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WOMEN'S VOICES IN THE BIBLE: VICTORY SONGS AND LAMENTS

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Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
Requirements for Master of Sacred Music Degree

Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion  
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## INTRODUCTION

The literature of Early Israel can be understood as a distinctive artistic expression with unique performers and Sitz im Leben. There is a general consensus among scholars that the archaic poetry, the narratives of the Judges and other stories circulated orally before being written down. In searching for the authors, composers and transmitters of these stories and songs, it becomes clear that in two of the traditions--the Victory Song and the lament-- women played the significant, if not primary role. Common performative elements and language associated with women appear in the descriptions of both rituals.

To fully understand the role of women in these traditions and consequently, in the larger social structure, the connections between the composers, performers and transmitters of the literature in its oral form and written form must be understood. The purpose of this study is to examine the evidence to support the role of women as the composers, performers and transmitters of these oral traditions through an examination of the biblical descriptions of the performative elements of the rituals. By identifying these songs as distinctive musical traditions, we are able to gain insight and understanding into the role that women played in certain rituals and in the community at large.

## 1. VICTORY SONGS

The Victory Songs have been identified as one of ancient Israel's types of war songs. Hermann Gunkel classifies the Victory Songs as a secular song type and suggests possible performers and settings for the songs.

Every ancient literary type originally belonged to a quite definite side of the national life of Israel...so in ancient Israel the song of victory was sung by maidens to greet the returning war host.<sup>1</sup>

Other scholars have supported and elaborated on Gunkel's identification of this genre.

The Victory Song was sung by women upon the return of the victorious army or at a separate victory celebration accompanied by music and dancing.<sup>2</sup>

To be considered a genre, Gunkel asserts that the literary type must have a specific use in a particular social setting with consistent, identifiable performers and participants. He states:

Every genre shows its individuality in defined characteristics:

- 1) In a common store of thoughts and moods, which is carefully transmitted from generation to generation.
- 2) In a traditional linguistic form, i.e. definite phrases, sentence structures images and so forth,
- 3) A definite Sitz im Leben of the people, in which it originally had its special place, out of which just these thoughts and their forms of expression have arisen and in which they are therefore also to be understood even if it is true that the

<sup>1</sup> Hermann Gunkel, What Remains of the Old Testament and Other Essays, trans. by H. K. Dallas (London: George Allan and Unwin Ltd., 1928) pp. 59-61.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Fohrer, Introduction to the Old Testament, trans. by David E. Green (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968) p. 275.

genres in a more developed time, when writing came to dominance in the cultural life, had given up this oldest situation in favor of the written book.

Only where we have all three criteria preserved together, only where we can ascertain that definite thoughts in a definite form on a definite occasion were expressed do we have the right to speak of a genre.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand the Victory Songs as a distinct genre, one must undertake a careful analysis of the various components of the songs.

Although several features of the Victory Songs have been studied in detail, little attention has been paid to them as a literary-musical genre. In order to have a comprehensive understanding of the Victory Songs as a literary-musical genre, it is necessary to explore the musical features of the Victory Songs. While it is impossible to know exactly what these songs sounded like, various musicological sources help to set parameters within which the musical sound can be described. Using available sources such as theoretical texts on the Ancient Near East,<sup>4</sup> reconstructions of ancient instruments and historical musical traditions about which we have some knowledge, it is viable to examine some of the possibilities for

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from An Introduction to Old Testament Study, by John H. Hayes (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979) p. 127 in an article by Hermann Gunkel, "Jesaia 33, eine prophetische liturgie," Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft (1924) pp. 177-195. Translator not indicated.

<sup>4</sup> J. B. Pritchard, ed., Ancient Near East Texts Relating to the Old Testament (Princeton N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1950, 1954, 1969)

the meter, scales, motifs and vocal sounds of these songs.

The identification of the setting of a genre in the life of a people must include the naming of both the originators and transmitters of the tradition. The biblical texts ascribe these songs to women. This ascription has caused much difficulty in the understanding of the Victory Song as a specific genre with its own social, theological and literary history.

Scholars have often been able to accept a Miriam or a Deborah as the poet - composer of Exodus 15:21 or Judges 5. But they have seen these women as individuals, not as examples of a women's traditioning group.<sup>5</sup>

For women, to be considered the creators and transmitters of a tradition, they must fulfill a consistent role in a society that allows them to pass the tradition from generation to generation. To appreciate the role that women played in the transmission of this tradition, the connections between the original occasion and ongoing institutionalization of the ritual must be clarified.

Any study of the Victory Song tradition must include the narrative. The narratives that accompany the Victory Songs are a primary source of information. They often describe the performance, the occasion and the composer-performers. The narratives also reveal a characteristic viewpoint and standard vocabulary for

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<sup>5</sup> Eunice Blanchard Poethig, The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel. Ph.D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1985 p.12.



recounting the Victory Song performance. The texts to be studied are those passages that establish the Victory Song as a distinctive musical tradition and that give information about women as the singers of Victory Songs:

Exodus 15:1-21 "Song of the Sea" and "Miriam's Song"

Judges 4 and 5 The Battle against Sisera, "Deborah's Song",  
Yael's victory and Sisera's mother's query

Judges 11:34 Jephthah's daughter's welcome

1 Samuel 18:6-7 (21:12 and 29:5) The women laud David  
over Saul

2 Samuel 1:20 The daughters of the Philistines rejoice

Jeremiah 31 The Virgin Israel and the maidens will rejoice

Judges 5 and 2 Samuel 1:20 give evidence for the setting of Victory Songs in the life of Israel and her neighbors. In Judges 5, the mother of Sisera, the Canaanite, and her ladies sing a premature song of Sisera's victory. In 2 Samuel 1:20, David speaks of the daughters of the Philistines rejoicing. Three of the narratives, Exodus 15:21, Judges 11:34 and 1 Samuel 18:6-7, describe the setting and the performance of the singing of Victory Songs. Exodus 15:21 and Judges 4 and 5 give information about Miriam and Deborah who are credited with the singing of the Victory Songs.

In order to develop as complete a picture as possible of the musical dimensions of the Victory Songs, we will study those texts which offer the most explicit description of the performances:

1 Samuel 18:6-7, 29:12 and 29:5, Exodus 15:20-21 and Judges 11:34.

### Texts

We begin the text study with 1 Samuel 18:6-7, 21:12 and 29:5. A standard vocabulary used to describe the Victory Song performance, emerges in these texts.

#### 1 Samuel 18:6-7

6 וַיְהִי בִבּוֹאָם בְּשׁוּב דָּוִד מִהַכּוֹת אֶת-הַפִּלִּשְׁתִּי

וַתֵּצֵאנָה הַנָּשִׁים מִכָּל-עָרֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לִשְׁרֹא

וְהַמְחִלּוֹת לִקְרֹאת שָׁאוּל הַמֶּלֶךְ בַּתָּפִים

בְּשִׁמְחָה וּבְשִׁלְשִׁים

7 וַתַּעֲנִינָה הַנָּשִׁים הַמְשַׁחֲקוֹת וַתֹּאמְרֶינָה

הִנֵּה שָׁאוּל בָּאֵלֵינוּ וְדָוִד בְּרִבְבֵּיתוֹ

6 When they came home,  
when David returned from killing the Philistine,  
the women came out of all the cities of Israel to sing  
the dance chorus to meet Saul the King,

the dance chorus to meet Saul the King,  
with frame drums, with joy and metal clappers.  
7 And the performing women sang antiphonally  
They said,

“Saul has slain his thousands  
and David his ten thousands.”<sup>6</sup>

1 Samuel 21:12

12 וַיֹּאמְרוּ עַבְדֵי אַכִּישׁ אֵלָיו

הֲלוֹא-זֶה דָּוִד מֶלֶךְ הָאָרֶץ הֲלוֹא לָזֶה

יָעֲנוּ בַּמַּחֲלוֹת לֵאמֹר הִכָּה שָׁאוּל בְּאַלְפֹו

וְדָוִד בְּרִבְבָּתָו

12 And the servants of Achish said to him  
“Is this not David the king of the land?  
Did they not sing to one another of him in the dances,  
‘Saul struck his thousands  
and David struck his ten thousands?’”

<sup>6</sup> Tanakh-The Holy Scriptures. Translation according to the Jewish Publication Society.  
1985. All subsequent translations are from the same source.

1 Samuel 29:5

הלא זה דוד אשר יִעֲנוּ-לוֹ בַּמַּחֲלוֹת

לֵאמֹר הֲכֵּה שָׂאוֹל בְּאַלְפֹו וְדוֹד בְּרַבְבָּתוֹ

5 Is this not David, of whom they sing to one another in the dances, saying,

"Saul struck his thousands

and David struck his ten thousands?"

Most of the key terms that identify the Victory Song as a distinctive musical tradition are found in the texts from 1 Samuel. It is interesting to note that these texts mention no leader for the women's chorus. Nonetheless, they do contain specific terms that appear to be part of a standard vocabulary used to describe the Victory Song performance.

וַתֵּצְאוּ הַנָּשִׁים לְקִרְאָתוֹ (and the women came out)... (to greet).

The verbs 'come out' and 'to greet' are frequently found together in a military context. Examples of this combination can be seen in Judges 4:18, "וַתֵּצֵא יָעֵל לְקִרְאָתוֹ...", Judges 20:25, "וַיֵּצֵא בְנֵימִן לְקִרְאָתָם...", Judges 20:31, "וַיֵּצֵא יִשְׂרָאֵל לְקִרְאָתוֹ...", 1 Samuel 4:1 "וַיֵּצְאוּ בְנֵי בְנֵימִן לְקִרְאָתוֹ..." and Isaiah 7:3 "...וַיֵּצְאוּ לְקִרְאָתוֹ..." This combination appears specifically in the context of a Victory Song in 1 Samuel 18:6 and in

Judges 11:34, "...יצאת לקראתו..." Although, לקראת can be translated as 'to meet', many scholars use the more specialized 'to greet' because of "...the clear implication that the purpose of their meeting is to deliver a verbal greeting."<sup>7</sup>

והמחלות (and the choristers/dancers). Most translations treat this term as a compound with לשיר to mean singing and dancing. However, the two terms are not grammatically parallel. Consequently, a more accurate translation is a dancing chorus. This idea is parallel to the הנשים המשחקות (the performing women) that are also found in the passage. This description of the women as entertainers is unique among biblical Victory Songs. The verb לשמוח appears in Jeremiah 15:17, 30:19 and 31:12, Zechariah 8:5 and 1 Chronicles 13:8 and 15:29 in a festival setting. In all of these passages, the term seems to refer to a defined group or professional guild. In the festival settings, the emphasis is on pleasing an audience. The audience varies from text to text. In Jeremiah 30:19 and Zechariah 8:5, the Song is directed to Adonai. Similarly, in 1 Chronicles 13:8, the performance is for G-d. In 1 Samuel 18:6-7, the women greet Saul and David and sing to them. In Exodus 15:21, while it is G-d who is praised for saving them, the entire community,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 75

led by Miriam are the performers. In all of these verses, the usage is distinctive because of its performance aspect.<sup>8</sup>

It is clear that only women comprise the group of performers in 1 Samuel 18:7 and in Jeremiah 31:12. Whereas in Zechariah 8:5 the performing group was clearly made up of men and women:

“...ימלאו ילדים וילדות...”<sup>5</sup>

5 ...shall be full of boys and girls...

The term לשמח seems to cover a broad range of acts performed by individuals or groups before G-D as in Jeremiah 30:19, Zechariah 8:5 and 1 Chronicles 13:8, before returning heroes as in 1 Samuel 18:6-7, or before people during festival occasions as in 1 Chronicles 15:29.

1 Samuel 18 :6 provides a clear description of the הנשים המשחקות (performing women) coming out of the cities בתפים בשמחה ובשלשים “with noisemakers, music and various dance movements” to greet Saul and David. There is a parallel reference in Jeremiah 30:19, “... במחל משחקים” and in Jeremiah 31:3, “וַיֵּצֵא מֵהֶם תוֹדָה וְקוֹל מִשְׁחָקִים...” “... תפילה ויצאת” Although the references in Jeremiah could merely reflect a dependence on the Victory Song tradition as a literary form,

<sup>8</sup> Elsewhere לשמח is clearly not performative in the same sense. In 1 Kings 4:20 and Ecclesiastes 8:15, it seems to connote general merrymaking or enjoyment.

"it would seem to be a living cultural tradition in the late monarchy."<sup>9</sup>

כְּתָפִים (with frame drums). These drums are the characteristic instrument of the Victory Song. They are usually referred to in the plural suggesting that they are played by a chorus, specifically of women. Other instruments, the שְׁלִשִּׁים are not so easily identified. There exists some debate as to what exactly these instruments sounded like. Some scholars base translation on the root of the word and describe it as a "three stringed" instrument or lute.<sup>10</sup> Others assert that lutes were marginal to Canaanite culture and that it is more likely that the שְׁלִשִּׁים were cymbals or metal bowls, basing their contention on the many instruments of this kind which have been recovered at archeological sites.<sup>11</sup> Curt Sachs posits a very different possibility that the שְׁלִשִּׁים were not instruments at all. He bases his hypothesis on the fact that שְׁלִשִּׁים is separated from the תְּפִילִּים in the list found in 1 Samuel 18:6-7. He concludes that it is a dance or dance steps connected somehow to the מְחֻלּוֹת.<sup>12</sup> Although

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 97

<sup>10</sup> Eric Werner, "Musical Instruments," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1963) p. 475.

<sup>11</sup> Bathya Bayer, The Material Relics of Music in Ancient Palestine and its Environs (Tel Aviv: Israel Music Institute, 1963) pp. 6-8.

<sup>12</sup> Curt Sachs, The History of Musical Instruments. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1940) p. 123.

the specific meaning of the term is not clear, there seems to be an obvious relationship between the תפלים, the משחקים and the שלשים. If all three are some kind of sound associated with the performance, the three components of the Victory Song performance could be the drum, the joyful noise produced by the singers and some kind of metal clapper. Or as Sachs claims, the three elements would be the drum, the joyful song and the dancing.

ותענינה (to sing responsively) This term appears to refer to an antiphonal or responsorial type of singing and may be seen as a specialized aspect of לענות (to answer). The verb appears in the context of the Victory Songs in 1 Samuel 18:7, "ותענינה הנשים ל...", 1 Samuel 21:12, "לוא במחלות... יענו במחלות לאמר", 1 Samuel 29:5, "לוא במחלות... יענו" and in Exodus 15:21, "ותען להם מרים...". There are other passages which contain the verb in contexts other than that of the Victory Song. In Numbers 21:17 and Isaiah 27:2, Israel sings responsively to the well and to the vineyard respectively. Deuteronomy 21:17 and 25:9 contain uses of the same term in a liturgical or juridical setting. Ze'eb Weisman asserts that the לענות (to answer) can be distinguished from the לענות (to sing antiphonally or to recite to music) by the preposition that follows the form of the



verb.

... לענות "to sing" with the preposition ל appears only in poetry where singing is implied while לענות with את and a direct object is a prose form meaning "to answer." לענות with the ל is found in Exodus 15:21, 1 Samuel 21:12 and 29:5...<sup>13</sup>

It is clear that the responsorial or antiphonal style of the Victory Song performance was not unique to that genre. The style of presentation was common in both secular and liturgical settings. Several types of antiphonal singing, chanting or recitation exist within the texts explored here. The Victory Songs suggest either a chorus of singers as in 1 Samuel 18:6-7, 21:12, 29:5 and Judges 5:11 or a leader with a chorus of singers as in Exodus 15:20-21, Judges 11:34 and 5:12. When a leader is specifically mentioned, it is a woman whose standing in the community is already established. Three such women exist: Miriam, Deborah and Jephthah's daughter. Longer biblical Victory Songs, cast in the first person, like the one found in Psalms 30:12 suggest the importance of the leader in the performance. This characteristic female leader was not exclusive to Biblical culture.

"The exultation of Inanna", composed by the high priestess and (daughter of Sargon) Enheduanna, gives 3rd millennium BCE evidence of an antiphonal performance between a female

<sup>13</sup> Ze'ev Weisman, "שירותיה" (Judges, v.29)" *Vetus Testamentum* 26 (1976) p.116-120  
Translator not indicated.

leader (Enheduanna) and a chorus.<sup>14</sup>

Another example of the female leader can be found in Egyptian culture.

The Egyptian tale Sinhue describes the Setting of a Victory Song led by the queen in the court of Pharaoh.<sup>15</sup>

A tradition of Victory Songs by women, without a designated leader also exists in the Ancient Near East.

1 Samuel 18:6, 21:12, 29:5, and Jeremiah 31:12 are biblical examples of this type of performance. Examples can also be found of such choral performances without a leader in Egyptian literature.

In the Victory Songs quoted in the Hymn of Mer-ne-ptah and in the Hymn of Joy at the Accession of Ramses IV, the singers are "they" of the "towns of Egypt" or the "womenfolk."<sup>16</sup>

The Victory Song texts suggest two types of responsorial performance. In the first sort, there is a repetition of a couplet as in 1 Samuel 18:6-7 and Exodus 15:21. The second type uses poetic lines interspersed within a narrative as in the "Song of the Sea" found in Exodus 15. Neither type is dependent on the presence of a leader.

The particular type of Victory Song performance outlined in the texts from 1 Samuel as well as the standard vocabulary used to

<sup>14</sup> W. W. Hallo and J. J. A. van Dijk, The Exaltation of Inanna (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968) p. 80

<sup>15</sup> J. B. Pritchard, Ancient Near Eastern Texts with Supplement (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969) pp. 18-22

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 378-379

describe the presentation are also found in the previously mentioned passages from Exodus and Judges.

Judges 11:34, 11:37

34 וַיָּבֹא יִפְתָּח הַמִּצְפָּה אֶל בֵּיתוֹ וְהִנֵּה

בָּתוֹ יֹצֵאת לִקְרֹאתוֹ בַּתִּימִים וּבִמְחִלּוֹת וּרְק

הִיא יְחִידָה אֵין-לָהּ מִמֶּנּוּ בֶן אֹו-בֵת...

37 וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-אָבִיהָ יַעֲשֶׂה לִּי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה

הִרְפָּה מִמֶּנִּי שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים וְאַלֶּכָה

וְרָדַתִּי עַל הַהָרִים וְאֶבְכֶּה עַל-בְּתוּלִי אֲנֹכִי וְרַעִיתִי (רַעוּתִי)

34 Jephthah came to his home at Mizpah;

and behold, his daughter came out to meet him with timbrels and with dances; she was his only child; beside her he had neither son nor daughter.

37 She said to her father, "Do this thing for me:

let me be for two months, and I will go with my companions to the mountains and lament and bewail my maidenhood."

Many of the images of the Victory Song performances described in detail in the passages from 1 Samuel appear in this verse. Jephthah returns from defeating the Ammorites and his daughter "came out" to "greet him". She came with "drums" and with "dances". It is interesting to note that Jephthah's daughter greets her

father alone in verse 34 while her companions are already present in verse 37. This could be a mere literary device. But it seems more likely that while his daughter is mentioned in the singular, the plural forms of “drums” and “dances” imply that she was leading her female companions that are mentioned in verse 37.

Exodus 15:20-21

20 ותקח מרים הנביאה אחות אהרן את

התף בידה ותצאן כל הנשים אחריה

בתפים ובמחלת

21 ותען להם מרים שירו ליהוה כי-גאה

גאה סוס ורכבו רמה בים

20 Then Miriam, the prophet, the sister of Aaron, took a drum in her hand; and all the women went out after her with drums and dances.

21 And Miriam sang responsively to them,

“Sing to Adonai, for he has risen up triumphantly

Horse and its rider he has thrown into the sea.”

These two verses contain all of the elements associated with the Victory Song tradition of the Bible. Miriam, a woman of standing in the community, takes a “drum” in hand. A “chorus of women” comes out after her with “drums” and with “dances.” They “sing” to

each other in an “antiphonal performance.” All of these features combined comprise the distinctive performance style of the Victory Song tradition. Taken together, these elements convey a particular musical presentation.

In summary, the texts reveal key information about the performance of the Victory Songs. The use of drums and dances or movement are two significant components of the Songs. The purpose of the presentation was to honor a deity or a hero returning from battle and were part of a festive celebration. The dances and the drums served as accompaniment for the antiphonal singing between a lead female singer and a chorus or between two choruses. According to the textual narratives, in the early tradition the performers were exclusively women. While in the later traditions both men and women were involved. The common scene was one in which the lead singer came out from the city or dwelling to greet the victor and to make a joyful celebration.

Several elements suggest a high level of “professionalism”. The proficiency needed for the dances and to play the instruments, the expectations of the audience in the celebrative context and the length and complexity of the longer poetry in the longer Victory Songs all imply a certain amount of training, at least for the leader of the Song. It seems evident that the same high level of skill was not required of

the chorus.

### Musical Sound

The actual sound of the Victory Song performances is unknown. While the practice of recording spoken words in writings has allowed for the preservation of poetry, the same cannot be said for the recording of musical sounds. We do have some available sources for speculating about the musical sounds of the Victory Songs. The sources of information are:

1) the analysis of ancient texts with attention being paid to indications of performance... 2) the identification of archaeological artifacts as instruments and their examination by musicians and 3) the comparison of biblical references with contemporary practices in the Middle East...<sup>17</sup>

Ethnomusicological methods can help to define some of the parameters of the Victory Song performance. With its modes, meters, melodic phrases and sounds, it would seem that the music has its own characteristic moods and forms.

The classic Near Eastern music of today uses various metrical patterns: regular beats, complex meters and free improvisation. The dominant form is the maqam.

Each maqam is characterized by a particular melodic range, mood, typical phrases and progressions as well

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<sup>17</sup> H.G. Farmer, "The Influence of Music: from Arabic Sources" (Proceedings of the Musical Association 52, 1926) ; George Adam Smith, The Early Poetry of Israel in its Physical and Social Origins (London, 1927)

as rhythmic formulas and tempo.<sup>18</sup>

A. Z. Idelsohn states that the "...maqam is closely related to the modes used in synagogue worship..."<sup>19</sup> Biblical scholars have long debated the existence of meter in Hebrew Biblical poetry. Although the common consensus is that there is no fixed meter, most scholars agree that there is some symmetry which results from the syntax of the Hebrew language.<sup>20</sup> Songs, especially those accompanied by instruments or dancing, are not necessarily governed by the same rules as other Biblical poetry. Poethig suggests for these songs that

...the model of metrical "folk songs" is more helpful. In such songs, the music dictates the rhythm, and the meter of the poetic line is shaped to conform to the music, though flexibility is necessary in both words and music to achieve the proper "fit."<sup>21</sup>

It seems most logical that the Victory Songs were sung to short music lines adapted to fit the length of the poetic line. As R. B. Cootes asserts,

...the verse line was not measured in stresses, beats, syllables, or words, but by some nonverbal component of oral

<sup>18</sup> Johanna Spector, "Classical Music in Egypt with Special References to Maqamat," Ethnomusicology 14 (1970) p. 249.

<sup>19</sup> A. Z. Idelsohn, Jewish Music and its Historical Development, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929)

<sup>20</sup> G.B. Gray, The Forms of Hebrew Poetry, (New York: KTAV, 1972), James L. Kugel, The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), M. O'Connor, Hebrew Verse Structure, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980).

<sup>21</sup> Eunice Blanchard Poethig, The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel, Ph. D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1985 p. 102.



performance such as rhythm or musical phrasing.<sup>22</sup>

There is evidence for several options of tonal organizations in the Victory Songs: the heptatonic, the pentatonic, a pattern dominated by a single tone, and small scope melodic modules. The heptatonic scale—a seven note scale in an octave—existed as early as the third or second millennium BCE.<sup>23</sup> This scale is composed of whole and half tones whose locations vary to create different sounds. Evidence for usage of this scale does exist in translated cuneiform texts, but only in the context of the stringed instruments which were marginal to Canaanite culture. Therefore, there is no direct evidence to support the origin of the Victory Song in this scale. The same evidence exists for the use of the pentatonic-five toned scale. Since the heptatonic and pentatonic scales are both linked to a stringed instrument, their function within the drum sounds of the Victory Songs are limited at best. The third possibility for tonal organization revolves around a single tone. This form of vocal music is still evident in some Oriental Jewish communities and is common in chant. An examination of the chant used by the Yemenite community for Exodus 14 and 15 has a focus of 3 tones. Idelsohn

<sup>22</sup> R. B. Coote "Tradition, Oral, Old Testament." The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement, ed. by Keith Crim. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976) pp. 914-916

<sup>23</sup> Eric Werner, "The Origins of the Eight Modes of Music," Hebrew Union College Annual Vol 21 (1948).



comments that,

...the very smallness of the compass of the Yemenite song mode testifies to its antiquity...<sup>24</sup>

The final option for tonal organization depends on short melodic phrases which are repeated. The intervals are usually smaller than a fifth. Although it is doubtful that the ancient Israelite drum was tuned in the same manner, the frame drums of the Central Asian doira produce tones which are a fourth apart. These short melodic phrases are sung repeatedly in an antiphonal manner in many Yemenite folk songs.

Whatever the tonal patterns, the major components of Biblical chant as we know it today are melodic motifs or set groups of tones. This system is dated to antiquity by the system of accents which represent the melodic motifs. There is a consensus among musicologists that,

...these melodic motifs were derived from ancient folk songs which were later systemized into modes and systems of motifs...<sup>25</sup>

It is, of course, difficult to determine whether the music originated in the "folk setting" and moved into the temple or court where it was

<sup>24</sup> A. Z. Idelsohn, Thesaurus of Hebrew -Oriental Melodies vol.1: Yemen, trans. from German (New York, KTAV, 1973) p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> R. Lachman, Jewish Cantillation and Song in the Isle of Djerba, (Jerusalem: Archives of Oriental Music, The Hebrew University, 1940) p. 81. A. Z. Idelsohn, Jewish Music and its Historical Development, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929)

refined or if the style originated in the temple and was adapted by the "folk."

The emphasis of the Victory Songs was on the communication of ideas and of a story. The preservation of the texts indicates the centrality of the vocal component of the songs. The use of the "drum" implies a metrical musical accompaniment. The poetic form of the short parallel phrases gives some guidance as to the rhythmical structure. Given the absence of stringed instruments, it is more likely that the melodies were limited to a narrow range of tones, circulating above and below a key note. The poetic structure and the cantillation of today point towards a Victory Song tradition consisting of short melodic phrases that indicated the beginning, middle and end of the lines. Given the significance of the message the singers were trying to impart, repetition was necessary to insure comprehension on the part of the audience.

In antiphonal forms, refrains, choruses or the direct repetition of a leader's lines, repetition offers an opportunity for an audience to take part with ease in the act of performance.<sup>26</sup>

Curt Sachs places the Victory Song in,

...a primitive stage in which emotion and free effusion shaped the pattern of melody and rhythm...Everyone in Israel

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<sup>26</sup> Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977) p. 129.

sang...Music exalted and wailed...<sup>27</sup>

Sachs uses the word primitive to describe a musical style that is lacking structure and formula. However, given the highly developed musical culture of the Victory Song performance, it does not seem appropriate to call Israel's Victory Songs "primitive."

### Women as Transmitters of an Oral Tradition

The texts previously surveyed show women as performers of Victory Songs. Women's choruses or prominent female leaders with a singing/dancing group, greeted victorious military leaders or led the people in praising Adonai for victory over their enemies. The sociological setting of the Victory Songs suggests that the Songs were spontaneous oral compositions created at the moment victory was known. To fully understand the role of women as conveyers of the Victory Song tradition, we must survey the various theories of oral composition and of transmission. The relationship between oral composition, transmission of the composition and the written form of the Songs is not easy to reconstruct. D. N. Freedman summarizes the problem,

Rarely if ever can oral and written categories be kept separate especially in the Near East where writing was a compulsive

<sup>27</sup> Curt Sachs, *The Rise of Music in the Ancient World-- East And West*. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1943) p. 59.

habit long before the time of the patriarchs.<sup>28</sup>

The Victory Songs are preserved within a written narrative even though their origin is oral. It is rare for an oral composition to be performed in its original form by anyone other than the composer. Each performer would modify the composition. At some point, a given version of the composition is written down.

Israel's Victory Songs emerged from a relatively sophisticated tradition of poetic and musical composition as well as techniques for transmission. To understand how the Victory Songs came into being and how they were preserved, we will explore the methods by which "folk" music can be composed and transmitted.

Albert Lord, having developed Milman Parry's analysis of Homeric epics, states that,

...poetry with a high percentage of formulaic elements is assumed to have been composed in performance...the existence of repetition becomes not just a sign of a method of poetic composition, but implies a singer who composes songs during a performance using traditional formulas...<sup>29</sup>

Ruth Finnegan argues, however, that ,

Orally composed poetry does not have to be poetry composed in performance by means of formulaic phrases and lines.<sup>30</sup>

28 David Noel Freedman, "Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah." Pottery, Poetry and Prophecy. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1980) p. 9.

29 Albert P. Lord, The Singer of Tales, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960)

30 Ruth Finnegan, Oral Poetry, p. 80.

This oral-formulaic theory applies to both composition and transmission. Although this model was not developed around the study of Hebrew poetry, it can be usefully applied to the studying of the composition of biblical poetry and songs. Lord describes this process as,

...the building of metrical lines and half lines by means of formulas and formulaic expressions and the building of songs by the use of themes i.e., repeated incidents and descriptive passages...<sup>31</sup>

Although there are scholars who do not find the oral-formulaic theory of composition useful for studying the Victory Songs, the narratives themselves support this idea. None of the texts refer to written activity preceding the oral performance. This lack of information about the composition of the songs does not preclude the possibility that the songs were composed in some formula prior to the performance. On the other hand, it is reasonable to conclude that the composition was oral and spontaneous during performance. The compositions were certainly the work of an individual among the choruses of women singers. While the chorus might repeat a short couplet or phrase, it is unlikely that the group would engage in spontaneous composition.

It is likely that the composers used familiar established folk

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<sup>31</sup> Albert P. Lord, The Singer of Tales, p. 4.

melodies consisting of 2-4 melodic units repeated again and again with variations suited to the text. An analysis for the Yemenite melody used to chant Exodus 15 as presented by Idelsohn reveals a short line beginning with a voice rise, repetition of the key tone to fit the text and a concluding cadence.

Figure 1



Early singers probably had a great freedom of choice in the use of available melodies. The fact that the Victory Songs were accompanied by drums and by dances suggests that there was some rhythmical conformity, but that the motifs were flexible to accommodate the poetic line.

The early Victory Song singers were a group responsible for creating and preserving an oral tradition. Their performance required that at least the leader and some of the group be trained and skilled in poetry and music. Once the ritual was fixed, the women composers of the Victory Songs in their early stages were also the preservers of the tradition. The texts that are preserved in the Bible are probably records of a developed process of oral composition that took place among the women who sang Israel's

## Victory Songs.

### Choruses and Leaders

The victory songs were performed by choruses of women; sometimes led by prominent women. These groups of women are called "women", "dancers", "performers", "companions", "princesses", and "daughters". The most general of these terms is **הַנָּשִׁים**, "the women." In Exodus 15:21 "the women" follow Miriam's lead and in 1 Samuel 18:6 "the women come forth" from the cities. Stanley Gevirtz expresses one interpretation:

Following a successful military campaign against the Philistines, the returning Israelite warriors were met by their women-folk...This activity of women, hailing returning victors with music and dancing, appears to have been traditional in early Israel...<sup>32</sup>

It would seem that this interpretation of the Victory Song setting is somewhat limited. In 1 Samuel 18, the women address Saul and David not the menfolk. Victory Songs praise the victorious leader, Adonai, the tribal leaders or the king. They are also addressed to the community as in Exodus 15. Here the women are not welcoming victorious menfolk, rather they are leading the community in celebration of their salvation from Pharaoh's troupes. The terms **הַמְּחֻלָּוֹת**, "the choristers/dancers" and **הַנָּשִׁים הַמְּשַׁחֲקוֹת**, "the

<sup>32</sup> Stanley Gevirtz, "Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel." Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 32 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963) p. 15



performing women" from 1 Samuel 18:6 and 7 illustrate the performative nature of the women's chorus. The primary function of these choruses was to lead people in a jubilant celebration through joyous singing and dancing. The terms רעות, "companions" and שרות, "princesses" are used to describe the women who were handmaidens of prominent Israelite women. Their inclusion in the narratives surrounding the Victory Songs makes it possible to assume that they were also involved in the choruses of these prominent women.

Jephtah's daughter is accompanied by her רעות in Judges 11:37-38. Although only Jephtah's daughter greets her father, the plural use of the terms for drums and dances suggests that she is escorted by her companions. The שרות are clearly part of the court which supports Sisera's mother in Judges 5:29.

#### Judges 5:29

29 חכמות שרותיה תענינה אף-היא תשיב

אמריה לה.

29 The wisest of her ladies give answer;  
She too, replies to herself...

The direct involvement of only the wisest of the ladies in an



exchange with Sisera's mother suggests the possibility that some musical expression existed since the same term חַמּוֹת is used in Jeremiah 9:16 in reference to skilled lamenting women. Scholars interpret the term בָּנוֹת, "daughters of" in two different ways. The first suggested use of the term is one of kinship.<sup>33</sup> The word is used literally to describe a familial relationship within the "house" of Israel as in Exodus 2:1:

1 וַיֵּלֶךְ אִישׁ מִבֵּית לֵוִי וַיִּקַּח אֶת-בֵּת-לֵוִי

1 A man of the house of Levi went and took a daughter of (the house of) Levi.

Similarly the term בָּנוֹת may also have referred to members of a group as in 2 Samuel 1:20:

20...פֶּן תִּשְׂמַחְנָה בָּנוֹת פְּלִשְׁתִּים פֶּן תַּעֲלֹזְנָה בָּנוֹת הָעַרְלִים

20...daughters of the Philistine rejoice

Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult.

The second interpretation of the term בָּנוֹת suggests a more institutionalized professional meaning.<sup>34</sup> Haldar proposes that members of professional orders were called the "sons" of the founder

<sup>33</sup> Eunice Blanchard Poethig, The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel, Ph. D. Dissertation, Union Theological Seminary, 1985 p. 176

<sup>34</sup> Alfred Haldar, Associations of Cult Prophets among the Ancient Semites, (Uppsala Almquist & Boktrycker, 1974) pp. 134-135

or leader of the guild. In his discussion, he cites examples of this use for members of musical guilds. One example of this language is found in 1 Chronicles 25:9-31 where lots are parceled out to the guilds. The formula here refers to the leader of the guild and his "sons". In verse 9, we read, "The first lot fell to Asaph- to Joseph; the second to Gedaliah, he and his brothers and his sons." The only specific mention of women as part of a musical guild occurs in 1 Chronicles 25:5-6. "...G-d gave Heman fourteen sons and three daughters. All these were under the charge of their father for the singing in the House of the Lord." While the "daughters of Israel" that appear in Judges 11:40 are a specialized group who engage in some annual ritual for Jephtah's daughter, it is not clear that they are connected to a specific guild or association. What does seem clear is that the term בָּנוֹת in the context of the Victory Songs always refers to a group of women. The emphasis of the "daughters of Israel" in 1 Samuel 1:24 and Judges 11:40 and the "daughters of the Philistines" in 2 Samuel 1:20 is on the female members of the nation. This distinction between "all Israel" and "the daughters of Israel" implies that it was possibly an expected role for the women to participate in the singing of Victory Songs.

The two named leaders of the Victory Songs, Miriam and

Deborah, both had links with a prophetic tradition and are referred to as “mother” and “prophet.” The unnamed leaders, Jephthah’s daughter and Sisera’s mother were from prominent military families. In Judges 5, Deborah is called “mother.” Many scholars have discussed the use of this particular term. Some have argued that this title suggests that Deborah is like a tribal leader as in Judges 17:10, although there are no passages in which a tribal leader is called “father.”<sup>35</sup> Others connect the use of “mother” with Deborah’s religious authority which puts her “...on par with the priest who is given the title “father.”<sup>36</sup> Baruch Halpern suggests that the tribes of Canaan were divided into “mothers’ houses” and that Deborah was the “mother” of that tribe which would develop into Israel.<sup>37</sup> All of these interpretations give the term “mother” some leadership or primacy among the people on a par with male leaders such as a priest or military leader.

Both Deborah and Miriam are called נביאָה, “prophet.”

Deborah’s role as a “woman prophet” is her primary function as it is the first designation given her in Judges 4:4. In her oracles to Barak, it appears that the singers of the Victory Songs took delight in

<sup>35</sup> Abraham Malamat, Charismatic Leadership in the Book of Judges ed., F. M. Cross (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1976)

<sup>36</sup> Walther Eichrodt, Theology of the Old Testament translated by J. A. Baker (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961)

<sup>37</sup> Baruch Halpern, The Emergence of Israel in Canaan (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983)

celebrating the victories of women. Although Barak is promised the victory, it is Yael who delivers the decisive blow to Sisera. It is Yael who fulfills Deborah's word that Sisera would be defeated by a woman. It is not clear, from Judges 4, whether or not Deborah's title of "woman prophet" has much to do with her role as a Victory Song leader. The same ambiguity arises in the application of the term "prophetess" to Miriam. It seems that by giving judgments and oracles, her role was similar to Deborah's. Scholars note that the term "prophet" came into use in the late monarchy.<sup>38</sup> So while the title "prophetess" may not reveal much about Miriam or Deborah specifically, it does reflect the importance of their role to the women's traditions and to the traditions of the community at large in the late monarchy.

Jephthah's daughter and Sisera's mother are both prominent women in the family of military leaders. In Judges 11:34-39 and 5:28-30 respectively, both women are accompanied by רָעוֹת, "companions" or שָׂרוֹת, "princesses." Both are seen at home waiting for the return of a victorious leader. In Judges 11:34-39, Jephthah's daughter "comes out to greet him" with "drums and dances." As previously discussed, it seems that the plural forms of the "drums

<sup>38</sup> B. D. Napier, "Prophet," The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible 3 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1963) p. 906

and dances" implies that her "companions" were with her at the time of this greeting. In Judges 5:28-29, Sisera's mother and her "ladies/princesses" are looking out of the window of the house as they wait for Sisera's return. The conversation is responsorial as Sisera's mother asks,

28 בַּעַד הַחֲלוֹן נִשְׁקָפָה וְתִיבֵב אִם סִיסְרָה בַּעַד הָאֲשָׁנָב

מִדּוּעַ בָּשָׁשׁ רָכְבוּ לְבוֹא מִדּוּעַ אַחֲרָיו פָּעַמִּי מִרְכַּבוֹתָיו

29 חֲכָמוֹת שְׂרוּתֶיהָ תַעֲנִינָה אֵף-הִיא תִשִּׁיב אֲמַרֶיהָ לָהּ

30 הֲלֹא יִמָּצְאוּ יַחֲלָקוּ שְׁלָל רַחֵם רַחֲמָתִים לְרֹאשׁ גִּבּוֹר

שְׁלָל צִבְעִים לְסִיסְרָא שְׁלָל צִבְעִים רַקְמָה

צִבְעֵי רַקְמָתִים לְצֹאֲרֵי שְׁלָל

28 Why is his chariot so long in coming?

Why so late the clatter of his wheels?

29 The wisest of her ladies give answer

She too, replies to herself:

30 They must be dividing the spoil they have found...

While these passages may reflect a simple conversation, the poetic structure of the lines, suggests that they may be part of a Victory Song.

In all of the aforementioned texts, the Victory Songs are led by

women whose prominence is already known. The women lead Victory Songs because of their prominence; they do not become prominent because they lead victory songs.

The social setting for the singing of Victory Songs varies throughout the texts that we have studied. In Exodus 15 and Judges 4 and 5, the women are a part of the central establishment. The Texts from Samuel imply that women supported David's bid for the Kingship. While there is no concrete evidence to support the existence of a definite guild of women who sang Victory Songs, the texts describe what appears to be a traditional role for women in the community. The texts picture groups of women and their leaders performing a distinctive musical tradition associated with the celebration of victory.

## 2. LAMENTS

A study of Biblical lament reveals three distinct types of laments: communal lament, individual lament, and funeral dirges. Communal and individual laments share a common working definition. Each is

[a] composition whose verbal content indicates that it was composed to be used by and/or on behalf of a community (or individual) to express both complaint, and sorrow and grief over some perceived calamity, physical or cultural, which had befallen or was about to befall them (or him) and to appeal to G-d for deliverance.<sup>39</sup>

A funeral dirge is defined as a specific composition whose,

... verbal content indicates that it was composed in honor of a deceased person sometimes eulogizing the individual, sometimes merely bewailing the loss. It was apparently used by either the individual or by groups at funeral observances.<sup>40</sup>

These definitions are intended to include thought and mood, Sitz im Leben, and linguistic structures. A study of the genre reveals that the communal laments, individual laments, and funeral dirges are therefore related in form and in their usage. The three varieties are often linked and can be grouped together in a genre termed laments. As Ferris asserts,

The notion of genre has a breadth of meaning in Biblical studies. On the one hand its terminology is applied to the larger

<sup>39</sup> Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East. Ph.D. Dissertation, Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1984 (The Society of Biblical Literature, 1992) p. 10

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p. 11

categories of the literature. On the other hand, it may refer to more narrowly defined groups of compositions and focus on structure or scheme.<sup>41</sup>

For this purpose of studying women and laments in the Bible, the genre is defined "...in a way that is consistent with its use in literary analysis in general."<sup>42</sup> The genre is "...used to designate a selection of literary compositions which share a common theme and mood, and similar intent and function."<sup>43</sup>

While the laments preserved in the Bible have primarily been attributed to male authors, the performance practice of the lament genre was not in the hands of men only, and probably not even primarily so. To fully understand the role of weeping in the ritual life of biblical women and their communities, we must explore the texts that contain information about the performance and sociological function of the laments. It is interesting to note that while expressions of personal sorrow are present in the Torah, the language and ritual associated with the lament tradition does not appear in the Five Books. Thus all of the texts will come from the Prophets or the Writings.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>42</sup> A. Marino, "Toward a Definition of Literary Genres," in "Yearbook of Comparative Criticism, vol. 8, Theories of Literary Genre", ed., J. P. Strelka (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978)

<sup>43</sup> Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Ph.D. Dissertation, Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1984 (The Society of Biblical Literature, 1992) p. 9



In 2 Chronicles 35:25, male and female singers lament over the death of Josiah.

2 Chronicles 35:25

25 וַיִּקְוֶן יִרְמְיָהוּ עַל-יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ וַיֹּאמְרוּ  
כָּל-הַשָּׂרִים וְהַשֹּׁרוֹת בְּקִינוֹתֵיהֶם עַל  
יֹאשִׁיָּהוּ עַד-הַיּוֹם וַיִּתְּנוּם לַחֵק עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל  
וְהֵם כְּתוּבִים עַל-הַקִּינוֹת

25 Jeremiah composed laments for Josiah which all the singers, male and female, recited in their laments for Josiah, as is done to this day; they became customary in Israel and were incorporated into the laments.

This text shows the connection between a funeral dirge and a communal lament. While composed for the specific occasion of the death of Josiah, the dirge becomes a part of the body of communal laments of the people. According to this passage, it was not unusual for a lament to be used on the occasion of more than one disaster or to be used in memory of the original occasion. However, there is no evidence indicating that this practice was fixed. It is noteworthy that females are mentioned in this later retelling of an earlier story. The retention of the women can be understood as an indication of their cultural and historical importance. The male and female

mourners, people skilled in lamenting, can also be found in Amos 5:16 .

Amos 5:16

16 לכן כה-אמר יהוה אלהי צבאות אדני  
בכל רחבות מספד ובכל-חוצות יאמרו  
הו-הו וקראו אכר אל-אבל ומספד אל-ידעי נהי

16 Assuredly,

Thus said the Lord, My Lord, the G-D of Hosts:

In every square there shall be lamenting,

In every street cries of "Alas, Alas!"

And the farm hand shall be called to mourn,

And those skilled in wailing to lament.

This combination of male and female mourners found in 2 Chronicles and in Amos, "...parallels the general situation observed in Mesopotamia."<sup>44</sup> In Zechariah 12:12, men and women lament, but they do so apart from one another.

Zechariah 12:12

12 וספדה הארץ משפחות משפחות לבד  
משפחת בית-דויד לבד ונשיהם לבד...

12 The land shall wail, each family by itself: The family of

<sup>44</sup> J. Morgenstern, Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions Among the Semites (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College, 1966) pp. 164-166

David by themselves and their womenfolk by themselves...  
 The distinction between the **בית-דויד** and the **נשיהם** is significant as the **בית-דויד** seems to refer to the men only, not to the entire family or line of descent. While this is clearly an example of a communal lament in which the entire community wails for "those who are slain," the explicit separation of men and women suggests that the rituals may have been different for the men and for the women.

In a number of texts only women are mentioned as lamenting as part of a mourning ritual. Like 2 Chronicles 35:25, Judges 11:37-40 reveals a lament that becomes a part of a customary ritual. In this text, the original lament and the ongoing ritual belong exclusively to women.

Judges 11: 37-40

37 וַתֹּאמֶר אֶל-אֲבִיהָ יַעֲשֶׂה לִּי הַדָּבָר הַזֶּה

הַרְפָּה מִפָּנַי שָׁנִים חֲדָשִׁים וְאַלֶכָה

וַיְרַדְתִּי עַל-הַהָרִים וְאַבְכָּה עַל בְּתוּלִי אֲנָכִי וְרַעִיתִי (רַעוּתִי)

38 וַיֹּאמֶר לָכִי וַיִּשְׁלַח אוֹתָהּ שְׁנֵי חֲדָשִׁים

וַתֵּלֶךְ הִיא וְרַעוּתֶיהָ וַתִּבְכֶּה עַל-בְּתוּלֶיהָ עַל-הַהָרִים

39 וַיְהִי מִקֵּץ שְׁנַיִם חֳדָשִׁים וַתָּשָׁב אֶל

אָבִיהָ וַיַּעַשׂ לָהּ אֶת נִדְרוֹ אֲשֶׁר נָדָר

וְהָיָא לֹא-יִדְעָה אִישׁ וְתָהִי חֶק-בִּישְׂרָאֵל

40 מִיָּמִים יְמִימָה תִּלְכְּנָה בְּנוֹת יִשְׂרָאֵל

לְתַנּוֹת לִבָּת יִפְתָּח הַגִּלְעָדִי אַרְבַּעַת יָמִים בַּשָּׁנָה

37 She said to her father, "Do this thing for me:

let me be for two months, and I will go with my companions to the mountains and lament and bewail my maidenhood."

38 "Go," he replied. He let her go for two months, and she and her companions went and bewailed her maidenhood upon the hills.

39 After two months' time, she returned to her father, and he did to her as he had vowed. She had never known a man. So it became a custom in Israel

40 for the maidens of Israel to go every year, for four days in the year, and chant dirges for the daughter of Jephthah the Gileadite.

In this passage, weeping and a recurrent women's ritual are both explicitly stated. In 2 Samuel 1:24, "the daughters of Israel" are called to weep for Saul.

2 Samuel 1:24

24 בנות ישראל אל-שאול בכינה המלבשכם

שני עם-עדנים המעלה עדי זהב על לבושכן

24 Daughters of Israel, Weep over Saul.

Who clothed you in crimson and finery,

Who decked your robes with jewels of gold.

The same בנות appear in Ezekiel 32:16 as they are called upon to intone a dirge.

Ezekiel 32:16

16 קינה היא וקוננה בנות הגוים תקוננה

אותה על-מצרים ועל-כל-המונה תקוננה

אותה נאם אדני יהוה

16 This is a dirge, and it shall be intoned

The daughters of the nations shall intone it

They shall intone it over Egypt and all her multitude

declares the Lord G-D.

Although some scholars have suggested that the term בנות can refer to female members of a specialized guild of musicians,<sup>45</sup> that

<sup>45</sup> Alfred Haldar, Associations of Cult Prophets Among the Ancient Semites. (Uppsala: Almqvist & Boktrycker, 1974) pp. 134-135

meaning is not clear here. What is apparent is that the בנות are the female members of a nation. This distinction between the "daughters" of the nation and "all" of the nation implies that the women were responsible for leading the community in mourning or in lamenting on behalf of the community. This separation parallels that found in Zecahariah 12:12 with the use of the terms בית-דויד and נשיהם. The term בנות is used to designate those who are called upon to lament in Jeremiah 49:3, but in this context, the term refers specifically to the familial relationship.

#### Jeremiah 49:3

3הילילי חשבון כי שדדה-עי צעקנה בנות רבה חגרנה

שקים ספדנה והתשוטטנה בגדרות

מלכם בגולה ילך כהניו ושריו יחזיו

3 Howl, Oh Heshbon, for Ai is ravaged

Cry out Oh daughters of Rabbah! Gird on sackcloth, lament

And run to and fro in the sheepfolds

For Milcom shall go into exile

Together with his priests and attendants.

Jeremiah 9:16-17 and 19-20 are especially informative about the role of women in the lament tradition.

Jeremiah 9:16-17 and 19-20

16 כֹּה אָמַר יְהוָה צְבָאוֹת הַתְּבוֹנְנוּ וְקִרְאוּ

לְמִקְוֵנוֹת וּתְבוֹאִינָה וְאֵל-הַחֲכָמוֹת שְׁלָחוּ וּתְבוֹאִינָה

וְתִמְחַרְנָה וְתִשָּׁנָה עָלֵינוּ נְהִי וְתִרְדְּנָה

עֵינֵינוּ דָמְעָה וְעַפְעֵפֵינוּ יִלּוּ-מֵיִם...

19 כִּי שָׁמְעָה נָשִׁים דְּבַר-יְהוָה וַתִּקַּח אֲזִנָּכֶם

דְּבַר-פִּי וּלְמַדְנָה בְּנִתֵיכֶם נְהִי וְאִשָּׁה רָעוּתָה קִינָה

20 כִּי-עָלָה מוֹת בְּחַלּוֹנֵינוּ בָּא בְּאַרְמְנוֹתֵינוּ

לְהִכְרִית עוֹלָל מִחוּץ בְּחוֹרִים מִרְחֻבוֹת

16 Thus says the Lord of Hosts: Listen!

Summon the dirge singers, let them come;

17 Send for the skilled women, let them come.

Let them quickly start a wailing for us,

That our eyes may run with tears, Our pupils flow with water.

19 Hear, Oh women, the word of the Lord,

Let your ears receive the word of his mouth,

And teach your daughters wailing

And one another lamentation.

20 For death has climbed through our windows,  
Has entered our fortress,  
To cut off babes from the streets,  
Young men from the squares.

These verses from Jeremiah reveal much about the communal function of the women mourners. Verse 17 suggests that, in order for the community to mourn, the women must first begin the lament. The fact that the women are perceived as hearing the words from G-d and not just men, in verse 19 reinforces the perception of their power. Jeremiah first calls for the "the mourning women", "the skilled women" "to start a wailing for us." The women are instructed to "teach your daughters wailing" and to teach "one another lamentation." The נָשִׁים or הַחֲכָמוֹת are to teach the רְעוּתָהּ or בְּנֵי־כֶם the lament. This text suggests a professional group and a process of transmission of the tradition. The term מְקוֹנְנוֹת parallels the term הַחֲכָמוֹת which may indicate that a certain level of skill was required for the execution of the mourning ritual. It appears from this passage that the singing of laments was a trade which had to be studied and was often transmitted from mother to daughter. Athalya Brenner writes, "Women who took up mourning as a



vocation had to learn the formulae of their trade."<sup>46</sup> This idea that the lament tradition is transmitted by a formula adapted to the occasion is supported by other scholars.

During their appearances at funerals, and on similar occasions, the wailing women had to be able to draw on a reservoir of suitable texts on the one hand, on the other hand, to possess the ability to suit these to the circumstances. Thus, they gave the public the opportunity to express their emotions. It is to this function of emotional release which wailing women performed that an appeal is made in Jeremiah 9.<sup>47</sup>

Brenner states that the song found in Jeremiah 9 about death which "has climbed through our windows" is an example of a formula which is borrowed from an Ugaritic myth.<sup>48</sup> Ferris supports this connection between the Ugaritic and Hebrew traditions of lament. He cites texts which contain reference to "weeping women" and "mourning women" who lead the dirges which are apparently taken up by others.<sup>49</sup> This ritual parallels that which is described in Jeremiah 9:16-17.

While there is little literary material available about the musical sounds or performative aspects of the lament tradition, some ideas can be gleaned from the texts. There is a tendency towards the

<sup>46</sup> Athalya Brenner, "The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative" (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of Old Testament, 1985) p. 37

<sup>47</sup> Athalya Brenner and Fokkelen Van Dijk-Hemmes, On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible (Leiden: New York: Brill, 1993) p. 84

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84

<sup>49</sup> Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Ph.D. Dissertation, Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, 1984 (The Society of Biblical Literature, 1992) p. 75

repetition of "Alas, Alas" like that which is found in Amos 5:16.<sup>50</sup> Ferris writes, "...there seems to be merely a howl repeated in perhaps an off-beat cadence."<sup>51</sup> He claims that two things indicate that this off beat cadence may have been a fairly common characteristic. He cites G. B. Grays's discussion of Budde's association of a 3:2 meter with laments.

Gray posits that Budde's main contribution in this regard was to point out 1) the nature of the unequal division of the rhythmical periods and 2) the extent to which the rhythm characteristic of Lamentations occurs elsewhere in the Old Testament...He argued that there was always an uneven balance...the uneven meter is always apparent.<sup>52</sup>

The second line of evidence to support this off beat cadence revolves around the funeral dances of the Egyptians. While this practice is admittedly from a different milieu, E. Lane asserts that the connection is a valid one.

The women would dance with a slow movement, and in an irregular manner; generally pacing about, and raising and depressing the body. This dance was continued for an hour or more and was performed twice or three times in the course of the day.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> See also 1 Kings 13:30, Jeremiah 22:18 and Micah 1:8

<sup>51</sup> Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, p. 76

<sup>52</sup> G. B. Gray, The Forms of Hebrew Poetry as quoted in Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, p. 77

<sup>53</sup> E. Lane, An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians, 5th ed (London: Murray, 1971)

He states that the Hebrew רָקַד is used exclusively to denote a skip, or leap of joy and is used in direct contrast with סָפַד in Ecclesiastes 3:4. He argues that the skipping gait would, in slow motion, produce the "limping funeral dance" similar to that of the Egyptians. There is no definitive evidence to support the claim that the laments were accompanied with instrumentation. However, Ferris maintains that they were probably not recited a Capella.

Given the role of music and musical instruments in other aspects of the social and religious life of the Canaanite-Hebrew culture, it seems reasonable to infer that the Hebrew laments were accompanied by musical instrumentation.<sup>54</sup>

In spite of the uncertainties of the performative elements of the lament tradition, it is clear that they were led by people, often women, who were specially trained to perform the lamentations. The "mourning women" or "dirge singers" were brought in to lead the keening as the community watched or joined in the ritual. The tradition was transmitted from mother to daughter in some formula which was adapted to fit specific occasions.

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<sup>54</sup> Paul Wayne Ferris, Jr., The Genre of Communal Lament in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, p. 87

### 3. COMPARISONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Much of the language used to describe performers of the Victory Songs and Laments is the same in both traditions. These linguistic similarities reveal two closely related traditions which are connected by more than the central role that women play in both. Poethig suggests that the common language implies that the same group of women perform both rituals.

In 2 Samuel 1:20 and 24 the term "daughters" is used both for those who will weep over Saul and those Philistine daughters who will exult over Saul's death. From this statement we learn that the same women who sang victory songs also led laments, a conclusion which can also be drawn from Judges 11:34-40.<sup>55</sup>

Although this definitive conclusion seems tenuous, the similarities in the descriptions of the two traditions cannot be ignored. The use of the term בָּנוֹת in both passages from 2 Samuel 1 does not in itself support the claim made by Poethig that the same women would lead both laments and Victory Songs. What can be inferred from the parallel use of the term is that both victory songs and laments were ascribed to "daughters" of a people. This implication is significant in that it suggests that both traditions are assigned to specialized groups of women who are recognized by the community of which they are a part. Acceptance of Judges 11:34-40

<sup>55</sup> Eunice Blanchard Poethig, The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel, p. 179

as support for Poethig's assertion is dependent on the acceptance of the notion that the רָעוּת, "companions" present in verse 37 are already with Jephthah's daughter in verse 34 as she goes out to greet her father. As previously discussed, this assumption relies solely on the plural forms of the terms for "drums" and "dances" found in verse 34. While this reasoning is certainly plausible, it is not completely convincing. However, if one accepts the supposition that the "companions" are present in verse 34, then it would appear that this particular group of women was versed in both the Victory Song and lament traditions.

In Jeremiah 9:16, the "skilled women" are called upon to start a wailing for the community while the same term is used to describe the women who accompany Sisera's mother in Judges 5:29. As the term חֲכָמוֹת is used in reference to the musical expression of grief in Jeremiah, it is plausible that the use of the same term in Judges 5:29 refers to a musical expression of victory. Judges 5:29 is of particular interest in establishing a connection between the women who sing victory songs and those who lament. Scholars have ascribed the words spoken by Sisera's mother to both traditions. Poethig sees these verses as a victory song.

**This poetic description of Sisera's Mother and her ladies is an important source of information for the development of the**

picture of women as singers of Victory Songs. Recognizing the Victory Song context of the narrative helps resolve some of the problems of translation. Not only is the Sitz im Leben of the Victory Song described, but the performers are identified in performance. The passage contains what are probably some standard phrases or formulas used in the creation of Victory Songs in a performance setting.<sup>56</sup>

Unlike Poethig, Brenner sees the passages as a lament. She associates the "women at the window" found in Judges 5:28 with the lament in Jeremiah 9:20 about death "who climbed into our window."

There is a presence of threatening death...Against this background the words which the mother of Sisera screams while waiting for her son, "Why is his chariot so long in coming? Why so late the clatter of his wheels?" can be recognized more easily as a lament formula, which must have sounded all too familiar to the ears of ancient Israel's women.<sup>57</sup>

Rather than creating ambiguities in the identification of these verses, the debate about their content only serves to reinforce the common elements found in the Victory Songs and laments. So while it is not definite that the same women performed both victory songs and laments, it is reasonable to conclude that the groups of women functioned in a similar way in the society of which they were a part. In both traditions, women led the community in celebration of victory or in lamenting death or defeat or they expressed the emotions on behalf of the community. Because the women played a

<sup>56</sup> Eunice Blanchard Poethig, The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel, p. 136

<sup>57</sup> Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien Van Dijk-Hemmes, On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible, p. 85



similar role in both traditions, it is possible to draw similar conclusions about the women and their function in society.

The function of the Victory Songs and laments in the Bible cannot be understood apart from the awareness of the power of music to influence the beliefs and the actions of the community. The capacity of music to influence the spirit and the role of music in biblical religion has been described by Alfred Sendry.

In contrast to the primitive belief that music and sound were safeguards against evil spirits, music in ancient Israel was perceived as an aid to divine inspiration. Music had the amazing capacity to stir the innermost sentiments of the soul.<sup>58</sup>

The power of music when united with ideas and proclaimed in public can transform music into a vehicle for social change. On the one hand, Victory Songs and laments may have been a tool for preserving the status quo. After a victory, defeat or death, the songs gave the community an opportunity to release the emotions and then return to its normal state. In other instances, however, the songs served as a means for change. In the Victory Song found in 1 Samuel 18:6-7, the women support David in his bid for Kingship making the song an overt statement for political change. In their setting in Early Israel, the theology of the songs made them agents for social or theological change. Directed to G-d, they were means by

<sup>58</sup> Alfred Sendry, Music in Ancient Israel, (London: Vision Press, 1969) p. 495-515

which the people of Israel, led by the women, could restructure their understanding of life after a great triumph or after a disaster. Such a spiritual and social role for these musical expressions is posed in light of their original context in the celebration of victories, defeats or death, all of which are connected to the will of Adonai.

The performative aspects of the Victory Songs and of the laments are significant. Most readers of the Bible assume that the terms "grief" and "joy" refer to the emotional experiences that are congruent with those with which they are familiar. However, as Anderson points out, this is not necessarily the case.

The concepts of grief and joy are thought to reflect internal emotional experiences that are available to all and not determined by other social or cultural variables. Yet the use of these terms in the Bible belies this easy assumption--for example, the curious Hebrew expression, "to do a grief," or its converse "to do a joy." Such phrases suggest that the terms have an important performative element that is often not felt by modern English speakers.<sup>59</sup>

The relationship between emotional perception and behavior is a close one and it is nearly impossible to separate the two. From the texts studied, it is clear that the Victory Songs and the laments were formulaic in origin and adapted to fit a particular event. It appears, that both traditions were studied and passed on to subsequent generations. The behavioral display was not necessarily a

<sup>59</sup> Gary A. Anderson *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Dance: The Expression of Grief and Joy in Israelite Religion*. (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991) pp. 1-7



spontaneous expression of feeling by the women who were called to perform. Huntington and Metcalf suggest that the perception of feelings like joy and grief comes from certain prescribed behaviors. "The movement is from behavior to feeling, rather than the other way around."<sup>60</sup> Of course, there are times when the feelings are strong and felt clearly by the performer. Here the ritual cycle serves to provide boundaries for the individual performers and, more importantly, for the community as a whole. These rites of victory celebration and lament externalized emotions through music and dance and established a finite period during which the sentiments could be expressed.

The Victory Song and lament traditions give evidence that the communities of which they were a part gave real attention to the contributions of women in the society. Poethig states,

The fact that later theological and historical reflection did not totally write over the evidence is testimony to the authority of the texts, and perhaps, the recognition of the accuracy of the tradition.<sup>61</sup>

While some scholars debate about the laws which governed the relationships of women to the family, depicting Israelite women as dependent and usually inferior, in a male-centered and male

<sup>60</sup> Richard Huntington and Paul Metcalf, Celebrations of Death, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979) p. 23-24

<sup>61</sup> Eunice Blanchard Poethig, The Victory Song Tradition of the Women of Israel, p. 247

dominated society<sup>62</sup>, their role as creators and transmitters of the two traditions secured for them a place in this structure. Carol Meyers asserts that,

Despite the many influences leading to the emergence of male dominance in local as well as national settings, women still appear in occasional leadership roles even in the biblical record. Those women should be viewed not as the exceptions but rather as the representation of perhaps a larger group of publicly active females whose identity was lost because of the male-controlled canonical process.<sup>63</sup>

Although these women singer-composers were professionals, they were not supported by the community at large like the priests or other critical personnel such as metallurgists.<sup>64</sup> They performed as the occasion demanded, not on a fixed schedule. The tradition of women learning the necessary skills for composition and performance of the victory songs and laments is well known in biblical Israel. The skills were transmitted from generation to generation in some formula and were adapted to fit specific occasions. If the men were called to battle, it would be the women who were awaiting their return to celebrate their victory or to mourn their defeat. The fragments of these songs found in the Bible,

<sup>62</sup> Phyllis Bird, "Images of Women in the Old Testament," in Religion and Sexism: Images of Women in the Jewish and Christian Traditions, ed. by Rosemary Radford Ruether (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) pp. 41-88

<sup>63</sup> Carol Meyers, Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) pp. 162-164

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160-165

reveal theologically significant content. Therefore, the function of the women and their songs was both cultural and religious.

In conclusion, it is clear that women played a significant role in the emotional life of the community at large. Common performative elements and language found in the texts reveal that they were responsible for the performance of songs that celebrated victory or mourned death and defeat. There is much evidence to support the claim that women composed the Victory Songs and laments as well. The ongoing appearance of women at the center of these traditions allows us to appreciate their role as transmitters of the rituals. It is clear that in both traditions, the women needed a certain level of proficiency. Although a definite group of skilled women are described in association with the laments, no such definite guild is described in the Victory Songs. What is evident are two distinct cultural traditions in which women sang publicly to Adonai to celebrate victory or to mourn defeat. These rituals belonged primarily, if not exclusively, to the women of the community who were responsible for the composition, performance and transmission of the traditions.

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