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## 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,<sup>1</sup> and a glaring example such as the collocation of ערומים ‘naked’ in Gen 2:25 and ערום ‘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.<sup>2</sup>

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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.<sup>3</sup> As a paradigm, note the use of the hapax legomenon **מִשְׁתַּאֵה** ‘gaze, watch’ in Gen 24:21, alliterating with the roots **שָׁתַה** ‘drink’, appearing 7 times in the chapter (including nearby in vv. 18, 19, 22), and **שָׁאֵב** ‘draw (water)’, also appearing 7 times in the chapter (including nearby in vv. 19 and 20). Note especially the form **וַתִּשְׁאֵב** in v. 20, which alliterates most closely with **מִשְׁתַּאֵה**, following four words later, because of the presence of the 3rd-feminine-singular preformative **-ת** (the alliteration is completed by the correspondence of the labial consonants *bet* and *mem* in these two words).<sup>4</sup> 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*.<sup>5</sup>

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 al-

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to alliteration therein (p. 203), though only in a very limited way. The one work associated with the literary approach to Bible that is most replete with examples of alliteration is the magnum opus of J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel* (4 vols.; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1981-93); consult the index to each volume for references. For poetry, see W. G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry: A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup 26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986) 225-29. Another important study is L. Boadt, “Intentional Alliteration in Second Isaiah,” *CBQ* 45 (1983) 353-63. Also of interest is the two-part study of B. Margalit (“Alliteration in Ugaritic Poetry: Its Role in Composition and Analysis [I],” *UF* 11 [1979] 537-57; idem, “Alliteration in Ugaritic Poetry: Its Role in Composition and Analysis [II],” *JNSL* 8 [1979] 57-80), though I do not adhere to Margalit’s approach throughout.

3. For examples in poetry, see my “*Talpiyyôt* (Song 4:4),” *JNSL* 20 (1994) 13-19; idem, “Psalm cx 3b,” *VT* 49 (1999) 548-53; and J. P. Fokkelman and G. A. Rendsburg, “נגדה נא לכל עמר” (Psalm cxvi 14b, 18b),” *VT* 53 (2003) 328-36. For examples in prose, see my “Some False Leads in the Identification of Late Biblical Hebrew Texts: The Cases of Genesis 24 and 1 Samuel 2:27-36,” *JBL* 121 (2002) 23-46, especially pp. 28, 36; idem, “Hurvitz Redux: On the Continued Scholarly Inattention to a Simple Principle of Hebrew Philology,” in *Biblical Hebrew: Studies in Chronology and Typology* (ed. I. Young; JSOTSup 369; London: T. & T. Clark, 2003) 104-28, especially pp. 106-7, 118. For the same phenomenon in a classic Egyptian prose tale, see my article “Literary Devices in the Story of the Shipwrecked Sailor,” *JAOS* 120 (2000) 13-23.

4. This passage was treated in my “Some False Leads,” 28.

5. The term is borrowed from Margalit, “Alliteration in Ugaritic Poetry.”

most any chunk of biblical prose could serve as an equally successful model.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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 *בת* ‘daughter’ serves as a *Leitwort* in the first two chapters of Exodus (see 1:16, 22; 2:1, 5, etc.).<sup>8</sup> To enhance the texture of this pericope further, the author introduces the word *בתים*, literally, ‘houses’, in 1:21. When we realize further that the idiom *עשה בתים* is used here in a special, legal-technical sense with the meaning ‘to found a family’, as noted in fact by our jubilarian (!),<sup>9</sup> we gain an added appreciation of the author’s tack in making use of the full range of connotations of words in his lexis.

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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.

8. See, e.g., U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 17; and E. Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1995) 260.

9. S. M. Paul, “Exodus 1:21: ‘To Found a Family’—A Biblical and Akkadian Idiom,” *Maarav* 8 (*Let Your Colleagues Praise You: Studies in Memory of Stanley Gevirtz*; 1992) 139-42.

## 2. *Exodus 2:3*

In line with the above, we also may note the introduction of the word תבת 'basket of' in 2:3, in proximity to the *Leitwort* בת. 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 (26×). 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 כי 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 עם בני ישראל 'the people of the children of Israel', used for the first time in Exod 1:9). Accordingly, the use of תבה in the Exodus narrative can be explained along the same lines.<sup>10</sup>

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 בת. Moreover, the construct form תבת produces the exact same syllable as בת.<sup>11</sup> But regardless of the construct form תבת, the absolute form תבה itself alliterates with בת, 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 תבה and the technical term בתים, 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 חדש (attested 281× in the Bible, 2× in Ben Sira, 87× in the Dead Sea Scrolls, and 8× in inscriptions) and the far less common ירח (attested 12, 0, 4, and

10. See I. Kikawada, "Literary Convention of the Primeval History," *AJBI* 1 (1975) 3-22; J. S. Ackerman, "The Literary Context of the Moses Birth Story (Exodus 1-2)," in *Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives* (ed. K. R. R. Gros Louis, J. S. Ackerman, and T. S. Warshaw; Nashville: Abingdon, 1974) 74-119; and Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 256, 263.

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).<sup>12</sup> The distribution of ירח 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.<sup>13</sup> Its presence in the Moses birth story, in the expression שלשה ירחים ‘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.<sup>14</sup>

In the following v. 3, we read ותחמרה בחמר ‘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, ירחים. Actually, this statement is not 100% accurate, because the two *hets* in these two lexemes represent different sounds: cognate data inform us that the root חמר ‘loam’ has the pharyngeal fricative /ħ/, while ירח ‘month’ has the velar fricative /h/.<sup>15</sup> 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 *reš*.

Furthermore, while the word חמר ‘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 ירחים ‘months’ in 2:2. The use of the standard word חודשים ‘months’ would not have produced the same literary result.

12. For the data, see *DCH* 3:165, 4:296. Of the 9 epigraphic attestations of ירח, 8 appear in one inscription, the Gezer Calendar. The remaining attestation of ירח 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.

13. G. A. Rendsburg, *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings* (Bethesda, MD: CDL, 2002) 127-28; idem, “A Comprehensive Guide to Israelian Hebrew: Grammar and Lexicon,” *Orient* 38 (2003) 26.

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.

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 **צפן** 'hide' appears twice, in both v. 2 and v. 3. Its presence triggers the realization that three words have the combination sibilant + *pe*: **זפת** 'pitch', a rare word, attested only 3× in the Bible; **סוף** 'reeds', another rare word, attested only 4× (not including instances of **ים סוף** 'Sea of Reeds'); and **שפת** 'lip of (the Nile)' = 'riverbank', a common usage. While none of these words is as unexpected as the presence of **ירחים** in example no. 3 above, the overall effect is a first-rate alliterative chain.

5. *Exodus 5:9*

The root **שעה** 'pay heed, have regard' appears in the narrative corpus only here and in Gen 4:4-5 in the Cain and Abel story (2×).<sup>16</sup> It clearly is invoked to alliterate with the common root **עשה** several words earlier in the verse.<sup>17</sup> The two expressions **ויעשו בה** 'and they shall do it [the work]' and **ואל ישעו** 'and they should pay no regard [to words of falsehood]' appear in quick succession, albeit separated by an *'atnah*. In addition to the alliteration present, note the assonance created by the final *-û* vowels in both verbs,<sup>18</sup> 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: **מדוע לא כליתם חקכם** 'why did you not finish your quota?' The use of **חק** for 'quota' is essentially unique in the Bible.<sup>19</sup> And while there is nothing unusual about the verb **כלה** 'finish' in this context, by collocating these two words, the author creates an echo of the short phrase that appears three verses earlier: **לכו קחו** '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 **נגשי העם ושטריו**, while 5:14 has **שטרי בני ישראל**), note that

16. The root appears 12 times in poetic texts; it is especially common in Isaiah, wherein are found 7 attestations.

17. Thus already Cassuto, *Exodus*, 68.

18. I use the term *assonance* in its more limited sense, with reference to like-sounding vowels, as opposed to consonants. See, for example, the entry in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed.; Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), available online at either <http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=assonance> or <http://www.bartleby.com/61/77/A0477700.html>.

19. Thus BDB 349. Similar meanings are attested in passages such as Gen 47:22 (2×) and Prov 31:15.

these are the only two instances in the narrative in which the שטרים ‘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 צבר ‘heap up’, present in the form ויצברו ‘they heaped up’ in Exod 8:10, is a relatively rare lexeme in the Bible. It appears only 7× in the Bible, 6× as a verb and once as a noun in 2 Kgs 10:8.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup>

In the present instance, the alliterative match is quite obvious. The form ויצברו follows the elevenfold use of the word צפרדע ‘frog’ (10× in the plural, 1× in the singular) in Exod 7:27–8:9.<sup>22</sup> 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 ואמרת ‘and you shall say’ (7:16 [1st plague], 7:26 [2nd plague], 8:16 [4th plague], and 9:13 [7th plague]).<sup>23</sup> In one passage, 9:1, in anticipation of the 5th plague, we encounter the divergent form ודברת ‘and you shall speak’.<sup>24</sup>

The author has altered the verb of speech at this specific point in order to produce alliteration with the name of the 5th plague, דִּבְרַת ‘pestilence’.<sup>25</sup> This noun form appears for the first time in v. 3 and then again in v. 15.

20. For the noun form צבור, 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 542× (!) in the Tannaitic corpus.

21. For the best examples, see צבר in Hab 1:10 alongside מבצר ‘fortress’ and עפר ‘dust’; and in Zech 9:3 alongside צר ‘Tyre’, מצור ‘rampart’, עפר ‘dust’, and חרוץ ‘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 ודברת is rare, especially in contrast to the more common ואמרת. In the Torah, for example, the former appears only 3× (Exod 4:15, 9:1; Deut 6:7), while the latter appears 40×.

25. There is also another factor at work here. I consider the change of אמר to דבר in this verse to be a prose analogue to the poetic 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 דָּבָר ‘thing, matter’ appears 3× 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 דָּבָר appears.

In sum, three separate lexemes from the root ד-ב-ר (by this statement, I do not mean to imply that the noun דָּבָר ‘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 היה ‘be’ in the Bible.<sup>26</sup> The passage is well known: הנה יד יהוה הויה במקנך ‘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.<sup>27</sup>

Ogden presented the following table:<sup>28</sup>

|           |               |      |         |      |
|-----------|---------------|------|---------|------|
| Exod 7:17 | במטה אשר בידי | מכה  | אנכי    | הנה  |
| Exod 7:27 | את כל גבולך   | נגף  | אנכי    | הנה  |
| Exod 9:3  | במקנך         | הויה | יד יהוה | הנה  |
| Exod 9:14 | את כל מגפתי   | שלח  | אני     |      |
| Exod 10:4 | מחר ארבה      | מביא |         | הנני |

*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 וירא אלהים כי טוב ‘and God saw that it was good’ in day two of creation in Genesis 1 (not to be restored according to the LXX).

26. That is, strictly speaking. Participles of the by-form הוה appear in Qoh 2:22, Neh 6:6.

27. G. S. Ogden, “Notes on the Use of הויה in Exodus ix 3,” VT 17 (1967) 483–84, in particular, p. 484.

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 היה ‘be’. What he did not note is that the combination of the exceptional form הריה and the divine name יהוה 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 פיה ‘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, חפניכם ‘your fistfuls’ in v. 8 and פרה ‘sprouting’ in vv. 9-10 (2×).

Due to a lack of cognates, we are unable to determine the exact phonetic value of the *het* in פיה. 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 חפן (for example, Akkadian *upnu*, Arabic *ḥafna*)<sup>29</sup> point to the presence of a pharyngeal fricative, /ħ/, while cognates for the verb פרה (for example, Arabic *faraha*) support the presence of a velar fricative, /ħ/. 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 מתלקחת appears in 9:24, one of only two attestations of the Hitpaël of the root לקח ‘take’; the only other instance is Ezek 1:4, where the same expression, אש מתלקחת, appears.<sup>30</sup> In the preceding verse (Exod 9:23) are two lexemes that alliterate with this word. The first is קלת ‘voices’ (= thunder), which includes three sounds identical to sounds occurring in מתלקחת. The second is the rare verbal form ותהלך, 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/ - /ħ/ - /l/ - /q/ of מתלקחת in scrambled fashion.

29. Also perhaps Ugaritic *hpn*, depending on how one understands CTU 1.16 VI 58. The much better attested noun, *hpn*, means ‘an article of clothing’.

30. For discussion on the meaning of the term, see Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, 334.

### 12. Exodus 9:30

In the description of the 7th plague, the text includes a statement of a sort not previously encountered. I refer to the following: ידעתי כי טרם תיראון מפני יהוה אלהים 'I know that you do not yet fear YHWH God' (v. 30).<sup>31</sup> This statement allows for the use of the adverb טרם 'yet' amidst the four uses of the root מטַר '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.

### 13. Exodus 10:26, 28

The word פרסה '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: פרסה 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: אל תספ ראות פני 'you are not to see my face again'. Note the string of consonants that bridges the middle two words of this phrase: samek - pe - reš, exactly the same three consonants that appear in the word פרסה '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 *alliterationis causa*.

### 14. Exodus 11:1-2

The word כלה '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).<sup>32</sup> The usage is considered odd enough by scholars that the text is often viewed as suspect.<sup>33</sup>

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 כלי כסף וכלי זהב '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.

(v. 2). The twofold use of כלי ‘objects of’ rehearses the sounds in כלה ‘completely’ in the previous verse.

#### 15. Exodus 13:17

Exod 13:17 has been discussed by other scholars.<sup>34</sup> The text reads as follows: ויהי בשלח פרעה את העם ולא נחם אלהים דרך ארץ פלשתים כי קרוב הוא כי ייהי בשלח פרעה את העם ולא נחם אלהים פן ינחם העם בראתם מלחמה ושובו מצרימה 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 נחה ‘lead’, and the second root is נחם ‘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 *-ām* to נחה, creating the form נחם ‘lead them’, with the same three consonants as the root of the verb נחם ‘regret, change one’s mind’.

In this case, moreover, the phonetic likeness is exact, because the *het* in each case represents /ħ/ (compare with Arabic *naḥā* ‘go, walk, wend one’s way’; and the Ugaritic personal names *mnhm* and *ynhm*, both widely attested<sup>35</sup>). In addition, note the presence of the noun מלחמה ‘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.<sup>36</sup> And once more, the *het* here represents the phoneme /ħ/ (compare with Ugaritic *mlhmt*, Arabic *malḥama*, and so on).

#### 16. Exodus 16:29-35

The trigger for this discussion is the unique expression in 16:35: ארץ נושבת ‘inhabitable land’. Although the closest alliterative words appear at some distance, five and six verses earlier, I nevertheless believe that the presence of השבת ‘the Sabbath’ in v. 29 and וישבתו ‘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 נושבת and נושבה (for which, see Jer 6:8, in a similar expression), the author chose נושבת

34. E.g., Cassuto, *Exodus*, 156; and Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 327.

35. G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, *Diccionario de la lengua ugaritica* (2 vols.; Barcelona: AUSA, 1996–2000) 2:283, 531.

36. E. Lipiński, *Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar* (Leuven: Peeters, 1997) 134–35.

because of the presence of the *taw*, thus completing the alliteration with the root שבת 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 דבש ‘honey’ in v. 31; the noun משמרת ‘preserve’ (in this context) in vv. 32–34 (3×, once in each verse); and the hapax legomenon צנצנת ‘jar’ in v. 33. Note the following sound links. The word דבש comprises two of the same consonants as נושבת/שבת, while the third consonant, the *dalet*, is the voiced counterpart of the voiceless dental *taw*. The word משמרת has the *šin* 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, צנצנת has *nun* and *taw*, as in נושבת, along with the emphatic sibilant *ṣade* with at least a minimal correspondence to *šin*. The overall result is a string of words, two of them unusual (נושבת, צנצנת), 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: משמרת (2×), משמרת (1×), צנצנת, and נושבת. 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: *-aCt* (without anaptyxis) or *-aCet* (with anaptyxis).

#### 17. Exodus 19:20–24

In 19:21, the following expression appears: פן יהרסו אל יהוה לראות. A similar expression appears in v. 24: אל יהרסו לעלת אל יהוה. Normally the root הרס 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’.<sup>37</sup> 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: פן יפרץ בהם יהוה: פן יפרץ במם (v. 22), פן יפרץ במם (v. 24).

Given the uniqueness of this use of the root הרס, 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 הר סיני ‘Mount Sinai’ in vv. 20

37. Thus, for example, BDB 248; RSV; NJB; and Fox, *Five Books of Moses*, 367, 369.

and 23 (as well as in vv. 11, 18). Note that the root **הרס** 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: **וזה הדבר אשר תעשה להם לקדש אתם לכהן לי לקח פר אחד בן בקר ואילם שנים תמימים** ‘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 **לקח** ‘take’, instead of the usual form **קח**. 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.<sup>38</sup> In 1 Kgs 17:11, Elijah addresses the woman of Zarephath, while Prov 20:16 appears in a book replete with IH features.<sup>39</sup> 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 **קח**, while in the second the IH form **לקח** 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 **לקח**, because the inclusion of the *lamed* creates a threefold string of alliterative words close together: **לקדש** ‘to sanctify’, **לכהן** ‘to serve’, and **לקח** ‘take’.<sup>40</sup>

38. Rendsburg, *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Kings*, 46–47.

39. See Y. Chen, *Israelian Hebrew in the Book of Proverbs* (Ph.D. diss.; Cornell University, 2000).

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 **לכהן** 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: **בְּרָעָה** ‘with evil’ in v. 12, **הַרְעָה** ‘the evil’ in v. 12, **אֲרַבָּה** ‘I will multiply’ in v. 13, **זֵרְעֶכֶם** ‘your seed’ in v. 13, **הַרְעָה** ‘the evil’ in v. 14, **עֲבָרֵיהֶם** ‘their [two] sides’ in v. 15, and **בְּרָעָהּ** ‘in its [the people’s] shouting’ in v. 17. The consonantal trio *bet - reš - ‘ayin* forms the basis for the alliteration, as seen in the first, sixth, and seventh words. Three others (the second, fourth, and fifth) include the *reš - ‘ayin* elements; while the remaining word (the third) includes the *reš - bet* sounds.

Included in this string of lexemes are two unusual items. First, the word **עֲבָרֵיהֶם** ‘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<sup>41</sup> (and indeed this is the only passage in the Bible that comments on this feature of the tablets).<sup>42</sup> Second, the noun **רָעַע** ‘shouting’ in v. 17 (within the form **בְּרָעָהּ** ‘in its shouting’) appears in only two other places in the Bible (Mic 4:9, Job 36:33), though admittedly, the verbal root **רוע** ‘roar, shout’ appears more commonly.<sup>43</sup> Note also the orthography of this last item, with the archaic spelling **ה-** for the 3rd-masculine-singular-pronominal suffix, thus permitting **בְּרָעָה** ‘with evil’ in v. 12 and **בְּרָעָהּ** ‘in its shouting’ in v. 17 to look exactly alike.<sup>44</sup>

20. *Exodus 32:22-27*

A second, related cluster of words appears later in the same chapter.<sup>45</sup> Verses 22-27 include the following: **בְּרָע** ‘in evil’ in v. 22, **הַתְּפָרֵקוּ** ‘break off’ in v. 24, **פָּרַע** ‘wild’ in v. 25, **פָּרַעֵהוּ** ‘let them [lit., him] be wild’ in v. 25, **שַׁעַר** ‘gate’ (3×) in vv. 26-27, **חַרְבּוֹ** ‘his sword’ in v. 27, **עָבַר** ‘pass’ in v. 27, **רַעְהוֹ** ‘his friend’ in v. 27, and **קָרְבּוֹ** ‘his kinsman’ in v. 27. As in the previous ex-

41. Note BDB 719: “even **מִשְׁנֵי עֲבָרֵיהֶם** Ex 32<sup>15</sup> (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 ‘ayin in the roots **רַעַע** ‘be evil’ and **רוע** ‘roar, shout’, because of a lack of cognates in Arabic and Ugaritic (some have been proposed [see the lexical], but they are not convincing). The root of **עָבַר** ‘pass, cross’ (as in **עֲבָרֵיהֶם** ‘their sides’) is the pharyngeal fricative /ʕ/ (compare Ugaritic *ʕb*), 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 *ברע* and *עברו*). The slight change from voiced /b/ to voiceless /p/ allows the twofold use of the root *פרע* to alliterate. A similar slight change from one pharyngeal fricative to another (/ʕ/ to /ħ/) permits *חרבו* to serve (compare with Ugaritic *ħrb*). The *reš* - *‘ayin* combination is present in the words *שער* and *רעהו*. Building from the root *פרע* is the root *פרק* (in *התפרקו*); recall that /q/ is a velar plosive. And finally, the shift back from voiceless /p/ in this root to voiced /b/ produces the form *קרבו*.<sup>46</sup>

As in the previous example, so here we may point to some atypical uses. First, the expression *שער המחנה* ‘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 *בשערי מחנות יהוה* ‘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 את קרבו איש את רעהו ואיש את אחיו ואיש את קרבו* ‘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 על רעהו ואיש אל אחיו* and Jer 31:33, *איש את רעהו ואיש את אחיו*.<sup>47</sup> 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 את קרבו* in the canon.

### 21. Exodus 36:6

My final example appears in a brief narrative embedded in the tabernacle account. The expression *ויכלא העם מהביא* ‘and the people were restrained from bringing’ is situated within the greatest concentration of uses of the word *מלאכה* ‘work’ in the Bible (13× 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 *ʕb* and *ḡr* reveal a pharyngeal fricative in *עבר* and a velar fricative in *שער*. We do not possess reliable evidence for the roots *רעע* ‘be evil’ and *פרע* ‘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 *אל* and *על* 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 **כלא** and **לאך** (from which **מלאכה** 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, **חשך** (see 2 Sam 18:16) or **עצר** (see Judg 13:15, 1 Sam 21:8). It also may be significant that this is one of only three appearances of the root **כלא** 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 **כלא** in the Niphal in which people are restrained.<sup>48</sup> Second, in at least the first instance of **מלאכה**, 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’.<sup>49</sup> This means that, by selecting the root **כלא** and by extending the meaning of **מלאכה**, 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 **כלה**).

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).<sup>50</sup> Proof of this is found in the passage included in the topsy-turvy world imagined by Isaiah: ושמעו כיום ספר ההוא החרשים דברי ספר (Isa 29:18), indicating that in the present world the deaf are excluded from the reading process.<sup>51</sup> In this setting, the very sounds of the composition served to enhance the performance and the presentation,<sup>52</sup> 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 קרא 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.<sup>53</sup>

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

# *Birkat Shalom*

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Shalom M. Paul  
on the Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday

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