

## **Crisis and Call to Leadership in the Abrahamic Traditions**

### **I. Introduction**

All people were a single community, so Allah raised prophets as bearers of good news and warners and He revealed to them the Book with Truth that it might judge between people in that in which they differed. (Qur'an, 2:213)

“Verily, Abraham himself was like a community who believed in the true Allah and was not one of the idolaters.” (Qur'an, 16:120t)

These verses from the Qur'an capture the energy and hope of this book: to celebrate each of the three Abrahamic traditions and to consider their capacity for mutually enriching dialogue. Each of these traditions has placed great responsibility on specially endowed leaders—prophets—who are charged with leading the community into paths of righteousness and peace. Leaders of this sort do not arise in isolation. On the one hand, they draw spiritual life from the vitality and vision of their own communities. On the other hand, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders in today's world also need the vitality and vision that can be sparked by dialogue with one another.

Finding a hospitable space for productive dialogue is not so simple in the world we currently inhabit. We are living in a time of crisis. In many parts of the world, Jews, Christians, and Muslims dwell in profound tension with one another. As we know, these tensions sometimes break out into violence. Of course, such hostilities are never purely religious in origin. They are fueled by historical injustices, geo-political disruptions, economic dislocations, and other complex situational factors. Yet the power of religion can sometimes add destructive fuel to already smoldering embers. As British Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has wisely noted, religion “is a fire—and like fire, it warms but it also

burns.” And religious leaders must take responsibility for being “guardians of the flame.”<sup>1</sup>

How are religious leaders to exercise this responsibility in today’s world? More specifically, how are Jewish, Christian, and Muslim leaders to engage one another constructively in order to reach beyond their differences? One answer is to begin with the practice, shared by all three traditions, of reading scripture. As is well known, the three Abrahamic traditions together represent the “people of the book.” They look to scriptural texts to mediate the divine Word. This shared practice of engaging scripture presents an opportunity. Rather than engaging one another at the point of conceptual or theological conflict, the process of “scriptural reasoning” calls for member of the three faiths to engage each other’s sacred texts together.

So then, how does scriptural reasoning work? The idea is to gather persons who are devoted to their own traditions of learning and practice but who are also graced with fellow-feeling and eager to engage in dialogue with scholars of the other traditions. This model offers an alternative to the dominant way of dealing with religious differences in the West since the Enlightenment. According to the Enlightenment model, the primary way to reduce conflict has been to eliminate religious difference. This has been achieved either through the secularization of religious elites or through the assimilation of any two of the Abrahamic religions to the cultural and political hegemony of the other one.

By contrast, in the model offered by scriptural reasoning, the accent is on “interpretive hospitality.” Participants from all three traditions read, struggle over, challenge, and interpret texts from their own and the other’s traditions with a sense of

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<sup>1</sup>Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference*, p. \_\_\_\_.

openness and mutuality. There may arise argument, to be sure – debate, discussion, questioning – but this must take place in a spirit of mutual respect and of wonder – and, throughout, of love for God’s Word as embodied in our respective scriptures.

In short, one goal of our scriptural reasoning research group was to explore new models of scholarly and of inter-religious fellowship. We did so convinced that the sacred texts of each of the Abrahamic religions contains great resources for peace and mutual understanding. We were concerned that too often people assume that religion is always the problem and never part of the solution to the inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflicts that rage in the world today. This assumption is somewhat understandable, since, ironically, it is often the most fervent adherents of a religious tradition who contribute to these conflicts. In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim contexts, these most fervent adherents are the very ones who live their lives with greatest fidelity to their scriptural sources. It is then assumed to be self-evident that appeals to scripture (Tanakh, New Testament, or Qur’an) should be eliminated from secular discourse and from the work of peace-making and bridge-building. Our conviction, however, is that the very opposite could be true. Rather than eliminating scripture from the dialogue, it may be most fruitful to begin there.

The Muslim, Jewish, and Christian scholars represented in this volume joined together for three years to re-examine the scriptural sources of their respective traditions in order to discern to what extent their sacred texts are antagonistic or complementary. *Crisis and Call* is the fruit of this work and fellowship.

The three years of dialogue were hosted, graciously and courageously, by the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey (“CTI”). We are grateful to

Wallace Alston, the Director of the CTI when the project began who made the decision to fund it, and to current Director, Will Storrar, who has continued to offer enthusiastic support. As a center for Christian theological studies, the CTI had never before sponsored a fellowship of Muslim-Jewish-Christian study. Like previous research groups hosted by CTI, this one engaged scholars twice a year for intense and lively sessions of study undertaken both for their own sake and for the sake of writing a collected work that would share the group's insights with a broader reading community. Unlike previous groups, however, this one began each session of work (3-4 days) with an initial day and a half of scriptural text study.

So what did this study look like? This study included selected readings from the Qur'an as well as from the Tanakh (Old Testament) and the New Testament. The rest of each session was devoted to medieval commentaries on each scriptural canon. A majority of the group consisted of text-and-historical scholars of these medieval commentaries. The rest are theologians and philosophers.

The use of medieval commentaries was emphasized for two reasons. First, the scriptural traditions have been mediated to us through a tradition of interpretation. In reading these sacred texts, it is illuminating to peer over the shoulders of the great master interpreters who have preceded us. Second, we knew that the potential for profound religious dialogue had already been introduced and tested in the late medieval period in Muslim Spain and in several later contexts of scholarly exchange in late medieval France and Italy. In medieval Spain, for example, a society arose in which a certain measure of tolerance was practiced. Arab and Berber Muslims conquered the Iberian peninsula in 711, a conquest that spelled defeat for Christians, but deliverance for Jews. Yet out of

this conquest emerged something positive for everyone—at least for a time. The Muslim policy of openness toward the People of the Book, the Dhimmi, meant that Jews, Christians, and Muslims studied one another's sacred texts and imbibed one another's cultures. Eventually, the texts of Aristotle, which had been preserved in Arabic, were reintroduced to the West. An age of unprecedented interaction was born, which flowed over into the Christian regions of Spain as well.

Of course, this achievement of toleration fell well short of full acceptance. The cities of this region remained divided into Jewish, Christian, and Muslim quarters. As the political landscape changed—including the preaching of the first Crusade—accommodation for the Dhimmi eventually would be revoked, and non-Muslims would be forced to assent to Muslim ways. Although it took eight centuries to accomplish, Christians eventually reconquered Spain. In 1492 the last Muslim stronghold surrendered, and in the same year the Jews were brutally expelled from Spain. This experience, and many others like it, remind us that while toleration is a great achievement, it is not enough. A grudging tolerance is something far less than the true openness and welcome to which we are called by the highest and best of our scriptural traditions. As easily as toleration can be extended, it can also be revoked. So then, how do Jews, Christians, and Muslims find the grace to move beyond mere toleration and somehow to welcome one another with open arms? After all, if God is sovereign, as the Abrahamic religions all assert, then we must see in one another's existence something that God has ordained. A famous passage from the Qur'an makes this clear:

We have ordained a law and assigned a path to each of you. Had God pleased, He could have made you one nation, but it is His wish to prove you by that which He has bestowed upon you. Vie, then, with each other in good works, for to God you

shall all be returned, and He shall declare to you what you have disagreed about.  
(Surah 5:48)

What would it look like, then, for Jews, Christians, and Muslims to outdo one another in extending hospitality? We decided to engage in a experiment in such hospitality, paying special attention to the religious situation of the medieval period.

Our study began with formational study consisting in sustained periods of unfettered discussion of selected Jewish, Christian, and Muslim texts. We usually spent a day and a half of careful, verse by verse study of selections from each of the three scriptures, Tanakh, the New Testament, and the Qur'an. Before each meeting, the responsibility of each participant was to prepare larger portions of scripture: reading for the plain sense as well as examining text-historical studies and traditional commentaries. For the formational study, we would examine only a few verses at a time from each of three canons. After hearing an introduction to each selection by an appropriate text scholar, we would then break into small groups of three or four scholars (comprised ideally of one member from each tradition) for hours of close textual study and dialogue. This study would be interspersed with one or two plenary sessions: occasions to compare notes on what we had discovered about texts that proved particularly challenging and about powerful or surprising themes that had emerged from the study. We considered this initial work "formational" because it shaped the kind of fellowship we would share for the week: how we heard the plain sense of each of these scriptural texts; how we experienced inter-relations among the texts; how we spoke and listened to one another; and how we began to reason together – the first steps of the week's "scriptural reasoning."

Participants also began to bring in new passages that appeared to illuminate the group's study of the original passages. Significant medieval commentators from the past were also invoked to enhance the group's appreciation of the text. Over time, this collection of very different scholars became transformed into a community of care and of inquiry. We directed our energies, at once, to friendship, to careful study of scriptures and commentaries, and to discovering what unexpected kinds of dialogue might emerge both within and across the borders of each religious tradition.

The importance of friendship cannot be overemphasized. We discovered ways in which the scriptural traditions called us to fellowship as a dimension of study itself. We were instructed, for example, by the rabbinic tradition of *chevruta*, or "fellowships of study," in which the scripture and commentary texts were discussed back-and-forth by study partners.<sup>2</sup> Here the texts functioned like cookbooks that we could not fully understand until we "cooked" with them – at least on the limited "stove" that was available to us. This was the "stove" of a table, with chairs seated around it, and small selections of each scriptural canon placed on top. The "cooking" included textual and historical analyses, plain sense study, comparative text reading and examination, several levels of interpretive activity, and the various rounds of argument, debate, story telling, song, and play that rose up out of hours of reading and interpretation.

To take another example, we were instructed by the medieval Church traditions of *lectio divina*: that is to say, we allowed ourselves to give voice to images that the scriptural texts brought to our minds, and thereby, to share personal religious reflections alongside our semantic and rhetorical analyses. We were inspired, in this way, by the

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<sup>2</sup> Add Rabbinic sources. Frade.

Qur'anic portrayal of God as a friend of Abraham (Q.4:125 "...For God did take Abraham for a friend"). We felt we might discover ways that scriptural text study opened us, at once, to friendship with the God of Abraham and with each other who sat together bearing witness to God's Word. We were also inspired by each tradition's witness to joy within God's creation: "Raise a shout for the Lord all the earth; worship the Lord in gladness; come into his presence with shouts of joy" (Ps. 100). Joy bubbled up in study but also around it. Our study was often punctuated with laughter and, in the evenings after study, we were wont to play; there was guitar playing and song and word games and more laughter. Throughout, however, we were also driven by the sense of crisis that brought us together and instructed by each scriptural tradition in how to respond: to turn; to observe; to read in order to respond to what we observe; to hear, to examine, to discuss, and to act.

Having been shaped by this formational study of scripture, the group then chose to address itself to a concrete problem: the crisis of inter-Abrahamic relations itself. A year of preliminary study lead the group to these working hypotheses: (a) That the crisis we observe is specific to modernity, that is, to the way that the three Abrahamic traditions relate to each other in the context of their relations to modern western civilization; (b) That we therefore have two crises to consider: the crisis of modernity (the troubled relation of each tradition to modern civilization) and the crisis of traditions (troubled relations among the traditions); (c) That these two crises are intimately related. In modern times, each tradition tends to adopt modern models of clarity, according to which each tradition defines its identity more clearly and sharply than it did in pre-modern times. As a result, each tradition tends to define its "borders" more sharply and thus its



differences from whatever lies outside these borders; (d) That these sharper differences also appear within each tradition as the difference between true “insiders” and others.

There are thus “others within” and “others without.”

After a year of study, the group organized itself into three smaller fellowships, each of which generated one of the three sections of this book. Although our formational study consisted in inter-Abrahamic conversation, the essays themselves are written from the faith tradition in which each of the scholars is rooted. We believe, however, that each respective author’s participation in the group has made these essays different than they otherwise would be. The essays display a dialogue—sometimes explicit, at other times implicit—between the scholars’ modern text scholarship and this new voice of inter-Abrahamic scriptural reasoning. Our hope is that this dialogue is itself a healing response to the crisis that has given rise to this book: a living illustration of how Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and modern academic thinkers and modes of thinking can meet together in harmony rather than in conflict. We hope, secondly, that the contents of these essays open a broader window into the classical sources of these three traditions and that, through this window, readers will see that these same sources may give rise to peace as well as provide distinct identities for each of the three communities.

We hope that readers may see through this “window” another model for inter-Abrahamic peace. This is not the model of mere “agreement”. The goal of our study has not been to etch out some public statement of shared beliefs. It has been, to the contrary, to nurture an environment of study and a level of friendship that can sustain deep disagreement as well as agreement. We recognize, after all, that this process is not about the end result of being able to declare Jews, Christians, and Muslims united around one

topic. It is, instead, about the process that is initiated when Jews, Muslims, and Christians are inspired, simultaneously, by the word of God they hear through their own sacred texts and by the way that word, at this time in history, prompts them to care as well for one another. The goal of this practice is realized when Jews, Christians, and Muslims can wrestle with these texts, respectfully disagree, reveal something new, and all the while practice the love for the other that each sacred text demands.

Here is an overview of the themes and goals of each of these parts. Part I, “Communal Identity and the Other,” opens with a set of reflections offering a gateway to our study as a whole. Part I contains essays examining each tradition’s sense of its own identity in relation to the ‘other’—both the “other within” and the “other without.” Part II, entitled, “Spirituality and Social Responsibility: The Case of Poverty,” moves beyond the broad question of identity to explore how the three traditions treat the concrete social issue of poverty.

Part II, “Spirituality and Social Responsibility: The Case of Poverty,” asks a question that cuts across the borders of these three traditions: how do the Abrahamic traditions in general respond to the theme of “poverty”? Some aspects of the traditions treat poverty as a spiritual ideal. Others consider it an emblem of personal loss and suffering. Are these two approaches antithetical? Are we forever forced to choose between an emphasis on the mystical and the pietistical, on the one hand, and the political and practical on the other? The goal of Part II is not to compare the traditions, but to illustrate what happens when members of all three traditions gather together to reflect on this work to which they are called.

Part III, “Abrahamic Traditions and Modernity,” addresses the crisis of tradition and modernity, an issue which constitutes the most general horizon within which our study proceeded. The primary questions addressed in Part III are: What kind of historical consciousness has entered each of these traditions as a result of their encounter with the modern west? How has the academic study of history, in particular, changed the way scholars read and comment on the scriptural literatures? Is there a way to honor both history and tradition in the study of scripture?

In sum, the most significant findings of our three years of fellowship are that the three scriptures, indeed, offer resources of peace as well as occasions for potential conflict; that to examine the sources of peace is (and must be) at the same time to enter into some aspect of the performance of peace that they teach and model. We believe our study together served as an introduction to that performance. We believe that the pursuit of peace is ultimately a face-to-face pursuit and that, within the frame of our work, there is therefore no substitute for face-to-face study of the three scriptural traditions by participants in those traditions. We hope this book performs, in writing, enough of what we experienced in person that readers will take hope and seek to read and re-read the book, but this time with others, and then seek to form fellowships of scripture study like those that gave rise to this book.

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## Chapter Sixteen

### Moses in the Sea

#### Reading Scripture as Liturgical Performance

*Peter Ochs*

*After about two years of wonderful study and fellowship, our group felt inspired one day to rest from writing and editing and dream up a title for our emergent book. On that day, the winning title was *In the Bosom of Abraham*. I think it was Ann who first thought of it—just look at the title of her essay—and I think it was Ann, Kevin, Kendall, and dear Michael, of blessed memory, who led the first chorus we sang to test the title out. We thought of book covers to go with the title.<sup>1</sup> And we thought of how much, indeed, we were all held in the bosom of Abraham: 20 scholars from such varied backgrounds and traditions, now joined in a fellowship of uncommon warmth and sharing. (We were 18 authors plus 2 who were then graduate students—Umeyye Isra Yazicioglu and Mahan Mirza—and are now professors like the rest of us).*

*As you can see, we changed the book's title. But we did not alter the warmth of our gatherings; or our ingenuousness with one another; or our tendency to allow long days of work to unfold into more unkempt evenings of play and mirth and song; or our earnest hope that this experience of affection-amidst-difference might one day be commonplace among our traditions and peoples rather than so very rare.*

*I came only late in our process of study to the idea of writing about Moses's "Song at the Sea." Reciting it in my room one morning (as part of Jewish Morning Prayer), I realized how, in Robert Jenson's words, scripture is a "dramatic performance," in this case a drama about the Israelites' exodus. I recited the Song again as if I were acting in a play about a scattered tribe's transformation into peoplehood and covenant, then again as if all the human beings who prayed the Song this morning were actors, on some larger stage, in some more global drama. By the time I asked myself, "But what drama?" it was almost time to rejoin my Abrahamic company. Perhaps an answer would come from them. Or from somewhere between here and there.*

One contemporary challenge to the goals of scriptural reasoning is, of course, scriptural illiteracy among religious and secular folks alike. But the goals of scriptural reasoning are equally challenged by the misuse of scriptural literacy, in particular a widespread tendency to misidentify scriptural *reading* with what we might label "literal translation." This is a tendency to presume that, say, the first line of Genesis, *breshit bara elohim et hashamayim v'et ha-arets*, precisely *means* the individual reader's sense of these words: "In the beginning (of all space and time), God created both heaven and earth. Now, the earth. . . ." For scriptural reasoners, first of all, we cannot bypass the Hebrew (for Jewish tradition) or the Greek (for Christian). Second, even if we take the text in English, we cannot bypass the range of possible meanings authorized by the grammar and literary setting of the text. According to a central medieval and contemporary Jewish reading, for example, "in the beginning" may most likely mean "in the beginning of God's creating [heaven and earth . . . , God said . . .]." There is no textual reason, further, to exclude the possibility that, according to the text, both the "waters" and the "unformed earth"

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preexisted the event of God’s saying “let there be light.” To live the meanings of scripture in a particular moment, however, the reader must often *choose* one of the grammatically possible meanings as the intended or appropriate meaning, then and there. “Do not murder,” for example, may imply several things, depending on the specific meaning “murder.” But in a particular time and place, a judge (or a jury) will have to decide which meaning applies then and there.

One contribution of scriptural reasoning is to redescribe some of the strategies classical and medieval readers employed—and modern readers typically fail to employ—to avoid reducing their readings to “literal translations.” This essay addresses one of these strategies: reading scripture by repeating and thus performing what scripture says. This is, in other words, to choose the meaning of scripture that can and should be performed in a given time and place. We will focus on liturgical repetition as one prototype of performative reading, and we will examine one illustrative text: Exod. 15 (Moses’s Song at the Sea) as it is repeated and performed in the traditional Jewish Morning Prayer service (*shacharit*).

## The Song at the Sea (Exod. 15)

Biblical scholars suggest that the text of this Song is one of the oldest compositions in our Bible: a truly ancient hymn of thanksgiving set at the moment of the Israelites’ miraculous escape from Pharaoh’s army and from the waters of the Red Sea.

**1** Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the LORD, and said, I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea. **2** The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation; This is my God, and I will praise Him; My father’s God, and I will extol Him. **3** The LORD is a warrior; The LORD is His name. **4** Pharaoh’s chariots and his army He has cast into the sea; And the

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choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea. **5** The deeps cover them; They went down into the depths like a stone. **6** Your right hand, O LORD, is majestic in power, Your right hand, O LORD, shatters the enemy. **7** And in the greatness of Your excellence You overthrow those who rise up against You; You send forth Your burning anger, and it consumes them as chaff. **8** At the blast of Your nostrils the waters were piled up; The flowing waters stood up like a heap; The deeps were congealed in the heart of the sea. **9** The enemy said, 'I will pursue, I will overtake, I will divide the spoil; My desire shall be gratified against them; I will draw out my sword, my hand will destroy them.' **10** You blew with Your wind, the sea covered them; They sank like lead in the mighty waters. **11** Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders? **12** You stretched out Your right hand, The earth swallowed them. **13** In Your loving-kindness You have led the people whom You have redeemed; In Your strength You have guided them to Your holy habitation. . . .<sup>2</sup>

Following both the medieval rabbinic commentator Rashi and contemporary rabbinic scholarship,<sup>3</sup> we may identify the “plain sense” of this text, or *peshat*, with its narrative coherence within the plot of Exodus overall. In terms of this plot, the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt (Exod. 1); they cried to God for help (Exod. 2); God heard their cries, sending Moses to deliver them from Pharaoh’s control (Exod. 2–7); Pharaoh resisted (Exod. 7–12); God sent plagues (Exod. 7–12); Pharaoh relented (Exod. 12); the Israelites fled eastward (Exod. 12–14); but then Pharaoh regretted letting them go and chased them down with his armies, right to the Red Sea (Exod. 14); the sea miraculously parted, allowing Israelites through but closing upon the pursuers and casting them down to the depths; the Israelites found themselves on the other side, on dry land (Exod. 14); and Moses and the Children of Israel sang this Song (Exod. 15).

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The Song extols YHVH as Israel's redeemer: in this instance, a God of war who thrust Pharaoh's host into the depths. YHVH has a powerful right hand that fights against the enemy. His nostrils breathe out the winds that pile up the floods. The enemy is haughty, but God's wind blew them away. *Mi kamokha?* "Who is like thee YHVH?" There is none so powerful and praiseworthy as God, who led His people out in love to come from danger to safety in His "holy habitation." Now all the peoples hear of the reputation of YHVH, and they will be frightened. They will fear the right hand of YHVH. They will know that this God protects His people. This God will plant them in His mountain, on which His own glory will dwell and from which He will reign forever.

As elements of a coherent narrative, this Song may be remarkable in its vividness and of course the fantastic events it narrates but, one might say, it is what it is: this is the praise with which Israel praised their God. Our traditions of interpretation do not just leave it there, however. For this narrative is not only a sacred one, whose meanings are taken to be instructive for the lives of this people. It also appears to be the narrative of narratives, the one that, perhaps more than any other, captures in relatively few words one of the essential lessons of the entire narrative: that Israel is God's beloved; Israel suffers terribly; but Israel's enemies become God's enemies; and, even if they suffer, the Children of Israel are ultimately saved by this God and for the sake of God, who seeks to dwell among them. But are these last two sentences still the plain sense of our text? Are they what the text *means*? Both Jewish and Christian interpreters, throughout the ages, have not found this so easy a set of questions to answer.

### Reading the Song through the Ages.

In the *Wisdom of Solomon*—a late second Temple, extra-canonical writing that was included in the Septuagint and in the Apocrypha—the Song is examined both historically and figurally. The

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miraculous events of the Exodus are commemorated and reconceived against the backdrop of a “new creation:” the waters’ parting is read as also a renewal and new expression of the formation of the primeval waters. Exodus thus renews Genesis and the Song enacts this renewal verbally. During the rabbinic period, the Song was revisited. The Song is in several collections of Midrash. In *Song of Songs Rabbah*, for example, we read, “just as a dove that left its nest, settled on a precipice, and encountered a snake cries for help, so too did Israel leave Egypt, find itself between Pharaoh and the Sea and cry to God for help. And God saved them.” Or, in *Exodus Rabbah: mah lekha ha yam*, “what’s with you oh, Sea, that you fear?” (Ps. 114). The Midrash comments, “the Sea refused to move when Moses called it, until God appeared Himself ‘in His glory.’” As illustrated in these two texts, the Midrash also reads the Song both historically and figurally. Unlike the *Wisdom of Solomon*, however, the midrashic figures remain within what we will see are liturgical tropes of Israel’s cycle of suffering, of petitioning God for help, and of anticipating redemption. This, in fact, will be the dominant theme of our study of rabbinic Morning Prayer.

If we turn, instead, to modern and contemporary readings, both Jewish and Christian, we encounter tension between strictly historical and performative reading. Umberto Cassuto, for example, offers an early version of Jewish historical critical reading.<sup>4</sup> He suggests the Song is an independent psalm of triumph redacted into the Exodus narrative. The Song itself may allude to ancient mythic tropes of a “revolt of the Sea,” perhaps from sources in the Sumerian myths of Marduk and Tiamat, and it may transform such tropes into the idiom of Israelite faith and worship. The more recent Christian historical commentator, Cornelius Houtman, reads the Song as part of his project of “returning” from more recent reader-response commentary back to questions of the actual history of the text and its redactional setting.<sup>5</sup> For him, “all in all, the

poem is also a confession of faith. Israel is professed to be YHVH's people and Zion is YHVH's royal seat. The credo is put in the mouth of Israel by the Sea. That links these articles of faith inseparably with the central theme of Israel's faith, the liberation from Pharaoh's yoke, and turns them into a creed of the fathers and of an authoritative confession."<sup>6</sup> While offered on behalf of strict historical-critical scholarship, these words nonetheless also fit very well with our overall theme. Whether looked at from within rabbinic reading practices or from the scientific perspective of textual scholars, the Song appears in each case as an element of the people Israel's religious performance.

This theme is taken up in a most integrative fashion by the Christian homiletical commentator E. Fretheim.<sup>7</sup> Commenting on the Song in its Exodus setting, he attends to the relationality of divine voice and human response in the narrative: "characteristic of this structure (for example in Exod. 14:10) is that what God has done is not rehearsed in independence from the specifics of the human situation. . . . Very specific human needs have been expressed to which God responds quite directly."<sup>8</sup> Fretheim later offers a diagram of Exod. 12–15 as framing a "narrative manual" of what will become Israel's liturgical performance of Passover: the Song commands its own performative reading.

## Performing the Song at the Sea: Selectivity and the Setting of Performance.

To speak of the performance of a text is to speak of its being *selected by someone for some context of performance*. In this case, the setting is the traditional Jewish prayer book and, before that, the emergence in late second Temple Judaism of a formal vocalized liturgy that was set

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along side and eventually replaced the priestly performance of sacrifice in the Temple. After the destruction of the Second Temple, the rabbinic sages formalized this liturgical practice so that the recitation of formal prayer would take place twice a day, corresponding to the twice-daily Temple offerings, with a third liturgy added in the evening.<sup>9</sup> Overall, then, we might consider these liturgies as among the central practices through which Jews after the fall of the Temple enacted Israel's intimate relation with YHVH and opened the possibility for daily acts of atonement. As the rabbinic sages said, this prayer is the "service of the heart," and "the utterances of the lips (in prayer) replace the sacrifice of bullocks." "What shall replace the bullocks we formerly offered to Thee? 'Our lips,' in the prayer we pray to Thee. So long as the temple stood we used to offer a sacrifice and thus atonement was made; but now we have nothing to bring but prayer."<sup>10</sup> And it is in that setting that the rabbis appear to have made this ancient Song at the Sea a central text and motif in the liturgy.

Consider, first, the positioning of the Song within the order of the daily Morning Service and then the positioning of selected parts of the Song throughout the service.

The tradition recognizes four major subsections of the liturgy. First are the "Morning Blessings" (*birkhot ha-shachar*), preliminary blessings that some uttered at home, some at the synagogue, but all of which awaken the worshiper to the formal "work" (*avodah*) of the service. Second comes the "Verses of Praise" (*pesukei de zimra*), psalms of thanksgiving and glory, extolling the One whom we will beseech in these prayers; praising God as creator of all the world, and as teacher, lover, and redeemer of Israel, the people who prays here. The third subsection is the "Sh'ma," one of the two formal pinnacles of prayer, surrounded with blessings before and after. This pinnacle is the recitation of the "Sh'ma" (from Deut. 6): Moses's call to Israel "Hear, Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH alone." The blessings before address God as the

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creator of the universe and loving teacher of Israel. The blessings after enjoin Israel to perform their love of God regularly, to beware of ignoring His teachings, to recognize the wonders He has performed for them when they have listened to Him, and to stand now in prayer, beseeching YHVH to help Israel now in its time of need. Israel's time of need appears to be perennial, although particular moments of crisis condition Israel's most urgent prayers of petition. The fourth subsection brings the second and perhaps ultimate pinnacle: the recitation of the "Standing Prayer" (*amidah*), also known as the "*sh'moneh esrei*" (the "18," named after the original 18 and later 19 blessings cited in this formal prayer). This is the prayer that specifically replaces Temple sacrifice: it is thus an act of "work" (*avodah*), like the work of the priests. Here, each worshipper extols the God "of our ancestors" who is "great, mighty, and exalted," who "sustains every living creature" and who "raises the dead." This is the "Holy God," before whom synagogue worshippers stand and intone the doxology of Isaiah, "holy, holy, holy, is YHVH of hosts; the whole world is full of His glory." And this is the god to whom we now lay bare our inner most and most earnest petitions: teach us, forgive us, save us, heal us, bless our soil, return our people, its law givers and saints, lay low our enemies, restore our worship, hear our prayers, bring peace.

Within the ascending drama of these four subsections of worship, the Song at the Sea stands between the second and third sections as the crescendo of praise for what God has done in history to help us in a time of need. As each small community of Israel gathers under the unity of God and the unity of its own community (in the *Sh'ma*), the Song is intoned as ultimate proof of the fidelity of this One whose instructions we now bear. "Then sang Moses and the Children of Israel . . .": the whole song is recited at this spot every morning, and the congregations' voice tends to sound loudest at the verses *mi khamocha*, "who is like you among the gods, YHVH?!"

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The congregation rises to intone a blessing of praise that completes the verses of praise: *yishatabach*, “you shall always be praised . . .,” after which the congregational leader intones the official “Call to Worship” of the Prayer Service, *barkhu et YHVH*, “praise YHVH the source of blessing.”

What might we say the Jews are doing when they repeat this Song at this point every morning? Our answer to this question constitutes what we may call the “performative meaning” of the Song for the people Israel. There are several appropriate ways to understand this meaning. One such meaning is most pertinent to our present study: that the sea that divided for us in the days of Moses and Pharaoh has divided for us many times since; that we pray this Song again because, in this still unredeemed world, there remains somewhere in each of our hearts a place where we still experience oppression, as if the army’s chariots still chase us, as if we see an impenetrable wall of water ahead of us, and as if we turn our voices to Heaven, praying that the waters may yet divide again, no matter how bleak our situation appears to be. In such a spirit, the Song may be repeated daily because the Jews understand it to be our daily bread, a response to the terrible challenges that face us daily. In this way, perhaps the tradition displays its sense that we both anticipate the coming of the Messiah and the end of earthly troubles and at the same time anticipate an indefinitely reiterated cycle of trials yet to face us.

In the second sub-section, “Verses of Praise,” pieces of the Song appear in every psalmic reference to the deliverance from Egypt: for example, “Praise YHVH . . . who brought the people Israel out of their midst . . . , with a strong hand and an outstretched arm . . . , who split the Red Sea . . .” (Ps. 136, recited on the Sabbath morning). The Song also reappears more indirectly through the oft-reiterated tropes of deliverance from apparent disaster, such as “YHVH I cried out and you healed me, you saved me from the pit of death” (Ps. 30). The actual recitation of the Song is

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anticipated in a reading from Neh. 9, “you saw the suffering of our ancestors in Egypt, . . . you divided the Sea,” and from Exod. 14, “thus YHVH saved the people Israel from the Egyptians on that day . . . when the people Israel witnessed the great power the Lord wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord; they trusted in Him and in His servant Moses.”

In sub-section three, the Sh'ma, both the spirit and many verses of the Song are re-intoned as a climactic demonstration that “Your teaching is true and enduring,” that is, that the God whose unity we have declared is indeed true to His word and saves us in time of need. The section begins with an account of salvation history, “You were always the help of our ancestors . . . our deliverer in every generation.” The central proof is that “You rescued us from Egypt . . . you split the waters of the sea; the faithful You rescued, the wicked drowned . . .” Then the voices of the congregation tend to rise to a crescendo with the communal chant, “*mi khamokha*, who is like you YHVH among all the Gods? . . . YHVH shall reign forever and ever.” Then, the congregation rises to intone the blessing that immediately precedes the standing prayer: “Blessed are you YHVH, redeemer of the people Israel.”

The general theme of redemption appears throughout the fourth sub-section, the *Amidah*, in such phrases as “You remember the pious deeds of our ancestors and will send a redeemer to their children’s children.” On the holidays of national redemption, such as Chanukah and Purim, special texts of salvation history are intoned toward the end of the *Amidah*. The final words of this section are a blessing to YHVH who blesses His people with peace, followed by personal reflections intoned to “my rock and my redeemer,” but there are no explicit citations from the Song until the final prayer of the entire Morning Service. This is the “*Aleinu*,” the congregation’s final statement of fidelity to God’s sovereignty, which ends anticipating the fulfillment of His sovereignty on Earth when “YHVH shall reign forever and ever,” the final verses of our Song.

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In many ways, one could therefore interpret daily Morning Prayer itself as a commemoration and repetition of the spirit and many of the words of the Song at the Sea.

### Reflecting on the Song at the Sea: Theory as also Performance.

Steven Fraade's study of *Sifre Deuteronomy* offers a prototype for achieving peace between the interpretive approaches of modern academe and rabbinic tradition.<sup>11</sup> He examines how this rabbinic midrash reads the biblical love song as a figure for the redoubled love relationship that is enacted when rabbinic sages gather to study Torah. There is a love between this fellowship of Israel and God, but there is also love among the sages themselves. To study God's word, in other words, is to participate in these earthly and heavenly dimensions of attentiveness and loving care. Toward the end of his literary and historical examination of the rabbinic midrash, Fraade suggests that the modern scholar, too, may consider him or herself part of this love relationship. In this way, the scholarly study of midrash may reenact its own performance of the ancient love poem, without thereby breaking the bounds of academic inquiry. In each case love is performed within the limits of its own setting. Within the ancient narrative, there is both the bodily human love between male and female characters and (through the lens of rabbinic reading) also love between the human community and God. One does not contest the other but reiterates it in a different realm. Within the rabbinic narrative, both these "ancient loves" are re-figured in the love of one Torah scholar for another and each Torah scholar with God. Finally, within Fraade's scholarly narrative, all three of these antecedent loves are re-figured in the love relationship between the academic inquirer and the rabbinic text in its literary, historical, midrashic, scriptural, and theological setting. No one love clouds the integrity of the other.

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For the sake of our project in scriptural reasoning, we could do no better than to read the liturgical performance of the Song at the Sea much the way Fraade read the midrashic interpretation of Song of Songs. This means we do not have to engage in a divisive battle for or against historical-critical scholarship and for or against more ancient traditions of figural reading. We can instead reenact each dimension of reading as a context-specific performance of something we too perform in reading and reasoning about the Song at the Sea. In this spirit, we may read the Song, in its plain sense, as what it announces itself to be: a song of praise for God's saving actions at some particular place and time. We can, with both Fretheim and *Song of Songs Rabbah*, read the Song as indivisible portion of the Exodus narrative or, with Houtman and Cassuto read it as distinct unit inserted into the narrative. Either way, the Song enacts what the narrative enacts: praise for Israel's redeemer. If we read the Song through the *Wisdom of Solomon*, this praise acquires an ontological seat as a reenactment of the miracle of creation itself: the boat that went forth out of the primeval waters is a figure of the dividing sea, which is a figure of Moses' lips, we could say, parted in praise; the praise bubbles forth. In both the rabbinic midrash and the liturgy that sits at the center of our study, we may observe how the rabbis instituted the Song as a libretto of praise to be re-intoned in whole or parts much more than three times a day. If so, we might characterize the rabbinic worshipper as one who acquires a daily habit, not only of singing this song and praising and petitioning the hero of the song, but also becoming "one who praises and petitions." That is to say, one consequence of the Song is its becoming a pattern of human life, a way that, in the worshipper's body or in the fabric of the worshipping community, the drama "they pursued, . . . we cried, . . . God saved," names a central dimension of what we mean by Jewish life. In this way, Jewish life itself becomes what the Song means.

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And what of scriptural scholarship? Does it, too, perform the Song, or does study require distance? Without distance, the scriptural scholar would appear to be indistinguishable from a worshipper. But, without performing the Song, the scholar would be unable to articulate its performative dimensions. Fraade offers us a way to appreciate scriptural reasonings' third option: every study may be enacted as a performance, as long as we distinguish among the various kinds of performance. There are, for example, liturgical performance, social performance, ethical performance, scholarly performance of the rabbinic kind, and scholarly performance as scriptural reasoning. As illustrated in this essay, scriptural reasoners may "perform" the Song as if it also anticipated the current crisis in scriptural reading: as if the enemy who pursues us today is the unhappy division we inherit between objectivist historiography and subjective confession; and as if our scholarly "redemption" comes when these opposing forms of inquiry are transformed into complementary dimensions of scriptural reasoning – dimensions of reading, analyzing (the text-historical elements of what is read), comparing (texts and sources and ways that these may be received), describing (the context of a given study, who is engaged in the study, for what purpose, and out of what traditions and practices of study), and applying (readings tested in social, political, ecclesial, liturgical and intra-academic contexts of practice), all in the company of various sub-communities of inquiry and fellowship. There are many texts to study, many dimensions of study, and many subcommunities in which to study, but there are no overly sharp borders that neatly divide each text, dimension, and sub-community from each other. Scripture stimulates and demands its readers' attention to what lies in-between as well as within such borders.

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1. And we enjoyed what we called "oodles" of smiles and laughter.

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2. The Song continues as follows:

**14** The peoples have heard, they tremble; Anguish has gripped the inhabitants of Philistia. **15** Then the chiefs of Edom were dismayed; The leaders of Moab, trembling grips them; All the inhabitants of Canaan have melted away. **16** Terror and dread fall upon them; By the greatness of Your arm they are motionless as stone; Until Your people pass over, O LORD, Until the people pass over whom You have obtained. **17** You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, The place, O LORD, which You have made for Your dwelling, The sanctuary, O Lord, which Your hands have established. **18** The LORD will reign forever and ever. **19** For the horses of Pharaoh with his chariots and his horsemen went into the sea, and the LORD brought back the waters of the sea on them, but the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea. **20** Then Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing. **21** Miriam answered them, "Sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; The horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea."

Throughout this chapter, the English Bible translation is adapted from Tanakh: *The Holy Scriptures, The New JPS Translation According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1985).

3. See, for example, David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat & Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1991), 8-10, 32-40, 81.
4. Otherwise known as Moshe David Cassuto (1883–1951), chief rabbi of Florence, Italy and a pioneer in Jewish historical critical study of the bible. See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*, trans. from Hebrew by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1967).
5. Cornelius Houtman, *Exodus. Volume II (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament)* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1996), : 7:14–19:25.
6. Houtman, 231.
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7. Terence Fretheim, *Exodus*, in the *Interpretation Series: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 34.
  8. Fretheim, 163.
  9. The evening liturgy was added to fulfill Biblical admonitions to recite the Sh'ma morning and evening. "Moses foresaw that a time would come when the temple would be destroyed and the bringing of first fruits (Deut 26:1ff) would cease, so he ordained that Israelites should pray thrice each day, for prayer is dearer to God than all good works and than all sacrifices" (*Tanchuma Ki tabo*, beginning, ed. Buber §1, cited in. Cf. B. Ber. 26b).
  10. *Pesiqta Shubah*, (ed. Buber p. 165b). "So long as the temple stood we used to offer a sacrifice and thus atonement was made; but now we have nothing to bring but prayer" (*Tanchuma Korah* §12.). Text suggested by Daniel Falk.
  11. Steven Fraade, *From Tradition to Commentary: Torah and Its Interpretation in the Midrash Sifre to Deuteronomy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).
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