a regular meter and rhyme,<sup>29</sup> Ramban’s commentary

25. See, for example, Ibn Ezra, Gen. 49:3, 6; Ex. 14:19, long commentary; Ex. 19:3, short commentary; Lev. 16:29; Num. 10:35, 12:6; Deut. 32:2. Ibn Ezra references this literary genre of “the prophecies” particularly with regard to his perception of the doubling (*kaful*) of ideas in parallel phrases in these biblical texts; see Jair Haas, “*Muda’ut Ve-yahas le-Kefel Inyan be-Milot Shonot’ ke-Tofa’ah Ofyanit le-Signon ha-Mikra’i be-Parshanut ha-Mikra ha-Yehudit Bimei ha-Beinayim*,” (Ph.D dissertation, Bar-Ilan University, 2005), especially 79–89, 94–106. Note Haas’s references to the sources in Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries for his observations of this biblical stylistic feature, *ibid.*, 79 n.184 and 84 n.195.

26. See Ramban, Ex. 15:13, discussed below; compare his commentary to Ex. 15:1, regarding the mode of prophecies.

27. Ramban would perhaps acknowledge that *shirah*/song could refer secondarily to the genre of praise and celebration.

28. Among modern scholars, there is a general consensus that biblical poetry is not defined by a consistent, measurable meter, as is the case in poetry of other cultures. See, for example, N.K. Gottwald, “Poetry, Hebrew,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 3:834–35; Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 301; Watson, *Poetry*, 98; Berlin, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 4:308; and Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 503.

29. See Berlin, *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes*, 10–11, 22–29. Compare Uriel Simon, *Four Approaches to the Book of Psalms: From Saadia Gaon to Abraham Ibn Ezra*, trans. Lenn J. Schramm (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 167–69 and 269 n.60; Mordechai Z. Cohen, “‘The Best of Poetry’: Literary Approaches to the Bible in the Spanish *Peshat* Tradition,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 6 (1995–1996): 22–23; and Jair Haas, “Did Medieval Jewish Commentators Understand Biblical Parallelism? A Critique of Robert Harris’ ‘Discerning Parallelism,’” *Revue Des Études Juives* 166:3–4 (2007): 471 n.21, who note the hesitancy of medieval Spanish exegetes to label a biblical text as “poetry” since it does not conform to the criteria of medieval Arabic poetry.

does not appear to consider a position on this debate. Instead, a study of his analysis of the Song of the Sea from the perspective of the genre of poetry elicits his keen literary insights into the relationship between the form and rhetoric of this biblical text. Furthermore, the issue of how to present the superiority of the Bible's composition in relation to the doctrine of *Arabiyya*, which promoted the preeminence of the Arabic language and writings, does not seem to be on Ramban's mind in his commentary on biblical songs.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Ramban does not specify the presence of figurative language or imagery as part of his definition of what constitutes a biblical *shirah*. Yet, in these texts, Ramban does show an interest in the figurative language of biblical song, as will become apparent in his commentary on the Song of the Sea.

Therefore, the question to be explored is how Ramban applies his delineation of the genre of *shirah* to his perception of the integral relationship between its form and meaning. Having stipulated that biblical song is configured with marked pauses, facilitating its oral, melodic recitation, Ramban intimates that his close reading of this type of text will focus on the arrangement of the song's lines into discernible patterns and relationships. In his commentary on the Song of the Sea, Ramban does not classify the corresponding relationship between related parts of a biblical verse, except in his analysis of v. 6, where he stipulates that its two parts are "doubled" (*kaful*), a term adapted from Ibn Ezra to signify a repetition of meaning in different words ("kefel inyan be-milot shonot"), or what is known in modern terms as synonymous parallelism.<sup>31</sup> Yet, Ramban does not read most verses of this song synonymously,

30. Ramban espouses the superiority and sanctity of the language of the Bible, designated as the "holy language" (*lashon ha-kodesh*) by the Sages; see his commentary to Ex. 30:13, based on *b. Berakhot* 13a. Furthermore, in the introduction to his biblical commentary, he advocates the kabbalistic premise that the entire Torah is composed of the names of God. Nevertheless, this perspective is not positioned within a wider theoretical discussion in his commentary regarding the evaluative relationship between Hebrew and Arabic, which was a concern for Spanish Andalusian exegetes. On this latter issue, see Berlin, *Biblical Poetry Through Medieval Jewish Eyes*, 17–22. Furthermore, the term, מילות, a Hebrew term coined by Saadia Gaon to convey the Bible's elegant form of expression, particularly its poetic eloquence, while it appears as an aesthetic rationale for synonymous repetition and semantic doubling in Ibn Ezra's writings (on this, see Haas, "Kefel Inyan," 94, 96–98, 102–103, and Cohen, "The Best of Poetry," 25, 32, and 51n.89), is used minimally by Ramban, with reference to the Bible's use of homonyms [see Ramban, Gen. 49:22; Exod. 3:2, in relation as well to Jud. 10:4; and Lev. 23:11], and it does not appear in his commentaries on biblical texts designated as *shirah*.

31. See further in my discussion on v. 6 above.

and only if one appreciates his perception of the diverse, variegated relationships between related paired lines can one ascertain the basis for his specific interpretations. Accordingly, applying the general inroads of modern literary scholarship, we will describe how Ramban views the parallelism between associated poetic lines by noting how he aligns them grammatically and semantically; with regard to semantic parallelism, we will note how he associates these relationships based on logical and descriptive correlations.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, we will seek to discern how he views the internal links between poetic lines and the ways in which he also establishes external links between lines from different stanzas, to integrate the song into a cohesive whole, informed by an elaborate network of interrelated themes and messages.<sup>33</sup>

32. The eighteenth-century Bishop Robert Lowth is credited with delineating three primary categories of parallelism in biblical poetic texts—synonymous, antithetical, and synthetic. See Robert Lowth, *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, trans. G. Gregory (Andover: Codman Press by Flagg and Gould, 1829), Lecture III, 34, 35; Lecture IV, 43–44; Lecture XIX, 154, 157–64. Nonetheless, scholars have since questioned the category of synonymous parallelism, presuming that the second related line in a poetic couplet contributes something additional to the first. On this point, see Kugel, *Idea of Biblical Poetry*, 8, 13, who notes that parallel lines should be analyzed with the approach of “A is so, and what’s more, B is so,” emphasizing that “B must inevitably be understood as A’s completion.” See his discussion, *ibid.*, 1–58. Compare Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 19, who surmises that in biblical poetry, when there is “semantic parallelism,” then “the characteristic movement of meaning is one of heightening or intensification . . . of focusing, specification, concretization, even what can be called dramatization.” See his discussion, *ibid.*, 5–26. See also idem, “The Characteristics of Ancient Hebrew Poetry,” in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 615–16. Compare the earlier observations of J. Muilenburg, “A Study in Hebrew Rhetoric: Repetition and Style,” in *International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament Congress Volume VTS 1* (Copenhagen/Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1953), 98. Furthermore, scholars have delineated additional categories of parallelism prevalent in biblical poetry; see, for example, Berlin, *Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism*, and idem, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 4:304–308, who adopts a linguistic approach that takes into consideration biblical parallelism’s lexical, grammatical, semantic, and phonologic features. Additional resources for categorizing different types of biblical parallelism are Watson, *Poetry*, 114–59; David L. Petersen and Kent Harold Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 21–35; and Zogbo and Wendland, *Hebrew Poetry*, 20–30.

33. In this regard, I will apply the general conclusion of Jair Haas, “*Kefel Inyan*,” 107–19, with which I concur, who notes that while Ramban demonstrates his awareness of the literary phenomenon of “the doubling of meaning in different words” (*kefel inyan be-milot shonot*), influenced particularly by the approach of Abraham Ibn Ezra, and he sometimes assigns two parallel poetic lines synonymous correspondence, he often prefers to differentiate between analogous lines and to distinguish a separate meaning for each one. Notably, Haas does not restrict his study of Ramban’s perception of the

## Ramban's Demarcation of the Overall Literary Structure of the Song of the Sea

In order to determine Ramban's insights into the poetic character of the Song of the Sea from a holistic perspective, it is necessary to first categorize how he delineates the song's structural parameters.

Ramban delimits the song to Ex. 15:1b–18, inferring that it is framed by the narrative statements in vv. 1a and 19, which serve to mark the song's timing. Clarifying this temporal background, Ramban links the adverbs of these verses and reads: “*Then (תְּנֵס) Moses did sing [v. 1a] when (כִּי) Pharaoh came with his chariots into the sea [v. 19]*—on that very day immediately, not the next day or later.” Alternatively, he renders that the connection between these verses stresses the greater immediacy of their melodic outburst:

*Then [Moses did sing (v. 1)], when Pharaoh came with his horse into the sea and God turned the waters back on them while the children of Israel were walking on the dry land in its midst (v. 19)—to inform that while they were walking in its midst on dry land, they said the song.<sup>34</sup>*

Ramban does not explain why the description of the song's timing is interrupted by the song itself. Yet, his analysis frames the song within the setting of circumstances that prompts its composition, drawing the reader's attention to the integral relationship between its content and the surrounding narrative events. Furthermore, while the Israelite crossing through the split sea is emphasized primarily in Ex. 14 (vv. 16, 21–23, 29) and after the song, and referenced allusively only in the song itself (15:8), Ramban's juxtaposition of vv. 1a and 19 as the frame of the song associates the central connection between this event, along with the drowning

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relation between parallel lines to biblical song; he also examines narrative contexts, as well as Ramban's commentary on Job, which Ramban classifies in the genre of *tokhahot* argumentation (see his commentary to Job 12:23, 14:10). While it is not wholly evident that Ramban deems the phenomenon of parallelism as a defining feature of biblical song, the preponderance of his focus on the relationship between parallel lines within his commentary on the Song of the Sea indicates his awareness that the frequency of parallelism in this literary mode demands attentive analysis and careful examination. On this latter point, compare Shenvald, “*Kefel Lashon ve-Kefel Inyan*,” 281–83.

34. Ramban, Ex. 15:19. Note that Rashi, Ex. 15:19, also renders *ki* as “when,” but he does not link this verse to the prologue in v.1. Luzzatto, Ex. 15:19 (ed. Schlesinger, 293), similarly agrees with Ramban. Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 546, however, finds Ramban's reading “less plausible” than other alternatives, presumably because of the necessity to link two distant verses. Instead, he interprets v. 19 as a narrative summation, rendering *ki* as “for.”

of the Egyptians, as the primary motivation for the song's composition.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, one anticipates that Ramban will apply his understanding of the catalytic narrative events in order to elicit the key motifs of the song and that he will interpret the song in relation to the prose description of the events.

The immediacy and spontaneity of the song conveyed through this narrative framework puts the reader in the mindset of those who have just experienced these defining events. This is evident in Ramban's grammatical reading of the opening words in v. 1a.<sup>36</sup> Noting the incongruity between the future construct of the verb signifying the act of singing, "Then Moses and Israel *will sing* this song (*az yashir*)," and the reality that the narrator is relating a past event, Ramban resolves that this linguistic formulation sets the proper tone for the ensuing poetic text. The intent is to create the impression that the song is transpiring at that moment, "as if they are singing before him." As Ramban explains, "The narrator (*ha-mesapper inyan*) positions himself in a particular time frame, and he hints to the situation from that [reference]." Ramban notes that the narrated frame establishes the mood of this scene, "speaking of it as a matter that is current, placing himself at its onset."<sup>37</sup> The implication is that this perspective immerses the reader in the unfolding scene, thus contributing to the vibrancy of the ensuing song. This dynamism integrally connects to the spontaneity of the song's oral composition.<sup>38</sup>

The narrative frame also focuses the reader on the song's participants. While v. 1a records that Moses and the children of Israel (that is, the men) sing this song, the temporal adverb, *ki—then*, in relation to vv. 19, 20–21, indicates that when Pharaoh and his army drowned and

35. Compare Richard D. Patterson, "Victory at Sea: Prose and Poetry in Exodus 14–15," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161:641 (January–March 2004): 50 and 50 n.27, who observes how the Israelite crossing through the split sea is highlighted in Exod. 14 and after the song, but only obliquely referenced in the song itself.

36. Ramban, Ex. 15:1.

37. Ramban, *ibid.*, indicates that it is a "norm of the language [of Scripture] (*minhag ha-lashon*)" for the narrator to describe events in this scenic mode. He further stipulates that the reverse scenario is also common, whereby the narrator speaks about a future event in the past tense as if it has already occurred, particularly in prophetic contexts.

38. Ramban is apparently influenced by Onkelos and Ibn Ezra, who advocate a reading of past tense for the grammatical construct of the future verb *yashir*, "will sing," particularly when this verb is juxtaposed to the adverb *az*, "then." Cf. Rashi's reading of Ex. 15:1. On these medieval approaches to this grammatical conundrum, see Simcha Kogut, *Ha-Mikra bein Taḥbir le-Parshanut* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Magnes Press, 2002), 57–59.

the Israelites crossed through dry land, “Miriam the prophetess took her drum in her hand and sang back to them (מִנְלֵת הַנָּשֶׁנִּים) the first verse of the song, that they [the women] should chant thus after Moses and Israel.”<sup>39</sup> Although Ramban does not clarify, it is possible that he reads the repetition of the first verse of the song in Miriam’s rendition (v. 21) as an indication that the women responded the entire song in kind.<sup>40</sup> Alternatively, this first verse was meant to serve as a chorus that the women would chant after each verse sung by the men.<sup>41</sup>

Presuming that biblical song is organized with a deliberate structure, Ramban’s commentary integrates an analysis of individual poetic lines into a broad schema. A close reading of his analysis of the Song of the Sea reveals that Ramban implicitly demarcates this text into distinct stanzas by eliciting the primary motif within each literary grouping. But, reading this song holistically, Ramban has an eye to integrating each of these motifs such that they interconnect to an overall cohesive text that pivots on the main goal of this song—to praise God’s attributes and actions that were manifested through the events at the sea.

The scholarly debate regarding the literary segments of the Song of the Sea is exemplified in Brevard Childs’ observation on this text:

The division into strophes . . . continues to be a highly subjective enterprise which is chiefly determined by the content of the poem in spite of the claims for larger poetic patterns.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, modern scholars generally agree that this song consists of two or three primary stanzas.<sup>43</sup> Although Ramban does not present

39. Ramban, Ex. 15:19. Cf. Rashbam, Bekhor Shor, and Hizkuni, Ex. 15:19, who, interpreting *ki* as “when,” infer that the conclusion of the statement in v. 19 is vv. 20–21. Ramban also links these verses, but he sees them as integrally associated with the temporal clause noted in v. 1a.

40. See Bekhor Shor and Hizkuni, Ex. 15:21, who claim that it was only necessary to repeat the first verse, as it represented the entire song that has just been recorded. This also appears to be Rashi’s approach.

41. See Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 548. Ramban is not clear whether *lahem* in v. 21 refers to singing to the men in response or to repeating the song’s lines to the women, even though the word is in the masculine form.

42. Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 247. Compare George Wesley Coats, Jr., “The Song of the Sea,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 31 (1969): 2 and nn.7, 9, who charts a range of scholarly opinions about the division of the song of Ex. 15 into strophes, demonstrating the lack of agreement among them, though there is general consensus regarding the boundaries of the poem as being vv.1b–18.

43. Among modern scholars, Childs, *ibid.*, 250–53, and Maribeth Howell, “Exodus 15, 1b-18: A Poetic Analysis,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 65:1 (1989): 9,

his insights with regard to all of the song's poetic units, a close reading of his commentary leads to the conclusion that he demarcates four major stanzas: verses 1b–7; 8–11; 12–17; and the climactic closure in verse 18.<sup>44</sup> This division is based on Ramban's perception of the progression of events depicted in the song in relation to the divine attribute that is the focus of Israel's praise in each stanza.

The first stanza (vv. 1b–7) introduces the catalyst and purpose of the song, and it foregrounds the main event of the Egyptian defeat, with the motifs of God's exaltedness and Israel's destiny as the central thematic pivots. The second stanza (vv. 8–11) details the events that result in the Egyptians' demise, with the goal of illustrating God's ability to perform miracles, which Ramban reveals to be His performance of diametrically opposed actions simultaneously. The third stanza (vv. 12–17) elaborates on God's diametric actions performed with regard to the Egyptians and the Israelites, transitioning to focus on the divine plans for the future destiny of His people. The song concludes in the fourth and final stanza (v. 18), which culminates in a succinct and powerful declaration of God's kingship. In Ramban's view, these words are the ultimate summation of all the divine attributes that have been delineated throughout the song.<sup>45</sup>

schematize this song with two stanzas, vv. 1b–12 and 13–18. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 51–54; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 505; and Patterson, "Victory at Sea," 47–49, divide this song into three stanzas, noting various literary features, such as repetition of imagery (as in the similes of vv. 5, 10, 16), staircase parallelism (vv. 6, 11, 16b), and concluding praises of God's power (as in vv. 6, 11, 18). These scholars disagree, however, regarding the exact verses comprising each stanza. Alter and Patterson begin the second stanza with v. 7 and the third stanza with v. 12, while Propp begins the second stanza with v. 8 and the third stanza with v. 13. Cf. J. P. Fokkelman, *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible at the Interface of Hermeneutics and Structural Analysis: Volume I: Ex. 15, Deut. 32, and Job 3* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1998), 34–35, who delineates four stanzas, separating vv. 17–18 as the last one.

44. Ramban considers stanzaic divisions of a poetic biblical text to be an integral aspect of his literary analysis of this type of genre of biblical text. Significantly, this is evident in his discussion of the literary structure of the song of *Haazinu* at the end of his commentary to Deut. 32:40–41 (*Ha-Keter*, Deut., 235). In the context of Ex. 15, however, the reader must do inferential analysis to discern Ramban's perception of the song's stanzaic divisions.

45. Compare the parallel insight of Isaac B. Gottlieb, *Yesh Seder la-Mikra: Hazal u-Parshanei Yemei ha-Beinayim Al Mukdam u-Me'uhar ba-Torah* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Magnes Press; Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2009), 323–24 and 324 n.32, who notes how Ramban observes that vv. 4–5 describe the events at the sea generally, while the next unit, which begins with v. 8, focuses in detail on this scene. As will be discussed, the presumption that Ramban marks four stanzas is based on how he views vv. 6–7 as a reiteration of the primary motifs of the first stanza, with v. 8 beginning a new unit that delineates God's defeat of the enemy, culminating in v. 11,

## Stanza I: The Motif of *Ge'ut*—Antithetical Actions: God's Rising Up Above the Enemy that is Lowered

Ramban discerns the first significant theme of this stanza by analyzing the linguistic meaning of the verb גָּאַה in the first line of v. 1 in relation to the image of the horse and rider hurled into the sea in the second line:

אשר לה כי גאה גאה / טוס ורכבו רמה בים

I shall sing to God, for He is greatly exalted/ horse and rider, He has hurled into the sea.

Ramban disagrees with Rashi, who renders the verb גָּאַה in the stative sense and interprets *ki* as a negative qualifier, thus construing this line antithetically, aiming to delimit the song's parameters: "I will sing to God, even though He is lofty beyond all songs."<sup>46</sup> Like Onkelos, Ramban renders גָּאַה in the active sense—acting exaltedly, in a proud manner: "The one who is *mitga'eh* elevates himself in distinction." Applying this meaning, as well as Onkelos' interpretation of the deictic particle *ki* as "for," Ramban interprets this line as a logical relationship of action-reason. Praising this divine attribute is the catalyst for this melodic forum.<sup>47</sup>

This idea is expanded in the second, corresponding paired line, which delineates how God exhibits this attribute in relation to His enemy: "For (*ki*) He raised Himself (*nitga'eh*) above the horse that is exalted in battle (*she-mitga'eh be-milhamah*) and over the warrior (*gibbor*) who rides it, for (*ki*) He hurled both into the sea."<sup>48</sup> The linking *ki* term that

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and the way in which he juxtaposes vv. 12 and 13 in relation to the ensuing verses of this third stanza.

46. This is Rashi's second opinion, Ex. 15:1. In Ramban's assessment, Rashi has rendered this verb with the denotation of loftiness, greatness, and increase. Rashi, however, does cite Onkelos' opinion first, though without elaboration. While Ramban focuses on the meaning of *ga'ah*, his disagreement with Rashi and his stipulation that "the correct [meaning] is the opinion of Onkelos" indicates that he reads the entire couplet in accordance with Onkelos' rendition.

47. Ramban, Ex. 15:1. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 509–10, also prefers to render this phrase in the active sense. Luzzatto, Ex. 15:1 (ed. Schlesinger, 275), observes that the coupling of the finite verb *ga'ah* with the infinitive absolute *ga'oh* points to the meaning of the verb in the active sense. Howell, "Exodus 15," 17, presents a reading like that of Ramban, rendering, "for He is gloriously triumphant."

48. Ramban, Ex. 15:1; apparently, his interpretation is also influenced by Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:1. Ramban's reading may also be rendering the double verb, *ga'oh ga'ah*, as an indication of God's exalted actions above and against the double exalted enemy, horse and rider. Compare Rashbam, Ex. 15:1, who observes that the term *ga'ah* is used in military victory.

Ramban introduces to connect the two poetic lines establishes the logical semantic relationship between the lines of this couplet.<sup>49</sup> By assigning God and His enemy, horse and rider, similar qualities of pride and exaltation, this poetic couplet sharpens the enemy's defeat, which is the primary topic of the song as stated in this opening stanza: God raises Himself above those who are themselves exalted.

Ramban's interpretation enables the reader to focus on the motif of opposition of raising and lowering (עָלָה in relation to נִמְלָא), which prevails throughout the first stanza.<sup>50</sup> This becomes evident in the extended observations in Ramban's commentary that follow.

Ramban pays attention to the poetic force of the figurative simile in v. 5 used to depict the ramifications of the Egyptian defeat:<sup>51</sup>

תְּהִמָּה יִכְסִימֶו / יַרְדוּ בְּמֵצְלָה כְּמוֹ אָבָן

The deep waters covered them/ they descended into the depths *like stone*.

Applying modern terms, Ramban perceives that the vehicle, the image of the stone, conveys the tenor, the idea of the finality of the Egyptian drowning in the deep waters.<sup>52</sup> Noting that the tenor is not wholly elucidated in v. 5, Ramban infers that this poetic device captures graphically the facts related in the prose version—that not one Egyptian survived this ordeal (Ex. 14:28).<sup>53</sup> Ramban notes that the Egyptians could have swum to the nearby shore or clung for safety to their shields or to

49. This is how Ramban clarifies that Onkelos views the second line as complementary to the first line in thought. As will become apparent, because Ramban is quite attuned to the paratactic, compact style of biblical song, which modern scholars have isolated as a key feature of biblical poetry, he often inserts linking terms to establish the connections between poetic lines in order to decode their conceptual relationship. On the succinctness of biblical poetry in modern scholarship, see the discussion, for example, in Watson, *Poetry*, 81–82; Berlin, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 4:303; and Weiss, “Poetry,” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 16: 258–59.

50. Compare Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 510, 519, 521, 542, 571, on the insight that this song has many verbs that convey the antithetical themes of lifting up and bringing down. See also Robert L. Shreckhise, “The Rhetoric of the Expressions in the Song by the Sea (Exodus 15, 1–18),” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: An Internal Journal of Nordic Theology* 21:2 (2007): 203–11. Shreckhise, *ibid.*, 210, notes that this unifying theme creates the general impression of “the irony and mockery of Pharaoh’s power and evil intent,” juxtaposed to God’s incomparable powers that bring about salvation.

51. For this analysis, see Ramban, Ex. 15:10, to v. 5 (and, as will be discussed, in relation to the parallel simile in v. 10).

52. For the components of a simile, vehicle and tenor, based on I.A. Richard’s analysis,

see M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 6<sup>th</sup> edition. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1993), 67.

53. Ramban, Ex. 15:10, paraphrases Ex. 14:28, noting, “Yet here [in this incident], not

one of them escaped.”

the horses that would float on the waters. Therefore, he surmises that the simile, “like stone,” emphasizes that they were completely defeated because of “the hand of God.”

The significance of the simile’s tenor is discerned by Ramban in his decoding of v. 5 in relation to v. 4:

מְרַכּוֹבָת פְּרֻעָה וְחֵילֵי יְרָה בַּיָּם / וּמִבְּחר שְׁלֵמִיו טָבַעוּ בַּיָּם סֶוף.

Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He hurled into the sea / and the select of his officers sank in the Sea of Reeds.

Observing the terse style of these verses, Ramban paraphrases their content with linking conjunctive *vav* (“and”) in order to clarify the dynamic, sequential relationship between them:

For at the beginning, [the song] stated “They were drowned in the Sea” [v. 4] and “They went down into the depths” [v. 5], and this was when the waters came back and “covered” [v. 5] the chariots and horsemen.<sup>54</sup>

Focusing on the relationship between the drowning in the Reed Sea (v. 4, טָבַעוּ בַּיָּם סֶוף) and the descent into the depths (v. 5, יָרְדוּ בְּמִצְוְלָה), which describe the end result, Ramban decodes how the first line of v. 5 delineates its cause: *תְּהִמָּת יִכְסִיםוּ*—the waters cover Pharaoh’s chariots and army.<sup>55</sup> Ramban implicitly quotes from the narrative version in the last phrase of his summary: “The waters came back *and covered the chariots and the horsemen* and all of Pharaoh’s army who were coming after them into the Sea” (Ex. 14:28),<sup>56</sup> in order to alert the reader that the song version only alludes to the background setting, which necessitated the bringing back of the waters to cover Pharaoh’s army.

54. Ramban, Ex. 15:9. Ramban observes the interrelationship between vv. 4–5, which provides a general overview of God’s actions against the Egyptian enemy, resulting in its final demise. Note that in light of the three perfect verbs surrounding the description of the deep waters covering the Egyptians—יָרְדוּ, יָרַה, טָבַעוּ—Ramban apparently determines that the imperfect verb *יכְסִיםוּ*, which relates to the same occurrence, also refers to an action completed in the past. On this point, compare David Noel Freedman, “Moses and Miriam: The Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1–18, 21),” in *Realia Dei: Essays in Archaeology and Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Edward F. Campbell, Jr. at His Retirement*, ed. Prescott H. Williams, Jr. and Theodore Hiebert (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 74.

55. Compare Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 38, on the semantic relationship between parallel lines, which often results in a “small-scale narrative within the poem” that relates its sequential progression.

56. This translation follows Ramban, Ex. 14:28. Gottlieb, *Yesh Seder la-Mikra*, 324n.32, also observes this indirect reference to the prose version, signaling how Ramban interprets the song as a chronological recounting of the events at the sea.

Apparently perceiving the subtle distinction between v.4, which describes God actively hurling the Egyptian army into the sea, and v. 5, which assigns the cause of their drowning to the deep waters that covered them, Ramban infers that the simile in v. 5—“like stone”—imparts how God manipulates natural agents in order to bring about the enemy’s total demise.<sup>57</sup> He develops his insight by correlating the prose version, which relates that “God shook the Egyptians into the midst of the sea” (Ex. 14:27), and by applying the agency of the wind mentioned in v. 10 of the song. As he explains, “God *raised them* (*שהיה ה' מגביהם*) with His harsh wind (v. 10) and *cast them down* (*וּמְפִילם*) into the sea,” without allowing them to swim to shore.

This analysis directs the reader to discern how Ramban takes as his cue the motif that opens this song to guide him to understand the implications of the ensuing descriptions. V. 1b declares that the song intends to praise God’s action of *נָאַת*, raising Himself above His enemy and causing them to be lowered in defeat into the sea. This contrast of raising/lowering is continued in Ramban’s description of the tenor of the simile “like stone,” which connotes how God “raised up” the enemy only to cast them down to their demise without any chance for survival.<sup>58</sup>

Ramban detects how this motif reaches its climax at the conclusion of the first stanza, vv. 6–7. Unlike many modern scholars, who view v. 6 as a general refrain that describes God’s strength broadly, Ramban maintains that this verse rounds out the primary focus of the first stanza on God’s exaltedness in relation to the lowering of His Egyptian enemy, encapsulating the very divine attribute that has been demonstrated throughout this stanza.<sup>59</sup> In order to elicit this main motif, he decodes the relationship between the parallel lines in the pairing:

57. Note Ramban’s reiterated focus in his commentary to Ex. 15:9, in relation to vv. 4–5, regarding the multiple descriptions of the sea in these verses (sea, depths, waters), which suggests that these lines aim to develop the theme of the enemy’s fate through the role of this natural agent.

58. Note that Chavel, *Peirush ha-Ramban*, 1:356, has the version, “*ומשפִילם בַּסֶּם*,” which directly focuses on the opposition of raising/lowering in this comment of Ramban.

59. Ramban, Ex. 15:6. Cf. James Muilenburg, “A Liturgy on the Triumphs of Yahweh,” in *Studia Biblica Et Semitica*, ed. W. C. Van Unnik and A.S. Van Der Woude (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1966), 241; Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 27–29, 41–42; as well as David Noel Freedman, “Strophe and Meter in Exodus 15,” in *idem, Pottery, Poetry, and Prophecy: Studies in Early Hebrew Poetry* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1980), 188–89, 191, who view this verse as a refrain, parallel to the style of vv. 11 and 16b, serving to mark the divisions of the literary units in this song. Ramban, however, associates v. 6 with v. 7 through the reiterative motif of *נָאַת*, and he maintains that v. 6 describes particular divine attributes that have been delineated in this first stanza.

ימין ה' נזרך בכח / ימין ה' תרעץ אויב.

Your right hand, God, mighty in strength / Your right hand, God, crushes the enemy.

Influenced by Ibn Ezra, Ramban interprets the verbatim repetition in v. 6, “Your right hand, God,” as having the rhetorical effect of conveying the idea of a continuous phenomenon.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Ramban renders these two corresponding lines as an example of synonymous parallelism, wherein each line expresses a complete statement, the second line reiterating the ideas in the first. As he observes, “And it [this verse] is doubled, as is the way of the prophecies (*ve-hu kaful ke-derekh ha-nevu’ot*).” As noted by Jair Haas, this reading exemplifies how Ramban adopts Ibn Ezra’s interpretative approach that the literary strategy of “semantic doubling,” the repetition of the same idea in different words (*kefel inyan be-milot shonot*), is an integral stylistic phenomenon of “prophecies.”<sup>61</sup> It is significant to note, however, that Ramban presupposes that the parallel semantic relationship between these lines is only couched in the poetic brevity of v. 6; the reader is charged with clearly establishing the balance implied in them. Filling in the presumed gaps, Ramban’s expansive reading accentuates the primary motif of the first stanza, thus eliciting its circular thematic frame.

Accordingly, Ramban interpolates this verse:

ימין ה' הוא נזרך בכח להשפיל כל גאה ורמ / ימין ה' תרעץ אויב בכח גדול

Your right hand, God, *is* mighty in strength *to lower every proud and haughty person*<sup>62</sup> / Your right hand, God, crushes the enemy *with great strength*.

60. Ramban, Ex. 15:6. See Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:6, and compare his commentaries to Gen. 49:22; Deut. 16:20; Ps. 77:2, 113:1, 118:16. Compare Haas, “*Kefel Inyan*,” 102.

61. Ramban, *ibid.* See Haas, *ibid.*, 107–108, regarding Ibn Ezra’s influence on Ramban’s literary insights into this style within biblical texts. For the phrase, “semantic doubling,” regarding this phenomenon, see Haas, “Did Medieval Jewish Commentators Understand Biblical Parallelism,” 466. On Ibn Ezra’s qualification of this style being prevalent within “prophecies,” see Haas, “*Kefel Inyan*,” 79–80, 98, 103. Note, however, that Ibn Ezra describes this literary feature often as *ha-ta’um kaful*, as, for example, in his commentary to Num. 23:18, 24:17. Notably, however, in this context, Ramban is applying this literary phenomenon to explain the structural alignment of lines in biblical song, noting its stylistic parallels to “the prophecies.” Furthermore, as will be discussed, Ramban does not agree with Ibn Ezra’s reading of v. 6, arguing that his explanation does not elicit fully the “semantic doubling” in this verse; this point is not noted in Haas’s analysis.

62. Note that Ramban’s phrasing is an indirect intertextual quotation of Isa. 2:12, in which God is described as lowering all those who are haughty to presume that true worship is through idolatry. Regarding Ramban’s technique of oblique intertextual

The first line describes God's right hand, a feminine noun, with the masculine participle, נָאדוּ בְכָחָ, signifying His great power.<sup>63</sup> Ramban presumes that this power refers to God's ability to lower those who raise themselves high in stature, which allows the reader to interrelate this verse by distant parallelism to the motif of נַזֵּה introduced in v. 1. Correlatively, Ramban interprets the second line as expressing how God's right hand represents His great strength, which He uses to crush the enemy. With his interpolation, Ramban verifies that the enemy in the second, parallel line represents the proud and haughty, who are lowered by God, described in the first line.

Furthermore, Ramban's reading demonstrates not only semantic parallelism between the two lines; he has connected them grammatically as well, as each line correspondingly has a subject, verb, object, and indirect object. The grammatical correspondence elicits their semantic correlations.

It is significant that Ramban does not adopt his predecessors' readings, even though he quotes their views. Like Ramban, Rashi presumes that the masculine participle of נָאדוּ בְכָחָ describes God's right hand. But, Rashi, as cited by Ramban, reads: "Your right hand, *which* is mighty in strength—what is its function? Your right hand, God, crushes the enemy."<sup>64</sup> One could explain, in modern terms, that Rashi reads this verse as a case of "staircase" or "incremental" parallelism, in which the thought is begun in the first line and is then reiterated and completed in the second line.<sup>65</sup> Ramban, however, critiques Rashi, expressly

references that have conceptual significance within his commentary, see Ephraim Chazan, "Kavvim Ahadim li-Leshono shel Ramban be-Peirusho la-Torah: le-Darkhei ha-Shibbut ve-Shilluvei ha-Mekorot u-Khetivato," *Mehkerei Morashtenu* 1 (1999): 163–74. On characterization and intertextuality in Ramban's commentary, see Michelle J. Levine, "Character, Characterization, and Intertextuality in Nahmanides' Commentary on Biblical Narrative," *Hebrew Studies* 53 (2012): 121–42.

63. Ramban, Ex. 15:6, cites Ezek. 2:9 to prove this gender flexibility with regard to the Hebrew term for "hand."

64. Rashi, Ex. 15:6. Although Rashi also cites a midrashic interpretation, the focus here is on the comment of Rashi cited by Ramban, Ex. 15:6. See Robert A. Harris, *Discerning Parallelism: A Study in Northern French Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis*, Brown Judaic Studies Number 341 (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 2004), 38–40, on this interpretation in Rashi's commentary, particularly regarding manuscripts that do not have this comment, and how Rashi presumably learned from his grandson, Rashbam, to detect this stylistic mode of parallelism; cf. Rashbam, Ex. 15:6. Cohen, *Ha-Keter*, Ex. part I, 120, concludes that this comment is not originally that of Rashi. Nevertheless, for this analysis, it is significant that Ramban cites it in his name.

65. For the definition of "staircase parallelism," see Watson, *Poetry*, 150–56; Watson, *ibid.*, 154, classifies v. 6 as staircase parallelism, along with vv. 11 and 16, whose

declaring, “But this is not correct in my opinion.” Ramban maintains that this verse is not comparable in its structure and form to other cases of staircase parallelism, such as Ps. 92:10 (*כִּי הָנָה אֹוֵבֶךְ הָ, כִּי הָנָה אֹוֵבֶךְ*) in which only the subject is noted in the first line, while the second line completes the thought by repeating the subject and then stating something about the subject.<sup>66</sup> In his view, v. 6a already stipulates additional information about the divine right hand—namely that it is mighty in strength. Were Rashi’s reading correct, Ramban claims the verse should have been formulated, “Your right hand God/ Your right hand God, crushes the enemy.”<sup>67</sup>

Although Ramban adopts Ibn Ezra’s premise of the stylistic device of “doubling” in this context, Ibn Ezra himself reads this verse differently. Claiming that the modifying phrase, “mighty in strength,” should be attributed to God, not His feminine right hand, Ibn Ezra renders, “Your right hand, God Who is mighty in strength/ Your right hand crushes the enemy.”<sup>68</sup> Here, significantly, Ibn Ezra is not reading the two parallel lines as an example of synonymous parallelism, of the doubling of the same idea in different words, but more in line with Rashi’s presumption of staircase parallelism. Yet, Ibn Ezra’s reading seems to be more plausible to Ramban than that of Rashi; when Ramban presents his own view in relation to that of Ibn Ezra, he stipulates, “And it is more correct to say,” indicating that he has not totally discounted Ibn Ezra’s reading. Presumably, Ramban is more inclined to Ibn Ezra’s analysis because it maintains that the thought of the first line about God’s right hand is not explicated until the second line, correlating with other cases of staircase parallelism, whereas Rashi indicates that the strength of God’s right hand is already stipulated in the first line.<sup>69</sup>

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function is to serve as a refrain and mark the closure of a stanza; similarly, Muilenburg, “Liturgy,” 237, 241–42. Compare Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 518, who observes that even if one were to render each line of v. 6 as an independent statement, the thought is nevertheless completed only with the second line; on this, see also Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 27–28, 41. Through his interpolations of each line, however, Ramban illustrates his position that these are two separate, complete thoughts that are intended to parallel one another stylistically and thematically.

66. Note that Ramban cites Rashi’s version of this interpretation as referencing additional examples of staircase parallelism, as in Ps. 93:3, 94:3; cf., however, Harris, *Discerning Parallelism*, 38n.10, who observes that not all editions and manuscripts of Rashi’s commentary include these other examples.

67. See Ramban, Ex. 15:6.

68. See Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:6.

69. On this point, see Yehudah Meir Devir, *Peirush ha-Ramban al ha-Torah, Shemot, im Be’ur Beit ha-Yayin* (Jerusalem: Makhon Megillat Sefer, 2002), 163n.4. Cf.,

In contrast to his predecessors' analyses, Ramban, who assigns the descriptive clause, "mighty in strength," to the divine right hand, develops an expansive reading of these paired lines as synonymous parallelism. By aligning these lines grammatically and semantically, Ramban succeeds in eliciting how this verse serves as a culmination of the first stanza, presenting an emphatic doubled statement about its primary motifs—God's glorious strength exhibited through His defeat of the haughty enemy.

Ramban correlates this reading consistently to the beginning of v. 7:

... וְרָב גָּאוֹנֵךְ תַּהֲרֵס קָמֵץ

And in Your great *exaltedness* You have overpowered Your enemy.<sup>70</sup>

This interlinear correspondence implicitly demonstrates how Ramban discerns the tightly balanced structure of the first stanza, reiterating its opening ideas about God's exalted status in the final verse of the stanza.<sup>71</sup>

### The Motif of Israel's Salvation for a Future Destiny

The second primary theme introduced in the first stanza—Israel's salvation being a means toward its greater future destiny—serves to interconnect the beginning of the song to the third stanza. This idea is evident

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however, Ibn Ezra's long commentary to Ex. 15:6, which cites a reading like that of Rashi. Compare Bekhor Shor, Ex. 15:6, who interprets the verse in accord with Ibn Ezra's preferred reading; on Bekhor Shor, see Harris, *Discerning Parallelism*, 88–89. Similarly, see Luzzatto, Ex. 15:6 (ed. Schlesinger, 281–82), though he disagrees with Ibn Ezra's premise that the repeated wording conveys God's constant smashing of the enemy, claiming that this verbatim repetition adds forcefulness to this statement and heightens the listener's anticipation to find out the culmination of the thought.

70. Ramban, Ex. 15:1; see Devir, *Peirush ha-Ramban, Shemot*, 163 n.5, for his brief observation of Ramban's semantic parallels between vv. 1, 6, and 7. This reading coheres with the literal meaning of *עֱמָק* in v. 7, "those who rise up," to describe the enemy whom God now lowers by acting exaltedly; on this, compare Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:7.

71. Note as well that Ramban, Ex. 15:9, infers that the particulars begin with v. 8, implying that the first poetic unit ends with v. 7. Howell, "Exodus 15," 22–23, aligns vv. 6–7 based on their 'hymnic' nature," as compared to the preceding and following verses, which have a narrative mode; she also notes the parallel between the imperfect verbs of these two verses. This position is also adopted by Childs, *Exodus*, 251, and Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 505, 520–21. Cf. Muilenburg, "Liturgy," 242–43; Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 51–52; and Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 35, 42, who maintain that v. 7 is the beginning of the second stanza, with the verb *תַּחַזֵּק* marking its beginning in relation to the start of the first stanza. This would also align the examples of staircase parallelism in vv. 6 and 11 as culminating each of these literary units, as noted by Fokkelman, *ibid.*, 27–28.

in Ramban's analysis of the second pair of lines in v. 2: זה אליו ואנו הוו / אלהי אבינו וארממו הוה. In this context, Ramban, in contrast to Rashi, accepts Ibn Ezra's premise that this is not an example of synonymous parallelism, and he thus differentiates between the verbs in each line. In fact, Ramban classifies this reading as "certainly the linguistic-contextual reading (ודאי פשטו של מילך)."⁷²

According to Ramban, the first line of v. 2 declares Israel's intent to establish for God an earthly abode, from the root **נוֹה**. Presumably, Ramban concurs with Ibn Ezra's reading from both linguistic and thematic considerations, as the verb **וְאָנוּ הוו** has linguistic echoes to v. 13, which declares that the people are guided "to Your holy abode (**לְנֹה קָדֵשׁךְ**)."<sup>⁷³</sup> This analysis is suggestive of an external, distant parallelism between poetic lines through the reiteration of this key term, which has the advantage of creating a kind of "envelope" or "inclusio" that unites the first and third stanzas thematically and demonstrates how the first stanza anticipates later units of the song.<sup>⁷⁴</sup> Accordingly, this reading implies the song's broader agenda. The song is not meant only to celebrate a past event, praising God for His wondrous acts; it also declares that Israel's salvation is a means to realize a greater national destiny.<sup>⁷⁵</sup>

72. Ramban, Ex. 15:2–3, citing Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:2. Compare Haas, "Kefel Inyan," 89–93, who cites various instances in which Ibn Ezra does not identify a biblical verse as an example of the doubling of ideas in different words. Additionally, Ramban may have applied Ibn Ezra's reading because it coheres with his kabbalistic reading of vv. 2–3; on this aspect of his analysis, see Haviva Pedaya, *Ha-Ramban: Hit'alut: Zeman Maḥzori ve-Tekst Kadosh* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved Publishers, 2003), 355 and 410 n37.

73. Ramban's rendering of **וְאָנוּ הוו** also follows Onkelos, Ex. 15:2. Bekhor Shor, Ex. 15:2, supports Onkelos by juxtaposing v. 13 to v. 2; similarly, see R. Behayei, Ex. 15:2, in *Rabbenu Behayei al Ha-Torah*, ed. Hayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1967), 2:127. In modern literary terms, this suggests an example of paronomasia, in which the poet applies two different words that sound alike; see Watson, *Poetry*, 242–43. Compare Nitzan, "Le-Mashma'utah shel 'Shirat ha-Yam,'" 10, on this device in this song. Cf. Rashi and Bekhor Shor on this verse, who also consider that **הוֹתָה** derives from the root **הָוָה**, referring to Israel's intent to praise God; compare Rashbam, Ex. 15:2, who supports this reading based on its parallel to **וְאָנוּ הוה**. See also Luzzatto, Ex. 15:2 (ed. Schlesinger, 278), who applies this couplet as a prime example of *kefel inyan be-milot shonot*. Similarly, see among modern scholars, Muilenburg, "Liturgy," 239–40, and Howell, "Exodus 15," 18. Interestingly, Propp, *Exodus* 1–18, 514, combines the two possible meanings of **הוֹתָה**, inferring that the optimal mode of exaltation is building God His abode.

74. On the concept of the envelope or inclusio device in biblical poetry in relation to distant parallelism, see Watson, *Poetry*, 282–86, and Zogbo and Wendland, *Hebrew Poetry*, 33–34.

75. Compare Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 29:46, cited by Ramban on this text, in which he notes that God redeemed Israel for the express purpose that they should

Adapting Ibn Ezra's reading, which assumes ellipsis and carries over the demonstrative *zeh* to the second line, Ramban interprets that the Israelites praise "this God of my father" and "speak of His heroic actions." The logical relationship between the paired lines is that of goal-catalyst. Uppermost in the Israelite mind is the understanding that its salvation and the enemy's defeat are for a loftier purpose. With the telling over of God's heroic deeds, Israel demonstrates how it absorbs the national ramifications of these divine actions.

In this manner, Ramban's reading allows the reader to construct an interlinear, semantic parallelism between the two couplets of v. 2. The first couplet, *וַיְהִי תָּמִרְתָּ אֶל־יְהֹוָה / וַיְהִי יְשֻׁעָה*, is interpreted by Ramban, adapting Ibn Ezra's reading, to mean that God's strength, exhibited through His people's salvation, is the subject of the song:

My strength and the song of my strength is God. And the meaning is that he gave thanks that his strength and power of which he sings belong to God and He was its [Israel's] salvation.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, in a complementary manner, the second couplet of v. 2 elaborates that this salvation heralds the opportunity to bring about a greater purpose in establishing God's abode among His people.

### **Stanza II: The Motif of God as Doer of Miracles, "The Thing and its Opposite"**

Ramban pinpoints the thematic pivot of the second stanza (vv. 8–11) by focusing on its culminating declaration in v. 11—that God is a doer of wonders (*פָּلָא*). In Ramban's view, this divine attribute is exhibited through miraculous acts in which God performs diametrically opposed actions (*עוֹשֶׂה גְּדוּלָות וּנְפָלוּאָות בְּדָבָר וּבְפָכוֹ*).<sup>77</sup> These acts are the focus of the second stanza, which are elucidated by Ramban's intuitive reading of vv. 8–10 as sequential parallelism, describing a mini-narrative that depicts how God works to confound the enemy by the opposing actions of the winds on the sea waters.

Ramban observes that the second stanza develops this theme by expanding upon the content of the first stanza. Organizing the sequential,

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build for Him a Tabernacle "so that I could dwell in their midst." This was already anticipated in God's declaration to Moses, Ex. 3:12.

76. See Ramban, Ex. 15:2–3, citing Ibn Ezra's long commentary to 15:2.

77. Ramban, Ex. 15:9, on v. 11.

interlinear relationship between the two stanzas, Ramban asserts:

*From the beginning, [the song] stated that they drowned in the sea and went down into its depths (vv. 4–5) . . . and afterward, [the song] returns to state how this was done (vv. 8–10).<sup>78</sup>*

Ramban discerns how the second stanza elucidates the divine attribute of performing diametrically opposed actions through its deliberate structure. The frame (vv. 8, 10) focuses on the opposing roles of the winds,<sup>79</sup> while the centered description of the enemy's perspective (v. 9) accentuates how God manipulates the enemy's will to act in a manner contrary to all logic and common-sense in order to bring about their demise.

Specifically, Ramban infers that two winds produce opposite effects on the sea waters in order to implement the divine plan. The figurative language in v. 8, “with the breath of Your nostrils (*ברוח נפי*)” is a metaphoric vehicle that signifies the tenor of the blowing of a “strong east wind” through which God dries up the sea, as noted in the prose account (Ex. 14:21). Ramban does not analyze the anthropomorphic image of God's nostrils, in contrast to Rashi, who interprets this image as indicative of God's anger, as if hot breath emanates from His nostrils, drying up the waters.<sup>80</sup> However, he does distinguish between this harsh wind, and a second wind, identified as “your wind (*ברוחך*) [v.10],” the normal airstream that blows over the sea and causes its waves that brings about the opposite effect by drowning the Egyptians. Juxtaposing the song's account with the prose version, Ramban clarifies an apparent ambiguity in the narrative account (Ex. 14:27–28), inferring that this second wind is responsible for causing the sea to “return toward morning to its full strength” and ordinary course, resulting in the waters covering the Egyptian army.<sup>81</sup>

78. Ramban, *ibid*. See Gottlieb, *Yesh Seder la-Mikra*, 323–24, who notes that Ramban applies the literary organizing perspective of “general to particular” (*kelal/perat*) in order to describe the structural arrangement between the stanzas. On this logical relationship between vv. 4–5 and 8–10, compare Childs, *Exodus*, 251.

79. Note that Ramban, Ex. 15:10, assumes an interlinear juxtaposition between vv. 8 and 10, by discussing the winds in both verses under the heading, “And the idea of this text (*ve-inyan ha-katuv*).” Compare Howell, “Exodus 15,” 29, who also observes the frame of the wind in vv. 8 and 10, which acts as an agent on the waters.

80. This analysis is based on Ramban, Ex. 15:9–10. Note how he combines the metaphor and its tenor in his paraphrase in his commentary to v. 10: “With the strong and harsh wind of His nostrils (*ברוח נפי העז*) the waters of the sea were heaped.” This manner of interpretation seems to point to Ramban's presumption that in this context, the image does not play an essential role in relation to its tenor. Cf. Rashi's detailed interpretation of the image of the “breath of God's nostrils,” Ex. 15:8.

81. Ramban, Ex. 15:9. In this context, he interprets *נשפת* to mean “blew,” parallel to

Aligning the temporal progression of events described in the second stanza, Ramban discerns a poetic mini-narrative, which reveals a successive chain of events in a relation of cause-effect that exposes how God miraculously defeats the enemy through enacting acts of “the thing and its opposite.” In order to elicit this idea, he clarifies the interlinear links between the poetic lines by inserting conjunctive *vav*s in his paraphrase of these verses, which are expressed in an elliptical, staccato style.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, contrary to Rashi, Ramban presumes that the enemy’s declaration in v. 9—“The enemy *said (amar)*: I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; my desire shall have its fill of them . . .”—is not a verbalized statement, but a reflection of the enemy’s inner point of view, rendering *amar* as thought. In addition, as noted by Isaac Gottlieb, Ramban disagrees with Rashi who reassigns this verse to the beginning of the song, inferring that the enemy’s declaration was Pharaoh’s initial attempt to persuade his people to chase after the fleeing Israelites. Ramban claims its position is properly placed within this stanza and is pivotal to understanding its major theme.<sup>83</sup> As Ramban explains:

נַבְעָל. See also his comment to Ex. 15:10, where he nevertheless classifies this second force as being a “harsh wind,” implying that even the usual wind of the sea had enough power to bring about the enemy’s complete demise. Perhaps his description of the second wind aims to juxtapose the roles of both winds, illustrating how God manipulates natural agents to perform two opposite actions. Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 526, also assumes there were two winds, noting that the gap in the prose account of Ex. 14:26-27 is filled by the song.

82. Compare Luzzatto, Ex. 15:9 (ed. Schlesinger, 283), who observes that the lack of conjunctive *vav*s “points to the succession of activities.” See also Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 53. For a different perspective on the paratactic construction of v. 9, see Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 44.

83. As Ramban, Ex. 15:9, asserts: “But in my view, by way of the contextual meaning (*ha-peshat*), this [verse] is arranged in conjunction with the verse that precedes it.” Cf. Rashi, Ex. 15:9, based on midrashic sources (*Mekhilta Shirata, parashah* 7, and *Kohelet Rabbah* 1:12), cited by Ramban, who maintains that v. 9 is out of chronological order within the Song, and compare Rashi, Ex. 14:6. Gottlieb, *Yesh Seder la-Mikra*, 323–24, cites this example as illustrative of Ramban’s overall preference to maintain the chronological order within the Torah, as compared to Rashi, who often applies the rabbinic principle *ein mukdam u-me’uhar ba-Torah*. As noted by Gottlieb, *ibid.*, 324, Ramban does acknowledge the song presents the events in a general manner and then backtracks to specify them in detail (*kelal/perat*); but Ramban maintains that overall, the Song preserves a chronological order. Ramban will allow for events to be recorded out of chronological order between stanzas in this Song. However, he insists that within a particular stanza, the events are meant to be recorded in their proper order, and, as I have analyzed, to communicate a message about the divine attribute that is being praised. Gottlieb does not discuss, however, how Ramban frames the delineation in vv. 8–10 in light of the culminating declaration of v. 11, and how Ramban views this latter verse as the key to placing the events of the preceding

For “with the breath of your nostrils”—that is, the strong east wind—“the waters piled up” *at the outset, and* the deep waters congealed, *and because of this*, “the enemy thought (*אמָר אֹיְבָה*)” *that* “it would pursue” *and* “overtake” them at the sea *and* would “divide their spoils” *and* his “desire would be filled from them” *and* [or: *but*] “You blew with Your wind over them and the sea covered them.” And [the song] mentions this [the enemy’s viewpoint], for *also* [in addition to the opposing actions of the winds], in this thought of his [the enemy] there is a cause and wonder from God (*סִבָּה וּפְלַא מָתָת הָשֵׁם*), Who hardened their hearts and frustrated their counsel, [leading them] to come into the sea, as I have explained above. *Therefore, there follows* “Who is like God among the angels” (v. 11), Who performs great acts and wondrous deeds, with the thing and its opposite.<sup>84</sup>

The events of vv. 8–10 are singled out for particular mention because they serve the song’s rhetorical purpose to praise God’s ways. The Israelites acknowledge how God’s providential attribute of acting miraculously through opposing actions (v. 11) is exemplified through His willful manipulation of the natural phenomenon of the winds (vv. 8, 10). Furthermore, God’s diametric conduct (v. 11) is revealed through His confounding of the enemy’s perspective (v. 9), so that it would pursue a reverse, absurd course of action, contrary to reason and logic, and chase the Israelites into the sea.

Ramban clarifies God’s manner of conduct in his commentaries on the narrative version; as he indicates, his earlier explanations on the narrative are meant to elucidate the song’s context. While the Egyptians should have realized that the splitting of the sea was a divine act, ironically, they are deluded into thinking that this was a mere natural coincidence, prompting them to continue with their evil designs to overtake and plunder the escaping Israelites. This ironic situation is instigated by God’s active manipulation of the Egyptian perception, described as the “hardening/strengthening of their heart (*טָבֵל יְהוָה*).”

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verses in perspective, also in relation to the agency of the winds in these verses. These aspects are the focus of the current analysis.

84. Ramban, Ex. 15:9, to vv. 8–10. Compare his analysis to Ex. 15:10 on the sequential relationship between the actions of the two winds in these verses, elucidated with the conjunctive *vav*. Compare Hizkuni, Ex. 15:9, and Rashbam, Ex. 15:9, who also read the enemy’s declaration in response to the split waters, although it appears that they render *amar* as speech. Among modern scholars, see Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 52–53; Howell, “Exodus 15,” 28–29; Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 521; and Patterson, “Victory at Sea,” 48–49, who have a reading like that of Ramban in relation to the chronology of vv. 8–10, though some render *amar* as speech. Compare Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 43–44, who presents an approach like that of Rashi and accordingly divides vv. 8–10 into three strophes.

Following the plague of the firstborn, Pharaoh is so fearful that he has no desire to chase after the Israelites. Therefore, God informs Moses that He will strengthen the king's will, making him more stubborn and resilient, in order to implement the divine plan to vanquish the enemy (Ex. 14:4).<sup>85</sup> As Ramban notes, applying oblique references to the song (and to his commentary on Ex. 15):

For when they [the Egyptians] will see that the sea has been split before the children of Israel and they are walking in the dry land in its midst, how could they *fill their hearts* [with the desire] [compare Ex. 15:9] to come after them to bring evil upon them? For among all of the wonders, there is none *like this wonder* [compare Ex. 15:11]. For this is truly madness among them. Nevertheless, [God] frustrated their plan and hardened/strengthened their hearts to enter into the sea.<sup>86</sup>

Similarly, analyzing God's decision to use the wind to split the sea, Ramban obliquely introduces terms and phrases from the song's account:

It was the Almighty's will to split the sea with a desiccative, east *wind* so that it would appear as if the wind was drying up the sea . . . For as a result of this, they *thought* that perhaps the wind made the sea into dry land, and not that the *hand of God* did this on Israel's behalf. And while the wind does not split the sea into divisions, they also did not pay attention to this, and they came after them out of their great lust to do harm to them . . . for [God] had hardened/strengthened their hearts (Ex. 14:4) to say, "I shall pursue my enemy and overtake them" [compare Ex. 15:9] in the sea and none may be saved from *My hand*, and they did not remember at this juncture that God *makes war* for them against Egypt (Ex. 14:25).<sup>87</sup>

Applying the image of the "hand," Ramban alludes to a key motif in the song: the battle waged between the "hand" of the Egyptian enemy (noted

85. See Ramban, Ex. 7:3, for his reading of the "hardening of Pharaoh's heart." Cf. Lichtenstein, *Biblical Poetry*, 111, who distinguishes between the prose version, which assigns the enemy's actions to God's hardening his heart, and the song account, which accentuates the enemy's autonomous thought. Ramban juxtaposes the two renditions, maintaining that the enemy's thoughts are influenced by God's manipulation of the enemy's "heart."

86. Ramban, Ex. 14:4.

87. Ramban, Ex. 14:21. Compare Simcha Ziskind Broyde, *Sam Derekh: Be'urim u-Ma'amarim al ha-Torah u-Peirush ha-Ramban* (Jerusalem: Ozar ha-Poskim, 2001), Exod., vol. 1, 95–96, 104–5, 337–39, who observes how Ramban's commentary to Ex. 14:4 and 21 indicates that the wonder of performing a thing and its opposite should also be applied to the Egyptian pursuit of the Israelites. The first wonder, the splitting of the sea, should have caused them to abandon pursuit of the Israelites; the fact that they did not constitutes a "reversal" through God's deliberate manipulation of the enemy's "heart."

in Ex. 15:9) and the “hand” of God, which will defeat them (explicitly referenced in v. 6 of the song). Ramban’s citation from Ex. 14:25, that God wages war against the Egyptians, also recalls God’s attribution as “a man of war” in the song (v. 3), which is juxtaposed to the Egyptian intent, noted in v. 9 of the song. The battle lines are drawn, with God always in control to ensure the proper outcome of events, which is praised by Israel as a miraculous act of the “the thing and its opposite.”

Sensitive to the repetition of key images that create a thematic link between the stanzas, Ramban observes how parallel similes invoke the idea of God’s decisive blow against the enemy. Ramban juxtaposes v. 5, which describes how the Egyptians “went down into the depths (*מצולות*) like stone,” with the correlating image in v. 10, which relates how the enemy “went down into the depths (*צללים*) like lead into the mighty waters.” He observes how the linguistic parallels of the verb *בָּשׂוּ* in v. 10 with the plural noun *מצולות* in v. 5 align the corresponding similes to convey an emphatic message.<sup>88</sup>

In contrast to Ramban’s reading, Rashi’s midrashic explanation infers that the three images in the song—stone, straw, lead (vv. 5, 7, 10)—impart different nuances, each relating to a form of death, from the least severe (immediate, sinking like lead) to the most extreme (delayed, due to the constant floating like straw).<sup>89</sup> Ramban (who does not comment on the image of straw, presumably viewing this simile in relation to God’s anger in v. 7<sup>90</sup>) deduces that this doubled visual imagery emphasizes the totality of the Egyptian defeat: “And he [Moses] noted this twice in the song, ”like stone, like lead,” for this *also* [came] to them from *the hand of God.*”<sup>91</sup> Ramban’s use of the superlative, “also,” indicates how he

88. Ramban, Ex. 15:10, associates these terms linguistically, noting that the verb *בָּשׂוּ* (a rare usage in the Bible) means “coming into the depths” (*באו במצולות*); this reading concurs with that of Rashi, Ex. 15:10, and Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:10. Cf. Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:10, who also posits that this verb might mean a loud banging, as in Hab. 3:16.

89. Rashi, Ex. 15:5, based on *Mekhilta Shirata, parashah 5* (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 133).

90. On this point, compare Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 520.

91. Ramban, Ex. 15:10. Cf. Nitzan, “Le-Mashma’utah shel ‘Shirat ha-Yam,’” 17, who infers that Ramban views the second image as more intense than the first image; his quotation of Ramban is not complete, seeming to shift the focus to the image of the lead, not that of the stone. In my view, Ramban’s main idea is that the two images work together to create an overall, emphatic impression about the complete defeat of the Egyptian army due to God’s involvement. Perhaps Ibn Ezra’s observation that repeated terms convey the impression of constancy (noted in v. 6) influences Ramban’s deduction that these parallel images focus on the unusual completeness of the drowning, which could only occur by God’s hand.

analyzes the semantic relationship between the two sets of parallel lines in v. 10. The first line elucidates that God manipulates nature to cause the Egyptian drowning (נשפה ברוחך כסמו ים), in relation to His control over the enemy's decision to pursue the Israelites, as noted in v. 9. The second line (צללו בעופרת במים אדים) reiterates that their complete demise was a result of God's use of the wind to continually cast them back into the sea, until no one was left alive.

In this manner, Ramban elicits how the song employs poetic devices to concretize its theological messages. The images of stone and lead are not intended only to memorialize the event of sinking; rather, they convey how the Israelites process the lesson of God's providential intervention that brings about the enemy's defeat. Ramban's analysis implicitly explains why the song focuses on the act of sinking in the first stanza (vv. 4-5), which is then reiterated in the second stanza. This event not only represents God's climactic victory over the enemy, but also acquires the deeper ramifications of illustrating God's unique powers to ensure their absolute destruction.<sup>92</sup>

As a result, Ramban does not interpret v. 11 as a general praise of God, but rather regards it as a culminating statement, parallel to vv. 6-7 of the first stanza, that encapsulates the pedagogical lessons to be gleaned about the divine attributes exemplified in the second stanza.<sup>93</sup> It is presumed that Ramban divides v. 11 into four interrelated poetic lines.<sup>94</sup> The first two lines, מי כמכה נادر בקדש / מי כמכה באלים ה', form a synonymous parallelism, declaring through rhetorical questions God's uniqueness as compared to the angels. The third line, גורא תהלה ת, progresses by delineating what makes God's powers incomparable; in Ramban's view, this line contrasts God's unmatched capacities with

92. As I have argued elsewhere, Ramban is often inclined to differentiate between multiple images, assigning each one a contributory role to the message of the metaphors or similes, but here, he determines that collapsing both similes (like stone, like lead) into one main message creates a cohesive integration between the two stanzas of the Song. I hope to publish a more extensive analysis of Ramban's literary approach to biblical imagery, based on the following two papers that I have delivered: "The Versatile Inventiveness of Biblical Imagery in Ramban's Torah Commentary," Annual International Conference of National Association of the Professors of Hebrew Language and Literature (NAPH), University of Amsterdam (June 2018), and "Ramban's Literary Approach to the Poetic Efficacy of Metaphor and Simile," *Bakesh Torah*: International Conference on Research on the Bible and its Exegesis in Honor of Prof. Uriel Simon, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan (June 2019).

93. Modern scholars consider this verse, like v. 6, to be a "refrain" of general praise of God; see, for example, Muilenburg, "Liturgy," 244; Freedman, "Strophe and Meter," 191, 209; and Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 27-29, 45-46.

94. The analysis that follows is based on Ramban, Ex. 15:11.

those of earthly kings. Therefore, the fourth line, פָּלָא עַשְׂה פָּلָא, is viewed by Ramban as a climactic specification of God's particular ability that sets Him apart from all other beings, both heavenly and mortal powers.

Aligning the first two lines as synonymous parallelism, Ramban renders, “Who is like You, God, among the heavenly angels?/ Who is like You, powerful in the holy residence of the heavens?” Although he concedes that the term אֱלִים in the first line denotes the mighty and powerful, which could refer to humans, as Rashi renders,<sup>95</sup> in this context, it refers pointedly to the heavenly angelic powers. This reading contrasts God, who is designated elsewhere as the “Supreme Power (*El Elyon*)” (Gen. 14:18), with the lower celestial forces, described only as *elim*.<sup>96</sup> Detecting an external linguistic parallel to the term *El* in v. 2, “This is my God—*zeh Eli*,” Ramban supports his inference that the main focus of this couplet is on God and the angels.<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, this juxtaposition may suggest how the primary theme of this song is continued from the first to the second stanza, conveying the intention to praise “my God,” who is incomparable in bringing about Israel’s salvation.<sup>98</sup>

In order to establish semantic synonymy between the first two lines, Ramban does not render *ba-kodesh* as “in holiness,” but rather specifies that this describes the holy residence of the heavens, in which God reigns supreme. As in his interpretation of v. 6, Ramban does not read this verse as an example of staircase parallelism; each line communicates a complete thought that declares God’s incomparable powers in the heavenly realm. In this manner, he retains the consistent style between the conclusion of each of the two stanzas, implicitly highlighting their balanced presentation of God’s praiseworthy attributes. Had Ramban read נָאכֶר בְּקֹדֵשׁ as “awesome (or: majestic) in holiness,” the second line of the couplet would have specified the divine attribute that makes God unmatched to other celestial beings. Ramban maintains, however, that

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95. Rashi, Ex. 15:11, citing Ezek. 17:13.

96. See the parallel reading in Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:11. Compare Ramban, Gen. 14:18, who renders the epithet *El Elyon* as “God, Who is supremely mighty over all the powers”; in that comment, he references his understanding of Ex. 15:11.

97. Note Ramban’s stipulation, Ex. 15:11, that the term אֱלִים refers to the heavenly angels, “from the language of ‘This is my God’ - v. 2.”

98. Perhaps this reading could serve to counter that offered by various modern scholars who, rendering אֱלִים as the gods of foreign nations, interpret the first rhetorical question as a declaration that God surpasses them, particularly the Egyptian gods; see Muilenburg, “Liturgy,” 242, 244; Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 51–52; Howell, “Exodus 15,” 30; and Propst, *Exodus 1–18*, 464, 526–27. Propst, *ibid.* 527, considers a reading like that of Ramban.

the answers to these rhetorical questions are revealed only in the third and fourth lines of this verse.<sup>99</sup>

The third line delineates how God is set apart from other heavenly powers in that He is נורא תהלה—that is, “awe-inspiring through praises (*nora bi-tehillot*).” In order to clarify God’s awesomeness, Ramban apparently applies the verb “to do” (*oseh*) from the final line and capitalizes on the plural “praises,” thus interpolating, “For [God] does awe-inspiring things and is praised through them.”<sup>100</sup> However, Ramban presumes that this line distinguishes the Divine from the powers of earthly kings: “And because earthly kings are awesome ‘through tyranny and corruption’ (Is. 30:12), [the song] states that God is awe-inspiring through the things for which He is extolled.”<sup>101</sup> The oblique intertextual allusion to the text in Isa. 30 that describes the Egyptian kings as oppressive and corrupt, intimates that Ramban views v. 11 as a declaration of how God renders the powerful earthly authorities, the Pharaohs, impotent through His absolute might, evidenced by His fearsome, praiseworthy, unparalleled actions.

The implication of Ramban’s analysis is that v. 11 aims to characterize God not only as the supreme heavenly power, but, in this third line, as the absolute sovereign who emerges victorious against the kings of Egypt.<sup>102</sup> Thus, Ramban’s reading elicits an additional underlying

99. Ramban’s reading of *ba-kodesh* anticipates the reference to God’s holy abode in v. 13 and the *mikdash* (Temple) in v. 17. Ramban is influenced by Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:11. Cf. Rashbam, Ex. 15:11, who juxtaposes this verse with v. 6, reading the couplet as “staircase parallelism”: “Who among the celestials is like You, God, as majestic in holiness as You are.” Compare Harris, *Discerning Parallelism*, 66n.42, on Rashbam’s analysis. The presumption that this is an example of staircase parallelism in which the rhetorical questions are answered through the three qualifiers of נאדר בקדש, נורא תהלה, עשה פלא is also the view of Luzzatto, Ex. 15:11 (ed. Schlesinger, 284–85), and modern scholars such as Howell, “Exodus 15,” 30, and Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 526–28.

100. Ramban, Ex. 15:11. See Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 400, notes to v. 11, who observes that the plural “praises” “may refer in a kind of ellipsis to the tremendous acts performed by God that make Him the object of praise.” It appears this is why Ramban renders this phrase as he does, which also correlates with his reading of the last line that specifies God’s praiseworthy, incomparable actions. Ramban disagrees with Rashi and Bekhor Shor, Ex. 15:11, who interpret this phrase as a declaration that everyone fears to praise God, for praise of Him is boundless, an analysis that parallels Rashi’s interpretation of v. 1b. Ramban maintains that vv. 1b and 11 assert that the song intends to praise God for His particular incomparable actions.

101. Ramban, ibid. Ramban’s contrast between God and earthly kings is not found among his predecessors’ readings.

102. Ironically, however, in Isa. 30, the prophet chastises the Judean kingdom for trust-

thematic pivot: The divine authority trumps the sovereignty of the Egyptian monarchy. As will be seen, this divine characterization serves as the basis for Ramban's analysis of the song's closure in the final stanza.

Specifying these fearsome acts that bring praises, Ramban delineates that the fourth line proclaims God as a “doer of wonders (**אֵל כָּלָשׁוֹן**),” miraculous acts in which He performs diametrically opposed actions:<sup>103</sup>

For He enacted vengeances against those who transgressed His will, and through them [these retaliatory acts], He rescued (**וַיִּשְׁמַח**) His servants And therefore, through this, He is very awesome and praised.<sup>104</sup>

Manipulating the natural winds, God saves His people by causing the waters to pile up and congeal (although Israel's crossing of the sea is only implied), and, antithetically, returning the waters to their normal course so that the enemy is continually plunged into its depths. Furthermore, God manipulates the enemy's heart and will, causing it to act in opposition to common sense and logic. The dichotomy is established between the incomparable wondrous deeds of God, which simultaneously accomplish opposite results, and those of the angelic beings and the earthly kings.

### **Stanza III: The Motif of God's Diametric Acts: Revenge Against the Enemy and Guiding the Israelites to the Holy Land**

Ramban perceives that the third stanza (vv. 12–17) follows from the description of God's attribute in v. 11 by centering on the thematic focus of God's diametric acts. In this stanza, the juxtaposed opposing acts are God's revenge against the enemy and His simultaneous guidance of His people toward their future destiny in the Holy Land, which will culminate with the building of a Temple in which God will reside.

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ing in an Egyptian alliance to save them from their enemies. Applying Ramban's intertextual juxtaposition, one could sharpen Isaiah's message by inferring that the prophet is rebuking his people for not absorbing the lessons of the Song of the Sea.

103. Ramban, Ex. 15:9, on v. 11. Note that he understands **רוּבָה** as a collective noun. Compare R. Behayei, Ex. 15:11 (ed. Chavel, 2:132), who interprets Ramban's reading of v. 11 in relation to the oppositional roles of the wind, even though he maintains that it was the same wind that performed both functions.

104. Ramban, Ex. 15:11. Compare Ramban, Ex. 17:5, who applies the phrase “a thing and its opposite” to delineate the miracle inherent in the fact that the staff that had turned water to blood could bring forth water from a rock.

Thus, Ramban explains that v. 12, נטית ימינו ארץ / חבלעמו אָרֶץ, which resumes the account of the action at sea, also serves to move the song forward to its culmination. Integrating the second and third stanzas, he clarifies:

The meaning (*ha-ta'am*) [of v. 12] is: *For after* “You blew with Your wind” and “the sea covered them” (v. 10), “You stretched out Your right hand” over them and Your outstretched arm (הנטוּך הַגְּדוּלָה) and the “earth swallowed them (האָרֶץ).”<sup>105</sup> And the idea is (*ve-ha-inyan*) that after they drowned, the sea expelled them like the norm of seas. Similarly, Scripture stated, “Israel saw Egypt dead on the shore of the sea” וַיַּרְא יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת מִצְרָיִם מֵת עַל שָׂפַת הַיָּם (Ex. 14:30), and there they would disintegrate and the dust would return as it was on the earth. Thus, they [the Egyptians] were “swallowed up” and destroyed.<sup>106</sup>

This analysis reads the semantic relationship between the two lines of v. 12 as action-consequence. As a result of God extending His “right hand,” which Ramban infers has as its indirect object the Egyptian enemy, the earth subsequently “swallows” them.<sup>107</sup> Correlating the events at sea described in v. 10, Ramban surmises that v. 12 continues the action where the second stanza left off, because of the interruption of v. 11, describing how the ocean persists in its normal fashion and tosses the Egyptian bodies ashore, where they will disintegrate.

Ramban presumes that the song proceeds to relate the events chronologically by aligning the prose version in Ex. 14, which delineates how the Israelites witness the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Accordingly, he reads the phrase, “the earth swallowed them,” as a mixed expression, in which “earth” is understood literally but the act of “swallowing” is an applied reference to the bodies’ eventual decomposition without burial.<sup>108</sup>

105. Ramban’s addition of the *vav* to the verb חבלעמו (and see similarly in his commentary on v. 13) is also indicative that he regards this imperfect verb in the past tense, as a completed action, paralleling the perfect verb, “You stretched out,” at the beginning of this couplet. On the fluidity of the tenses in this verse, compare Freedman, “Moses and Miriam,” 75.

106. Ramban, Ex. 15:12. Ramban’s introductory markers to his analyses—“the meaning is” and “the idea is”—indicate that he intends to fill in the gaps of the song account, in this case, by establishing the juxtaposition between vv. 10 and 12 and by decoding the idea conveyed in the line, “earth swallowed them,” through comparative association with the prose account and interpretation of the verb’s applied connotation.

107. Note Ramban’s specification of the indirect object as “the enemy—*ha-oyev*” in his commentary to Ex. 15:13, on v. 12, observing obliquely the correlation with the enemy’s antithetical plans in v. 9.

108. Ramban, Ex. 15:12, cites other biblical verses—Job 10:8; Lam. 2:2; Is. 3:12—

Ramban does not adopt Ibn Ezra's reading, which presumes that v. 12 describes the divine mediation that brought about the Egyptian drowning, recapping the events of v. 10 and interpreting "the earth" figuratively as referring to the ocean floor. In line with this analysis, Ibn Ezra maintains that Ex. 14:30 should be understood as describing the Israelites standing on the shore of the sea and witnessing the Egyptians being drowned by the waters.<sup>109</sup> In contrast, adhering to his presumption that the song relates the events sequentially, Ramban maintains that v. 12 begins a new section, progressing in its condensed narrative form to relate the final defeat of the Egyptian enemy.<sup>110</sup> This description closes the song's first main motif—the Egyptian downfall—and opens the way for the second motif—Israel's salvation and future destiny, beginning in v. 13.

Ramban also does not adopt Rashi's reading of v. 12, which views the sea's expulsion of the Egyptian bodies as a miraculous occurrence prompted by the Israelites' doubts about the enemy's death. Rashi interprets the "earth swallowed up" literally, signifying that the Egyptians ultimately merited burial. Ramban, however, counters that God's "right hand" is consistently used for acts of revenge and destruction. Although he posits that perhaps God uses His "right hand" to drown the Egyptians, and only afterward are they buried with a different divine action, Ramban prefers to decipher v. 12 as a poetic description of God's working through nature, the ocean currents being responsible for washing the bodies ashore. He therefore interprets the verse as saying that, following this exposure, the bodies remain to disintegrate without burial, which is described metaphorically.<sup>111</sup>

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to corroborate that the verb of "swallowing" may be secondarily applied to an act of destruction and disintegration. Compare Bekhor Shor, Ex. 15:12, who has a similar reading; however, on Ex. 14:30, he maintains that "on the seashore" refers to the Israelites who witnessed the sea wash the Egyptian bodies ashore.

109. See Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:12, and compare his long commentary to Ex. 14:30. Ibn Ezra explains the "right hand" as a figurative reference to God's power. See Rashbam, Ex. 14:30, for a reading like that of Ibn Ezra; note, however, that Rashbam, Ex. 15:12, interprets the "right hand" as that of Moses, corresponding to Ex. 14:26, as does Ḥizkuni, Ex. 15:12. Among modern scholars, compare for this latter view, Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 529; Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 53–54; idem, *Five Books of Moses*, 400, notes to v.12. Presumably, Ramban prefers to relate the event described in v. 12 to God's "hand," as the focus in vv. 12–13 is on God's direct actions, not those of Moses, who is never named in the song.

110. This observation supports Gottlieb's analysis, *Yesh Seder la-Mikra*, 316–412, of Ramban's adherence to the chronological order within the Torah.

111. See Rashi, Ex. 14:30, based on *Mekhilta va-Yehi, parashah 6* (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 113) and *Pesahim* 118b, on the sea's expulsion of the Egyptian bodies, and Rashi, Ex.

Ramban's expansion of v. 12 to include both God's "right hand" and His "outstretched arm" demonstrates indirectly how he views this text as anticipatory of forthcoming poetic lines, thus exposing their extended parallelism. The description of God's hand that defeats the enemy predicts that He will exercise His powers against the nations whom Israel will encounter on its journey to Canaan; as v. 16 declares, "By your arm's greatness (בגַּדְלָךְ רֹוּחָךְ) they be still as stone."<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, in light of the description of Israel's destiny foretold in Ex. 6:6, "And I shall redeem them with an outstretched arm," one may deduce that Ramban intends obliquely to juxtapose the hand of God against the enemy with His power that directs His nation toward their destination, linking v. 12 to v. 13, which relates, "You have guided them with Your kindness, this people whom You redeemed." In his comments on Ex. 6:6, Ramban observes that the metaphoric image of the outstretched hand is an indication that God will pursue the enemy relentlessly until Israel is saved.<sup>113</sup>

In this regard, Ramban's analysis of v. 12 is sharpened. While the prose account relates that after the Egyptians are drowned, the sea expels their bodies, the song version adds that God continues His unremitting vengeance to demonstrate the enemy's decisive demise, leaving their bodies to decay into the dust of the earth. Through this extended association, Ramban proves that the song not only echoes the immediately preceding narrative, but it is framed by the entire Exodus narrative and validates the divine commitment to fulfill His promises to His nation. Furthermore, this intertextual allusion continues the main motif that unifies this song, as noted in v. 11—the oppositional actions enacted by God. The divine "hand" that destroys the enemies of Israel, past and future, with judgment, is the "hand" that leads Israel in kindness to fulfill its future role, as described in v. 13.

Accordingly, one may deduce how Ramban is correlating the interlinear antithetical parallelism of v. 12 with v. 13, *נִהִיָּת בְּחֶסֶד עַם זוֹ גָּאֵלָת* / *נִהִיָּת בְּעֹזֶךְ אֱלֹהָי קָדְשָׁךְ*, juxtaposing God's diametric acts of destroying the

15:12, based on *Mekhilta Shirata, parashah 9* (ed. Horovitz-Rabin, 145), on his literal reading of the "earth swallowed up." Ramban's critique of Rashi is found in his commentary to Ex. 15:12.

112. Compare Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 54; Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 46; and Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 537, who correlate the images of stone and lead from the first two stanzas with the reference to stone in v. 16 in the third stanza.

113. Ramban, Ex. 6:6. Shreckhise, "Rhetoric of the Expressions," 212 and 212 n.25, also makes the association between v. 13 and Ex. 6:6.

enemy and guiding His people to their future destiny.<sup>114</sup> Disagreeing with Ibn Ezra, who argues that the verbs in v. 13 should be understood as “prophetic perfects,” in which future events are described as if they have already transpired, Ramban retains the past tense of the verbs, parallel to their tense in v. 12.<sup>115</sup> He interpolates vv. 12-13 with additional insertions of linking *vav* conjunctions to expose the interlinear, temporal sequencing:

He [Moses] says (v. 12): “You stretched out Your right hand” *against the enemy, and* “the earth swallowed them” *and* (v. 13) “You guided with Your benevolence” (*נִיחַת בְּחִסְדֶךָ*) *through the pillar of cloud to guide them on the way* (*לְנַחֲזֹותךָ*) “this nation *whom* You have redeemed” (*תִּלְאַמֵּד וְוְשָׁמָעַ*). And “You led *them* with the strength” of Your hand (*לְנַהֲלֹת אֶתְכֶם בְּעֵז*) “to Your holy abode” (*לְקָדְשָׁה כָּל נָהָר*) *for they are going toward it.*<sup>116</sup>

While God is stretching His right hand in vengeance against the enemy, He is concurrently guiding His people with divine benevolence by means of the cloud toward His “holy abode,” even though the journey through the wilderness and conquest of Canaan has yet to take place.

A close reading of Ramban’s commentary suggests that Ramban intuitively deciphers the parallelism between the two lines of v. 13 by inferring that the second line specifies the message of the first, identifying the ultimate destination. Knowing the second line sharpens the meaning of the first line; the purpose of redemption is to direct the people to fulfill a spiritual destiny. Expanding on their terse construction, Ramban fills in the gaps so that each line shares grammatical parallelism, containing a subject, verb, object, indirect object, and the means by which Israel is guided. The first line indicates that God is guiding His redeemed nation toward the way—*הַדָּרָךְ*, obliquely citing from Ex. 13:21, which he also applies to decode the song’s allusive reference to the means of guidance by the divinely protective pillar of cloud.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, the second line

114. Ramban’s semantic link between vv. 12 and 13 also leads one to presume that he views v. 12 as the beginning of a new poetic unit in this song. For the phonetic and semantic relationships between these verses, compare Muilenburg, “Liturgy,” 237, 244–46; Coats, “Song of the Sea,” 6, 10; Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 54; and Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 46–47.

115. Citing Ibn Ezra, Ramban, Ex. 15:13, observes that his predecessor reads the perfect verbs in v. 13 in the future tense, “for this [style] appears in the prophecies.” However, Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:13, also considers that the perfect verbs in v. 13 should retain their past tense meaning.

116. Ramban, Ex. 15:13.

117. Compare Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:13, who also associates God’s

explicates that God is leading the implied Israel by the might of His hand toward the specified destination, the “holy abode.” Correlating vv. 12 and 13, Ramban introduces the image of the “hand” into his reading of “with Your might (**גַּעֲבָה**),” obliquely interrelating God’s actions of justice against the enemy (with His “right hand”) and of benevolence toward His people (with the “strength of Your hand”).<sup>118</sup>

In contrast to his predecessors, who associate the “holy abode” with Mt. Sinai or the land of Canaan,<sup>119</sup> Ramban searches for its reference within the song itself, identifying it as the future Temple noted in v. 17.<sup>120</sup> Presumably, this reading is buttressed by the additional linguistic parallel between the root **שְׁדָךְ** in **לְשֶׁדֶךְ קְנָה נָה** and **שְׁדָךְ**. Apparently, Ramban detects that the poetic device of repetitive terms facilitates decoding its ambiguities. Furthermore, this reading demonstrates the interlinear correlations between poetic lines, aligning vv. 13 and 17 semantically.

Ramban’s analysis exposes the song’s extended thematic frame. What is anticipated in the first stanza, in v. 2, in which Israel declares its intent to establish God’s abode (**גְּתָן אָנוּ**), is now explicated in the third stanza as being part of God’s plan when He avenges the enemy and redeems His people, for He is already guiding them toward this holy objective. In his introduction to the Book of Exodus, Ramban observes that Israel is not considered fully redeemed until “the day of their return to their place and to the stature of the patriarchs,” which occurs with the building of the Tabernacle, when God’s glory is present continuously among them. Correspondingly, his interpretation of v. 13 stipulates how the song focuses on the broader national purpose—to establish for God an abode, as it were, on earth, where He will be perpetually sanctified within their land.<sup>121</sup>

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benevolence with the guidance through the pillars of the cloud and fire, even though he renders the verbs in v. 13 in a future sense. Cf. Lichtenstein, “Biblical Poetry,” 112, who claims that the cloud is not referenced in the Song.

118. Ramban’s interpolation also indirectly guides the reader to correlate the “strength of Your hand” in v. 13 with “Your hands” that establish the sanctuary in v. 17. Compare Howell, “Exodus 15,” 40, who observes that only in v. 17 is God’s hand referred to as *yad* (contrasted with the hand of the enemy in v. 9). With Ramban’s interpolation, one may infer that he juxtaposes the “hand” of God that guides His redeemed people in v. 13 with the goal of building the Temple.

119. Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:13, identifies the “holy abode” as Mt. Sinai. Cf. Bekhor Shor, Ex. 15:13–15, who identifies the holy abode as the land of Canaan.

120. Ramban, Ex. 15:13, on v. 17. Note, however, that he does not explain v. 17 in its entirety; presumably, he interprets the “mountain of Your inheritance” and “the firm place for Your dwelling” as the Temple as well, which is situated on Mt. Moriah.

121. Ramban, Ex. 15:13, cites Isa. 2:2 to clarify that the preposition “to” in the phrase,

Ramban detects that the culmination of this stanza is marked by a shift in tone from a song of praise to one of prayer, which coheres with its thematic transition in this stanza to focus on Israel's future destiny. This shift is also evident in and integrated with the final verse of the song, which marks its closure. The thematic move to focus on the fear of the neighboring nations in vv. 14-15, who react in trepidation to the terrifying news of the events at the sea,<sup>122</sup> culminates in Moses' prayer concerning Israel's future encounters with these hostile nations. Focusing on the first couplet of v. 16, בָּגְדֵל וַיֹּשֶׁר יִדְמֹו כָּאָבָן, Ramban notes the imperfect verb, *tippol*, and explains: "And he [Moses] prays that even more fear and dread shall befall them, that they shall not accost Israel in war."<sup>123</sup> While the stone image previously portrayed the Egyptians' absolute defeat, Ramban implies that the same image modifies its relevance depending on context; in v. 16, it relates the tenor of the enemy's paralysis and immobility.<sup>124</sup> The semantic relationship in the first couplet is read as cause-effect and interpreted both in relation to the following temporal couplet,<sup>125</sup> עַד יַעֲבֹר עַמְקַת הַ / עַד יַעֲבֹר עַם זֶה קָנִית, and

"to Your holy abode," means they are walking in that direction, even though they have not yet reached their goal. As noted by Yaakov K. Schwartz, *Sefer Yekev Efrayim: Reshimot shel He'erot u-Berurim be-Peirushei Ramban al ha-Torah* (New York: Chen Pub., 1995), 2:67, on Ex. 15:13, this citation supports Ramban's conception that the final destination of the Israelites' journey is the Temple, for this is the place to which all nations will eventually arrive in messianic times. Ramban also cites *Mekhilta Shirata, parashah 9*, which identifies *neveh* as the Temple, referencing Isa. 33:20. Regarding the circularity of the Song in describing the Israelites' intent at the moment of the Exodus to build for God a permanent abode, see Rachel Friedman, "Searching for Holiness: The Song of the Sea in the Bible and in the Liturgy," [http://www.mesorahmatrix.com/essays/8\\_SearchingforHoliness-RachelFriedman.pdf](http://www.mesorahmatrix.com/essays/8_SearchingforHoliness-RachelFriedman.pdf), 214-216.

122. For discussion of these verses, see Ramban, Ex. 15:14-16. In that context, Ramban also considers that the nations had already been expressing fear from the time they heard about the plagues in Egypt.

123. Ramban, *ibid*. Apparently, he understands יְמִתָּה וְפַדֵּחַ as a hendiadys; contrast Rashi, Ex. 15:16, who distinguishes between these nouns. Compare Bekhor Shor and Hizkuni, as well as Abravanel, Ex. 15:16 (ed. Shutland, 220), who also read the verb in the future imperfect, signifying a prayer. Cf. Howell, "Exodus 15," 36; Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1995), 338; and Freedman, "Moses and Miriam," 76, who render *tippol* in the perfect sense, aligned with the verbs of vv. 14–15. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 401, translates, "did fall," perhaps to capture the effect of the imperfect verbal form. By rendering *tippol* as an imperfect verb, Ramban decodes the song's transition in tone and emphasis.

124. Presumably, Ramban renders the verb שָׁמַר from the root שְׁמַר, meaning “silent.” Compare Luzzatto, Ex. 15:16 (ed. Schlesinger, 290), as well as Propp, *Exodus* 1-18 pp. 536-37, and Shreckhise, “Rhetoric of the Expressions,” 214n.31. Cf. Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 401, who renders “like a stone,” based on the root שְׁמַר. In his notes, however, he considers the former reading.

125. While Ramban does not comment on the parallelism of the third repetitive

to the previous couplets of vv. 14–15. As Ramban elaborates, Moses prays that God should continue to bring fear upon the nations, so that they will not wage war against Israel until it enters Canaan. Because the indirect object of this prayer is described ambiguously in v. 16 as “on them,” Ramban considers, in disagreement with Ibn Ezra, that Moses includes all nations, and the Canaanites (v. 15), in his request that Israel should not be attacked before it safely traverses Canaan’s borders<sup>126</sup>

In light of this reading, one can determine how Ramban views vv. 14–16 structurally. The general designations, “nations” (v. 14) and “them” (v. 16), frame the centered delineation of the specific peoples that heard and reacted with fear (Philistia, Edom, Moab, Canaan), and whom Moses hopes will continue to exhibit dread and terror.

Presuming an interactional relationship between the song’s composer and his divine addressee, Ramban infers that Moses shifts to a liturgical mode, inserting a subjective request into his lyrical recounting of the events and hymnal praise of God’s miraculous feats, which also introduces an anticipatory tone into the song. Having focused the reader on the song’s expression of Israel’s distant goal of building God a holy sanctuary (vv. 2, 13, paralleling v. 17), Ramban interprets v. 16 to mean that Moses aims to project the song’s purpose beyond its commemoration of past events, in order to serve as a paradigm for Israel’s future expectations of how God will deal with their enemies and protect them so that they may fulfill their destiny.

#### **Stanza IV: The Motif of God’s Kingship**

The song’s shift to the liturgical mode persists in the conclusion of v. 18, וְעַת יְמָלֵךְ עַל־עַם וְעַת. Notably, Ramban does not interpret this verse as a general declaration of praise about God’s kingship, but rather analyzes

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couplet in this song, “until Your people cross, O Lord/until this people, whom You acquired, cross,” presumably he regards these lines as synonymous parallelism as well. Cf. Rashbam, Ex. 15:16, who associates these lines stylistically as staircase parallelism, corresponding to v. 6. Similarly, see Muilenburg, “Liturgy,” 248; Howell, “Exodus 15,” 37–38; and Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 505.

126. Ramban, Ex. 15:14–16, and cf. Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:16. In order to maintain this reading, Ramban cites the midrash (*Tanhuma, Hukkat* 18) that the Canaanites who attacked from Arad (Num. 21:1) were not pure Canaanites; compare Rashi, Num. 21:1. Ramban, *ibid.*, observes the efficacy of Moses’ prayer, for while Edom confronted Israel “with massive troops and a strong hand” (Num. 20:20), and “they were desiring to fight them because of their hatred of them,” their fear prevented them from acting.

its specific proclamation as a climactic conclusion to the song's prevalent motifs:

He [Moses] was saying that God displayed currently that He is king and He has dominion over everything, for He liberated (*שִׁלַּח*) His servants and brought His rebels to ruin. So may it be His will to do [so] in all generations forever: "May He never withdraw His eye from the righteous" (Job 36:7), nor hide it from the malicious wicked.<sup>127</sup>

This analysis coincides with Ramban's rendition of v. 11, the conclusion of the second stanza, in which God is lauded for performing the simultaneous, opposite actions of revenge against His enemy and salvation of His people and, in doing so, proving that He is incomparable to the greatest of earthly kings.<sup>128</sup> In order to bring "thematic closure" to the song,<sup>129</sup> Moses reiterates this primary motif, emphasizing that God has demonstrated His absolute dominion over "everything"—perhaps implying over nature as well—throughout these historical occurrences.<sup>130</sup> In contrast to his predecessors, who claim that God's kingship will only become apparent when Israel has built His Temple, Ramban's reading suggests how he conducts a conceptual "retroactive reading" of the song, implying that God's sovereignty has been evident in the divine antithetical conduct with the Egyptians and Israel.<sup>131</sup>

127. Ramban, Ex. 15:18.

128. Employing similar wording in his commentary to both verses, regarding both God's vengeance against transgressors and rescue of His servants (*שֵׁה נְקֻמָּת בְּעֹבֶר*)—v. 11; *רָצַנוּ וְהַשְׁעָה אֲתָּה עַבְדִּי* and *אָבֹד אֲתָּה מְוֹדִי*—v. 18), Ramban directs his readers to make this extended parallel juxtaposition. Significantly, the phrase, *שֵׁה נְקֻמָּת בְּעֹבֶר* appears only in these two verses in Ramban's biblical commentary; *שֵׁה רָצַנוּ* appears only in his commentary to Ex. 15:11, 26 (as well as Num. 11:22, Deut. 11:2).

129. For this description of how poems end, see Barbara Herenstein Smith, *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago, 1968), 96–98; compare her discussion of how poems achieve closure through identifications of their thematic structure, 98–150. See also Watson, *Poetry*, 63–65.

130. In a reading parallel to that of Ramban, Alter, *Five Books of Moses*, 402, notes to v. 18, indicates that this poetic line is not an epilogue; rather, "its celebration of God's supremacy corresponds to the endings of the two previous strophes (vv. 6 and 11). God's regal dominion is confirmed both by the victory over the Egyptians and the establishing of a terrestrial throne in Jerusalem." Similarly Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 334, observes that the subject of God's sovereignty in v. 18 resonates with the broad themes of the Exodus story; since chapters 4 and 5, the subject "revolved around just who shall be king (God or Pharaoh) and just who shall be served," and this is resolved by God's defeat of the Egyptian ruler, so that God "can now be acclaimed as king, while we hear nothing further of Pharaoh."

131. On the views of Ramban's predecessors, see, for example, Rashi, Ex. 15:18, and Ibn Ezra, long commentary to Ex. 15:18. For a modern reading parallel to Ramban's predecessors, see Propp, *Exodus 1–18*, 545. On retroactive reading of poetry, see

On the other hand, rendering *yimlokh* as future imperfect, Ramban analyzes v. 18 as a culminating prayer that positions this song within a broader theological framework, aligning with the liturgical, future tone of v. 16.<sup>132</sup> For this purpose, Ramban specifies that God's kingship in this context refers to the divine providential manner, guarding the righteous and punishing the wicked.<sup>133</sup> Accordingly, he exposes the thematic continuum of the defining aspect of God's sovereign authority that has been displayed throughout the events described in the song, which establishes a prototype of Israel's expectations from God in His manner of justice that should persist for all generations.

In modern terms, Ramban's reading implies that the song ends on a note of finality, as v. 18 is its conclusion, integrating thematically with the details of the song, but not "absolute finality," for it intends to be boundless, extending beyond its structural confines so that its thematic principles become applicable to situations other than the immediate historical context that prompted its composition.<sup>134</sup>

## Conclusion

In his study of biblical poems, Robert Alter observes:

[P]oetry is quintessentially the mode of expression in which the surface is the depth, so that through careful scrutiny of the configurations of the surface—the articulation of the line, the movement from line to poem, the imagery, the arabesques of syntax and grammar, the design of the poem as a whole—we come to apprehend more fully the depth of the poem's meaning.<sup>135</sup>

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Watson, *Poetry*, 64. Compare Ramban, Ex. 13:16, who notes that the plagues are a "wondrous miracle" that impart essential principles of faith, teaching God's qualifications as the Creator Who is providentially omnipresent, performs acts of kindness toward those who fulfill His will, and is omnipotent with incomparable powers over all.

132. Hizkuni, Ex. 15:18, similarly reads this verse as a prayer, but without Ramban's additional clarifications. Cf. Luzzatto, Ex. 15:18 (ed. Schlesinger, 291), who claims that Ramban's reading requires that v. 18 be formulated in the order of: "He will rule, God, for eternity." Luzzatto maintains that this statement only refers to the time when God will become the eternal king with the building of the Temple.

133. Ramban's description of God's ways with the righteous derives from Job 36:7, which fittingly records Elihu's speech about God's relationship with earthly kings; those who follow His ways are exalted on their thrones, while those who are corrupt will perish by His judgment.

134. On closure of a poem that does not aim for absolute finality, see Smith, *Poetic Closure*, 120, 130–31.

135. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 205; compare his observations, 113, 151, 160–61. See also Fokkelman, *Major Poems*, 23, who insists that proper interpretation of biblical poems must employ a "hermeneutic awareness," comprising an analysis that unearths

The present study illustrates how Ramban deciphers a biblical song's diverse poetic devices and complex literary structure, which coalesce to create a coherent and meaningful literary product. In his analysis of the Song of the Sea, Ramban investigates the song's prevalent poetic features in order to identify the primary themes that organize and integrate the specific contents of each stanza and interrelate the stanzas into a coherent whole—the motif of *ge'ut*, God's rising up above the enemy that is lowered; Israel's salvation for a future destiny; God as doer of miracles, the thing and its opposite; and God's diametric acts of revenge against the enemy and guiding the Israelites to the Holy Land, all culminating in the final expression of God's demonstrated kingship. His commentary reveals a discerning eye for the rich poetic features that combine to produce a densely textured, multifaceted composition with a clear purpose, conveyed on multiple levels, through subtle and effective linkages that bind the different parts of the poem thematically. Ramban displays an intuitive awareness of the integral relationship between form and rhetoric within a biblical song/*shirah*, which distinguishes it as a distinctive mode of discourse.

As M. H. Lichtenstein asserts, to truly appreciate biblical poetry, one must decipher its “unique vision and voice.”<sup>136</sup> A close reading of Ramban's commentary reveals his insights into the Song of the Sea's “vision and voice” through his exploration of how its integrated and cohesive poetic form communicates its rhetoric, which has far-reaching relevance.

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the wealth of “meanings and sense” through close consideration of “the impressive array of artistically and thematically relevant signals given off by language, style and structure.” In *Reading Biblical Poetry*, 34–35, Fokkelman expands this approach, stipulating that a Hebrew poem contains both “quantity” and “quality,” “language and prosody,” as its composition as “a well-constructed hierarchy” contributes to its “meaning and sense.” Compare Zogbo and Wendland, *Hebrew Poetry*, 2, regarding the prominence of the “form of the message” in poetry, as compared to prose; see also Berlin, “Introduction to Hebrew Poetry,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, 4:302, and Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, 14.

136. Lichtenstein, “Biblical Poetry,” 113.