ETZ HAYIM

TORAH AND COMMENTARY

THE RABBINICAL ASSEMBLY
THE UNITED SYNAGOGUE OF CONSERVATIVE JUDAISM

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17 Now when Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer; for God said, “The people may have a change of heart of territory in Canaan alongside the highway. The “Sea of Philistia” in 23:31 is the section of the Mediterranean adjacent to it. These apparently anachronistic names attest to the dominant role played in later centuries by the Philistines in that part of the country. They were part of a vast confederacy of “sea peoples”—so named by the Egyptians—and were first mentioned in historical records that date from the time of Ramses III (1183–1152 B.C.E.). They invaded Egypt from the region of Crete in the eighth year of that king’s reign.

a change of heart Preferring Egyptian slavery to war.

17. God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was nearer The Hebrew word translated here as “although” (ki) has several different meanings. The commentators differ in their understanding of the word and of God’s purpose in leading Israel by a longer, less direct route. Some see it as an act of kindness and consideration on God’s part. One commentator translates ki karov hu as “because God was near to them” and loved them and, therefore, did not want to risk having some of them killed in a battle with the Philistines (Minhah B’Iulah). Others give it a psychological interpretation. Thus Rashi: God did not lead Israel through Philistine territory precisely because it was close, and it would have been too tempting to become discouraged and return to Egypt. Ramban: Although the way through the Philistine territory was more direct, God was afraid that the people would be discouraged if they had to fight their way through.

Finally, some see the long route as necessary for the Israelites to develop the qualities they would need to conquer and settle the Promised Land. Ibn Ezra: God did not want them to arrive at the Promised Land too soon. Having been slaves all their lives, they would not have been prepared to conquer Canaan until they had a lengthy experience of freedom. Maimonides: God wanted to accustom them to hardship, to prepare them for the task of conquering and settling Canaan. Some commentators specifically spell out the implication that sometimes the harder way of doing something turns out to be the better way. “There is a long way which is short and a short way which is long” (BT Er. 53b). When something comes to us too easily instead of being hard earned, we don’t always appreciate it.

The Midrash understands the phrase “God did not lead them” as “God was not comforted,” taking the word naham not as “lead” but as “was comforted” [Exod. R. 20:13]. Although God rejoiced over the Israelites who were redeemed from Egypt, God was not comforted for those who died without seeing the deliverance.
when they see war, and return to Egypt.” 18 So God led the people round about, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds.

Now the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt. 19 And Moses took with him the bones of Joseph, who had exacted an oath from the children of Israel, saying, “God will be sure to take notice of you: then you shall carry up my bones from here with you.”

20 They set out from Succoth, and encamped at Etham, at the edge of the wilderness. 21 The Lord went before them in a pillar of cloud by day, to guide them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, that they when they see war

Since the days of Pharaoh Seti I (ca. 1305–1290 B.C.E.), the coastal road to Canaan had been heavily fortified by the Egyptians. A chain of strongholds, way stations, reservoirs, and wells dotted the area as far as Gaza, the provincial capital.

18. by way of the wilderness This must refer to one of the ancient, natural tracks that cross the Sinai peninsula. The vagueness of the designation and the inability to identify and locate most of the many wilderness stations recorded in the Torah make it impossible to chart the route followed by the departing Israelites.

Sea of Reeds Literal translation of yam suf. The Red Sea, its usual but incorrect translation, is more than 120 miles from the probable site of Goshen, where the Israelites lived in Egypt—too great a distance to cover even in one week in those days. The Hebrew word suf is derived from the Egyptian word for the papyrus reed, which grows in fresh water; therefore, yam suf would not be an appropriate designation for the present Red Sea, because its water is saline and does not favor the growth of that plant. This stage of the march probably took the Israelites to the far northeastern corner of Egypt, to one of the lagoons near the shore of the Mediterranean Sea.

19. Joseph’s dying request is fulfilled. His words here are almost precisely those given in Gen. 50:25.


Etham The site, mentioned again in Num. 33:6–8, has not been identified; nor are we given the distance between it and Succoth.

21–22. The dynamic presence of God is a recurring theme throughout the narratives of the wilderness wanderings. It is symbolized by the mysterious, intangible elements of fire and cloud—a storm cloud shot through with flashes of lightning (see Ezek. 1:4). During the day, the dark cloud was most visible; at night, the fiery flashes were (see Exod. 40:38). The cloud escorts

19. Moses took with him the bones of Joseph While the others were busy packing their belongings in preparation for the journey, Moses was busy keeping a promise. Gen. 50:25 expresses Joseph’s dying wish: “When God has taken notice of you, you shall carry up my bones from here” (Mekh.). A later comment understands the passage symbolically: To be a proper leader of Israel, Moses acquired the strengths of Joseph, his ability to provide people with food as well as with spiritual guidance and his capacity to forgive people who had wronged him.

HALAKHAH L’MA-ASEH
13:19. Moses took with him the bones of Joseph Some Jews who do not live in Israel arrange to be buried there. Some Jews who are buried outside of Israel arrange that some earth from Israel be buried with them. These customs express the Jewish commitment to the land of Israel. They also reflect the midrash that Israel will be the site of resurrection, even for those who died in the Diaspora (JT Ket. 35b).
The Lord said to Moses: 2Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. 3Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, “They are astray in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them.” 4Then I will stiffen Pharaoh’s heart and he will pursue them, that I may gain glory through Pharaoh and all his host; and the Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord. And they did so.

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers had

and guides the people through the untamed wilderness, signals the beginning and end of each day’s journey, and provides a protective screen in times of peril. Although God is portrayed as speaking “from the midst of the cloud,” as in Exod. 24:16, this should always be understood as figurative language. There never is a question of His actually residing inside the cloud or being identified with it. This is clear from 19:20, when God “came down” on Mount Sinai only after it had been enveloped in cloud (19:16).

THE MIRACLE AT THE SEA  (14:1–31)
The liberated Israelites, having reached the edge of the wilderness, suddenly were ordered to change course. This new direction, fraught with great danger, was actually a tactic to mislead the Egyptians and lure them to their doom, the culminating defeat of Pharaoh. Egypt does not appear in Israelite history again for three centuries, in the time of King Solomon. The miracle of the parting, or splitting, of the sea (k’re-at yam suf) left a profound impression on all subsequent Hebrew literature and became the paradigm for Israel’s future redemption from exile. Most of the biblical passages that celebrate the crossing of the sea relate solely to God’s sovereign control over nature and history and do not mention the drowning of the Egyptians.

REASON TO CHANGE COURSE  (vv. 1–4)

2. Some of the place-names mentioned here, and repeated in Num. 33:7–8, cannot be identified with certainty. Baal-zephon was a port on the Mediterranean coast, suggesting a northern route from Succot for the Exodus.

3. astray The word translated as “astray” (n’vukhim) here has the sense of “disoriented” or “hopelessly confused.” The Israelites, at God’s behest (v. 2), have taken up a position where they are hemmed in on all sides—by Egyptian border fortresses, by the wilderness, and by the sea.

4. Pharaoh will be irresistibly drawn to give chase.

stiffen Pharaoh’s heart See Comment to 4:21. that I may gain glory Or “and I will . . .” The Hebrew is unclear whether this is the purpose of the tactic or its consequence. Destruction of the wicked reaffirms the fundamental biblical principle that the world is governed by a divinely ordained moral order that ultimately must prevail. God is thereby glorified. (For a similar notion that God takes “glory” by humbling a foe, see Ezekiel’s war of Gog, Ezek. 38–39.)

THE EGYPTIANS HAVE A CHANGE OF HEART AND GIVE CHASE  (vv. 5–9)

5. the people had fled It is clear that the Israelites are not coming back, for the “three-day
a change of heart about the people and said, 
“What is this we have done, releasing Israel from 
our service?” He ordered his chariot and took 
his men with him; he took six hundred of his 
picked chariots, and the rest of the chariots of 
Egypt, with officers in all of them. The Lord 
stiffened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and 
he gave chase to the Israelites. As the Israelites 
were departing defiantly, the Egyptians gave 
chase to them, and all the chariot horses of Pha-
raoh, his horsemen, and his warriors overtook 
tem encamped by the sea, near Pi-hahiroth, 
before Baal-zephon.

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites caught 
sight of the Egyptians advancing upon them. 
Greatly frightened, the Israelites cried out to the 
Lord. And they said to Moses, “Was it for 
want of graves in Egypt that you brought us to

journey” that Moses repeatedly requested has 
come and gone, and they have not returned.

6. took his men The word translated here as 
“men” (אָמ) usually means “people.” It can also 
mean an “armed force.”

7. Pharaoh himself leads an elite corps of 600 
chariots, apparently the standard military unit. 
and the rest of the chariots The Hebrew 
reads, literally, “every chariot/all the chariots/all 
the chariotry of Egypt”—i.e., in addition to the 
elite corps. The chariot, a powerful and revolu-
tionary innovation in the art of warfare, was in-
troduced into Egypt from Canaan. Among the 
Hittites and Assyrians, the chariot crew was com-
pared of a driver, a warrior, and a shieldbearer; 
but Egyptian chariots generally had only a 
two-man team. Drawn by two horses, it was used 
for massed charges. The charioteers, well trained 
and highly skilled, enjoyed high social standing 
and became a military aristocracy.

8. departing defiantly Literally, “with up-
raised hand,” a metaphor drawn from the depic-
tion of ancient Near Eastern gods menacingly 
brandishing a weapon in the upraised right hand. 
The confident Israelites are oblivious of the re-
newed Egyptian threat.

9. his horsemen Horseback riding was intro-
duced into Egypt only in the 14th century B.C.E., 
and the use of mounted cavalry in warfare was un-
known before the end of the 11th century B.C.E. 
Hence, the word understood here as “horsemans 
(eparsh) probably means “steed,” as in other bib-
lical texts. It also could be a term for “charioteer,” 
one skilled at handling a horse.

THE PEOPLE’S REACTION; MOSES’ RESPONSE 
(vv. 10–14)

10. cried out to the Lord The self-assurance 
mentioned in verse 8 suddenly vanishes. Now 
only God can save them. 11. This rebuke is uttered with bitter irony, 
for Egypt was the classic land of tombs.

CHAPTER 14

10. the Israelites caught sight of the Egyptians advancing Often in life, we think we 

Greatly frightened The Israelites still have 
a slave mentality, despite their having experi-
enced God’s redemptive power during the Ten 
Plagues [Ibn Ezra]. No matter how much God 
has done for them, they still lack confidence in 
God’s saving power.
die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt? 12 Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, saying, ‘Let us be, and we will serve the Egyptians, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness?’” 13 But Moses said to the people, “Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the L

or will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. 14 The L will battle for you; you hold your peace!”

15 Then the L

or said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. 16 And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground. 17 And I will stiffen the hearts of the Egyptians so that they go in after them; and I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his warriors, his chariots and his horsemen. 18 Let the Egyptians know that I am L

or, when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

19 The angel of God, who had been going ahead of the Israelite army, now moved and followed behind them; and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place

EXODUS 14:12

12. This statement is not found in the two previous repudiations of Moses by the Israelites (in 5:21 and 6:9). Therefore, it must reflect some incident not otherwise recorded in the Torah. A rebellion by the Israelites at the Sea of Reeds is reported in Ps. 106:7.

13–14. Moses ignores their rebuke; he attempts to calm them and allay their fears.

GOD’S RESPONSE (vv. 15–20)

15. Why do you cry out to Me? This was the first of many times that Moses interceded for the people. Here he is told by God: It is time for action, not for prayer.

16. Moses is not instructed to strike the sea. In verse 21 the action of Moses with his rod is the signal for the strong wind to blow back the waters. It is God who splits the sea.

19. The symbol of God’s indwelling Presence, the luminous pillar of cloud mentioned in 13:21 as leading and guiding the people, now serves as a protective screen separating the Egyptians and the Israelites.
behind them, and it came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel. Thus there was the cloud with the darkness, and it cast a spell upon the night, so that the one could not come near the other all through the night.

Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the Lord drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians came in pursuit after them into the sea, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and horsemen. At the morning watch, the Lord looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He locked the wheels of their chariots so that they

**THE PARTING OF THE SEA**
(vv. 21–29)

21. Moses fulfills the instructions detailed in verse 16. But God is the immediate cause of what is about to take place.

*a strong east wind* See Comment to 10:13.

23. Pressing forward in an uncontrollable frenzy, the Egyptian forces plunge into the turbulent waters.

24. *morning watch* In ancient Israel, the night was divided into three watches: 6 to 10 P.M., 10 P.M. to 2 A.M., and the morning watch between the hours of 2 and 6 A.M. These hours would vary, according to the season.

25. He locked The wheels became bogged down in the mud.

21. Like many of us, the rabbis of old had difficulty accepting the literal veracity of the splitting of the sea, the classic example of God working a miracle for Israel's sake. They believed in the divine miracle but were reluctant to accept the suspension of natural law. They fasten on the apparently superfluous words “a strong east wind" as a hint that the splitting of the sea was accomplished through natural, rather than supernatural, means. Similarly, in the 19th century, Levi Yitzḥak of Berdichev translated the words *ru·ah kadim* not as “east wind" but as “an ancient wind," explaining, “God does not change or suspend the laws of nature in order to work miracles. The wind that divided the sea had been created for that purpose at the time of the creation of the world.” According to one midrash, the sea would not part until the Israelites showed enough faith to march into the waters. They were reluctant to do so, waiting for God to work a miracle first. Finally, Nahshon son of Amminadab, of the tribe of Judah, was bold enough to march into the sea. Only at that point did the sea respond to his act of faith by separating, allowing the Israelites to cross on dry land [BT Sot. 37a]. Another legend would have it that Pharaoh alone, of all the Egyptians, survived. Because he had learned his lesson, he was appointed king of Nineveh. In that capacity, he led his people in penitential prayer and fasting to avert the decree of the prophet Jonah. When he died, he was stationed at the gates of the underworld, where he would greet tyrants of a later generation with the words “Why did you not learn from my example?” [Mekh.].
moved forward with difficulty. And the Egyptians said, “Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.”

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen.” Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the Lord hurled the Egyptians into the sea. The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen—Pharaoh’s entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

Thus the Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the Lord had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they had faith in the Lord and His servant Moses.

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**the Lord is fighting for them**  The fulfillment of the prediction in verse 14.

**27. hurled . . . into the sea**  They were buffeted about in the sea.

**RECAPITULATION (vv. 30–31)**

These two verses round out the preceding narrative and preface the following “Song at the Sea.”

**31. wondrous power**  Literally, the “great hand” of God that cut off the tyrannous “hand of Egypt.” The word for “hand” (yad) is a key word in this chapter, occurring seven times.

**they had faith**  In the Hebrew Bible, “faith” does not mean belief in a doctrine or a creed. It refers to trust and loyalty expressed through commitment and obedience.

**His servant Moses**  As the faithful instrument of God’s will, it is fitting that Moses receives the title “servant of the Lord/of God.” He is referred to by this title more than 30 times in the Hebrew Bible and is unquestionably Israel’s greatest leader.
THE DEFEAT OF THE EGYPTIANS (vv. 1–10)

1. I will sing

The “I” here can refer only to Moses.

for

This gives the occasion of the song.

driver

The word translated as “driver” (rokheve) here means the rider in the chariot, not one on horseback. See Comment to 14:9.

my strength and might

The source of my survival.

will enshrine Him

Build Him a shrine or temple. Psalms 118:28, which seems to quote this verse, reads “I will praise You” (odeka).

Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea

The driver says, “Why punish me? I could not have pursued the Israelites if the horse had not carried me so swiftly.” The horse says, “Why punish me? I only did the driver’s bidding.” What does God do? God judges the driver and the horse together. Similarly, in the world to come the soul will plead, “Why punish me? It was the body that sinned.” And the body will say, “I would have done nothing, but the soul directed me to act.” What will God do? God will reject the duality that separates body from soul and judge both together (Mekh.). Another rabbinic tradition describes the angels as wishing to chant their hymns while the Egyptian pursuers were drowning. God silenced them, asking, “How can you sing hymns when My creatures are perishing?” (BT Meg. 10b). This is like our custom to spill drops of wine from our cups at the Pesah Seider (see Prov. 24:17). Our cup of deliverance and rejoicing cannot be full when we recall that innocent Egyptians had to suffer because of their ruler’s stubbornness. A similar outlook is behind the custom of breaking a glass at the conclusion of a wedding, to remind us of the destruction of the Temple and other mournful events of Jewish history. Our personal happiness should never leave us unmindful of the sorrows and misfortunes afflicting others (BT Ber. 31a).

2. This is my God

“A common woman at the Sea saw God more clearly than any of the prophets did.” This is why she could proclaim, “This is my God!” (Mekh.). For those who experienced God’s saving power as they left Egypt, God was unmistakably real, not the subject of abstract speculation.

I will enshrine Him

Hebrew: anveihu; “I will build Him a permanent sanctuary.” The moments in our lives when God seems so real to us are overpowering but fleeting. To keep those memories accessible, we need to establish places where we can reconnect with those feelings of being in God’s presence. Anveihu can also be translated as “I will glorify Him.” “God has made us known among the nations, and we will make God known among the nations.” How can a human being glorify God when all glory is already God’s? Ishmael says, by performing religious acts in a particularly glorious manner, with an especially beautiful sukkah or an especially handsome tallit. Abba Saul says, by imitating God. Even as God is gracious and compassionate, so we should be gracious and compassionate (BT Shab. 133b).
Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD. They said:
I will sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously;
Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and might;
He is become my deliverance.
This is my God and I will enshrine Him;

THE SONG AT THE SEA (Shirat ha-Yam) (15:1–21)

After the narrative account of the extraordinary events at the Sea of Reeds, there follows one of the two oldest extended poems in the Hebrew Bible. (The other poem is the Song of Deborah in Judg. 5, designated as the haftarah for this parasha.) Its date is debated. Exod. 15:21 links it to Miriam’s song, which may have predated it. It is a lyrical outpouring of emotion on the part of the people who experienced the great events of the Exodus. Carefully crafted, the song celebrates the mighty acts of God as He intervenes in human affairs. It uses strong poetic metaphor. Thus in place of the naturalistic “strong east wind” that blew through the night (14:21), there is the poetic “blast of [God’s] nostrils” (15:8)—a sudden, brief, yet devastatingly effective breath that humbles human arrogance. Moses plays no active role, for he does not hold out his arm over the sea, as in 14:16,21. Rather, it is the “right hand” of God that is extended (15:12). Nor is there any mention of the angel, the cloud, or the darkness, all so prominent in 14:19–20 and all serving as intermediaries that mark the distance between God and Israel.

CHAPTER 15

14:31–15:1. They had faith in the LORD. . . .
Then Moses . . . sang  Moses’ song does not celebrate the splitting of the sea. It celebrates the Israelites’ commitment to faith in God after experiencing the splitting of the sea. The crossing of the sea is the prototype of the biblical miracle, the one to which Jews have always looked to recall God’s intervention on our people’s behalf. We can scarcely imagine what is must have felt like for the Israelites, whose lives to this point had been a tale of unrelied misery, to have events conspire to favor them so spectacularly. Moses’ song of triumph is traditionally read in the Torah service with a special chant, both in sequence as part of the Book of Exodus and on the seventh day of Pesah, the day on which tradition maintains that it was sung. The miracle of crossing the sea is recalled in the prayer book just before the Amidah prayer on weekdays and on Shabbat and festivals. Its placement in the prayer service suggests to the worshiper that prayers may well be answered, as they were for our ancestors at the shores of the sea. It is referred to in the Book of Psalms as proof of God’s caring for the people Israel.

Then Moses and the Israelites sang  From the day that God created the world until this moment, no one had sung praises to God—not Adam after having been created, not Abraham after being delivered from the fiery furnace, not Isaac when he was spared the knife, or Jacob when he escaped from wrestling with an angel and from Esau. But when Israel came to the sea and it parted for them, “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD.” And God said, “for this I have been waiting” (Exod. R. 23:4).

Legend has it that the angels wanted to sing songs of praise, but God told them, “Wait, and let Israel sing first. Humans are able to praise only when they are inspired. If we do not give them the opportunity, the desire will pass” (David of Kotzk). “Sometimes ‘then’ (as in ‘then Moses sang’) refers to the past, and sometimes to the future” (Mekh.). We believe that times will come when Israel will once again have cause to break into a grateful song of praise to God.

In the Mishnah (Sot. 5:4), Nehemiah suggests that Moses and the Israelites all sang the song together. Akiva suggests that Moses sang it line by line, with the people repeating each line. Their disagreement might be understood as follows: Nehemiah would welcome only those who know the words of prayer. Akiva, on
the enemies of Israel are the enemies of God, so that Israel's wars for survival are portrayed as the battles of the Lord.

Lord is His name! The statement evokes the power of God with which the name is associated (see Comment to 6:3). This divine name is the one that is repeated in the liturgical recitation of the Sh'ma.

5. deeps The Hebrew word t'homot is the term for the vast ocean of waters, which was believed to lie beneath the earth, as mentioned in Gen. 1:2.

7. fury The word translated as “fury” (haron) is a term used only of divine anger. Here the word carries its original sense of “burning.”

8. blast of Your nostrils Poetic imagery for the wind.

froze They formed a solid mass.

9. The poet mimics the arrogant self-confidence of the foe.

I will divide the spoil This promise is an inducement for reluctant soldiers to give chase.

shall subdue Literally, “my hand shall dispossess them,” here meaning “I shall force them into slavery once again.” Note the staccato effect of the Hebrew verbs, implying the overconfident pride of the Egyptians.

10. The first section of the Song at the Sea closes with a recital of God’s effortless act that exposes the empty rhetoric of the enemy. The waters do not act on their own accord but only when God energizes them.

wind blow One brief, light puff, and the sea engulfs the Egyptians.

THE INCOMPARABILITY OF YHVH (vv. 11–13)

11. The song and its theme of God’s sovereign control over nature ends with an affirmation of His uniqueness through a rhetorical question: “Who is like You, O Lord?”

celestials These are the hosts of ministering angels imagined as surrounding God’s throne, waiting to be of service.

4. God’s justice is meted out measure for measure. As the Egyptians drowned Israelite babies, so they themselves were drowned. As they immersed the Israelites in mud-like mortar, so they now sank in the mud. In short, all of us eventually pay for what we have done wrong.
The God of my father, and I will exalt Him.

3 The LORD, the Warrior—
LORD is His name!

4 Pharaoh’s chariots and his army
He has cast into the sea;
And the pick of his officers
Are drowned in the Sea of Reeds.

5 The deeps covered them;
They went down into the depths like a stone.

6 Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power,
Your right hand, O LORD, shatters the foe!

7 In Your great triumph You break Your opponents;
You send forth Your fury, it consumes them like straw.

8 At the blast of Your nostrils the waters piled up,
The floods stood straight like a wall;
The deeps froze in the heart of the sea.

9 The foe said,
“I will pursue, I will overtake,
I will divide the spoil;
My desire shall have its fill of them.
I will bare my sword—
My hand shall subdue them.”

10 You made Your wind blow, the sea covered them;
They sank like lead in the majestic waters.

11 Who is like You, O LORD, among the celestials;

God of my father See Comment to Exod. 3:6.

3. Warrior This description of God reflects 14:14, “The LORD will battle for you” and verse 25, “the Egyptians said . . . the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.” Because the Egyptians came against Israel as an armed force, the Lord—to whom alone victory is attributed—metaphorically is described as a warrior. In the biblical view,

God of my father, and I will exalt Him It is as great a spiritual commitment to honor God because your ancestors did as it as to do so because you have experienced God in your own life (Aaron of Belz). Others, however, taught that it is not enough to inherit a faith. One must discover and experience the reality of God in one’s own life.
the Israelites: from south to north and then westward across the Jordan.

15. Edom The Edomites were descendants of Esau, brother of Jacob, also known as Edom. They occupied the southernmost part of Transjordan and later became perpetual enemies of the Israelites.

Moab The plateau east of the Dead Sea between the wadis Arnon and Zered. It was occupied by the Moabites, who are traced back to Abraham’s nephew Lot. The alarm felt by the Moabites at the appearance of the Israelites close to their border is described in Num. 22:1–7.

are aghast Literally, “melt away.” They are demoralized.

16. The Israelites are perceived as a threat by the peoples who dwell in the vicinity of the wilderness route and who fear that they may be struck by God who accompanies and protects Israel.

Your people The one whom You selected for a unique relationship and destiny.

THE GRAND FINALE (vv. 17–18)

The Song at the Sea closes with an affirmation of confidence in the promise that God’s redemption of Israel from Egypt will culminate in the building of a Temple. The theme parallels the traditional Canaanite theme that Baal will build a palace after defeating his foes.

17. place The dais on which the divine throne rests.

18. The song closes, as it opens, with the exaltation of God, now expressed in terms of sovereignty. This is the earliest biblical use of this metaphor of God as King, found elsewhere in the Torah in Num. 23:21, another poetic passage. This finale is the climax of the basic themes of the poem: God’s absolute sovereignty over nature and history.
Who is like You, majestic in holiness, 
Awesome in splendor, working wonders!

12 You put out Your right hand, 
The earth swallowed them.

13 In Your love You lead the people You redeemed; 
In Your strength You guide them to Your holy abode.

14 The peoples hear, they tremble; 
Agony grips the dwellers in Philistia.

15 Now are the clans of Edom dismayed; 
The tribes of Moab—trembling grips them; 
All the dwellers in Canaan are aghast.

16 Terror and dread descend upon them; 
Through the might of Your arm they are still as stone—
Till Your people cross over, O Lorp, 
Till Your people cross whom You have ransomed.

17 You will bring them and plant them in Your own mountain, 
The place You made to dwell in, O Lorp, 
The sanctuary, O Lorp, which Your hands established.

18 The Lorp will reign for ever and ever!

12. earth swallowed them  This is poetic language for “They met their death.” “The earth” here refers to the underworld, as in the story of Korah (Num. 16:32).

13. With the Egyptian menace finally eliminated, the poem moves away from the events that occurred at the sea to focus on the march to the Promised Land.

In Your love  The word translated as “love” (hesed) means “loyalty.” A crucial term in the Bible, it can express intimate relationship, covenantal obligation, or even undeserved benevolence. It is one of God’s supreme attributes.

Your holy abode  This phrase refers either to the entire Land of Israel or to the Temple on Mount Zion.

THE EFFECT ON NEIGHBORING PEOPLES  
(vv. 14–16)

God’s mighty deeds on Israel’s behalf strike terror in the hearts of Israel’s neighbors, their potential enemies. These are listed in the order that Israel would have encountered them. The Philistines are mentioned first because they were closest to the northeastern border of Egypt and because they were the most formidable. The other three appear in proper geographic and chronologic order, according to the circuitous route followed by
EXODUS 15:19  b’shallah

19 For the horses of Pharaoh, with his chariots and horsemen, went into the sea; and the LORD turned back on them the waters of the sea; but the Israelites marched on dry ground in the midst of the sea.

20 Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron’s sister, took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her in dance with timbrels. 21 And Miriam chanted for them:

Sing to the LORD, for He has triumphed gloriously;
Horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.

22 Then Moses caused Israel to set out from

A CODA (v. 19)
A brief prose summary of the occasion for celebration closes the composition and reconnects it with verse 1.

THE SONG OF MIRIAM (vv. 20–21)
These verses affirm the custom (chronicled in Judg. 11:34 and 1 Sam. 18:6) of women going forth with music and dance to hail a returning victorious hero, although here God and not man is the victor.

CRISES IN THE WILDERNESS (15:22–17:16)
Freed from the Egyptian threat, the people begin the long trek through the wilderness toward the Promised Land. The rest of the Book of Exodus relates some major events of the first year of these

20ff. After crossing the sea, the Israelites promised to be faithful to God forever. A mere three days later, however, they were complaining, yearning to be back in Egypt. Although they had been slaves in Egypt, they had been free of the responsibilities of making choices, ordering their lives, and providing food for their families. While life now offered more possibilities, it made new demands.

It may be that it is hard to sustain one’s faith without enough food to eat. Or it may be that it is hard to nourish one’s faith today on the basis of yesterday’s miracle. Yesterday’s miracle, however spectacular it may have been, grows stale overnight. The miracle does not last; only the daily triumph over adversity endures. Jewish faith is not rooted in miracles; the generation that crossed the sea did not maintain their faith for more than three days after that event. Jewish faith is rooted in the daily experience of God’s reality and God’s goodness. Thus God changes tactics here. Instead of a spectacular miracle once in a generation, God works a small miracle, the manna, every day. The Talmud equates the two: “Providing everyone with enough to eat is as great a miracle as splitting the Sea” (BT Pes. 118a).

20–21. Where did Miriam and the other women obtain timbrels in the wilderness? These righteous women were so confident that God would work miracles for them that they had brought timbrels along from Egypt, antic-
the Sea of Reeds. They went on into the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. 23 They came to Marah, but they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter; that is why it was named Marah. 24 And the people grumbled against Moses, saying, “What shall we drink?” 25 So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet.

There He made for them a fixed rule, and there He put them to the test. 26 He said, “If you will heed the LORD your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases

wanderings, the central event being the experience at Sinai. On the way to that mountain, four crises occur, which reflect the harsh realities of life in the wilderness brought on by nature’s cruelties and human brutality.

BITTER WATERS AT MARAH (15:22–27)
This section resumes the narrative interrupted at 14:29.

22. A location called Shur, the site of an oasis between the Negeb and Egypt, is mentioned several times in biblical texts. The name means “a wall” and probably refers to the wall of fortifications built by the pharaohs in the eastern delta of the Nile along the line of the present-day isthmus of Suez.

three days If intended literally, this implies a distance of 45 miles at most. Often “three days” is a literary convention (see Comment to 3:18).

24. the people grumbled Their seemingly innocent and justifiable question was accusatory and confrontational.

25. Moses is not a wonder worker; he can do nothing except by divine instruction.

a fixed rule Apparently the verse is a parenthetic note that reflects a now-lost tradition about some law(s) given to Israel at this site.

He put them to the test Rashbam explains that the lack of drinking water was a test of Israel’s faith in God.

26. diseases Not the plagues, but maladies endemic in Egypt, referred to elsewhere in Torah as “the dreadful diseases of Egypt,” “Egyptian inflammation,” and “the sicknesses of Egypt.”

ipating that God would give them cause to celebrate (Mekh.).

22. they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water Later Sages took water to be a symbol of Torah and taught that just as the body cannot go three days without water, the soul cannot go three days without the refreshing, life-sustaining contact with Torah. Thus they instituted the practice of several public readings from the Torah each week—on Shabbat, Monday, and Thursday.

23. they could not drink the water . . . because it was bitter Literally, “they could not drink the waters . . . because they were bitter” (“water” is plural in Hebrew). Were the waters bitter? Or was it the people who were bitter, full of self-pity at having to travel through a wilderness (Exod. R. 50:3)? One of the Sages interprets the words “found no water” [v. 22] to mean that water was there [see the oasis nearby in Elim, v. 27] but the people did not notice it because they were so busy complaining.

25. the water became sweet The purpose of religion is not to explain life’s bitterness but to sweeten it, to make it more palatable. The Midrash envisions Moses asking God, “Why did You create brackish water in Your world, a liquid that serves no purpose?” God replies, “Instead of asking philosophical questions, do something to make the bitter waters sweet.”
that I brought upon the Egyptians, for I the LORD am your healer.”

27 And they came to Elim, where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees; and they encamped there beside the water.

16 Setting out from Elim, the whole Israelite community came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. 2In the wilderness, the whole Israelite community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. 3The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.”

4 And the LORD said to Moses, “I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day’s portion, which they shall eat.” Thus Moses told the people to do.

**your healer** God is the ultimate source of all healing. Just as He cured the waters at Marah, so will He heal the ills of obedient Israelites. Here, a great deed of God is cited to support an injunction to the Israelites. Until now, God’s miracles were directed to convincing Pharaoh to let Israel go.

**27. Elim** A wooded, freshwater oasis.

**SHORTAGE OF FOOD—MANNA AND QUAIL** (16:1–20)

It is now six weeks after the Exodus. With the oasis at Elim behind them and the provisions brought from Egypt exhausted, the people face a severe food shortage. Conditions in the wilderness make it impossible to secure fresh supplies. Popular discontent flares, and harsh accusations are hurled against Moses and Aaron.

**THE COMPLAINT** (vv. 1–3)
The hardships of wilderness life arouse nostalgia for life in Egypt.

2. **whole Israelite community** The suffering is more severe and widespread than in the previous crisis, for there the grumblers were described simply as “the people” (15:24).

3. **died by the hand of the LORD** That is, from natural causes. Death in old age in slavery is preferable to early death by starvation in freedom.

**fleshpots . . . bread** Because the people left Egypt with their flocks and herds, they could not have been in danger of starvation. Livestock, however, is the most valuable possession of the pastoralist, and the people would not have wanted to slaughter their cattle for food. Also, the lack of adequate pasturage no doubt had caused considerable losses among the flocks, adding to the people’s hardships.

**THE DIVINE RESPONSE** (vv. 4–5)
Even before Moses can “cry out to the LORD,” as in the preceding crisis (15:25), God responds to Israel’s needs.

4. **the LORD said to Moses** God reveals His intentions to Moses but does not instruct him to divulge the information to the people.

**each day** The fixed daily allotment of manna to each individual ensured fair and equal distribution of the food.
portion—that I may thus test them, to see whether they will follow My instructions or not. 5But on the sixth day, when they apportion what they have brought in, it shall prove to be double the amount they gather each day.” 6So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, “By evening you shall know it was the Lord who brought you out from the land of Egypt; 7and in the morning you shall behold the Presence of the Lord, because He has heard your grumblings against the Lord. For who are we that you should grumble against us? 8Since it is the Lord,” Moses continued, “who will give you flesh to eat in the evening and bread in the morning to the full, because the Lord has heard the grumblings you utter against Him, what is our part? Your grumbling is not against us, but against the Lord!”

4. that I may thus test them In what way is the manna a test? Some commentators see it as a deprivation, being confined to the same limited menu day after day. Others interpret it differently: If people are assured of food to eat without any effort on their part, will they remember to be grateful to God (Dov Ber of Mezeritch)? Are wealthy people more likely to follow God’s ways, out of gratitude? Or are poor people more likely to do so, because their awareness of their dependence on God is greater? Perhaps the test was to see whether people would content themselves with one day’s supply, truly believing that God could be counted on to renew their food supply on the morrow.

6. Aaron He is included here because the people directed their complaint against both Moses and Aaron.

it was the Lord And not we, who took you out of Egypt.

7. Presence of the Lord This is the first biblical usage of the crucial Hebrew phrase “k’vod YHVH.” It refers to a fiery phenomenon radiating a bright light (see Ezek. 1:28; and cf. Exod. 3:2, 19:18).

against the Lord The grumbling against Moses and Aaron is really a grievance against God, from whom their mission and authority derived.

For who are we . . . This self-deprecating question is intensified by the Hebrew word mah, literally, “what”—used of things rather than persons.

8. Moses repeats the sentiment he has just voiced and expands it to emphasize that the people’s complaint is in fact a challenge to God.

to eat . . . to the full The varying expres-
Then Moses said to Aaron, “Say to the whole Israelite community: Advance toward the LORD, for He has heard your grumbling.”

And as Aaron spoke to the whole Israelite community, they turned toward the wilderness, and there, in a cloud, appeared the Presence of the LORD.

The LORD spoke to Moses: “I have heard the grumbling of the Israelites. Speak to them and say: By evening you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; and you shall know that I the LORD am your God.”

In the evening quail appeared and covered the camp; in the morning there was a fall of dew about the camp.

When the fall of dew lifted, there, over the surface of the wilderness, lay a fine and flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground.

When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is it?”—for they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, “That is the bread which the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you requires to fill your vessels—"flesh to eat," and "bread . . . to the full"—seem to indicate that God will satisfy the cravings for both flesh and bread.

Aaron again acts as Moses’ spokesman, this time to the Israelites rather than to Pharaoh.

toward the LORD Literally, “before the LORD.” Here, as Rashi notes, it must refer to the direction of the cloud.

That is, in the luminous cloud that symbolizes God's active, dynamic, indwelling Presence in Israel during the wilderness period. The sudden appearance of the cloud affirms the announcement just made by Aaron. See Comment to 13:21–22.

THE QUAIL AND MANNA ARRIVE (vv. 11–20)

God fulfills His promise. The narrative offers a detailed description of the manna, but says little about the quail. Perhaps this is because the cry for bread was considered reasonable and the craving for meat was not. The Torah describes the provision of manna as a supernatural phenomenon; the quail, except for its timing, was entirely natural (see Num. 11:31–32). The manna was supplied continually for 40 years, whereas the quail appeared only occasionally.

12. I have heard The repetition of the complaint serves to introduce the account of the actual arrival of the quail and manna. They appear not by chance but as the result of divine deliberation.

you shall know Israel “knows” God by experiencing His actions on their behalf.

13. quail These small birds of the pheasant family migrate in vast flocks from central Europe to Africa in the autumn. To this day they are caught in large numbers in northern Sinai and Egypt.

a fall of dew Two layers of dew enveloped the manna, so that it remained clean until it was collected in the early morning. In biblical times, dew was thought to descend like rain from the sky; thus the manna could be called “bread from Heaven.”
eat, an omer to a person for as many of you as there are; each of you shall fetch for those in his tent.”

17. The Israelites did so, some gathering much, some little. 18. But when they measured it by the omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no deficiency: they had gathered as much as they needed to eat. 19. And Moses said to them, “Let no one leave any of it over until morning.” 20. But they paid no attention to Moses; some of them left of it until morning, and it became infested with maggots and stank. And Moses was angry with them.

21. So they gathered it every morning, each as much as he needed to eat; for when the sun grew hot, it would melt. 22. On the sixth day they gathered double the amount of food, two omers for each; and when all the chieftains of the community came and told Moses, 23. he said to them, “This is what the L ORD meant: Tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy sabbath of the L ORD. Bake what you would bake and boil what you would bake...
boil; and all that is left put aside to be kept until morning." So they put it aside until morning, as Moses had ordered; and it did not turn foul, and there were no maggots in it. Then Moses said, "Eat it today, for today is a sabbath of the Lord; you will not find it today on the plain. Six days you shall gather it; on the seventh day, the sabbath, there will be none."

Yet some of the people went out on the seventh day to gather, but they found nothing. And the Lord said to Moses, "How long will you men refuse to obey My commandments and My teachings? Mark that the Lord has given you the sabbath; therefore He gives you two days’ food on the sixth day. Let everyone remain where he is: let no one leave his place on the seventh day." So the people remained inactive on the seventh day.

The house of Israel named it manna; it was like coriander seed, white, and it tasted like...
wafers in honey. 32Moses said, “This is what the Lord has commanded: Let one omer of it be kept throughout the ages, in order that they may see the bread that I fed you in the wilderness when I brought you out from the land of Egypt.” 33And Moses said to Aaron, “Take a jar, put one omer of manna in it, and place it before the Lord, to be kept throughout the ages.” 34As the Lord had commanded Moses, Aaron placed it before the Pact, to be kept. 35And the Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a settled land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan. 36The omer is a tenth of an ephah.

From the wilderness of Sin the whole Israelite community continued by stages as the Lord would command. They encamped at Rephidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. 2The people quarreled with Moses.

equal to an individual’s daily ration—is to be preserved as a kind of cultural relic and serve future generations as a reminder of God’s providential care of Israel throughout the wilderness period.

33. before the Lord That is, in front of the Ark in the Holy of Holies of the tabernacle, which was not erected until the first anniversary of the Exodus. Because the priesthood in Israel has not yet been established, the instruction to place the omer of manna “before the Lord” cannot be contemporaneous with the events described earlier.

34. the Pact That is, “the Ark of the Pact.” The Ark housed the two tablets of stone on which the Decalogue was inscribed.

35. After the Israelites crossed the Jordan and celebrated the Passover in the land of Israel for the first time (Josh. 5:11–12), the manna ceased.

36. The note is needed here because the omer, which never recurs in the Bible as a measure, became obsolete and unintelligible to later generations. The ephah (eifah), a dry measure of Egyptian origin that approximately equals 1 bushel (35 L), is frequently mentioned in the Bible.

MASSAH AND MERIBAH (17:1–7)

For the third time the people grumble against Moses. This time they even question God’s providence. The incident made a profound impression on Israel’s historical memory. Its locale was called by a derogatory symbolic name: Massah-M’ribah, literally, “trial-quarrel.” The frequent reference to this narrative in the Bible indicates that it was much talked about in ancient Israel.

1. Rephidim The last station on the journey from the Sea of Reeds to Sinai, according to Exod. 19:2 and Num. 33:14–15. Although its precise location is still uncertain, Exod. 17:6 shows that it was situated close to Horeb/Mount Sinai. A wilderness station would have water. Why, then, was there no water for the Israelites when they arrived at Rephidim? Either the area was affected by a severe drought or the Amalekites were in control of this region and blocked the approaches to the sources of water.

2. quarreled The narrative uses the Hebrew verb יִרְדּ (irad), “fight,” a term that conjures up a picture of an angry, hostile confrontation.
“Give us water to drink,” they said; and Moses replied to them, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you try the Lord?” 3 But the people thirsted there for water; and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?” 4 Moses cried out to the Lord, saying, “What shall I do with this people? Before long they will be stoning me!” 5 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. 6 I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink.” And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. 7 The place was named Massah and Meribah, because the Israelites quarreled and because they tried the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord present among us or not?”

8 Amalek came and fought with Israel at

**EXODUS 17:3**

Give us water  The demand, in effect, is both a denunciation and an accusation.

3–4. The situation has deteriorated. The language of the people is unrestrained; their mood, explosive. A riot may break out any moment.

6. at Horeb At this site—known as “the mountain of God,” another name for Mount Sinai—Moses first received the call to leadership and the promise of Israel’s redemption.

Strike the rock  Most likely, soft porous limestone, which can retain water. A sharp blow to such rock can crack its crust and release a flow of groundwater. The miracle is credited to God and not to Moses, a point emphasized several times in the Bible. Moses acts only as the agent of God’s will, not on his own initiative.

**THE BATTLE WITH AMALEK**

(vv. 8–16)

According to the more detailed account given in Deut. 25:17–19, the Amalekites made a surprise rear attack on the famished and exhausted Israelites not long after the escape from Egypt. They cut down the stragglers—the elderly, the weak, and the infirm. Israel was forced to fight its first war of survival. The Amalekites were a tribe of

5. take along the rod with which you struck the Nile  Thus the people might know that the rod that had been used to start a plague, to make the waters of the Nile undrinkable, could also be used to produce a blessing, to call forth water in the wilderness.

8. Amalek is the Torah’s symbol of pure malice, attacking without cause. Some people commit crimes for profit or revenge, but Amalek acts that way for the sheer joy of hurting people. God’s “war from generation to gener-
Rephidim. 9 Moses said to Joshua, “Pick some men for us, and go out and do battle with Amalek. Tomorrow I will station myself on the top of the hill, with the rod of God in my hand.”

10 Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. 11 Then, whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed; but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. 12 But Moses’ hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. 13 And Joshua overwhelmed the people of Amalek with the sword.

14 Then the Lord said to Moses, “Inscribe this in a document as a reminder, and read it aloud to Joshua: I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!”

And Moses

Edomite nomads whose home was the Negeb and the Sinai Peninsula. Interpreting the appearance of the Israelites in this region as a menacing encroachment on their territory and as a threat to their control of the oases and trading routes, the Amalekites savagely attacked them.

9. Joshua Although previously unmentioned, he is not identified here, which suggests that he was well known. He was Moses’ faithful attendant and his designated successor. This incident is the only account in the Torah of Joshua’s military skill.

10. Hur Like Joshua, he too must have been an important public figure at this time. A later tradition identifies him as the husband of Moses’ sister, Miriam.

11. *b’yaḏ ramah* The hand is viewed by the Sages as a symbol of action and power, not as a mysterious focusing of supernatural power on Israel.

12. *remained steady* The Hebrew root מַצָּר means “to be firm,” “to be established” (see 2 Sam. 7:16). The verse makes the point that Moses’ steady arms and hands, which gave confidence to the people, had to be propped up. The power was God’s, not his.

13. *overwhelmed* The use of the Hebrew יָכְתוּ בָעָם, “to be weak,” seems to convey the notion of inflicting heavy casualties, rather than total victory. The Amalekites were forced to withdraw.

14. *Inscribe* This is the first reference in the Bible to the act of writing.

*a reminder* See Comment to 2:24.

...
built an altar and named it Adonai-nissi. He said, “It means, ‘Hand upon the throne of the LORD!’ The LORD will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages.”

15. built an altar As an expression of gratitude to God and as a memorial and witness to the battle.

Adonai-nissi Literally, “The LORD is my standard.”

16. This verse appears to be a citation from some ancient poetic text, now lost—perhaps the Book of the Wars of the Lord, mentioned in Num. 21:14, or the Book of Jashar, cited in Josh. 10:13 and 2 Sam. 1:18. These works apparently contained war songs and poetic accounts of battles. The verse may be an excerpt from a poetic version of the battle against Amalek.

He said, “It means, . . .” The passage is intended to be an explanation of the altar’s name, but the relationship between the two is difficult to discern.

Hand upon the throne Some ancient and medieval Jewish commentators understood the unusual word “kes,” which appears only here, as kissēi, “throne,” and interpreted the phrase to be an oath uttered either by Moses or by God, reinforcing the promise of verse 14.

the LORD Hebrew: yah. See Comment to 15:2.

“I will deal with him.” At times, however, Amalek is like a fly, appearing only where dirt and filth are. In those cases, the Torah says “you blot out his memory” (Deut. 25:19) by cleaning up the corruption that attracts him. We are commanded to combat Amalek in every generation, even as we wait for God to eradicate Amalek entirely. On Purim, when we make noise to blot out the name of Haman, considered a descendant of Amalek both biologically and spiritually, we are fulfilling this commandment.

16. The words translated as “throne of the LORD” (kes Yah] in the last verse of the parashah, are written “defective,” with letters missing, as if to imply that God’s sovereignty is incomplete as long as Amalek is at work in this world (Tanh. Ki Tetzei).
The battle between a coalition of northern Israelite tribes and the Canaanite armies is recounted in prose and in poetry in this haftarah. It was part of the wars that completed the conquest of the land begun by Joshua in the mid-12th century B.C.E. Both accounts praise the prowess and the initiative of two women: Deborah, a prophetess and judge in the region of Ephraim, and Jael, a tent dweller of the Kenite tribe.

Ashk’nazim recite both the prose and the poetic accounts. S’fardim recite only the poetic version, the focus of which is the praise of God, the participating tribes, and the individual heroes. As in military epics of other cultures, this song of glory is addressed to both contemporary and future generations.

Both versions of the victory over the Canaanites portray God’s power on behalf of His people. Both versions omit the historical prologue (Judg. 4:1–3) that presents the Canaanite menace as divine punishment for Israelite offenses against God, and presents the divinely aided victory as a result of the people’s return to Him in supplication.

Each version is distinctive in content, voice, style, and theological emphasis. The prose account uses the narrative voice, portraying Deborah as both charismatic leader—able to rouse the troops to battle—and prophetess. The events unfold within the framework of her prophecies, which charge the narrative with expectation. Details of the battle are meager, save for the concluding encounter between Jael and Sisera. The death of the Canaanite commander at the hands of the Kenite woman is a memorable moment of great glory. Jael’s use of a ruse, by which military victory is ensured, is a characteristic feature of other narratives in the Book of Judges.

In the poetic version of these events, the hymn of praise in Judg. 5 is sung by the heroine (“I will sing,” v. 3) with interjections by a song leader or chorus (“Awake, awake, O Deborah! / . . . strike up the chant! / . . . Take your captives, O son of Abinoam,” v. 12). This poetic version, placed after the historical narrative, functions as a supplementary song of victory, although it must have been formulated originally as an independent epic. This is suggested by the fact that in this version seven tribal units answered the call to battle (not just Zebulun and Naphtali, as in Judg. 4). Also, other tribes are chided or cursed for not participating in the national call to arms (5:14–18,23).

Repetitions and puns give the song a structure as well as the tempo and tone of a living epic. For example, the adverb az (then) provides a recurrent punctuation of details and events (vv. 8,11,13,19, 22). The word az spelled with an alef also evokes a military term spelled with an ayin, namely: oz (courage, v. 21).

RELATION OF THE HAFTARAH TO THE PARASHAH

The Song of Deborah and Barak (Judg. 5) is read along with the Songs of Moses and Israel and of Miriam (Exod. 15) as two celebrations of divine salvation in history. Moses’ Song of the Sea, which celebrates how the Lord “threw the Egyptian army into a panic” (va-yahom, Exod. 14:24), occurs at the beginning of national liberation and anticipates settlement in the Land and the building of the Temple (Exod. 15:15–17). It concludes with the climactic hope in God’s enduring kingship (v. 18). Deborah’s song, which celebrates how “the Lord threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic” (va-yahom, Judg. 4:15), occurs within the period of settling the Land. It, too, concludes on a hopeful note (Judg. 5:31).
Deborah, wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time. She used to sit under the Palm of Deborah, between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim, and the Israelites would come to her for decisions.

She summoned Barak son of Abinoam, of Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, “The Lord, the God of Israel, has commanded: Go, march up to Mount Tabor, and take with you ten thousand men of Naphtali and Zebulun. And I will draw Sisera, Jabin’s army commander, with his chariots and his troops, toward you up to the Wadi Kishon; and I will deliver him into your hands.” But Barak said to her, “If you will go with me, I will go; if not, I will not go.” “Very well, I will go with you,” she answered. “However, there will be no glory for you in the course you are taking, for then the Lord will deliver Sisera into the hands of a woman.” So Deborah went with Barak to Kedesh. Barak then mustered Zebulun and Naphtali at Kedesh; ten thousand men marched up after him; and Deborah also went up with him.

Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the other Kenites, descendants of Hobab, father-in-law of Moses, and had pitched his tent at Elon-bezaanannim, which is near Kedesh.

Sisera was informed that Barak son of Abinoam had gone up to Mount Tabor. So Sisera ordered all his chariots—nine hundred iron chariots—and all the troops he had to move from Harosheth-goiim to the Wadi Kishon.

Judges 4:4. Deborah . . . a prophetess

Deborah is portrayed with seerlike qualities and as a judge (v. 5). Rabbinic tradition lists her among seven female prophets in the Hebrew Bible, along with Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Abigail, Hulda, and Esther (BT Meg. 14a).

7. Jabin

A king of Canaan, with a large military force of 900 iron chariots (v. 13). See Comment on 4:2–3.

11. Kenites

A nomadic tribe that associated with Israel (see Num. 24:22).

13. Hobab, father-in-law of Moses

Here he is a Kenite, the ancestor of Heber (v. 11), but in Num. 10:29, Hobab is son of Reuel the Midianite. Exodus 2:18 speaks of Reuel as Moses’ father-in-law, and Exod. 18:1 identifies him as Jethro, priest of Midian. Rabbinic tradition tried to resolve these variations by assuming that Jethro had seven names.

13–14. The battle took place in the Galilee, in the Valley of Jezreel. Harosheth-goiim was near Megiddo. The Wadi Kishon rises in the southeast of the valley and flows into the Mediterranean. Mount Tabor is also located there.
Then Deborah said to Barak, “Up! This is the day on which the LORD will deliver Sisera into your hands: the LORD is marching before you.” Barak charged down Mount Tabor, followed by the ten thousand men, and the LORD threw Sisera and all his chariots and army into a panic before the onslaught of Barak. Sisera leaped from his chariot and fled on foot as Barak pursued the chariots and the soldiers as far as Harosheth-goiim. All of Sisera’s soldiers fell by the sword; not a man was left.

Sisera, meanwhile, had fled on foot to the tent of Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite; for there was friendship between King Jabin of Hazor and the family of Heber the Kenite. Jael came out to greet Sisera and said to him, “Come in, my lord, come in here, do not be afraid.” So he entered her tent, and she covered him with a blanket. He said to her, “Please let me have some water; I am thirsty.” She opened a skin of milk and gave him some to drink; and she covered him again. He said to her, “Stand at the entrance of the tent. If anybody comes and asks you if there is anybody here, say ‘No.’” Then Jael wife of Heber took a tent pin and grasped the mallet. When he was fast asleep from exhaustion, she approached him stealthily and drove the pin through his temple till it went down to the ground. Thus he died.

Now Barak appeared in pursuit of Sisera. Jael went out to greet him and said, “Come, I will show you the man you are looking for.” He went inside with her, and there Sisera was lying dead, with the pin in his temple.

On that day God subdued King Jabin of Canaan before the Israelites. The hand of the Israelites bore harder and harder on King Jabin of Canaan, until they destroyed King Jabin of Canaan.

23–4. King Jabin of Canaan
He is also called “King Jabin of Hazor” (v. 17, Josh. 11:1,
According to Judg. 5:19, Jabin was only one member of a coalition of kings of Canaan led by Sisera. The title “king of Canaan” is attested centuries earlier in the Mari tablets of northern Mesopotamia.

Judges 5:1. On that day Deborah and Barak... sang The victors sing a song of praise to God and the people. Rabbinic tradition records “Ten Songs” that span the sacred history of Israel. The 1st is sung during the Passover feast (Isa. 30:29), and the 2nd is the “Song of the Sea” in the parashah (Exod. 15). This song of Deborah and Barak is the 6th song. The 10th song will be the messianic song of the future (see Isa. 42:10; Mekh. B’shallah 1).

2. When locks go untrimmed Apparently as an act of dedication (see Num. 6:5) [Transl.].

3–5. The Targum saw here an allusion to Mount Sinai and the giving of the Torah (see Rashi and Ps. 68).

6. Shamgar The previous chieftain to lead the people of Israel (see Judg. 3:31).
On that day Deborah and Barak son of Abinoam sang:

2 When locks go untrimmed in Israel,
    When people dedicate themselves—
    Bless the LORD!

3 Hear, O kings! Give ear, O potentates!
    I will sing, will sing to the LORD,
    Will hymn the LORD, the God of Israel.

4 O LORD, when You came forth from Seir,
    Advanced from the country of Edom,
    The earth trembled;
    The heavens dripped,
    Yea, the clouds dripped water,

5 The mountains quaked—
    Before the LORD, Him of Sinai,
    Before the LORD, God of Israel.

6 In the days of Shamgar son of Anath,
    In the days of Jael, caravans ceased,
    And wayfarers went
    By roundabout paths.

7 Deliverance ceased,
    Ceased in Israel,
    Till you arose, O Deborah,
    Arose, O mother, in Israel!

8 When they chose new gods,
    Was there a fighter then in the gates?
    No shield or spear was seen
    Among forty thousand in Israel!

9 My heart is with Israel’s leaders,
    With the dedicated of the people—
    Bless the LORD!

10 You riders on tawny she-asses,
    You who sit on saddle rugs,
    And you wayfarers, declare it!

11 Louder than the sound of archers,
    There among the watering places
    Let them chant the gracious acts of the LORD,
    His gracious deliverance of Israel.

Then did the people of the LORD
March down to the gates!
13. The Lord’s people Reading “am [with a patah vowel] Adonai,” as in many Hebrew manuscripts [Transl.].

14. whose roots are in Amalek This is a puzzling comment about the origins of citizens of Ephraim. An old solution that continued into the Middle Ages interprets the passage as referring to heroes who stemmed from Ephraim and fought against Amalek; for example, Joshua (Exod. 17:8–13) and Saul (1 Sam. 15) (see Targ. Jon., Rashi, and Radak).

19. At Taanach, by Megiddo’s waters In the Valley of Jezreel. The Canaanite kings came to this broad plain to stage the battle.
Awake, awake, O Deborah!
Awake, awake, strike up the chant!
Arise, O Barak;
Take your captives, O son of Abinoam!

Then was the remnant made victor over the mighty,
The Lord's people won my victory over the warriors.

From Ephraim came they whose roots are in Amalek;
After you, your kin Benjamin;
From Machir came down leaders,
From Zebulun such as hold the marshal's staff.
And Issachar's chiefs were with Deborah;
As Barak, so was Issachar—
Rushing after him into the valley.

Among the clans of Reuben
Were great decisions of heart.
Why then did you stay among the sheepfolds
And listen as they pipe for the flocks?
Among the clans of Reuben
Were great searchings of heart!
Gilead tarried beyond the Jordan;
And Dan—why did he linger by the ships?
Asher remained at the seacoast
And tarried at his landings.
Zebulun is a people that mocked at death,
Naphtali—on the open heights.

Then the kings came, they fought:
The kings of Canaan fought
At Taanach, by Megiddo's waters—
They got no spoil of silver.
The stars fought from heaven,
From their courses they fought against Sisera.
The torrent Kishon swept them away,
The raging torrent, the torrent Kishon.

March on, my soul, with courage!
Then the horses' hoofs pounded
As headlong galloped the steeds.
"Curse Meroz!" said the angel of the Lord.
"Bitterly curse its inhabitants,
27. At her feet be sank  The phrases here have an intensifying redundancy, rhythmically echoing the violent hammering of the murder (Radak).

28. Through the window peered Sisera’s mother  The image of Sisera’s mother on the rampart, peering through the window, is a conventional scene. Thus Michal, daughter of Saul, looks from her royal window at the processional bearing the Ark to Jerusalem. The particular phrase used with Michal (nishk’fah b’ad ha-hallon, 2 Sam. 6:16) is almost identical with that used of Sisera’s mother. The portrait of (royal) women at the window is also represented in 8th-century-b.c.e. Phoenician ivories.

31. all Your enemies  In the context of the haftarah, the refrain calling for the defeat of “all” God’s enemies has an eschatologic ring, looking to “the end of days” (see Rashi and Kara, following Targ.).

His friends  Hebrew: ohavav, literally “His loved ones.” In Hebrew and its cognate equivalent in Akkadian, this is a standard designation for treaty partners.
Because they came not to the aid of the Lord,
To the aid of the Lord among the warriors."

24 Most blessed of women be Jael,
Wife of Heber the Kenite,
Most blessed of women in tents.
25 He asked for water, she offered milk;
In a princely bowl she brought him curds.
26 Her [left] hand reached for the tent pin,
Her right for the workmen’s hammer.
She struck Sisera, crushed his head,
Smashed and pierced his temple.
27 At her feet he sank, lay outstretched,
At her feet he sank, lay still;
Where he sank, there he lay—destroyed.

28 Through the window peered Sisera’s mother,
Behind the lattice she whined:
“Why is his chariot so long in coming?
Why so late the clatter of his wheels?”
29 The wisest of her ladies give answer;
She, too, replies to herself:
30 “They must be dividing the spoil they have found:
A damsel or two for each man,
Spoil of dyed cloths for Sisera,
Spoil of embroidered cloths,
A couple of embroidered cloths
Round every neck as spoil.”

31 So may all Your enemies perish, O Lord!
But may His friends be as the sun rising in might!

And the land was tranquil forty years.