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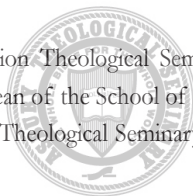
*The Song of the Sea and the Subversion of Canaanite Myth: A Missional Reading*

**Abstract**

By means of explicit links to the Ugaritic Baal Cycle (*CAT* 1.1–1.6), the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15:1b–18) models missional engagement with the late Bronze/early Iron Age cultures in which Israel emerged, and in the process enhances Israel’s presentation of Yhwh as the true King of the cosmos. By subverting the mythic worldview of the Baal Cycle, the Song implants a new view of creation and reality into God’s people while serving as a witness to the nations of a different type of God.

**Keywords:** Baal, missional hermeneutic, Song of the Sea, myth

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## Introduction

A missional hermeneutic reads scripture through the lens of mission as the interpretive key to unlocking meaning (Russell 2010). The aim of this essay is to explore how Israel's celebration of Yhwh's victory at the Sea in the poetry of Exodus 15:1b–18 models a missional engagement with the late Bronze/early Iron Age culture and enhances Israel's presentation of the LORD as king of the cosmos (Hunsberger 2016:59–62). Exodus 15:1b–18 shares its structure and language in common with the Canaanite Baal Epic. Although Exodus 15:1b–18 is not myth, its allusions to Canaanite mythic themes and deployment of the broad structure of Baal's story allow Israel's proclamation of Yhwh's victory over the powers of Egypt to subvert Canaanite myth and offer an alternative worldview (Russell 2016:135–136). This cultural engagement is critical for gaining insights into how to reach twenty-first century persons with the Gospel. In the ancient world just as now, conversion was never a matter of merely hearing new facts or truths. To convert fully to Yhwh involved a subversion of one worldview and the implantation of a new one.

John Oswalt's *The Bible among the Myths: Unique Revelation or Just Ancient Literature* serves as a mature expression of his core conviction about the uniqueness of Israel's scripture when compared with the literature of the ancient Near East. According to Oswalt, Israel's portrayal of Yhwh and its understanding of reality cannot be explained by evolutionary thinking. Oswalt has consistently followed the approach associated most prominently with William F. Albright (1969) and his student G. E. Wright (1950). Recent scholarship (e.g., Smith 2001), including an Evangelical voice (Enns 2005:23–70), has argued more for the continuity of the Old Testament with its context and seeks to explain the distinctive Israelite understanding of God and the world through an evolutionary understanding without recourse to revelation from a transcendent God.

In this essay, I want to explore the close links between Israel's literature and the mythic lore of Israel's neighbors. As Oswalt observes (2009: 12), there has been no new textual evidence unearthed to explain the pendulum swing in scholarship noted above. Oswalt views the clear differences between Israel's literature and its Canaanite counterparts as evidence for special revelation. Others explain the differences simply as Israel's unique understanding, but one that ultimately emerged over time through ordinary human reflection. Is there any way through this impasse? I argue here that through a missional reading of the Bible, the allusions to and appropriations of mythic literature can enhance our understanding of special revelation by demonstrating that it models an incarnational or missional approach to the peoples of the ancient world. Rather than demonstrating the lack

of uniqueness of the Bible because of its continuity with Near Eastern literature, the close ties actually are the means by which scripture's special revelation connects cogently to its audience to subvert the Canaanite worldview for both Israelites and Canaanites who may encounter Israel's story (Currid 2013:131–141).<sup>1</sup> This leads to the possibility of true conversion from a pagan worldview to a biblical one in the service of God's mission to bless the nations through the people of God (Gen 12:3b; Exodus 19:4–6).

The Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1b–18) will serve as a test case for this thesis. The Song of the Sea is potentially one of the earliest extant examples of Israelite literature (Cross and Freedman 1955:237–250; Russell 2007:57–148). Moreover it testifies about Israel's core experiences of God's salvation: the victory at the Sea as the culmination of the Exodus and guidance to Yhwh's holy abode.

Cross and Freedman reckoned Exodus 15:1b–18 as a “sort of ‘national anthem’” in the early cult of ancient Israel (Cross and Freedman 1955:237n.f). They do not expand on this remark, but it remains suggestive. In the modern world, a national anthem serves to instill and celebrate an ethos and identity for a nation's people at public events *and* offers a testimony to other nations about the distinctive nature of the land. How does Exodus 15:1b–18 serve this role?

In the book of Exodus, the narrative testimony of the Passover and Yhwh's victory at the Sea (Exod 12:1–14:31) prepares the reader for the dynamic celebration of deliverance that occurs post-deliverance on the shores of the sea. Yhwh has won a great victory over the enemy of God's people. Of course, in Exodus, this enemy is the *historical* Egyptians, but the celebration is bigger than merely a one-time event. This is a victory for all times and all places. The poetry of Exodus 15:1b–18 achieves this transcendent meaning through its intentional deployment of mythic themes that it shares in common with the Baal Cycle. The Song of the Sea assumes the deliverance from the Egyptians and guidance to Yhwh's holy mountain. Yhwh has acted. God's people respond with a song of victory.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let us first engage the spirituality and worldview of Canaan.

### **The Gospel According to Baal**

The excavations at the ancient port city of Ugarit yielded a significant number of texts (Smith 2016:139–167). This collection of economic and religious writings serves to provide modern readers with a substantive overview of the cultural milieu of Canaan around the shift from the late Bronze to early Iron Age. The fall of Ugarit at the transition between these eras allows scholars to date these texts to the general time of Israel's emergence further to the south.

Most prominently among the Ugaritic literature is the Baal Cycle (Smith 1997: 81–176).<sup>2</sup> These texts tell the story of Baal’s attainment of divine kingship. For those unfamiliar with the contours of Baal’s tale, here is a brief summary:

In the Canaanite pantheon, El is the chief god. El is the creator and wise benefactor of creation. He reigns along with his wife Asherah. In the opening scene (*CAT* 1.1), El has decreed that Yamm (god of the Sea/River) will rule over the second tier of gods who control nature and the cycles of life and death on earth. The conflict of the Baal Cycle stems from El’s decision to elevate Yamm as divine regent. This decision threatens the world as Yamm represents the power of chaos and destruction. As the personified Sea and River<sup>3</sup> and embodiment of the power of watery chaos, Yamm continually threatened the order of the cosmos. The elevation of Yamm constituted a direct threat to the Storm god Baal. Baal was the giver of the rains that brought life and good to the world.

In response, Baal and Yamm engage in an epic duel for supremacy (*CAT* 1.2). Baal, however, has an edge through the intervention of the divine craftsman Kothar Wa-Hasis. Kothar fashions weapons for Baal that allow him to defeat Yamm in a decisive battle. At the climax of this encounter, Baal strikes Yamm dead and destroys his body. The scene ends with the acclamation “Baal reigns” (*CAT* 1.2 IV 34–36).<sup>4</sup> Baal’s actions are not universally lauded and the goddess Astarte rebukes him for vanquishing Yamm.

To celebrate Baal’s position of supremacy over the gods he enjoys a feast complete with a huge goblet of alcohol and a collection of female deities (*CAT* 1.3). At this point, the warrior goddess Anat enters and the Baal Cycle narrates a bloody sequence in which Anat slaughters human warriors mercilessly. This is the sole appearance of humans within the Baal Cycle.

Baal’s rule is enhanced by the building of a palace for him on the holy mountain of Zaphan (*CAT* 1.4). Kothar Wa-Hasis is again present to aid in the construction. Upon its completion, there is a banquet held in which Baal entertains other gods and goddesses. In the final columns of *CAT* 1.4, the tensions between Baal and Mot, god of death and the underworld, begin to rise. Mot does not recognize Baal’s reign.

The last section of the Baal Cycle involves a second major conflict (*CAT* 1.5–1.6). This time Baal challenges Mot, the god of death and the underworld. Baal desires to extend his reign over Mot. Thus, they engage in a duel. Baal, however, loses and finds himself trapped in the underworld. His demise leads to parched fields. The gods and goddesses mourn. El and Anat intervene. This leads to the return of Baal from death. Baal and Mot again fight. This time with the help of other deities Baal prevails. But as the annual seasons testify, death and life alternate in

their governance of the world. So the Baal cycle ends. Baal is the king who defeated Yamm, but the power of death and the underworld remains a potent threat.

As with all myth, the Baal Epic deals with the deepest fears and longings of humanity. Baal's story focuses primarily on two. First, Baal's conflict with Yamm answers the fear of a catastrophic end of the world as we know it. To elevate Yamm to the pinnacle of power meant the enthronement of chaos and disorder over creation. Yamm personified chaos and served as a constant threat to civilization through the fury of the sea itself as well as through raging rivers and streams whose waters swallowed up travelers and whose floods razed houses and villages. With Baal's defeat of Yamm and the confession, "Baal will reign" comes *security* regarding the future stability of the world. The mighty Storm god Baal would bring life giving rains to the world rather than unleash chaos and destruction. Second, Baal's battle with Mot answers the question of the power of death over life. Mot represented all that opposed life in the world from the loss of vegetation in the winter to the inevitable death of all living beings. In the Baal cycle, these champions fight to a draw. Baal tastes death, but returns alive. Mot then experiences death for a season before emerging anew annually to have his fill. Thus, the Baal Cycle engrains a status quo in which human history records the endless cycles of the seasons of the death and life of all living things.

This worldview comes into direct conflict with the biblical narrative that tells the story of a different God and a new way of understanding reality. Before exploring this, let us ponder the connections between Exodus 15:1b–18 and the Baal Cycle (*CAT* 1.1–1.6).

### Links between the Song of the Sea and the Baal Cycle

A close reading of Exodus 15:1b–18 reveals broad narrative parallels with the Baal Cycle as well as close linguistic ties (Craigie 1971:19–26, Cross 1973:112–144, and Russell 2007:39–42 and 69–71). The argument for the connection between Exodus 15:1b–18 and the Baal Cycle does not stand on any one specific piece of data but on the preponderance of evidence.

First, the Song of the Sea narrates the deliverance at the sea, Yhwh's guidance of his people to his holy mountain, and final acclamation of Yhwh's kingship in roughly the same order as Baal's story:

A. *First Conflict*. Exodus 15:1b–10, 12 narrates Yhwh's victory over the forces of Egypt. The sea is not a personification of Yamm, but merely a weapon yielded by Yhwh against a human threat to God's people. The Exodus serves as the decisive demonstration of Yhwh's power and commitment to God's people throughout Israel's scriptures.

B. *Implied Proclamation of Kingship.* Exodus 15:11 uses the language of incomparability. At this point in the Baal Cycle, Yamm declares Baal king (*CAT* 1.3 III:28–31). The explicit language of kingship is not present in the Song until 15:18. However the language of incomparability serves a similar function. Mann states that Yhwh’s elevation over all other gods is nowhere more clear than in Exodus 15:11 (1977:125).

C. *Second Conflict.* Exodus 15:14–16 describes the terror that falls on the peoples of Canaan as Yhwh leads his people toward his mountain. These are future enemies. But unlike Mot who proved a worthy and equal opponent to Baal, the peoples of Canaan already stand defeated. They are petrified and as immobile as stones.

D. *Sanctuary on Yhwh’s Holy Mountain.* Exodus 15:13 and 17 detail Yhwh’s guidance of God’s people to his holy mountain, the mountain of his inheritance. The language of 15:17 mimics the terminology used for Baal’s shrine on Zaphan (see below).

E. *Explicit Proclamation of Kingship.* The Song of the Sea reaches its zenith in the confession “Yahweh will reign forever and ever.” Yhwh is king over creation. Unlike the Baal Cycle where a similar confession for Baal occurs in the middle of the story, Yhwh stands as unrivaled king at the end of the poem. The declaration of Yhwh’s eternal rule breaks reality out of the mythic cycles affirmed by Baal’s story.

Second, there are two striking linguistic ties that link these two ancient poems.<sup>5</sup> Exodus 15:17 describes Yhwh’s sacred mountain using the same phraseology as the Baal Cycle deploys in reference to Mount Zaphan (Hess 2007:100, Russell 2007:41, Smith 1997:168n64):

You brought and planted them *on the mountain of your inheritance,*  
 The place for your habitation, you made O Yhwh;  
 The sanctuary, O Yhwh, your hands have established  
 (*italics added, Exod 15:17*)

Come and I will reveal it, in the midst of my mountain Divine Zaphan  
*In the holy mount of my heritage,*  
 In the beautiful hill of my might (*italics added, CAT 1.3 III:28–31*)

Also, the concluding declaration of Yhwh’s rule (Exod 15:18) is identical to Yamm’s words:

Yhwh will reign (Exod 15:18a)  
 Baal will reign (*CAT* 1.2 IV:32 and 34–35)

### The Subversion of Baal and the Elevation of King Yhwh

Once the parallels with the Baal Cycle come to light, readers of the Song of Sea gain insight into the strategy of Israel's great anthem of Yhwh's victory at the sea. It functions to instruct God's people in a counter cultural worldview in which they live out their identity as a kingdom of priests and holy nation (Exod 19:5–6) whose vocation is to serve as a conduit of blessing to the nations who do not yet know Yhwh (Gen 12:3). Simultaneously, the Song of the Sea proclaims to the nations an alternative vision of reality that serves as an invitation to join God's people in declaring and living in light of Yhwh's eternal reign. The Song of the Sea answers the same deep human fears as the Baal Cycle, but its answers articulate a revolutionary worldview central to the rest of scripture and opens up the future to the hope and abundance of God's kingdom. The following features serve as key elements of the Song of the Sea's strategy for undercutting the ideological claims of Baal's story. By deploying language and narrative patterns common to Canaanite religion, the Song of the Sea presents the Gospel of Yhwh.

*Polytheism versus unilateral action.* When reading the Baal Cycle, a modern Christian reader will be surprised by the plethora of named deities. The above summary only scratched the surface. Against the polytheistic backdrop of the Baal Cycle, the ancient reader was struck by the unilateral action of Yhwh. Yhwh acts alone to defeat the powers of Egypt and the future enemies of God's people. Yhwh does not have any helpers or sidekicks. No other gods or goddesses are present or even named. Yhwh does not need to seek permission to act. There are no repercussions or challenges from other deities in response to Yhwh's victory at the sea, guidance of God's people, or the proclamation of Yhwh's eternal reign. In Exodus 15:18 it is the people of Yhwh who proclaim his kingship because there are no other gods present in the poetry.

*Subversion of the powers behind the gods.* In the Song of the Sea, there are only three characters: Yhwh, God's people (vv. 13 and 16), and human enemies who threaten God's people (Egypt [esp. vv. 1b and 4], Philistia, Edom, Moab, and the peoples of Canaan [vv. 14–15]). Yhwh acts in human history. In the Baal Cycle, events occur in the realm of the gods. It is the story of Baal and Baal's interactions with the pantheon of deities common to the Western Semitic religions. Each of these deities represented a power or force in nature. For example, Yamm was the god of sea and river and Mot was the god of the underworld and death. There is no hint of these gods in Exodus 15. There is only Yhwh. In fact, it is striking that Yhwh uses two weapons against the Egyptians. In vv. 1b–10, Yhwh wields the sea (Heb: *yam*) against Egypt. In Yhwh's hands, the sea is not a fearsome deity. It is

simply a part of creation that becomes the means by which Yhwh defeats Egypt. Likewise v. 12 reports that Yhwh opened up the earth and caused it to consume the enemies of God's people. In this context, earth likely takes on the connotation of underworld (Russell 2007: 16). Yet who commands this once feared realm? It is Yhwh.

*Historicization of Canaanite mythic themes.* The good news of the Song of the Sea is the reality that it occurs in human space and time. It is not a tale of the olden days of creation or set in mythic realms. Yhwh is active and vibrant in the world on behalf of God's people. Yhwh does not fight other gods and goddesses. There is no need. Instead, Yhwh fights on behalf of *people* against the superpower of the Late Bronze Age, i.e. Egypt, and neutralizes future enemies in one epic battle at the sea. The Song of the Sea follows the general structure of the Baal Cycle, but narrates the conflicts as a this-world, human-centered account. This is crucial to the rhetorical power of the Song. Yhwh does what no other god or goddess does. Yhwh acts for *God's people* and does what they could not do for themselves—delivers the weak from the strong. Moreover, the emphasis on God's power over *historical* enemies breaks the mythic cycles. The victory at the Sea was the critical victory necessary to shape a good future for God's people. As noted above, there is not a second enemy to fight in the Song of the Sea. No future battle is needed because God has won all future victories by his demonstration of power at the Sea. Future enemies in Canaan stand frozen in fear before the advance of the people of God.

*Pro-Human Vision.* In the Baal Cycle, the principal mention of humans occurs in its narration of Anat's murderous rampage against human warriors. The Song of the Sea declares not only that Yhwh acts in real human time and space, but that Yhwh takes action on behalf of God's people against the human powers of oppression. The God of scripture does not merely move to solidify the status quo, which privileges the powerful and sanctifies injustice for the benefit of the few. This was the principal goal and function of ancient myths. They gave ideological support for the power structures as they existed. The official theologies thus blessed and ratified the *status quo*. The Song of the Sea is radically different. Yhwh intercedes, creates, and guides a people who were the opposite of connected and prosperous. In fact, the exaltation of Yhwh in the Song of the Sea implies both a new status for and exaltation of God's people (Mann 1977: 129).

Moreover, Yhwh desires a *relationship* with this delivered people. They will serve in God's mission, but they are far from slaves in terms of status. In Exodus 15:13 and 17, Yhwh brings God's people to the dwelling place of God. This is unprecedented. Baal had a cosmic mountain Zaphan and built a palace there, but he issued no invitations to people. Baal only allowed gods and goddesses to attend



his feasts and banquets. Yhwh is different. Yhwh does not invite deities to the holy mountain. Instead, Yhwh invites his newly delivered people. Moderns tend to assume that God, the gods, or the universe works on our behalf for good. We can easily miss the power here. The Song of the Sea not only tells the story of a different kind of god—one who engages our world in order to deliver a people to himself, but it also emphasizes that Yhwh the true King (15:18) in fact desires the sort of relationship with God’s people that the Near Eastern myths reserved for members of the divine pantheon. Thus, a relational god that cared about common people served as a threat to the power structures of the ancient world. Yhwh’s victory at the sea and guidance to the sanctuary served as the basis for the identity of God’s people. Note the language of the Song of the Sea in vv. 13 and 16: people whom you [Yhwh] redeemed (Heb: *ga’al*) and people whom you acquired/created (Heb: *qanal*). The Song does not call the people “Israel.” Their identity is in the divine actor who opened up a new future for them.

*Yhwh’s Incomparability.* What is the missional message rooted in the unilateral actions of Yhwh, the subversion and historicization of mythic themes, and the pro-human agenda? Yhwh is incomparable to any other god. In other words, there is no being worthy of the title God and King other than Yhwh (Wright, Christopher J. H. 2006:136–142). This is the clear implication of the refrain of v. 11: “Who is like you among the gods, O Yhwh? Who is like you mighty among the holy ones? (Miller 1964:241, Muilenberg 1966:244, and Russell 2007:16) Awe-inspiring in praises; doing wonders.” As Israel’s national anthem, the Song of the Sea lifts up Yhwh high above any other divine being.

*True Security.* The Song of the Sea secures the past, present and future of God’s people. Unlike the Baal Cycle, which ends with a cyclical annual sharing of power between Baal and Mot, there is no ambiguity in the witness of the Song about Yhwh. Yhwh is the king forever—for all seasons and all times. The victory at the Sea and guidance to Yhwh’s holy mountain ground the security of God’s people in the *historical* actions of Yhwh on their behalf. God’s people are not trapped in endless cycles that codify a suffocating status quo that favors the powerful. The liberating power that saved God’s people from Israel and brought them into covenant relationship at Sinai opens up a preferred future in which God’s kingdom endures for eternity. Security and deliverance from the deep fears of the dissolution of creation and from the cycles of death and life may be found in Yhwh alone. There is no other. In the Baal Cycle, Yamm declares Baal king yet Mot and Baal end the cycle having battled to a stalemate. In contrast, in the Song of the Sea, Yhwh’s incomparability is evident after the victory at the Sea (15:11). The Song climaxes with the acclamation “Yhwh will reign forever and ever.” This fully

subverts Canaanite myth. There is no cycle of struggle. Yhwh's kingship is eternal and not seasonal/cyclical. This is tremendous news for all Creation.

### So what?

The Song of the Sea models a profound understanding of human needs and the communication of transformational truth. Cross and Freedman's description of the song as national anthem captures the power of its language (1955:237n. f). Exodus 15:1b–18 serves as a declaration of Yhwh's victory on behalf of God's people following the exodus, but its use of mythic language and themes transcends Yhwh's direct intervention in human affairs during the late Bronze age and extends these implications to all who would declare Yhwh's eternal kingship. Exodus 15:1b–18 reminds *insiders* of the identity, character, and mission of Yhwh. It announces to *outsiders* the incomparability of Yhwh and with it an implicit invitation to proclaim with God's people "Yhwh will reign."

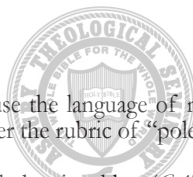
The ties between the Song of the Sea and the Baal Cycle serve as a missional model for God's twenty-first century people. The deep narratives about the security of the created world as well as the deep fear of death remain part of the human condition. Twenty-first century people may no longer fear gods such as Yamm, but the destructive anti-creational forces personified by Yamm still abide. We moderns fear asteroid strikes, zombie viruses, pandemics, and the threat of catastrophic flooding caused by global warming. We can add to these manmade threats of nuclear devices, electromagnetic pulse weapons, autonomous AI, and totalitarian governments. Of course, the fear of death has never receded from humanity. Moreover, in the twenty-first century, we find the emerging bio-tech field striving to achieve goals of extending human longevity to unprecedented lengths.

These observations demonstrate that the core message of the Song of the Sea remains timely. Wise interpreters of scripture will recognize how the Song's modeling of direct engagement with the late Bronze Age cultural milieu heightened the power of its poetic retelling of Yhwh's foundational acts on behalf of God's people. There remains the need to craft compelling retellings of the Gospel in light of the worldviews of the twenty-first century.<sup>6</sup>

### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Currid does not use the language of missional hermeneutics but still makes a similar argument under the rubric of "polemical theology."

<sup>2</sup>The Baal Cycle includes six tablets (*CAT* 1.1–1.6).



<sup>3</sup>In the Baal Cycle, Yamm carries the twin titles: Prince Sea/Judge River.

<sup>4</sup>This may be the speech of Astarte or perhaps even a final confession by Yamm. The text is fragmentary at this point. Regardless, compare with Exodus 15:18.

<sup>5</sup>Those interested in more data are encouraged to engage the literature referenced at the beginning of this section as there are many more subtle word pairs and shared vocabulary. Given the brevity of this essay, I am only including the two most explicit examples.

<sup>6</sup>I am grateful for the positive influence that Dr. John Oswalt has had on my life. He invested his time and wisdom into me during my years as a student and then as a teaching fellow at Asbury Seminary (1991–96). His modeling of the Christian life and his clear articulation of his scholarly convictions continue to serve as examples for my personal faith and my vocation as an evangelical Wesleyan biblical scholar. It is a privilege to offer this essay in honor of my teacher and mentor.

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