

Literary Theory and Composition History of the Torah: The Sea Crossing (Exod 14:1-31) as a
Test Case¹

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This essay argues that literary theory is not just a tool for synchronic studies of biblical literature but is essential if we are to understand its diachronic development and its rootedness in ancient culture. A new reading of the sea crossing narrative in Exodus 14 informed by German reception theory and linguistic pragmatics (relevance theory) suggests a very different understanding of this text's composition history than that offered by tradition-historical and source-critical methods, and helps us better understand its connections to ancient Near Eastern culture as well as literature elsewhere in the Tanakh.

Literary theory became popular in biblical studies during the 1980s as scholars became increasingly less convinced by the yield of classic historical-critical method, which seemed to focus more on deconstructing a narrative based on stylistic differences than explaining how it

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works as a whole.² Scholars employed the formalist theories in vogue at the time, demonstrating that historical critics can be too quick to jump in with a diachronic solution to what may be a synchronic problem. But the reactionary character of this early push for literary theory in biblical studies also led scholars to downplay the presence of fractures in the text which may be markers of composition history. The distance between modern literary criticism and classic historical criticism (or *Literarkritik*) is actually not as vast as it seems, because concern for the literary integrity of a text is at the center of both enterprises.³ As Rolf Knierim pointed out, “the determination of sources is a possible result of literary-critical work [*Literarkritik*] but not its methodological principle.”⁴ Setting historical and literary criticism at odds and practicing them

² Brian Peckham, “Writing and Editing,” in *Fortunate the Eyes that See: Essays in Honor of David Noel Freedman in Celebration of His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. A. Beck, et. al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 364.

³ John Barton, “Historical Criticism and Literary Interpretation: Is There Any Common Ground?,” in *Crossing the Boundaries: Essays in Biblical Interpretation in Honour of Michael D. Goulder*, ed. S. E. Porter, P. Joyce, and D. E. Orton (Biblical Interpretation Series 8; Leiden: Brill, 1994), 7. This is easily forgotten when it comes to historical-critical methods, but see Norman Habel, *Literary Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 2-7.

⁴ Rolf Knierim, “Criticism of Literary Features, Form, Tradition, and Redaction,” in *The Hebrew Bible and its Modern Interpreters*, ed. D. A. Knight and G. M. Tucker (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985), 131. Until the Graf-Wellhausen documentary hypothesis became the paradigm, fragmentary and supplementary hypotheses circulated alongside it and, in fact, still do; e.g., Christoph Levin, “Source Criticism: The Miracle at the Sea,” in *Method Matters: Essays on the*

in isolation thus obscures the fact that they have essentially the same goal. The question is not whether to use literary theory, but which tools best help us understand the literary integrity of a text *as well as* identify and explain places where it truly lacks integrity. Formalist theory did biblical studies an enormous service by teaching us to read with an eye to literary concerns we had not considered before, but its ahistorical sensibility does not enable us to deal well with issues like the composite nature of biblical literature or its rootedness in ancient culture. Other literary theories do, and I would like to explore the potential yield of a few literary-critical tools in the following study of the sea crossing narrative.

Exodus 14 is a transitional narrative in which the Israelites move from enslavement in Egypt to the freedom (and danger) of the wilderness by crossing the sea on dry ground. A crux of mid-twentieth century scholarship on this text is the question of whether it belongs to an exodus tradition or a wilderness tradition, each of which was understood to have developed orally in a different cultic context before it took shape as literature.⁵ Martin Noth stated confidently that the sea crossing is the heart of the exodus tradition, but George W. Coats noted various elements that link Exodus 14 with the wilderness narrative and argued that it belongs instead with the wilderness tradition. Brevard Childs resolved this conundrum using the Documentary Hypothesis: The J version of the narrative is associated with the wilderness (Pesah was its exodus event), while the P version identifies the sea crossing as the paradigmatic exodus event,

Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen, ed. J. M. LeMon and K. H. Richards (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 39-61.

⁵ The classic articulation of tradition-historical method is Martin Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* (2 vols.; Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1943); *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, trans. B. W. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1972).

and the lack of clarity about which tradition Exodus 14 should be associated with arose as the two versions were combined.⁶

The tradition-historical method yielded some important insights about this text, not least of which is that there appear to be two different endings to the exodus narrative, one associated with Pesah and the other associated with the sea crossing. But this approach to the issue of why it contains both exodus and wilderness elements is problematic. Dale Patrick questioned whether the sea crossing narrative could ever have been associated with the wilderness tradition alone because the story is by its very nature the culmination of Israel's struggle to get out of Egypt. Patrick himself worked squarely within the tradition-historical method, but he offered a key insight that transcends it, namely that the complaint motif was a "freefloating compositional theme" understandably used in a narrative set at the edge of the wilderness.⁷

⁶ Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), 104-105; George W. Coats, "The Traditio-Historical Character of the Reed Sea Motif," *Vetus Testamentum* 17 (1967): 253-65; Brevard S. Childs, "A Traditio-Historical Study of the Reed Sea Tradition," *Vetus Testamentum* 20 (1970): 406-18; George W. Coats, "The Sea Tradition in the Wilderness Theme: A Review," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 12 (1979): 2-8. Childs' view continues to be accepted in recent commentaries; e.g., Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 182-84, 199-200, 300.

⁷ Dale Patrick, "Traditio-History of the Reed Sea Account," *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976): 248-49. See David H. Aaron, *Etched in Stone: The Emergence of the Decalogue* (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), 48-52 for a theoretically grounded discussion of floating motifs as elements of cultural repertoire.

Using Wolfgang Iser's framing of how literature is read and the implications for how it is written, which he articulated in *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, we might think of the complaint motif as an element of cultural repertoire. *Cultural repertoire* is anything in a culture that can be referred to in a text: other texts, geography, social phenomena, history, ideas, motifs. When an author constructs a text, he selects elements of repertoire from various background contexts ideally known to both him and the reader and blends them together in order to develop the narrative.⁸ Tradition-historical method thus presented a false choice in asking us to decide whether the sea crossing belongs to the exodus *or* the wilderness, and source criticism played into the hands of this way of framing the issue. Instead, we might consider the transitional character of this narrative and ask: What elements of cultural repertoire are used here, and from what backgrounds were they drawn?; What literary goals were they blended together to serve?; and How (and how *well*) do they work together to achieve these goals? When we consider Exodus 14 from this literary-critical angle, we will see that it is not a combination of two independent sources, each of which construed the sea crossing in the context of a different tradition complex, but that much of it is actually a tightly-constructed, purposeful whole.

The wilderness complaint motif involves the Israelites complaining in a situation of distress—typically one at home in the wilderness such as lack of food or water—followed by a response from Moses, divine intercession, and a miracle.⁹ The complaint in Exod 14:10-12

⁸ Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).

⁹ For definition of the elements of this motif, also referred to as the murmuring motif, see George W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Traditions of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968) and more recently Aaron, *Etched*, 190-93.

comes when the Israelites, on their way out of Egypt, notice the Egyptian army in hot pursuit. This is not a typical wilderness situation, but the motif is nonetheless used to develop one of the main themes of the narrative. The Israelites' complaint is prompted by their fear of the pursuing Egyptians (Exod 14:10), yet by the end of the narrative they have learned to fear Yahweh instead (Exod 14:31). Moses' response in Exod 14:13-14 facilitates this shift: He does not merely calm the Israelites' fear of being overtaken by the Egyptians but also exhorts them to be in awe of Yahweh's power to save them. The expression אֵל תִּירָא (verse 13) and the idea that Yahweh will battle on behalf of the Israelites against their enemies (verse 14) are drawn from the background of Deuteronomistic war ideology, where such exhortations appear frequently.¹⁰ Blended with the complaint motif, this element of repertoire serves as the pivot on which the theme of fearing Yahweh is developed. It also ties the complaint (verses 10-12) and response (verses 13-14) elements of the motif with the dénouement of the narrative (verse 31) in a tightly knit whole, one goal of which is to get the Israelites to feel the right kind of fear (awe) of the right individual (Yahweh).

Historical critics sometimes lose sight of the core goal of *Literarkritik* in their effort to apply a particular model of composition history. The complaint and response in Exod 14:10-14 are typically assigned by historical critics like Marc Vervenne to J and E, with the holy war language

¹⁰ E.g., Deut 20:3; Josh 10:25; 1 Sam 7:7-11. See Jan A. Wagenaar, "Crossing the Sea of Reeds (Exod 13-14) and the Jordan (Josh 3-4): A Priestly Framework of the Wilderness Wandering," in *Studies in the Book of Exodus: Redaction–Reception–Interpretation*, ed. M. Vervenne (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996), 465 and William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 1-18: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 495.

attributed to a (proto-) Deuteronomistic redaction (R^{JE}).¹¹ But it is notoriously difficult to isolate proposed Deuteronomistic redactional layers, and even Vervenne does “not believe that the process of growth of this narrative thread can be entirely reconstructed.”¹² If we cannot discern the contours of a redactional layer, however, the only warrant we are left with for positing one is our presumed model of composition history, and we then run the risk of reconstructing a process that simply instantiates our presumed model rather than one that accounts for the shape of the text, which is what *Literarkritik* is supposed to do. John Van Seters approaches the problem of Deuteronomistic language differently, arguing that J made use of Deuteronomistic materials; indeed, holy war language is not limited to Moses’ response but carries through the entire sea crossing narrative, including Yahweh causing the enemy to panic (Exod 14:24; cf. Exod 23:37; Deut 2:15; Josh 10:10; Judg 4:15; 1 Sam 7:10; 2 Sam 22:15) and leaving not a single enemy (Exod 14:28; cf. Judg 4:16).¹³ Van Seters’ analysis illustrates that an author can draw repertoire

¹¹ Marc Vervenne, “The ‘P’ Tradition in the Pentateuch: Document and/or Redaction?: The ‘Sea Narrative’ (Ex 13,17–14,31) as a Test Case,” in *Pentateuchal and Deuteronomistic Studies: Papers Read at the XIIIth IOSOT Congress, Leuven 1989*, ed. C. Brekelmans and J. Lust (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 78; Marc Vervenne, “The Sea Narrative Revisited,” *Biblica* 75 (1994): 84-85; and Marc Vervenne, “Exodus Expulsion and Exodus Flight: The Interpretation of a Crux Critically Re-Assessed,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 22, no. 2 (1996): 50.

¹² Vervenne, “Sea Narrative Revisited,” 85.

¹³ John Van Seters, *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus-Numbers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 134-35.

from different background contexts to compose a narrative and that variations in language and style are not always significant for distinguishing one compositional layer from another.¹⁴

The scribe has also blended the basic form of a salvation oracle with the complaint motif, and this blend facilitates the development of a second theme, that of salvation.¹⁵ Not only does Moses calm the Israelites' fear of the Egyptians, he also anticipates their deliverance from them (ישועת יהוה, verse 13; cf. ויִשַׁע יְהוָה בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם, verse 30). The theme of salvation is set up in verse 10, as the verb צָעַק, 'to cry out,' is used to articulate the Israelites' complaint (Exod 14:10).¹⁶ Choice of this verb suggests an effort to blend the complaint motif with the broader exodus narrative: The Israelites initially cry out to Yahweh in Exodus 2:23, and Yahweh later indicates that he has heard their cry for salvation and will answer it through Moses (Exod 3:7-10).¹⁷ Moses indeed plays a role in Yahweh's act of drying up the sea, and the dénouement of the sea crossing narrative (Exod 14:30-31) indicates that this act of salvation has the desired

¹⁴ The classic case of this in Pentateuchal studies is arguably the blend of priestly and deuteronomistic style in texts composed relatively late in the formation of the Torah; see Lothar Perlitt, "Priesterschrift im Deuteronomium?," in *Deuteronomium-Studien* (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 1994), 123-43.

¹⁵ אֵל הִירָאָה, followed by a promise of deliverance, and resulting in trust of the prophet is a structure like that of Isa 7:4-9; see Van Seters, *Life of Moses*, 134-35.

¹⁶ The typical verbs in complaint episodes are רִיב (Exod 17:2; Num 20:3) and לָחַן (Exod 16:2; Num 14:2). Num 20:2 and 16:3 use קָהַל בּ and Num 21:5 uses דָּבַר בּ. Num 21:2 does use צָעַק when the Israelites call on Moses for help, but their initial complaint to Yahweh is framed with אָנָּה.

¹⁷ Diana Vikander Edelman, "The Creation of Exodus 14–15," in *Jerusalem Studies in Egyptology*, ed. I. Shirun-Grumach (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998), 146.

result: It has inspired in the Israelites the fear of Yahweh which they lacked at the beginning of the narrative and prompted the Israelites to trust Moses as well. The three major themes of the narrative—fear of Yahweh, salvation, and trust in Moses—are thus inextricably bound together.

Thomas Dozeman notes that the complaint motif “is a rejection both of Yahweh’s salvation and of Moses’ authority.”¹⁸ Indeed, the complaint in Exod 14:10-12 is key to the development of the narrative, because it establishes the tensions that will ultimately be resolved when the Israelites are saved and learn to both fear Yahweh and trust Moses. The Israelites’ wish to return to Egypt is a standard element of the complaint motif (see Exod 16:3; Num 14:2-3; Num 11:46; Num 21:5), but Exod 14:12 is unique in its statement that “it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” This particular complaint puts the Israelites’ pending salvation in jeopardy because they express a desire to move *away* from salvation rather than *toward* it; as William H. C. Propp notes, they show an “ambivalence toward freedom.”¹⁹ This ambivalence is the result of being caught between their fear of the Egyptians and their fear of the potential dangers in the wilderness. What they perceive to be in their best interest in this liminal situation prevents them from seeing the possibility of real freedom and from fearing Yahweh. It also prompts them to lash out at Moses, and their distrust of his leadership is expressed in two reversals: “Let us be so that we may serve the Egyptians” (Exod 14:12) is a reversal of Moses’ request to Pharaoh to let the Israelites go so they may serve Yahweh (see Exod 4:23; 7:16, 26; 8:16; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7).²⁰ We also find a reversal of the exodus formula (להוציא ממצרים) in ממצרים, ‘What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt?’ (Exod 14:11), as

¹⁸ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 301.

¹⁹ Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 494.

²⁰ Levin, “Source Criticism,” 45.

the Israelites use it to speak of pending doom rather than salvation. In both cases, the Israelites accuse Moses of acting against their best interest when the problem is not Moses but the Israelites' interpretation of their predicament. By the end of the narrative, their trust in Moses is established along with their grasp of the true nature of the situation.

Source critics sometimes separate verses 11-12 from verses 10, 13-14 because they find the theme of fear in verses 10, 13-14 but not in verses 11-12. Moreover, they note that verses 11-12 are concerned with death in the wilderness, while verse 10 is concerned with the pursuing Egyptians.²¹ One of the contentions formalist literary critics have with historical criticism, as framed by David Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, is that “the analysis of sources, fundamental to the method, was basically dependent on aesthetic premises which were often arbitrary and rarely acknowledged.”²² The composite character of biblical literature has long been acknowledged, but what may *seem* to be fractures in a narrative are not always real fractures. So how does one tell what constitutes a fracture in the text? As Meir Sternberg put it, “the task of decomposition calls for the most sensitive response to the arts of composition,” and Iser’s aesthetic theory offers one way to get control of the discussion: Where elements of cultural repertoire work well together to

²¹ Noth, *Exodus*, 106 attributes Exod 14:11-12 to E, while Levin, “Source Criticism,” 44 sees them as part of a late redaction. Coats, *Rebellion*, 136 adds that verses 11-12 take a negative, accusatory tone in an otherwise positive narrative about Israel’s deliverance.

²² David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 8.

serve a coherent set of literary goals, we should avoid positing unevenness in the text and drawing conclusions about composition history on that basis.²³

When we consider the role of the complaint (verses 10-12) in the development of the sea crossing narrative, we see that there is no unevenness in the text. The Israelites fear *both* the Egyptians *and* the possibility of death in the wilderness; the latter is simply expressed as anger directed at Moses in order to develop the theme of trust in him alongside the themes of fear of Yahweh and salvation by placing all three in question. Indeed, the Israelites complain to *both* Yahweh *and* Moses in order to express lack of confidence in both of them.²⁴ Moses' response

²³ Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985), 16. Iser's approach to aesthetics is certainly not the only literary theory one could use; I prefer it to formalist theories because his notion of repertoire drawn from a shared cultural background has the potential to help us understand how ancient texts are rooted in the cultures in which they were produced as well as how we as readers (separated now by significant temporal and cultural distance) receive these texts. The point is simply to have a solid and transparent means of control so that we are not building arguments about composition history on a foundation of ultimately irrelevant observations.

²⁴ Joel S. Baden, *The Composition of the Pentateuch: Renewing the Documentary Hypothesis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 200 argues that the Israelites' complaint to Yahweh in verse 10 (ויצעקו בני ישראל אל יהוה) should be assigned to a different source (P) than the rest of verses 10-14 (J) because he sees it as a doublet of the Israelites' complaint to Moses in verse 11, but this analysis fails to reckon with fact that fear of Yahweh and trust in Moses are established through their cooperation in bringing about a single event. The development of these themes

(verses 13-14) then moves all three problems toward their resolution: He exhorts the Israelites not to be afraid, announces their pending salvation which will inspire their fear of Yahweh, and begins to win their trust himself. In other wilderness complaint episodes, Moses responds to the Israelites by complaining to God (Num 14:5; 20:6) or falling on his face before God (Exod 17:4; Num 11:1-15), but here he speaks *to the people*, and what he says is going to happen *does* happen in the end, establishing him as the trustworthy character he is said to be in Exod 14:31. To separate verses 11-12 from verses 10, 13-14 is therefore to break up elements of the complaint motif and destroy the fabric of the narrative.

The complaint motif is not limited to the Israelites' complaint and Moses' response but includes the elements of divine intervention and miracle as well, and the latter are used in the sea crossing narrative to help establish trust in Moses. Divine intervention in the rock/water episodes involves Yahweh giving Moses instructions on how to carry out his role in the miracle, which he follows in one case (Exod 17:6) and fails to follow in the other (Num 20:7-11). The sea crossing narrative also involves instructions, which Moses follows *to the letter*. The first command is issued in Exod 14:16: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה אֲרֹמְמָה אֶת יָדְךָ עַל הַיָּם, 'Hold out your arm over the sea,' and the expression is repeated nearly verbatim when the sea is dried up in verse 21 (וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל יְהוָה אֲרֹמְמָה אֶת יָדְךָ עַל הַיָּם), 'Moses held

naturally involves the Israelites addressing complaints to both characters to establish the lack of confidence in them which is remedied by the end of the narrative. Note also that וַיִּצַּעֲקוּ, as discussed above, introduces the theme of salvation in this episode and is thus connected with Moses' response in verses 13-14 which assures the Israelites that salvation will indeed come. Baden is right to note the presence of a double complaint in verses 10-11, but this doublet is significant for the development of character and theme in the narrative and thus should not be taken as a source-critical indicator.

out his arm over the sea’) and again when it is brought back over the heads of the Egyptians in verses 26-27. This command-execution structure is typically assigned by source critics to P and understood to accompany Moses’ splitting of the sea, while the complaint and response elements are assigned to J, where Yahweh dries up the sea himself. This source division not only breaks up elements of the complaint motif used to develop the narrative, but also destroys the idea that Yahweh and Moses work *in tandem* to get the Israelites out of Egypt and earn their awe and trust.²⁵ This is evident in Exod 14:16-17, where Moses’ and Yahweh’s respective roles are contrasted in clauses with fronted pronouns:

וְאַתָּה הָרַם אֶת מִטְּךָ וְנִטְתָּ אֶת יָדְךָ עַל הַיָּם, ‘*As for you*, hold out your arm over the sea...’

וְאֲנִי הִנְנִי מַחְזֵק אֶת לֵב מִצְרַיִם, ‘*As for me*, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians...’²⁶

²⁵ Marc Vervenne, “The Protest Motif in the Sea Narrative (Ex 14,11-12): Form and Structure of a Pentateuchal Pattern,” *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 63 (1987): 257-71 limits the motif to the protest against leaving Egypt (manifest in the sea crossing narrative in Exod 14:11-12), but it involves a more extensive plot structure which must be accounted for in an effort to explain its function in the narrative; cf. Aaron, *Etched*, 190-193. Moreover, because the themes (fear of Yahweh, salvation, trust in Moses) developed by means of the command-execution structure (typically P) are resolved in Exod 14:30-31 (typically J, like the complaint and response), they should not be broken into two different sources; for typical source divisions, see Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), 220.

²⁶ Peter Weimar, *Die Meerwundererzählung: Eine redaktionkritische Analyse von Ex 13,17–14,31* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1985) 177-78 sees וְאַתָּה as unnecessary because Yahweh is

We as readers see that the staff in Moses' hand is not actually what dries up the sea; Yahweh does this himself using a strong east wind (Exod 14:21). Moses' act of holding his staff over the sea appears to the Israelites as a *sign* of the salvation Yahweh is working, inspiring their trust in Moses' leadership just as the precise command-execution structure inspires it in the reader.

The miracle itself comes in the form of Yahweh drying up the sea so the Israelites can escape Egypt by crossing on dry land. Because this act evokes a common myth in the ancient Near East in which a deity creates the world by conquering chaos in the form of a personified sea, the sea crossing narrative is often viewed as a historicized myth.²⁷ Michael Fishbane offers an important critique of this approach in *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking*, where he points out that biblical scholars have often brought to their exegesis a misguided understanding of myth (as a primitive intellectual form) and how it was employed by Israelite scribes (who retained vestiges of myth in order to neutralize them in favor of history).²⁸ By studying uses of the divine combat motif in a variety of poetic texts, Fishbane demonstrates that scribes did not merely tolerate myths but actively *made* them, arguing that we should consider how a mythic motif is used in

already speaking to Moses in verse 15 and relegates it to a redactional effort to bridge verses 15 and 17, But Weimar misses the purpose of fronting pronouns in Hebrew syntax, and Vervenne, “‘P’ Tradition,” 84 is correct that they play an important role in the structure of the narrative.

²⁷ E.g., Carola Kloos, *Yhwh's Combat with the Sea: A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Amsterdam: van Oorschot, 1986); Bernard F. Batto, *Slaying the Dragon: Mythmaking in the Biblical Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992), 116-17.

²⁸ Michael Fishbane, *Biblical Myth and Rabbinic Mythmaking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 1-7.

any particular instance in order to understand the “complex symbiosis” between the motif and the concerns of the literary context.²⁹ We might think of the divine combat motif as an element of cultural repertoire, typically used in order to invoke these mighty primordial acts of creation as an expression of confidence in or appeal to Yahweh’s power to *save* in a situation of communal or individual crisis (e.g., Ps 74:15; 2 Sam 22:8-21//Ps 18:8-20; Isa 43:1b-2, 16-19; 44:27; 50:2; 51:9-11). The miracles in other complaint episodes are specific to their respective situations, and the same is true here: The divine combat motif is blended with the complaint motif to create the dramatic act of salvation which gets the Israelites out of Egypt and inspires awe in Yahweh as well as trust in Moses.

When the Israelites complain, they ask Moses מה זאת עשית לנו להוציאנו ממצרים, ‘What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt?’ (Exod 14:11). This question is anticipated by Pharaoh in verse 5 when he says, מה זאת עשינו כי שלחנו את ישראל מעבדנו, ‘What have we done, releasing Israel from our service?’ Propp calls this a case of “unconscious irony,” but it is not irony, and it is not unconscious on the part of the scribe.³⁰ Pharaoh’s realization of his error is a deliberate echo of the complaint motif which establishes Yahweh’s act of drying up the sea as a response to the Egyptians as much as to the Israelites, and the miracle is also used to develop a secondary theme: Yahweh’s judgment against Egypt.³¹ Fishbane notes that the divine combat motif is sometimes used to express Yahweh’s power to *judge* as well as to *save*: Ezekiel 29, for example, is an oracle

²⁹ Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 21.

³⁰ Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 494.

³¹ I refer to judgment of Egypt as a secondary theme because it is not one of the three major themes explicitly resolved in the dénouement of the narrative (Exod 14:30-31); rather, it finds its last expression in verse 18 before the sea crossing is narrated.

of judgment against Pharaoh which depicts him as the sea monster defeated by Yahweh, and the oracle announcing Yahweh's pending destruction and exile of Egypt by means of Nebuchadnezzar in Ezekiel 30 also employs the divine combat motif (verse 12).³² The sea event in Exodus 14 is an act of judgment against the Egyptians as well, evident in Exodus 14:21, where Yahweh dries up the sea with a strong east wind. The east wind, or רוח קדים, is a common tool of judgment in prophetic passages, in many cases used for drying up or scorching something, be it Israel as a vine or Jonah after his shade plant had been destroyed.³³ The sea event was designed as an act of judgment as well as salvation from the plan's very inception. Yahweh notes that he will bring the Egyptians out after the Israelites וידעו מצרים כי אני יהוה, 'so the Egyptians will know that I am Yahweh' (Exod 14:4), an expression which appears repeatedly in the judgment oracle in Ezekiel 30 (verses 8, 19, 26). Again, source-critical studies have tended to break up what is inextricably connected: Verses containing this expression are typically attributed to P, while Yahweh drying up the sea in Exod 14:21 is attributed to J.³⁴ Since the two work together to develop the theme of Yahweh's judgment against Egypt, to separate them is to destroy the fabric of the narrative.

Exodus 14 certainly resonates with the ancient Near Eastern mythic background, as all uses of the divine combat motif do, but it is not a historicized myth. Rather, the scribe who composed

³² Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 61; other examples include Nah 1:3-4; Jer 51:34-37.

³³ General examples include Jer 18:17; Job 27:21; examples of the wind causing a shipwreck include Ezek 27:26; Ps 48:8; and examples of a drying, scorching wind include Gen 41:6, 23; Ezek 17:10; 19:12; Hos 13:15; Jon 4:8; see Jean-Louis Ska, "Séparation des eaux et de la terre ferme dans le récit sacerdotal," *La nouvelle revue théologique* 103-4 (1981): 527, 530.

³⁴ E.g., Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 220.

the sea crossing narrative blended the divine combat motif with other elements of cultural repertoire, including the complaint motif and Deuteronomistic war ideology as well as expressions from salvation and judgment oracles, in order to create a new narrative about Israel's salvation in a particular situation. As Fishbane notes, “[m]ythmaking is also a learned and literary act that, far from being a feature of degeneration or decreased spontaneity, is often a key factor in the revitalization of earlier sources and is a sign of ongoing cultural creativity.”³⁵ The sea crossing narrative appears to have become a paradigm of salvation for the Israelites—a myth in its own right—evident in poetic texts such as Psalm 78, which use the divine combat motif but appear also to have this specific narrative in mind.³⁶ Exodus 14 is thus a quintessential example of the kind of mythmaking Fishbane discusses.

The itinerary genre is yet another element of cultural repertoire used to construct the sea crossing narrative. A series of three itinerary notices brings the Israelites out of Egypt in the present form of the text:

Exod	ויסעו בני ישראל מרעמסס סכתה	The Israelites set out from
12:37		Ramesses to Sukkot.

³⁵ Fishbane, *Biblical Myth*, 20.

³⁶ Ps 78:12-13 refers to splitting the sea specifically *in Egypt* and taking the Israelites through it. See also Psalm 114, which refers specifically to a sea event in Egypt; Isa 11:15-16, which compares the departure from exile in Assyria with Yahweh's drying up of the Egyptian sea to create a path out; and Isa 43:16-19, which refers to the destruction of horses and chariots, specific to Exodus 14. Other uses of the divine combat motif are more generic.

Exod	ויסעו מסכת ויהנו באהם בקצה	They set out from Sukkot and
13:20	המדבר	camped at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness.
Exod	דבר אל בני ישראל וישבו ויהנו	Speak to the Israelites so that they
14:2	לפני פני החירת בין מגדל ובין הים לפני בעל צפן נכחו תחנו על הים	turn and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; they should camp next to the sea.

Source-critical studies have typically viewed Exod 13:20 as the J notice. Etham is taken to be the setting of the J sea crossing narrative which follows, and its location at the edge of the wilderness makes the sea crossing the first event in the wilderness narrative. The P notice in Exod 14:2 is understood to provide a different setting for the sea crossing narrative, one located in Egypt rather than the wilderness, making the sea crossing the last event of the exodus.³⁷ A major problem with this view is that the sequence of stops at Rameses, Sukkot, and Etham established in Exod 12:37 and 13:20 takes the Israelites out of Egypt through Wadi Tumilat, which is nowhere near a sea. This problem illustrates how important it is to consider the background from which repertoire is drawn and its function in a narrative. The geographical names in these itinerary notices are not empty placeholders but are used to create setting and, because they refer

³⁷ E.g., Childs, “Traditio-Historical Study”; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 182-83, 199-200; Thomas B.

Dozeman, “The Priestly Wilderness Itineraries and the Composition of the Pentateuch,” in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. T. B. Dozeman, K. Schmid, and B. J. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 262-65.

to places whose locations we are more or less clear about, we can judge whether or not they constitute a *plausible* setting.³⁸ Exod 14:2 includes places near a sea, but the edge of the wilderness at Etham (Exod 13:20) is not a plausible setting for the sea crossing narrative at all.

Just as working with unclear aesthetic premises can lead to identification of fractures in a narrative which are not really there, it can also result in failure to see inconsistencies that *are* present and significant. Reinhard Kratz understands the whole series of itinerary notices in Exod 12:37, 13:20, and 14:2 to have been formed around a previously existing sea crossing narrative in order to make it a stage on the itinerary out of Egypt.³⁹ Joel Baden holds a similar view, assigning all three notices to his P source and understanding Exod 14:2 as a “direct continuation” of Exod 13:20.⁴⁰ But the notion that all three itinerary notices are of a piece (whether a single redaction or a single source) is problematic, because the itinerary notice in Exod 14:2 is not like Exod 12:37 and 13:20 in form. Again, background context places an important constraint on interpretation: No extant itinerary document in the ancient Near East changes form in the middle, so it is highly unlikely that we have a coherent string of notices here.⁴¹ Exod 12:37 and 13:20, along with most of the itinerary notices throughout the wilderness narrative, use the verbs נָסַע for departure and הִגִּיעַ for arrival in their narrative preterite forms, and I have argued elsewhere that this series of notices is part of an effort by a priestly scribe to emplot the wilderness narrative

³⁸ On exodus geography, see Angela R. Roskop, *The Wilderness Itineraries: Genre, Geography, and the Growth of Torah* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 237-52.

³⁹ Reinhard G. Kratz, *The Composition of the Narrative Books of the Old Testament*, trans. J. Bowden (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 284.

⁴⁰ Baden, *Composition*, 199, 206.

⁴¹ Roskop, *Wilderness Itineraries*, 186 (the point is illustrated by texts discussed on 50-82).

like an Assyrian annal.⁴² But Exod 14:2 is framed as direct speech and uses שׁוּבוּ to divert the Israelites' route away from their departure into the wilderness through Wadi Tumilat in the Pesah narrative, where there is no sea. Baden argues that the "route toward the sea is entirely unnecessary for the Israelites' escape" because in Exod 14:2 they are simply "retracing their steps for the sole purpose of luring the Egyptians toward the water, where Yahweh will destroy them."⁴³ This view neglects the geography as well as the form: In Exod 12:37 and 13:20 the Israelites are nowhere near a sea, so they are not merely retracing their steps in Exod 14:2, and the route articulated there is absolutely necessary to establish a plausible setting for the sea crossing narrative. The itinerary notice in Exod 14:2 may best be viewed as a *revision* to the priestly annalistic version of the wilderness narrative which takes them toward a seaside setting on the coastal route out of Egypt appropriate for the sea crossing.⁴⁴

The revision signaled by Exod 14:2 cannot be limited to the redactional addition of an itinerary notice, since elements of the itinerary genre are used throughout the sea crossing narrative. Verse 9 again uses the camping verb חָנָה and repeats elements of the setting established in verse 2, while the departure verb נָסַע does not occur until verse 15 when Yahweh commands Moses to tell the Israelites to move forward toward the sea, only *after*—and *in response to*—their complaint that involves a desire to go back to Egypt. These verses are all typically attributed to P, and use of language characteristic of the itinerary genre in these cases could, as Frank Moore

⁴² Roskop, *Wilderness Itineraries*, 136-184, especially the list of itinerary notices on 178.

⁴³ Baden, *Composition*, 205.

⁴⁴ Roskop, *Wilderness Itineraries*, 215-218; this is true of not just Exod 14:2 but all atypical formulations of the itinerary genre in the wilderness narrative, as I discuss on pages 185-232.

Cross suggested, mean that the itinerary notice is part of a P reworking of a JE narrative.⁴⁵ But we also find ענב used in verse 19 to indicate the movement of the pillar of cloud and fire, and this verse is typically attributed to JE.⁴⁶ The pillar serves to guide the Israelites on their wilderness journey, so it typically sets out *in front* of them (cf. Exod 40:36-38; Num 9:15-23; 14:14; Deut 1:32-33; Pss 78:14; 105:39; Neh 9:12, 19). In Exod 14:19, however, it sets out *behind* them to act as their rearguard, a creative adaptation of the itinerary genre to serve the need, unique to this narrative, to protect the Israelites from the Egyptians and give them a head start into the seabed.⁴⁷ Elements of the itinerary genre are thus blended with the complaint motif, the divine combat motif, Deuteronomistic war ideology, and prophetic imagery to aid the development of the entire sea crossing narrative.

⁴⁵ Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), 310.

⁴⁶ E.g., Noth, *Exodus*, 106; Coats, *Rebellion*, 131; Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 220; Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 480.

⁴⁷ Baden, *Composition*, 198 argues that the pillar of cloud and fire (which he assigns to J) is at odds with the notion that the Egyptians pursue the the Israelites into the sea (which he assigns to P; the Israelites do not cross the sea in his reconstruction of J) because the Egyptians would need to see the Israelites in order to pursue them, which the pillar prevents them from doing. It is not difficult, however, to understand that the pillar of cloud and fire keeps the Egyptians at bay long enough for the Israelites to get a head start, ultimately preventing the Egyptians from catching up with them in the middle of the seabed. In fact, one must envision such a scenario in order for the Israelites to get to the other side before the sea returns to its normal state, so that only the Egyptians (and not the Israelites as well) are wiped out when it does.

Childs was fundamentally right that the itinerary notice in Exod 14:2 brings the Israelites at least nominally back into Egypt after they had already arrived at the edge of the wilderness in Exod 13:20 so the sea crossing, rather than Pesah, could be depicted as the final departure from Egypt.⁴⁸ But the itinerary notice is not a feature of a P alternative to a JE sea narrative set in the wilderness. Rather, it serves to accommodate the sea crossing episode to the exodus narrative as a new paradigmatic exodus event. *Accommodation* refers to “the presentation of new information in a backgrounded way” so that, although new, its “presence in the text world is presented as an unremarkable fact,” and we read the new information as though it naturally belongs there.⁴⁹ The priestly narrative, structured by the itinerary notices in Exod 12:37 and 13:20, took the Israelites out of Egypt through Wadi Tumulat in an escape associated with the plague of the firstborn and the observance of Pesah; it had no sea crossing. Exodus 14 *as a whole* is a post-priestly addition to the exodus narrative, and the scribe(s) who wrote it used the itinerary genre to link this new episode to the previous chain of itinerary notices and take the Israelites farther north to an appropriate setting at the sea.

A number of other efforts to accommodate the sea crossing narrative to the exodus and wilderness narratives also suggest that it was written specifically for this context and explain its

⁴⁸ Coats, “Sea Tradition,” 4 argues that Exod 14:2 does not bring the Israelites back into Egypt because שׁוּב is “simply one of several [verbs] that can appear in itinerary formulas.” In fact, Exod 14:2 is the *only* itinerary notice in the wilderness narrative that uses שׁוּב, the typical verbs being הִנַּח and נָסַע. The fact that Exod 15:22 has the Israelites departing into a *different* wilderness than Exod 13:20 supports Childs’ interpretation against Coats’.

⁴⁹ Paul Werth, *Text Worlds: Representing Conceptual Space in Discourse* (New York: Longman, 1999), 280, 56.

transitional character.⁵⁰ Exodus 14 is tightly linked to the plague narrative by a number of shared expressions: וְהִזְקִיתִי אֶת לֵב, ‘I [Yahweh] will harden the heart’ of Pharaoh and the Egyptians (Exod 14:4, 8, 17; cf. Exod 4:21; 7:13, 22; 8:15; 9:12, 35; 10:20, 27; 11:10); וַיֵּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה, ‘the Egyptians shall know that I am Yahweh’ (Exod 14:4, 18; cf. Exod 5:2; 7:5, 17; 8:6, 18; 9:14-16, 30; 10:2); Pharaoh’s regret at sending the Israelites away (שָׁלַח in Exod 14:5; cf. Exod 4:21, 23 5:1-2; 6:1, 11; 7:2, 14, 16, 26-27; 8:4, 16-17, 24-25, 28; 9:1-2, 7, 13, 17, 28, 35; 10:3-4, 7, 10, 20, 27; 11:1, 10; 12:33; 13:15, 17); and Moses’ use of his staff (Exod 14:16; cf. Exod 4:1-5; 7:8-13; 7:19-25; 8:1-3; 9:22-26; 10:12-13 as well as Exod 17:5; Num 20:8-11).⁵¹ The first two expressions are found in verses typically attributed to P and are used to support the source-critical conclusion that P construes the sea crossing as the last event in Egypt and the culmination of the plague narrative.⁵² While these expressions may occur in other priestly texts, however, not every instance of them must be assigned to the same source or redactional layer; as Suzanne

⁵⁰ I do not necessarily mean to imply that no tradition of a sea crossing existed prior to the composition of Exodus 14, just that it had not yet become part of the standard exodus narrative and that the version we have had not been written. If there was such a tradition (and there seems to have been, if Exodus 15 is an early Hebrew poem), it was yet another element of cultural repertoire used to construct the narrative.

⁵¹ These connections to the plague narrative are well-rehearsed in the secondary literature; see Dennis J. McCarthy, “Plagues and Sea of Reeds: Exodus 5–14,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 (1966): 137-58; Edelman, “Creation,” 146-47; Dozeman, *Exodus*, 312. The hardening of Pharaoh’s heart is, in fact, intimately connected to the use of Dtr holy war ideology; see Robert R. Wilson, “The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 41 (1979): 34.

⁵² Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 223.

Boorer pointed out, “the relative levels of texts cannot be determined on the basis of formulaic comparisons alone.”⁵³ Given the character of the sea crossing narrative as a revision to P, these expressions are better understood as efforts to blend it in so it reads as a continuation of what precedes. Yet another sign of accommodation to the exodus narrative is the effort to set the sea crossing at the very end of the night (Exod 14:20-21, 24) in order to frame it as a continuation of the departure associated with the plague of the firstborn which takes place in the middle of the night (Exod 11:4; 12:29-31, 42).

Efforts to accommodate the sea crossing narrative to the previously existing text also look forward to the wilderness. Diana Edelman argued that Exodus 14 “does not presume the existence of the wilderness wandering traditions,” but use of the complaint motif to provide its basic framework is an important accommodation to those very traditions.⁵⁴ The pillar of cloud and fire is another key element of the wilderness narrative, where its primary role, “repeated at crucial junctures in the P History,” is to guide the Israelites through the wilderness.⁵⁵ But it also functions as a divine *melammu*, whose terror-inspiring brilliance overwhelms the enemy and protects the Israelite army.⁵⁶ The pillar is thus a fitting element of the priestly annalistic version

⁵³ Suzanne Boorer, *The Promise of the Land as Oath: A Key to the Formation of the Pentateuch* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1992), 444.

⁵⁴ Edelman, “Creation,” 143.

⁵⁵ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 310.

⁵⁶ For the functions of the pillar of cloud and fire, see Thomas W. Mann, “The Pillar of Cloud in the Reed Sea Narrative,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 90 (1971): 15-30 and especially Moshe Weinfeld, “Divine Intervention in War in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East,” in

of the wilderness narrative, and we should not be surprised to see discussion of its role accompany the first P itinerary notice to bring the Israelites into the wilderness in Exod 13:20-22.⁵⁷ Just as Exod 14:2 ties into the P itinerary notice in Exod 13:20, so reference to the pillar of fire and cloud in the sea crossing narrative picks up the priestly repertoire in Exod 13:21-22, but emphasizes its *melammu*-like function moreso than its guiding function in keeping with the character of the sea narrative as a battle scene: In Exod 14:19-20, the pillar functions as a rearguard to protect the Israelites from the Egyptians, while in verse 24 it throws the Egyptians into a panic so the Israelites can escape.⁵⁸ Such efforts to accommodate Exodus 14 both

History, Historiography, and Interpretation: Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Literatures, ed.

H. Tadmor and M. Weinfeld (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1986), 132-36.

⁵⁷ Exod 13:17-22 are often taken as part of the sea crossing narrative; e.g., Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 220-21, 223-24. But it should now be clear that verses 20-22 are part of the P narrative to which the sea crossing was later added. Verses 17-19 are a still later addition aimed at repairing the confusion generated when the sea the Israelites crossed was identified as *Yam Suf* (Exod 15:4, 22), which conflicted with the typical use of *Yam Suf* elsewhere in the Tanakh to refer to the two northern arms of the Red Sea (e.g., Exod 23:31; Num 14:25; 21:4; Deut 1:40; 2:1; 1 Kgs 9:26; Jer 49:21). Exod 13:17-19 restores *Yam Suf* to its typical referent; see Roskop, *Wilderness Itineraries*, 247-52. Consequently, the sea crossing narrative begins only in Exod 14:1.

⁵⁸ The messenger of God and the pillar of cloud and fire in Exod 14:19 are often assigned to two different sources, E and J, respectively. But, as Van Seters notes, both embody the “guiding presence of God...who provides victory over Israel’s enemies” (*Life of Moses*, 130). Important instances in other literature of the divine *melammu* (or the god himself—the two are

backward to the exodus and forward to the wilderness account for its transitional character better than a process of tradition history and combination of sources.

We have now seen a number of cases in Exodus 14 alone which illustrate that not every perceived tension in a narrative is a sign of composition history. Indeed, creating and resolving tensions is how an author develops a narrative. Iser argued that our brains are constantly trying to grasp the meaning of a text as we read. We build a coherent understanding of the discourse by negotiating textual cues created by the author, fitting each new piece of information into the picture we've already built at any given point in the process. A *horizon*, or point of tension, occurs when we encounter a new feature that prompts us to renegotiate that understanding.⁵⁹ Some horizons are *productive* tensions created by the author in a well-constructed narrative and are eventually either resolved or left in such a way as to contribute to its meaning. When we arrive at Exod 14:21, for example, we find Moses holding his arm over the sea and splitting it, but Yahweh also driving it back with an east wind, and we might be prompted to wonder who really dried up the sea and how it was done. We may not be able to reconcile splitting the sea with drying it up. But, as I argued above, we can see how a *partnership* between Yahweh and Moses in drying up the sea is critical for the thematic development of the narrative culminating

interchangeable) throwing the enemy into panic are cited by Weinfeld, "Divine Intervention," 133-136. Yet another effort to accommodate the sea-crossing narrative to the military character of the priestly narrative to which it is added is the expression בִּיד רָמָה in Exod 14:8, which C. J. Labuschagne identifies as a "military, or semi-military, expression, signifying readiness to fight and the will to prevail" ("The Meaning of *b^eyād rāmā* in the Old Testament," in *Von Kanaan bis Kerala*, ed. W. C. Delsman, et. al. [Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982], 146).

⁵⁹ Iser, *Act of Reading*, 96-99.

in Exod 14:30-31, helping us resolve part of this horizon: Yahweh's act demonstrates his power over Israel's enemies, while Moses provides a sign of it that inspires the Israelites to trust him as well as Yahweh.

Other horizons are unproductive but simply constitute poor composition. In Exod 14:15, Yahweh says to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me?," despite the fact that Moses does *not* cry out to God in verses 13-14. This horizon serves no meaningful purpose in the narrative. Dozeman noted, "It is as though Yahweh has forgotten the setting and the circumstances of the story."⁶⁰ But it is not Yahweh who has forgotten; it is the *scribe*. David H. Aaron emphasizes the importance of attention to aesthetics in the study of biblical literature:

Aesthetics are as essential to a document as form, content, and ideological purpose. Too often scholars ignore this aspect of the text, worrying that aesthetic judgments are too prone to subjectivity to be of value. Aesthetic criticism can be done on the basis of aesthetic expectations that emerge from the literature itself rather than on the basis of some externally established rubric, especially when it pertains to aspects of narrative plausibility.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 314. Even the ancient translators saw the aesthetic problem here. Coats, *Rebellion*, 130 points out that the Peshitta "has felt this problem and inserted an introduction before vs. 15 to report that Moses also cried to Yahweh. But this reading can hardly be considered more than a correction of the inconsistency."

⁶¹ Aaron, *Etched*, 191.

Elements of cultural repertoire are sometimes employed poorly, revealing a scribe's lack of skill or—more likely in this case, given the otherwise tight construction of the narrative—momentary carelessness. The horizon created by Yahweh's question in Exod 14:15 is easily explained by the fact that the complaint motif often involves Moses transferring the Israelites' complaint to Yahweh (e.g., Exod 15:25; 17:4; Num 11:2; 21:7). Vervenne suggested that “the usual scheme... is probably used and modified in a special way,” but he did not explain how.⁶² As I argued above, the scribe manipulated the response element of the complaint motif in order to develop the theme of trust in Moses by having him *reassure the people* instead of transferring the Israelites' complaint to Yahweh. When the scribe moved on to craft Yahweh's reply to Moses, however, he appears to have reverted to what is typical in the motif without noticing that it no longer quite worked with the changes he made.⁶³

⁶² Vervenne, “Protest Motif,” 261.

⁶³ Another example of poor composition can be found in Exod 14:20. Here the pillar of cloud, together with the darkness of the nighttime setting, prevents the Israelites and the Egyptians from engaging in conflict, yet *את הלילה ויאיר* indicates that the pillar lit up the night, which would compromise this purpose. Marc Vervenne, “Exodus 14,20 MT-LXX: Textual or Literary Variation?,” in *Lectures et Relectures de la Bible, Festschrift P.-M. Bogaert*, ed. J.-M. Auwers and A. Wénin (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1999), 3-25 noted a number of efforts in the versions to make sense of the awkward syntax in this verse but argued that the Masoretic Text is not corrupt and that *את הלילה ויאיר* may be a pre-Masoretic gloss, harmonizing Exod 14:19-20 with Exod 13:21-22, which emphasizes the daytime as well as nighttime forms of the pillar. Whether a gloss or an original part of the narrative, I am more inclined to see it as a clumsy anticipation of the pillar's role as a *melammu* in verse 24, because the awkwardness stems from having to juggle

Iser did not deal with composite literature, but his idea of horizons in a narrative provides biblical scholars with a useful way to frame our discussion of composition history. While some horizons are productive and others result from poor composition, still others are signs of diachronic development. In Exod 14:21-22, we see that the sea is *driven back* with a strong east wind and *split* in two. It is impossible to form a coherent picture of the narrative with both actions, especially since Yahweh commands *Moses* to split the sea in verse 16 (ויבקעהו), leaving a different character responsible for each action—Yahweh for driving it back, and Moses for splitting it. This horizon is unproductive: It does not develop plot, characterization, or theme, and the conflict it creates is never resolved.⁶⁴ The whole episode, as we have seen, coheres quite tightly except for a few minor spots that are closely focused on splitting the sea and crossing between two walls of water: ויבקעהו in verse 16; ויבקעו המים in verse 21 (וישם את הים להרבה) should

the two roles the pillar plays in this narrative: obscuring the view of the enemy, which requires cloud and darkness, and acting as a *melammu* to throw the enemy into panic, which requires the brightness indicated by ויאר את הלילה. This problem would have been avoided if the scribe had simply saved mention of the pillar's brightness for the point in the narrative where it was immediately relevant.

⁶⁴ Paul R. Noble, "Synchronic and Diachronic Approaches to Biblical Interpretation," *Journal of Literature & Theology* 7, no. 2 (1993): 136 gets at this concept when he notes, "a diachronic reconstruction is predicated not simply upon repetitions, tensions, etc. in the text, but upon it displaying *redundant* repetitions and *unfruitful* tensions. In other words, it is built upon the observation of features in the text that lack sufficient *intrinsic* motivations—e.g., repetitions that go beyond what is needed for the text's information-conveying purposes, and make no other positive contribution."

also be included here, since it is a doublet of ויבאו בני ישראל בתוך הים ביבשה (in verse 22); and ומשמאלם והמים להם חמה מימינם in verses 22 and 29. Source critics are right to consider this horizon a sign of composition history.⁶⁵ Especially where we can link elements of a horizon to a distinct set of literary goals, we are justified in suggesting the presence of a separate source or revision. Given the limited character of the passages in which splitting the sea surfaces, we are better off seeing a minor *revision* to the text in this case.⁶⁶ While an independent source might have an entirely different set of themes and literary goals, we can expect that a revision will seek to somehow extend the base narrative. To explain this revision, we might ask the same questions we asked in our effort to understand the construction of the base narrative itself: From what background context is this element of cultural repertoire (splitting a body of water and crossing it with water on either side) drawn, and how does it alter or expand this narrative?

⁶⁵ E.g., Childs, *Book of Exodus*, 218-19; Levin, “Source Criticism,” 50.

⁶⁶ ויסר את אפן מרכבתיו וינהגו בכבדת, ‘He turned aside the wheels of their chariots, and they drove with difficulty’ (Exod 14:25) may also be part of this revision. The notion that the chariots are stuck conflicts with the fact that the sea returns to its normal state and covers them as they are fleeing (verses 25, 27-28). This creates unproductive tension in the narrative, which reads clearly without these two clauses: The Egyptians realize what is happening once they are thrown into a panic, decide to flee, and fail to get out before the sea covers them. It is difficult, however, to see what is gained in the revision by having the Egyptians be stuck since, either way, they drown in the sea; perhaps the motivation was heightened drama. I tentatively attribute these clauses to the revision simply because I can think of no good warrant for arguing that they constitute a separate revision or a gloss.

We are sometimes able to identify more than one possible background context from which an element of cultural repertoire might have been drawn. The sea crossing narrative, as I noted above, is typically understood in the context of ancient Near Eastern mythology. Dozeman, for example, sees the version in which the sea is dried up as having been influenced by the Canaanite Yamm myth, while the divided sea reflects *Enuma Elish* (where Marduk cleaves Tiamat in two) and introduces the theme of new creation.⁶⁷ But Moses splitting the sea can also be understood against the background of prophetic activity elsewhere in the Tanakh, particularly 2 Kings 2 where Elijah and Elisha split the Jordan by slapping it with Elijah's mantle and cross it on dry land with the water הנה והנה (verses 8, 14), similar to מים מים ומשמים in Exodus 14:22, 29. The function of the miracle they perform is to demonstrate the transfer of prophetic authority from Elijah to Elisha for the benefit of the group of prophets who came down from Jericho to watch. Which context best helps us understand the role of Moses splitting the sea in Exodus 14?

Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson offer a way to address this question in *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*. When we process a new piece of information in a discourse, we choose the background context that will maximize the relevance of the information to the discourse as we have interpreted it thus far.⁶⁸ New information is judged relevant to the extent that it *strengthens* the understanding already constructed, *weakens* that understanding by calling it into question, or *develops* that understanding further.⁶⁹ Relevance is a matter of degree; new

⁶⁷ Dozeman, *Exodus*, 300, 304.

⁶⁸ Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), 132-42.

⁶⁹ Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 108-17. This is arguably just as true for new information added in the course of a revision as it is for new information within a single compositional layer.

information may be more or less relevant, depending on how significantly it strengthens, weakens, or develops the discourse.⁷⁰ When we have a choice of multiple background contexts in which to understand that information, one context may yield much more in terms of relevance than others and will therefore produce the strongest interpretation.

This is exactly what plays out as we consider the relative merits of relating the divided sea to the context of either ancient Near Eastern mythology or prophetic activity elsewhere in the Tanakh. If Moses splitting the sea is seen as an echo of Elijah and Elisha splitting the Jordan, this act characterizes Moses as a legitimate prophet. Indeed, Moses' prophetic character is already an issue in the base narrative, where his trustworthiness is bolstered by an effort to characterize him like Samuel, who is recognized as a trustworthy prophet by all Israel in 1 Sam 3:20. The complaint motif is blended with repertoire drawn from Samuel in Moses' response:

Exod 14:13

אל תיראו התיצבו וראו את ישועת יהוה אשר יעשה לכם היום כי אשר ראיתם את מצרים
היום לא תסיפו לראתם עוד עד עולם

Have no fear! Stand by and witness Yahweh's act of salvation which he will perform for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you will never see again.

1 Sam 12:16-17

⁷⁰ Sperber and Wilson, *Relevance*, 122-25.

¹⁶ גם עתה התיצבו וראו את הרבר הגדול הזה אשר יהוה עשה לעיניכם: ¹⁷ הלוא קציר חטים היום אקרא אל יהוה ויתן קלות ומטר ודעו וראו כי רעתכם רבה אשר עשיתם בעיני יהוה לשאול לכם מלך:

¹⁶ “Now stand by and see the marvelous thing that Yahweh will do before your eyes. ¹⁷ It is the season of the wheat harvest. I will pray to Yahweh and He will send thunder and rain; then you will take thought and realize what a wicked thing you did in the sight of Yahweh when you asked for a king.”

Exod 14:13 and 1 Sam 12:16 are the only two passages in the Tanakh other than 2 Chr 20:17 which have the expression התיצבו וראו, ‘stand by and witness.’ Exod 14:13 replaces את הרבר הגדול הזה in 1 Sam 12:16 with את ישועת יהוה, which brings in one of the main themes of the passage, salvation. This theme is recapped in the dénouement of the sea-crossing narrative:

Exod 14:30-31

ויושע יהוה ביום ההוא את ישראל מיד מצרים וירא ישראל את מצרים מת על שפת הים: וירא ישראל את היר הגדלה אשר עשה יהוה במצרים וייראו העם את יהוה ויאמינו ביהוה ובמשה עבדו:

³⁰ Thus Yahweh saved Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. ³¹ And when Israel saw the wondrous

power which Yahweh had wielded against the Egyptians, the people stood in awe of Yahweh; they trusted Yahweh and His servant Moses.

1 Sam 14:22-23

22 וכל איש ישראל המתחבאים בהר אפרים שמעו כי נסו פלשתים וידבקו גם המה אחריהם
במלחמה: 23 ויושע יהוה ביום ההוא את ישראל והמלחמה עברה את בית און:

22 When all the men of Israel who were hiding in the hill country of Ephraim heard that the Philistines were fleeing, they too pursued them in battle. 23 Thus Yahweh saved Israel that day, and the fighting passed beyond Beth-aven.

1 Sam 12:18

18 ויקרא שמואל אל יהוה ויתן יהוה קלת ומטר ביום ההוא ויירא כל העם מאד את יהוה
ואת שמואל:

18 Samuel prayed to Yahweh, and Yahweh sent thunder and rain that day, and the people stood in awe of Yahweh and of Samuel.

18 ויקרא שמואל אל יהוה ויתן יהוה קלת ומטר ביום ההוא ויירא את ישראל
Sam 14:23, where salvation from the Philistines rather than the Egyptians is at issue. Moreover, the conclusion of the sea-crossing narrative mimics the conclusion of 1 Sam 12:18, where the

people fear Yahweh and Samuel, only Exod 14:31 places fear of Yahweh and trust of Moses in separate clauses suitable for the two themes running through the narrative.

When we read the character of Moses in the sea crossing narrative, then, we read with the trustworthy prophet Samuel in the background and come to view Moses in a similar light. Reading Moses' splitting of the sea as a similar allusion to 2 Kings 2 thus *strengthens* our understanding of his character as a trustworthy prophet. It also *develops* our understanding of his prophetic character further, as it now looks like Moses performs a miracle. As noted above, Exod 14:16 is revised so that Yahweh commands *Moses* to split the sea himself rather than just hold his staff over it as a sign while Yahweh does the work. This revision blurs the distinction between Moses and Yahweh that is sharply maintained in the base narrative, not unlike Deut 34:10-12, which elevates Moses to an incomparable status among prophets and highlights the signs and wonders he performed in Egypt as indicators of his uniqueness.⁷¹

Viewed against the background of prophetic activity elsewhere in the Tanakh, then, the revision which has Moses split the sea is *highly* relevant to the development of character and theme in the sea crossing narrative. Relating the divided sea to the context of ancient Near Eastern mythology as Dozeman does also produces a degree of relevance because it resonates with use of the divine combat motif to construct the narrative. But it is a *much weaker* degree of relevance, especially when we consider that drying up the sea with an east wind is a use of the divine combat motif already filtered through prophetic imagery. Moreover, the theme of new creation that Dozeman identifies here does not strengthen or develop other prominent themes in the narrative quite the way amping up Moses' prophetic character does. The ancient Near

⁷¹ For discussion of Deut 34:10-12, see Stephen B. Chapman, *The Law and the Prophets: A Study in Old Testament Canon Formation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), 113-31.

Eastern mythic context is certainly a viable background for the sea crossing narrative, but understanding Moses' splitting of the sea as an allusion to Elijah and Elisha *maximizes* its relevance to the narrative and best explains the goal of this revision to the sea narrative.

What I have done here is straightforward literary criticism, but it demonstrates that attention to literary concerns does not have to—indeed should not—come at the expense of serious engagement with historical issues such as the diachronic development of a biblical text or its rootedness in ancient culture. Indeed, Iser has helped us see that attention to how horizons function (or fail to function) in a narrative and the background contexts from which cultural repertoire is drawn are important elements of the aesthetic experience of reading. Baruch Schwartz has argued that a particular model of composition history should be evaluated not on the basis of how theoretically plausible it is, but on how well it explains the literary problems in a text.⁷² It should now be evident that the Documentary Hypothesis is not an optimal solution to the literary problems in the sea crossing narrative, and that a supplementary model is preferable in this case. But the weaknesses of particular historical-critical studies do not, as early advocates of literary theory in biblical studies often suggested, render the historical-critical project (*Literarkritik*) irrelevant for the experience of reading the text as a whole. I have intended to show that literary-critical tools are essential to the success of this project and hope I have illuminated the richness we would miss in this narrative if we failed to understand its historical development as well as its narrative artistry.

⁷² Baruch J. Schwartz, "Does Recent Scholarship's Critique of the Documentary Hypothesis Constitute Grounds for Its Rejection?," in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research*, ed. T. B. Dozeman, K. Schmid, and B. J. Schwartz (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 9-10.