Alliteration in the Exodus Narrative

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The recent decades have seen a flowering of literary study of the Bible. Scholar after scholar has uncovered technique after technique in his or her reading and interpretation of biblical literature, both prose and poetry. In my reading of this vast amount of secondary literature, from which I and many others have learned a great deal, I am struck by how relatively little attention has been paid to the use of alliteration. Obviously, various examples of alliteration have been pointed out in certain instances. Scholars still cite the classic work of Immanuel Casanowicz,1 and a glaring example such as the collocation of יָרֵאָה 'naked' in Gen 2:25 and רֵשָׁו 'cunning' in Gen 3:1 is noted by nearly every commentator on the Garden of Eden story. But on a relative scale, I believe that my observation above is accurate—that in general, scholars have not paid sufficient attention to the role of alliteration in biblical literature, especially prose texts.2

1. I. M. Casanowicz, Paronomasia in the Old Testament (Boston: Cushing, 1894). Paronomasia and alliteration are not the same phenomenon, rather, in Casanowicz’s words, “Alliteration is the simplest, most frequent, and probably the oldest form of paronomasia” (p. 8).

2. Thus, for example, one finds no treatment of alliteration in the following books devoted to biblical narrative: R. Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981); A. Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative (Bible and Literature 9; Sheffield: Almond, 1983; repr. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994); M. Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); and H. C. Brichto, Toward a Grammar of Biblical Poetics: Tales of the Prophets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). I realize that the aim of these books is not to catalog the various literary devices employed by the ancient authors; and in fact, quite the contrary, these valuable contributions typically seek to address much larger questions. Nevertheless, the point stands. (I intend no criticism here, because I consider all of these works to be major contributions to the field.) A work that comes closer to cataloging literary devices in biblical prose is S. Bar-Efrat, Narrative Art in the Bible (JSOTSup 20; Sheffield: Almond, 1989; Hebrew original, 1979/1984); happily, one does find reference
In a number of recent articles, I have observed that alliteration frequently governs the specific word choice made by biblical authors, not only in poetic texts, in which readers are more likely to recognize the feature, but in prose narratives as well. As a paradigm, note the use of the hapax legomenon הָּתַּמ 'gaze, watch' in Gen 24:21, alliterating with the roots שָׁתַּה 'drink', appearing 7 times in the chapter (including nearby in vv. 18, 19, 22), and בָּאָה 'draw (water)', also appearing 7 times in the chapter (including nearby in vv. 19 and 20). Note especially the form בָּאָתָו in v. 20, which alliterates most closely with הָּתַּמ, following four words later, because of the presence of the 3rd-feminine-singular preformative כ (the alliteration is completed by the correspondence of the labial consonants ב and מ in these two words). There is no doubt, to my mind, that the author of Genesis 24 reached deep into the Hebrew lexicon in order to select this rare word alliterationis causa.

In the present essay, I wish to expand the discussion to demonstrate the variety of ways that alliteration works in an extended narrative. I have selected the Exodus narrative as a good example thereof, though in truth all...
most any chunk of biblical prose could serve as an equally successful model. In choosing alliteration as the subject of my contribution to this volume, I am pleased to point out that our honoree has himself taken note of this literary device in his own publications, most notably in his superb commentary on Amos. I dedicate these words to my dear friend Shalom Paul, whose warmth, humor, and good cheer are unceasing, as a token of my appreciation for the many kindnesses he has extended to me over the course of time, oceans, and continents.

1. Exodus 1:21

Previous scholars have noted that the word נשות ‘daughter’ serves as a Leitwort in the first two chapters of Exodus (see 1:16, 22; 2:1, 5, etc.). To enhance the texture of this pericope further, the author introduces the word בתי, literally, ‘houses’, in 1:21. When we realize further that the idiom עשה בתי is used here in a special, legal-technical sense with the meaning ‘to found a family’, as noted in fact by our jubilarian (!), we gain an added appreciation of the author’s tack in making use of the full range of connotations of words in his lexis.

6. The present essay is part of a large ongoing project of mine; I hope one day to communicate the results of my research in a monograph. In lieu of this, I would gladly share with any interested reader the handout used in several public presentations of my work on alliteration, most recently at the University of California at San Diego, December 2003. I am happy to note that my two main hosts in San Diego, Richard Friedman and William Propp, are among the scholars who have paid attention to the presence of alliteration in the Bible. A number of fine examples are observed in their respective works: R. E. Friedman, A Commentary on the Torah (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001) 440, 466, 510, etc.; and W. H. C. Propp, Exodus 1–18 (AB 2; New York: Doubleday, 1999), though the vast majority of these examples concern the poem in Exodus 15 (for references, see the index on p. 646, under both “alliteration” and “assonance”). For another recent contribution that focuses on alliteration, indeed sound play with a specific purpose, see V. A. Hurowitz, “Healing and Hissing Snakes: Listening to Numbers 21:4–9,” Scriptura 87 (2004) 278–87.

7. S. M. Paul, Amos (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 117, 163, 220 n. 21, 257 n. 13, 276 n. 33.


2. Exodus 2:3

In line with the above, we also may note the introduction of the word הבת ‘basket of’ in 2:3, in proximity to the Leitwort הב. Clearly, this is a rare word in Hebrew, used in specific contexts only—namely, here in Exod 2:3 (and in v. 5 in the absolute form) and in Genesis 6–9 (26x). As previous scholars have noted, the author of Exodus 1–2 evokes the language of the early chapters of Genesis (see, for example, the shared vocabulary of Exod 1:7 and Gen 1:28, and the expression יכ טוב ‘that it/he was good’ in Exod 2:2 and Gen 1:4, and so on), with the theological message that the two greatest events in the history of the world were the creation of the world and the creation of the people of Israel (note the phrase יְהוָה יְשוֹעַ ‘the people of the children of Israel’, used for the first time in Exod 1:9). Accordingly, the use of הבת in the Exodus narrative can be explained along the same lines.10

At the same time, however, we should note the sound effected by placing this word in our narrative, surrounded by repeated use of the word הב. Moreover, the construct form הבת produces the exact same syllable as הב.11 But regardless of the construct form הבת, the absolute form הבת itself alliterates with הב, with the two consonants of the two words in anagrammatic order. Naturally, these two consonants, /b/ and /t/, are among the most common in the language—and among the most common in any language—but given the rarity of both the word הבת and the technical term יָהָה יְשוֹעַ, I conclude that these lexemes were intentionally selected by the author to elicit the greatest sound effect possible.

3. Exodus 2:2–3

The Hebrew lexicon includes two words for ‘month’: the more common潔 (attested 281x in the Bible, 2x in Ben Sira, 87x in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and 8x in inscriptions) and the far less common יָהָה יְשוֹעַ (attested 12, 0, 4, and


11. Note, of course, that the spirantization of postvocalic [b] to [v] present in the Masoretic text arose only at a later date (see, similarly, n. 40 below). For this and all other phonological issues raised in the present essay, see the convenient summary in my "Ancient Hebrew Phonology," in The Phonologies of Asia and Africa (ed. A. S. Kaye; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997) 65–83.
9- in the corresponding corpora).\textsuperscript{12} The distribution of יר in Hebrew (Deut 33:14, 2 Kgs 15:13, etc.) and in cognate languages (Ugaritic, Phoenician, Aramaic) indicates that it is an Israelian Hebrew (IH) lexeme.\textsuperscript{13} Its presence in the Moses birth story, in the expression שלשה ירדים ‘three months’ at the end of Exod 2:2, in a narrative otherwise devoid of IH features, must be explained on grounds other than its northernness.\textsuperscript{14}

In the following v. 3, we read והמריה ירדים ‘and she loamed it with loam’. Note that the three consonants of this root, which appears here as both a verb and a noun, are the same three consonants present in the plural form, ירדים. Actually, this statement is not 100% accurate, because the two הッツ in these two lexemes represent different sounds: cognate data inform us that the root ירד ‘loam’ has the pharyngeal fricative /h/, while ירד ‘month’ has the velar fricative /h/.\textsuperscript{15} But this minor difference in the articulation of these two phonemes does not lessen the aural impact created by the juxtaposition of these words, especially in light of the exact match between the other two consonants, mem and re.

Furthermore, while the word ירד ‘clay’ in 1:14 appears at quite a distance from the like-sounding words in 2:2–3, its presence in the narrative should also be noted. All of this, then, explains the author’s choice of the word ירדים ‘months’ in 2:2. The use of the standard word ירדים ‘months’ would not have produced the same literary result.

\textsuperscript{12} For the data, see DCH 3:165, 4:296. Of the 9 epigraphic attestations of יר, 8 appear in one inscription, the Gezer Calendar. The remaining attestation of יר is in Arad ostracon no. 20, though only the last letter can be read with certainty. See G. I. Davies, Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) 378.


\textsuperscript{14} True, Exod 2:1–10 is usually ascribed to E, and this source is typically considered to be of Northern origin. But the whole existence of the Elohist source has been called into question by many scholars, and in any case I (and many other readers) prefer to treat the narratives as literary wholes, without recourse to source division. Accordingly, I set aside any suggestions of this sort. In addition, the main point is unchanged: there is no concentration of IH features in the story to warrant ascribing it to Northern provenience.

\textsuperscript{15} See the information provided in HALOT 331, 437–38.
4. Exodus 2:2–3

This same pair of verses includes another set of alliterative words. The verbal root הֵּלֵכַת הָיָה ‘hide’ appears twice, in both v. 2 and v. 3. Its presence triggers the realization that three words have the combination sibilant + pe: הֹלֵךְ ‘pitch’, a rare word, attested only 3x in the Bible; הָרָק ‘reeds’, another rare word, attested only 4x (not including instances of מָרָק מִם ‘Sea of Reeds’); and חֶסֶת ‘lip of (the Nile)’ = ‘riverbank’, a common usage. While none of these words is as unexpected as the presence of מִי in example no. 3 above, the overall effect is a first-rate alliterative chain.

5. Exodus 5:9

The root חָשׁ ‘pay heed, have regard’ appears in the narrative corpus only here and in Gen 4:4–5 in the Cain and Abel story (2x). It clearly is invoked to alliterate with the common root חָשׁ several words earlier in the verse. The two expressions חָשׁ וְהוֹלֵךְ וְחָשׁ ‘and they shall do it [the work]’ and חָשׁ וְחָשׁ ‘and they should pay no regard [to words of falsehood]’ appear in quick succession, albeit separated by an ‘atonah. In addition to the alliteration present, note the assonance created by the final -ע vowels in both verbs, though admittedly, this would have to be the case, given that both are 3rd-masculine-plural prefix-conjugation forms.

6. Exodus 5:11, 14

Exod 5:14 includes the following phrase: מָרַך הִלְקָם ‘why did you not finish your quota?’ The use of קָמָר for ‘quota’ is essentially unique in the Bible. And while there is nothing unusual about the verb הִלְקָם ‘finish’ in this context, by collocating these two words, the author creates an echo of the short phrase that appears three verses earlier: וָקָמָר ‘go, take’ (v. 11). Furthermore, while there is not an exact correspondence between the terms used to refer to the speakers who issued these commands in the name of the Pharaoh (5:11 has שְׁם הָעָם שִׁבָּרִים, while 5:14 has שְׁם הָעָם שִׁבָּרִים), note that...
these are the only two instances in the narrative in which the šamarîm ‘officers’ address the people directly. Accordingly, near the beginning of their words, one finds the consonantal string lamed-kap qop-het, and then, near the end of their words, one hears the string kap-lamed het-qop, all in the same voice.

7. Exodus 8:10

The root זכר ‘heap up’, present in the form זכרו ‘they heaped up’ in Exod 8:10, is a relatively rare lexeme in the Bible. It appears only 7 times in the Bible, 6 as a verb and once as a noun in 2 Kgs 10:8.20 Space does not allow me a detailed discussion, but note that in all 6 attestations of the verb in the Bible, the sounds of this root echo the sounds of nearby words.21

In the present instance, the alliterative match is quite obvious. The form זכרו follows the elevenfold use of the word זכרו ‘frog’ (10x in the plural, 1x in the singular) in Exod 7:27–8:9.22 The first and third consonants of this pair of words are identical, while the corresponding second letters represent the voiced and voiceless labials /b/ and /p/, respectively.

8. Exodus 9:1

In 5 places in the account of the plagues, God instructs Moses to warn Pharaoh of the impending disaster. In 4 of these cases, God uses the word זכרו ‘and you shall say’ (7:16 [1st plague], 7:26 [2nd plague], 8:16 [4th plague], and 9:13 [7th plague]).23 In one passage, 9:1, in anticipation of the 5th plague, we encounter the divergent form זכרו ‘and you shall speak’.24

The author has altered the verb of speech at this specific point in order to produce alliteration with the name of the 5th plague, זכרו ‘pestilence’.25

This noun form appears for the first time in v. 3 and then again in v. 15.

20. For the noun form זכרו, see the discussion in my Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings, 121. As noted there, the root is more common in Mishnaic Hebrew, especially the noun form, which appears 542x (!) in the Tannaitic corpus.

21. For the best examples, see זכרו in Hab 1:10 alongside חצרה ‘fortress’ and הר ‘dust’; and in Zech 9:3 alongside עיר ‘Tyre’, גבעה ‘rampart’, תנור ‘dust’, and זהיר ‘gold’.

22. See earlier, in very general terms, Friedman, Commentary on the Torah, 195.

23. See also Exod 4:22 in the portion of the narrative leading up to the plagues account.

24. We may note that in general זכרו is rare, especially in contrast to the more common זכרו. In the Torah, for example, the former appears only 3x (Exod 4:15, 9:1; Deut 6:7), while the latter appears 40x.

25. There is also another factor at work here. I consider the change of זכרו to זכרו in this verse to be a prose analogue to the poetical device identified by D. N. Freedman, in “Deliberate Deviation from an Established Pattern of Repetition in Hebrew Poetry as a Rhetorical Device,” in Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish
Furthermore, the noun רָכִּים ‘thing, matter’ appears 3x in this pericope, in vv. 4, 5, and 6. This lexeme is exceedingly common in the Bible, and it therefore may not be used here intentionally. One should note, however, that this is the only place in the long account of the 10 plagues in which the word רָכִּים appears.

In sum, three separate lexemes from the root רָכִּי (by this statement, I do not mean to imply that the noun רָכִּים ‘pestilence’ derives from the same etymological root as the other two items) are placed in proximity to produce a fine example of alliteration.

9. Exodus 9:3

In Exod 9:3, we encounter the only example of the participle of the verb יָדוֹ ‘be’ in the Bible.26 The passage is well known: גֻּזֹּן יָדוֹ יֵתָה יַהֲウェָה מְמ֣וֹךְ: ‘behold, the hand of YHWH will be against your livestock’, with the participle bearing future reference. G. S. Ogden noted a discernible pattern in the use of participles within the plagues narrative:

On five occasions Moses and Aaron are depicted as presenting themselves before the Pharaoh to petition for approval of an Israelite pilgrimage into the desert. On each of these occasions their words involve statements as to what Yahweh would do should the Pharaoh fail to comply with their request. In each of the five statements the pattern of speech is almost identical.27

Ogden presented the following table:28

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Studies, Division A: The Period of the Bible (Jerusalem: World Congress of Jewish Studies, 1986) 45–52; reprinted in Divine Commitment and Human Obligation: Selected Writings of David Noel Freedman (2 vols.; ed. J. R. Huddleston; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997) 2:205–12. I have collected a number of similar examples in prose texts, including, most famously perhaps, the omission of the refrain וַיִּירָא בַּלֹּא מְתוּנָם ‘and God saw that it was good’ in day two of creation in Genesis 1 (not to be restored according to the LXX).

28. I have corrected the errors that Ogden included in his transcription of Exod 7:17 (ibid., 484).
It is clear that each of the statements requires a participle, and that each (except one) is expressed in the first-person singular with reference to God. The exception is the passage in Exod 9:3, in which the subject is “the hand of YHWH.” Ogden’s contribution was to note why a participial form is required in this verse, thereby giving rise to the unique feminine-singular active participle of הָיָה ‘be’. What he did not note is that the combination of the exceptional form הָיָה and the divine name הָיָה creates an exquisite alliteration, thus providing us with another case of a rare or unique word or form used for the sake of this literary device.

10. Exodus 9:8–10

The word הָיָה 'soot' appears only here in the Bible, in Exod 9:8 and 10, in the description of the 6th plague. It has been chosen by the author specifically for the purpose of alliterating with words nearby, namely, כֹּף 'your fistfuls' in v. 8 and צָרֶף 'sprouting' in vv. 9–10 (2x).

Due to a lack of cognates, we are unable to determine the exact phonetic value of the het in הָיָה. For the other two words involved in this series, as in example no. 3 above, we are dealing with different hets. Cognates for the noun פֶּרֶח (for example, Akkadian upnu, Arabic ဖֶּרֶח)29 point to the presence of a pharyngeal fricative, /ḥ/, while cognates for the verb פֶּרֶח (for example, Arabic jaraha) support the presence of a velar fricative, /h/. Nonetheless, again as noted in no. 3 above, this has only a minor effect on the overall impact of the alliteration created by the collocation of these three lexemes.

11. Exodus 9:23–24

The rare word מִלְתָּלוֹת appears in 9:24, one of only two attestations of the Hitpael of the root לִקְחָה 'take'; the only other instance is Ezek 1:4, where the same expression, מִלְתָּלוֹת מָא ש, appears.30 In the preceding verse (Exod 9:23) are two lexemes that alliterate with this word. The first is לִקְחָה 'voices' (= thunder), which includes three sounds identical to sounds occurring in מִלְתָּלוֹת. The second is the rare verbal form מִלְתָּלָה, with the atypical preservation of the first root letter, he (there are 11 of these cases in the Bible, compared with 630 instances without the he in prefix-conjugation forms); the sounds /t/ - /h/ - /l/ - /k/ of this form correspond closely to the sounds /t/ - /ḥ/ - /l/ - /q/ of מִלְתָּלוֹת in scrambled fashion.

29. Also perhaps Ugaritic ญנ, depending on how one understands CTU 1.16 VI 58. The much better attested noun, ญנ, means ‘an article of clothing’. 30. For discussion on the meaning of the term, see Propp, Exodus 1–18, 334.
In the description of the 7th plague, the text includes a statement of a sort not previously encountered. I refer to the following:

I know that you do not yet fear YHWH God' (v. 30). This statement allows for the use of the adverb וְרָאַי ‘yet’ amidst the four uses of the root ‘rain’, twice as a verb (vv. 18 and 23) and twice as a noun (vv. 33–34). The alliteration created by these anagrammatic roots is obvious.

The word פרה ‘hoof’ appears in 10:26. This is the only place in the Torah (outside of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, where the dietary laws are presented) where this noun occurs. Moreover, this is the only place in the entire Bible where it is used metonymically: פרה here does not mean ‘hoof’ per se but stands for ‘domesticated animal’ in general.

The reader may raise an eyebrow at encountering this term in v. 26, but his or her question is soon answered upon reaching v. 28. Here, we read this expression in the mouth of the Pharaoh: ‘you are not to see my face again’. Note the string of consonants that bridges the middle two words of this phrase: סֵמֶך = פֶּרֶש, exactly the same three consonants that appear in the word פרה ‘hoof’. Given the unique use of this word in v. 26, as described above, especially the metonymy present, there can be little doubt that the author employed the word alliteration is causa.

The word כל ‘completely’ (which normally functions as a noun meaning ‘completion, complete destruction’) is used in 11:1 adverbially, one of only two appearances in the Bible (the other is Gen 18:21). The usage is considered odd enough by scholars that the text is often viewed as suspect.

But this atypical usage may be explained by the desire to produce alliteration. In the next verse we read that the Israelites were to ask their Egyptian neighbors for כל חסוק כניל יבש ‘objects of silver and objects of gold’

31. The inclusion of this statement in the narrative is another indication of the special character of the 7th plague; see S. B. Noegel, “The Significance of the Seventh Plague,” Bib 76 (1995) 532–39.
32. See BDB 478.
33. See, e.g., KB 438; and HALOT 477. This holds for both passages, ours and Gen 18:21. The emendations proposed, however, typically deal with the vowels only, in which case the alliteration would still be present. For a brief survey of proposed emendations, see Propp, Exodus 1–18, 342.
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15. Exodus 13:17

Exod 13:17 has been discussed by other scholars. The text reads as follows:

וַיָּדֶר בְּשָׁלוֹשָׁת פרֹת אֶת הַמַּעֲרָב לֹא חָלְלָהוּ דְּרֶךְ אַלְכּוֹד מַעְיָר פֹּלְשִׁיטִים מִכָּו בֵּרָה כֵּי מַעְרָב אֵלָה מַעֲרָב בּוֹרַאָם מַעְלַחָה תָּשִׁב מַצּוֹדָה

And it was, when Pharaoh sent the people forth, and God did not lead them via the way of the land of Philistines, though it was near, because God said, “lest the people change their mind when they see war and return to Egypt”’. Two relatively common roots are used here, but this does not diminish the overall result. The first root is מַעְלַחָה ‘lead’, and the second root is מַצּוֹדָה ‘regret, change one’s mind’. The resemblance of the sounds is made even more complete by the addition of the 3rd-masculine-plural-pronominal suffix -ם to מַעְלַחָה, creating the form מַצּוֹדָה ‘lead them’, with the same three consonants as the root of the verb מַצּוֹדָה ‘regret, change one’s mind’.

In this case, moreover, the phonetic likeness is exact, because the ħet in each case represents /h/ (compare with Arabic nahâ ‘go, walk, wend one’s way’; and the Ugaritic personal names mnhm and ynhm, both widely attested). In addition, note the presence of the noun מַלְחָה ‘war’ in the verse, which enhances the alliteration. The lamed in this word corresponds to the nun in the two verbal roots: liquids and nasals share similar phonetic characteristics, and /l/ and /n/ often interchange in cognates within Semitic. And once more, the ħet here represents the phoneme /h/ (compare with Ugaritic mlhmt, Arabic malmama, and so on).


The trigger for this discussion is the unique expression in 16:35: מַחְשָׁבָה ‘inhabitable land’. Although the closest alliterative words appear at some distance, five and six verses earlier, I nevertheless believe that the presence of מַחְשָׁבָה ‘the Sabbath’ in v. 29 and מַחְשָׁבָה ‘and they rested’ in v. 30 explains the author’s employment of the above phrase in v. 35. Note, moreover, that given the choice of the morphological variants מַחְשָׁבָה and מַחְשָׁבָה (for which, see Jer 6:8, in a similar expression), the author chose מַחְשָׁבָה...
because of the presence of the *taw*, thus completing the alliteration with the root *taw* that appears in 16:29–30.

Bridging the long range of these like-sounding words are several other words with less-than-perfect alliteration that nonetheless serve to augment the auditory effect. I refer here to the following items: the common noun יָבָשָׁה *yavesh* ‘honey’ in v. 31; the noun מַשְׁמַרְתָּה *meshemrath* ‘preserve’ (in this context) in vv. 32–34 (3x, once in each verse); and the hapax legomenon צָבָן *tsaven* ‘jar’ in v. 33. Note the following sound links. The word יָבָשָׁה comprises two of the same consonants as *tsaven* /*tsaven* (where the third consonant, the *dalet*, is the voiced counterpart of the voiceless dental *taw*). The word מַשְׁמַרְתָּה has the *sin* and the *taw* of our original two words, while the third key consonant is the twice-heard *mem*, a labial with phonetic similarities to *bet*. And finally, צָבָן has *nun* and *taw*, as in מַשְׁמַרְתָּה, along with the emphatic sibilant *sade* with at least a minimal correspondence to *sin*. The overall result is a string of words, two of them unusual (*tsaven*, צָבָן), with alliteration throughout.

Finally, we may note the presence of assonance in three of the words discussed here, specifically the words that appear at the end of this section in vv. 32–35: מַשְׁמַרְתָּה (2x), מַשְׁמַרְתָּה (1x), נְשָׁבָה, מַשְׁמַרְתָּה. Three of the five have the standard form, while two of them appear in pause; but in truth, during the Iron Age the ending on all of these words would have been exactly the same, most likely closest to the pausal forms: -ָּת (without anaptyxis) or -ָּת (with anaptyxis).

17. Exodus 19:20–24

In 19:21, the following expression appears: מָרֵדָת אל היה לְאָה. A similar expression appears in v. 24: אל היה לְאָה אל היה. Normally the root עֲדָה means ‘destroy’, though that connotation would be a bit too strong for these passages. Accordingly, translators and interpreters prefer a slightly milder nuance, such as ‘break through’. This meaning is further suggested by the twice-stated threat that, should the people break through, then God will burst out at them, in a form of tit-for-tat: מָרֵדָת אל היה (v. 22), מָרֵדָת אל היה (v. 24).

Given the uniqueness of this use of the root עֲדָה, in line with our approach in this essay, we are entitled to ask: why did the author select this verb in this context? The answer to this question is readily forthcoming: it is due to the presence of the key toponym יַה הָרֶם ‘Mount Sinai’ in vv. 20
and 23 (as well as in vv. 11, 18). Note that the root רֶשׁ appears in the toponym, bridging the two-word construct phrase.

18. Exodus 29:1

My next example takes us beyond the narrative portions of the book of Exodus, but I include it here nonetheless, if for no other reason than to demonstrate the pervasiveness of alliteration in biblical texts, even in unexpected settings such as the tabernacle account. The verse reads as follows:

וַיָּרֶשׁ אֶת-הָעָה לְכֹהֵן לְכֹהֵן יְלֶלֶל בַּעֲבוֹר בַּעֲבוֹר שְׂמֵי הָעַמֶּדת

'and this is the thing you should do to them, to sanctify them to serve me: take one bull, son-of-the-herd, and two rams, perfect-ones'. The atypical form in this passage is the masculine-singular imperative לְלָלֶל 'take', instead of the usual form לְלַלֶל. The former (and its feminine counterpart), with retention of the initial root letter lamed, appears elsewhere in the Bible in 1 Kgs 17:11, Ezek 37:16, and Prov 20:16. Elsewhere I have demonstrated the dialectal nature of this form; it is a characteristic of IH.38 In 1 Kgs 17:11, Elijah addresses the woman of Zarephath, while Prov 20:16 appears in a book replete with IH features.39 The most interesting of these passages is Ezek 37:16, in which God instructs the prophet to take two pieces of wood, inscribing “for Judah and for the children of Israel their friends” on one, and “for Joseph the wood of Ephraim and for the whole house of Israel their friends” on the other. In the first instruction, God uses the standard (= Judahite Hebrew) form לְלַלֶל, while in the second the IH form לְלָלֶל appears, as an element of style-switching, because this piece of wood is intended to represent the Northern Kingdom.

Now there clearly is no concentration of IH features in the Priestly material that dominates the end of the book of Exodus. But authors of biblical texts went to great lengths to introduce alliteration into their compositions, as this case well illustrates. The author of Exod 29:1 opted to use the IH form לְלָלֶל, because the inclusion of the lamed creates a threefold string of alliterative words close together: לְלָלֶל ‘to sanctify’, לְלָלֶל ‘to serve’, and לְלָלֶל ‘take’.40

40. Note that, in line with what was stated above (see n. 11), the spirantization of postvocalic [k] to [x] present in the Masoretic vocalization of לְלָלֶל arose only at a later date.
19. Exodus 32:12–17

Exod 32:12–17 contains a cluster of words with the same or similar sounds: הָרְעָה (‘with evil’) in v. 12, הָרְעָה (‘the evil’) in v. 12, יָרְעָה (‘I will multiply’) in v. 13, חָרְעָה (‘your seed’) in v. 13, יָרְעָה (‘the evil’) in v. 14, דְּרֶשׁ (‘their [two] sides’) in v. 15, and בָּרְעָה (‘in its [the people’s] shouting’) in v. 17. The consonantal trio בֵּט - רֶשׁ - שָׁאִין forms the basis for the alliteration, as seen in the first, sixth, and seventh words. Three others (the second, fourth, and fifth) include the רֶשׁ - שָׁאִין elements; while the remaining word (the third) includes the רֶשׁ - בֵּט sounds.

Included in this string of lexemes are two unusual items. First, the word דְּרֶשׁ (‘their sides’) in v. 15, with reference to the two sides of the two tablets of the Decalogue, is a usage that appears only here in the Bible and indeed this is the only passage in the Bible that comments on this feature of the tablets.42 Second, the noun עֹר (‘shouting’) in v. 17 (within the form בָּרְעָה ‘in its shouting’) appears in only two other places in the Bible (Mic 4:9, Job 36:33), though admittedly, the verbal root עֹר ‘roar, shout’ appears more commonly.43 Note also the orthography of this last item, with the archaic spelling נ- for the 3rd-masculine-singular-pronominal suffix, thus permitting הָרְעָה (‘with evil’) in v. 12 and בָּרְעָה (‘in its shouting’) in v. 17 to look exactly alike.44

20. Exodus 32:22–27

A second, related cluster of words appears later in the same chapter.45 Verses 22–27 include the following: בָּרְעָה (‘in evil’) in v. 22, פָּרָה (‘break off’) in v. 24, שָׁעָר (‘wild’) in v. 25, פָּרָה (‘let them [lit., him] be wild’) in v. 25, שַׁעַר (‘gate’) (3x) in vv. 26–27, רָעָה (‘his sword’) in v. 27, רָעָה (‘his sword’) in v. 27, רָעָה (‘his sword’) in v. 27, רָעָה (‘his sword’) in v. 27, רָעָה (‘his sword’) in v. 27. As in the previous ex-

41. Note BDB 719: “even מָשִּׁים עַבִּירֵים Ex 3215 (E) on their two sides (i.e. of tablets),” with the word even highlighting the unusual nature of this usage.
42. As noted by R. A. Cole, Exodus (TOTC; London: Tyndale, 1973) 218.
43. Unfortunately, we are unable to determine the exact phoneme that lies behind the grapheme ‘אֵין in the roots ‘be evil’ and ‘roar, shout’, because of a lack of cognates in Arabic and Ugaritic (some have been proposed [see the lexica], but they are not convincing). The root of רֶשׁ ‘pass, cross’ (as in דְּרֶשׁ (‘their sides’)) is the pharyngeal fricative /w/ (compare Ugaritic ’rb), but this piece of information serves us little without the additional information. Regardless, all these words would have alliterated with one another.
44. As noted already by Cassuto, Exodus, 418.
45. Noted in part by Cassuto (ibid., 421; in combination with the previous set of verses), though he understated the case.
ample, we may begin with bet - reš - ‘ayin as the consonantal basis for this alliteration (thus בֵּית and רֵאשׁ and עַיִן). The slight change from voiced /b/ to voiceless /p/ allows the twofold use of the root פֶּתֶחַ to alliterate. A similar slight change from one pharyngeal fricative to another (/º/ to /h/) permits הָרְבָּה to serve (compare with Ugaritic ḫrb). The reš - ‘ayin combination is present in the words פֶּתֶחַ and פֶּתַח. Building from the root פֶּתַח is the root פֶּתַח (in פֶּתַח; recall that /q/ is a velar plosive. And finally, the shift back from voiceless /p/ in this root to voiced /b/ produces the form קָרֶב.46

As in the previous example, so here we may point to some atypical uses. First, the expression פֶּתַח הָרְבָּה ‘the gate of the camp’ in v. 26 (see also v. 27) is most striking, for naturally a camp does not have a proper gate. The only parallel is 2 Chr 31:2, in which פֶתֶחַ הָרְבָּה ‘in the gates of the camps of YHWH’ is used metaphorically, because the setting is the temple, a structure with actual gates. Second, note the unique string איש אָדָם ‘each-man his brother, and each-man his friend, and each-man his kinsman’ in v. 27. Obviously, only one of these three expressions is needed. Indeed, in only two other passages in the Bible do we find two of the phrases side by side: Jer 23:35, איש אָדָם ‘each-man his brother, and each-man his friend, and each-man his kinsman and Jer 31:33, איש אָדָם ‘each-man his brother, and each-man his friend, and each-man his kinsman.47 Thus, Exod 32:27 is the only case in the Bible of the threefold chain. In addition, this is the only attestation of the expression איש קָרֶב in the canon.

21. Exodus 36:6

My final example appears in a brief narrative embedded in the tabernacle account. The expression יָכוֹל עַל עֲרֵץ ‘and the people were restrained from bringing’ is situated within the greatest concentration of uses of the word מַלָּאכָה ‘work’ in the Bible (13x within the 14 verses of the pericope of Exod 35:30–36:8, 3 of which are very close to the above expression). At first glance, there is nothing exceptional about either of these words;

46. Once more we have only partial evidence regarding the phonemes that lie behind the grapheme ‘ayin in these words. The Ugaritic cognates ḫrb and ṭjr reveal a pharyngeal fricative in הָרְבָּה and a velar fricative in פֶּתַח. We do not possess reliable evidence for the roots רְעֵץ ‘be evil’ and רְעֵץ ‘be wild’ (though again the lexica suggest a few [to my mind, unconvincing] possibilities). Once more, however, regardless of the exact pronunciation of all these words, their sounds were sufficiently proximate to engender the alliterative effect.

47. On the interchange of לא and לְעָל in the former passage, which is relatively common in the book of Jeremiah, see the discussion in my Israelian Hebrew in the book of Kings, 32–36.
thus, we may wish simply to observe that the roots הָלַּא and מַלְאַה (from which מַלַּא is derived) are anagrams of each other, and leave it at that.

On the other hand, two additional points may be raised. First, the author of Exod 36:6 could have selected another verbal root with the same or a similar meaning, for example, יָשַׁר (see 2 Sam 18:16) or עָצַר (see Judg 13:15, 1 Sam 21:8). It also may be significant that this is one of only three appearances of the root הָלַּא in the Niphal and that the other two refer to the restraining of water (Gen 8:2, Ezek 31:15). This is, therefore, the only instance of הָלַּא in the Niphal in which people are restrained.48 Second, in at least the first instance of מַלְאָה, in v. 7, and possibly in the instance in v. 6 as well, the meaning of this common word has been extended from its usual sense of ‘work, handiwork, craftsmanship’ to the unusual sense of ‘stuff, wares, items’.49 This means that, by selecting the root הָלַּא and by extending the meaning of מַלְאָה, the author of this passage made specific lexical choices, thereby pushing the limits of his language alliterationis causa.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have presented 21 examples of the use of alliteration in the narrative portions of the book of Exodus (or to be more exact, 20 within the narrative prose and 1 in a legal-cultic section). As adumbrated at the outset of the essay, alliteration operates in a variety of ways in the text. In the above illustrations, we noted the following:

a. Two cases of words, one very common (though used with a derived meaning) and one very rare, alliterating with a Leitwort in the text (nos. 1–2).

b. Two cases of the presumably Judahite author selecting words characteristic of IH to produce alliteration (nos. 3, 18).

c. Six cases of common words employed to generate sound echoes, sometimes with other common words, sometimes with rarer words, and sometimes with unusual meanings (nos. 4, 5, 6, 12, 15, 21).

48. Though, admittedly, examples in the Qal can be cited, for example, Gen 23:6 (with the by-form הָלַּא).

49. Biblical commentators who have noted the usage include Cassuto, Exodus, 461; and R. Alter, The Five Books of Moses (New York: Norton, 2004) 519. For several other examples in Biblical Hebrew, see KB 527; and HALOT 586.
d. One case of a deliberate departure from an established pattern in order to introduce a word that would alliterate with surrounding words (no. 8).

e. Eight cases of using unique or unusual forms, unique or rare words, or more-common words with unique meanings or connotations—all for the sake of alliteration (nos. 7, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17).

f. Two examples of alliterative clusters, in which a whole host of words operates together to produce the desired effect (nos. 19–20).

One is not surprised to learn that the largest number of examples fall into category (e). This conforms with my general observation, noted in print on several occasions (see the references in n. 3, along with the example presented in the second paragraph of this essay), that hapax legomena, rare words, atypical usages, unusual forms, and the like are frequently employed (and disproportionately, I would add, though this remains an impressionistic observation, without statistical analysis to substantiate it) to create alliteration.

I am a firm believer in what I call the oral-aural quality of ancient literature: one individual held the text in his or her hand and read aloud (the oral: from the mouth) so that the other individuals gathered would hear the prose or the poetry (the aural: into the ear).50 Proof of this is found in the passage included in the topsy-turvy world imagined by Isaiah:

םיַדוֹת בָּיָם יֶהְאוּ הַזוֹאת זְרוּעָה יַרְדָּם אֲשֶׁר יִשָּׁנָה בָּיָם בָּיָם 'on that day, the deaf will hear the words of the book' (Isa 29:18), indicating that in the present world the deaf are excluded from the reading process.51 In this setting, the very sounds of the composition served to enhance the performance and the presentation,52 and thus it is

50. Something like this is imagined by Alter (The Art of Biblical Narrative, 90–91), though his treatment there focuses on a different literary device: repetition.

51. In addition, note the basic fact—often either ignored or underappreciated—that אָדָה means both ‘read’ and ‘call’.

52. By comparison, note that the greatest example of oratory in the history of the United States, Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, is filled with alliteration. Consider the first line alone: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Note the use of “four,” “fathers,” and “forth” in quick succession, along with the assonance of “four,” “score,” and “forth”; as well as the same first syllable in the two words “continent” and “conceived” sandwiched around the phrase “new nation.” We now understand why Lincoln used “fourscore” instead of “eighty”!
no surprise to find alliteration so prominent in biblical literature of all types and genres. 53

53. And not just alliteration but other sound plays as well. See, for example, הָעַפּוֹ ‘what is this?’ in Exod 4:2, written as one word, instead of the usual הָעַפּוֹ, clearly invoked to echo the pattern (both vocalic and consonantal) of the word הָעַפּוֹ ‘staff’ as closely as possible; see Cassuto, Exodus, 46.
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