

THE FUNCTION OF THE WOMEN'S VICTORY SONG IN 1 SAMUEL

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Abstract: *Containing only six Hebrew words, the victory song of the women (“Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands”) punctuates David’s wilderness narrative at three critical junctures (1 Sam 18:7, 21:12 [11], and 29:5). Why is this song heard three times? What functions does the song serve? This article examines the victory song of the women within the narrative of David’s fugitive years, arguing that the women’s song functions both negatively and positively in the narratives of Samuel. Negatively, the song is responsible for inciting jealousy within Saul, thereby commencing Saul’s persecution of David. The song is also what causes David to feign madness before Achish. Due to the song’s emphasis, Philistines fail to stop in their attack on Saul and the Israelites. Positively, the song reminds David of his calling in a time when his faith wavers, rescues David from finding refuge with the Philistines, and prevents him from joining them in fighting against Saul and his fellow Israelites.*

Key words: *David, Saul, Goliath, Victory Song of the Women, Holy War, Miriam’s Song, 1 Samuel 16, 1 Samuel 21, 1 Samuel 29, Deborah’s Song*

The singing of hymns, according to David Barshinger, played a vital role in the revivals of Northampton, Massachusetts, starting in 1736.¹ Puritan preacher and pastor Jonathan Edwards testifies, “There was scarce any part of divine worship wherein God’s saints among us had grace so drawn forth and their hearts lifted up, as in singing the praises of God.”² Edwards even notes that during the time of the revival, his congregation adopted a new style of singing that involved “three parts of music, and the women a part by themselves.”³ Edwards’s belief in the power of singing, including the singing of women, finds affinity with the writer of the book of Samuel, who begins with the song of Hannah (2:1–10), a song that contains ten verses, making it the longest song in the Hebrew Bible sung by a woman.⁴

Then in 1 Samuel 18:7 when King Saul and his men return home after a victory over the Philistines, they are greeted by the women of Israel singing: “Saul has

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¹ David Barshinger, *Jonathan Edwards and the Psalms: A Redemptive Historical Vision of Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 75

² Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 4: *The Great Awakening*, ed. C. C. Goen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 151.

³ Edwards, *The Great Awakening*, 151.

⁴ Joan E. Cook, *Hannah’s Desire, God’s Design: Early Interpretations of the Story of Hannah*, JSOTSS 282 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 45.

slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.”⁵ This chorus is repeated twice more in 1 Samuel, specifically, 21:12 (11) and 29:5.

The song not only appears with frequency, but it also orchestrates the events of David’s fugitive years.⁶ When the song is first introduced in 1 Samuel 18:7, it triggers so much anger in King Saul that David has to escape from Saul’s parlous oppression, thus commencing David’s wilderness years. The song then makes a resurgence in 21:11, when David is about to decide to reside among the Philistines. This time the song incited so much fear in David that he feigned insanity to get away from King Achish. Finally, before David is drafted into the Philistine army to fight against Saul and the Israelites, the women’s song makes another comeback, this time rescuing David from having to fight against his own people (29:1–11). Why does this song have such power in directing the movements of David during his time in the wilderness?

This article explores the function of this song within the wilderness narrative of David. Why is the song of the women repeated at critical junctures of David’s wilderness experience? What functions does this song serve? We will answer these questions in two steps. First, we will analyze certain characteristics of divine warrior victory songs as performed by women in the Hebrew Bible. We will then examine how the songs of the women function within 1 Samuel 18:7, 21:12 (11), and 29:5.

I. VICTORY SONGS AS PERFORMED BY WOMEN IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Dating back to the 1901 work of Schwally, scholars have written extensively on the issue of holy war in the Hebrew Bible.⁷ Yahweh is depicted as the divine warrior who fights on behalf of his people, bringing the victory. In such combats, songs play an integral part. According to Longman, songs are utilized in three ways: first of all, songs are sometimes sung before a battle as the people of God cry out to Yahweh pleading for his help.⁸ Many of the Psalms that contain the phrase

⁵ All English Bible citations are from the NIV unless otherwise noted.

⁶ David Wolpe, *David: The Divided Heart*, Jewish Lives (New Haven: Yale University, 2014), 29–56.

⁷ Friedrich Schwally, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel: Semitische Kriegsaltertümer* (Leipzig: Dieterich’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, Theodor Weicher, 1901); Gerhard von Rad, *Der Heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1952); Patrick D. Miller Jr., *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); Duane L. Christensen, *Transformations of the War Oracle in Old Testament Prophecy*, HDR 3 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1975); Paul Hanson, *The Dawn of Apocalyptic: The Historical and Sociological Roots of Jewish Apocalyptic Eschatology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); W. R. Millar, *Isaiah 24–27 and the Origin of Apocalyptic*, HSM 11 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976); John J. Collins, “The Mythology of Holy War in Daniel and the Qumran War Scroll: A Point of Transition in Jewish Apocalyptic,” *VT* 25.3 (1975): 586–612; Douglas Stuart, “The Sovereign’s Day of Conquest,” *BASOR* 221 (1976): 159–64; Millard C. Lind, *Yahweh Is a Warrior: The Theology of Warfare in Ancient Israel* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1980); Sa-Moon Kang, *Divine War in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East*, BZAW 177 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989); Tremper Longman III and Daniel G. Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, Studies in OT Biblical Theology (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); Thomas B. Dozeman, *God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Charlie Trimm, *Fighting for the King and the Gods: A Survey of Warfare in the Ancient Near East*, RBS 88 (Atlanta: SBI, 2017).

⁸ Tremper Longman III, “Psalm 98: A Divine Warrior Victory Song,” *JETS* 27.3 (1984): 274.

“Arise, O Lord” are examples of such songs (e.g., Pss 3, 7, 10, and 132). Second, songs are sometimes performed during the battle to express the singers’ hope in God’s protection during the war (e.g., Ps 27). Jehoshaphat, who sends a band of singers in front of the army as it marches into combat is one such example (2 Chr 20:21).

Finally, songs are also often sung after God has secured the victory for his people. Songs that fall into this category abound: Psalm 18, 21, 24, 29, 47, 68, 76, 96, 97, 98, 114, 124, 125, and 136.⁹ Outside the Psalter, victory songs can be found in Numbers 21:27–30 and Habakkuk 3. In some of these songs, women play an important role as the musical celebrants.¹⁰ Meyers points out that women are commissioned in Psalm 68:12–13 (11–12) to sing out the news of Yahweh’s victory in holy war.¹¹ Moreover, in Judges 11:34, the daughter of Jephthah greets her father by beating hand-drums and dancing as Jephthah returns home victorious from his battle against the Ammonites.

In terms of what the women sang, Miriam’s song, which is sung after Yahweh’s victory over the Egyptians at the sea (Exod 15:21), and Deborah’s song, which is performed after defeating Jabin, king of Canaan (Judg 5), are most instructive. These two songs, as Hauser observes, are the most “extensive victory songs we possess, each celebrating Israel’s conquest in a particular battle.”¹² If we compare these two songs, three observations can be gleaned about divine victory songs.

First, God is the protagonist of such songs. Though human involvements are mentioned, God is unequivocally the victor of the battle. Miriam’s song opens with a call to sing to Yahweh (Exod 15:21). For Miriam, it is Yahweh and not the waves that plunge the Egyptian army and their horses to their demise. Whereas the sea is often personified as an agent of chaos in Hebrew poetry, not only is the sea passive it is also portrayed as having no threat to Yahweh at all.¹³

Similarly, the role of Yahweh is central in Deborah’s song in Judges 5. The song opens with a heavy emphasis on Israel’s victorious God: the tetragrammaton, for instance, is used six times in verses 2–5, at least once in each verse.¹⁴ This is

⁹ Longman, “Psalm 98,” 274.

¹⁰ Susan Niditch, *Judges*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 134; Susan Ackerman, “Otherworldly Music and the Other Sex,” in *The “Other” in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*, ed. Daniel C. Harlow et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 89.

¹¹ Carol Myers, “Mother to Muse: An Archaeomusicological Study of Women’s Performance in Israel,” in *Recycling Biblical Figures: Papers Read at a NOSTER Colloquium in Amsterdam, 12–13 May 1997*, ed. Athalya Brenner and Jan Willem van Henten, STAR 1 (Leiden: Deo, 1999), 72n61.

¹² Alan J. Hauser, “Two Songs of Victory: A Comparison of Exodus 15 and Judges 5,” in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, ed. Elaine R. Follis, JSOTSup 40 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 265.

¹³ Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of “Chaos” in the Hebrew Bible*, BZNW 341 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005), 78–83; Bernard F. Batto, “The Combat Myth in Israelite Tradition Revisited,” in *Creation and Chaos: A Reconsideration of Hermann Gunkel’s Chaokampf Hypothesis*, ed. Joanna Scurlock and Richard H. Beal (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 217–36; Solomon Wiener, “God vs. the Sea: Lessons of Psalms and the Midrash,” *JBQ* 43.1 (2015): 22–28; David Toshio Tsumura, “The Creation Motif in Psalm 74:12–14? A Reappraisal of the Theory of the Dragon Myth,” *JBL* 134.3 (2015): 547–55.

¹⁴ Alan J. Hauser, “Judges 5: Parataxis in Hebrew Poetry,” *JBL* 99.1 (1980): 23–41.

followed by a series of divine epithets, such as “the One of Sinai,” “God of Israel,” and so forth. Though Judges 5 describes the role of human warriors in detail in verses 2, 8–9, and 11–18, the phrase “praise the Lord” (ברכו יהוה) is repeated right after the leaders and people are praised. This is to remind readers that it is the Lord who is behind the people leading them to victory. Such a proposition is confirmed in verse 31 where Deborah attributes all the victory to Yahweh. As in Miriam’s song, the motif of water is not depicted as a personified antagonist. Rather, the water motif serves to heighten the greatness of Yahweh. In verses 4–5, there is a threefold reference to water: the heavens pour (water), the clouds drop water, and the mountains flowed (with water), all of which prepares the reader to meet Yahweh, the powerful God of the storm.¹⁵

Second, though women take the lead in singing these divine warrior victory songs, God’s victory is meant to be celebrated by the entire community. Consider the context of Miriam’s song, which comes right after the Song of the Sea (Exod 15:1–18). The Song of the Sea repeats almost verbatim the theme that is stated in Miriam’s song (compare 15:1b and 15:21).¹⁶ How then do we account for such a literary overlap?¹⁷ Yahweh’s triumph over Egypt in Exodus 14, according to Russell, is a monumental event in Israel’s history in that no human effort has been enlisted in the defeat of the Egyptians.¹⁸ The victory is entirely the work of God; as a result, such a victory warrants the praises of all Israel, coming first from the men (in the Song of the Sea) and then from women (Miriam’s song).¹⁹

Likewise, though Deborah references herself in both the first and the third person throughout her song (e.g., vv. 3, 7, 9, 12, and 15), the song is credited to both Deborah and Barak son of Ahinoam (v. 1). Moreover, Deborah’s song is punctuated with references to the community: there are mentions of different individuals (e.g., Shamgar, Jael, and Barak), groups (e.g., Israel’s princes, the singers at the watering places, and villagers in Israel), and the various tribes of Israel (e.g., Ephraim, Benjamin, Zebulun, Issachar, Reuben, Dan, and so forth). This is to signify that the song is not a solo musical piece. Rather, it is a congregational hymn to be celebrated by the entire community.

Third, these divine warrior victory songs celebrate the distinctiveness of God’s people from their enemies. Stargel has pointed out that the theme of the

¹⁵ Hauser, “Two Songs of Victory,” 271.

¹⁶ Bernhard W. Anderson, “The Song of Miriam: Poetically and Theologically Considered,” in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, Elaine R. Follis, JSOTSup 40 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 286.

¹⁷ It is beyond the scope of this article to deal with the textual, source, and redactional histories between these two songs. For that discussion, see J. Gerald Janzen, “Song of Moses, Song of Miriam: Who Is Seconding Whom?,” *CBQ* 54.2 (1992): 211–20; Frank M. Cross Jr. and David Noel Freedman, “The Song of Miriam,” *JNES* 14.4 (1955): 210–20; Hannah S. An, “A Canonical Reconsideration of the Song at the Sea (Exod 15:1–21): The Song of Moses or the Song of Miriam?,” *Canon and Culture* 10.1 (2016): 7–37; Mark Leuchter, “The Song of Miriam between Memory and History,” *JHS* 19.4 (2019): 39–48; Peter Enns, “A Retelling of the Song at the Sea in Wis 10,20–21,” *Bib* 76.1 (1995): 1–24.

¹⁸ Brian D. Russell, *The Song of the Sea: The Date of Composition and Influence of Exodus 15:1–21*, SBL 101 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 52–54.

¹⁹ Kang, *Divine War*, 114–25.

separateness of Israel is one that pervades the book of Exodus.²⁰ At least nine of the ten plagues strike Egypt exclusively, leaving Israel unaffected by most of the catastrophes.²¹ In the fourth, fifth, seventh, ninth, and tenth plagues, the distinction is made explicit.²² During the announcement of the plague of the flies, for instance, God makes it clear that he is “setting apart” Goshen, making a distinction between “my people” and “your people” (Exod 8:22–23). Enns surmises that “the distinction is maintained throughout the remainder of the plagues (except for the plague of locusts), either explicitly or implicitly, and culminates in the tenth plague where the ‘destroyer’ sees the blood of the Passover lamb ... and passes them by.”²³ Such a theme is then celebrated in Exodus 15. Both the song of the sea and the song of Miriam make much of how God has favored Israel over Egypt in that only God’s people are redeemed from the drowning sea of death.

Congruously, as Yahweh shows his favor upon his people by hurling their nemesis, the Egyptians, into the sea, God does something similar in Judges 5. As Hauser has observed, Judges 5:24–27 is the “cathartic climax” of the song.²⁴ In these verses, God takes Israel’s pent-up hatred toward the Canaanites and unleashes it slowly and mockingly onto Sisera as a representative of the Canaanites. Not only does Sisera die, he dies in a humiliating manner at the hands of a woman. Jael’s femininity is underscored in three ways in verse 24, where she is referred to as one “among women” (מְנַשִּׁים) twice and then once as a “wife” (אִשָּׁת). A series of four verbs in verse 26 announce that Jael “struck [הִלְמָה] Sisera, she crushed [מִחְקָה] his head, she shattered [מִחְצָה] and pierced [חִלְפָה] his temple.”²⁵ Then a sequence of seven verbs describe Sisera’s fall to ground: “he sank” (כָּרַע) is used three times, “he fell” (נָפַל) is used three times, and “he lay still” (שָׁכַב) is used once.²⁶ This shows that the enemy not only falls in the hands of an enemy, but God’s favor upon Israel is so distinctive that he is willing to humiliate her enemy on her behalf.

II. THE FUNCTION OF THE WOMEN’S VICTORY SONGS IN 1 SAMUEL

1. *First Samuel 18:6–11.* Israel’s victories over Egypt and over the Canaanites are cast in terms of a holy war where God fights for his people, and the same can be said about David’s triumph over Goliath.²⁷ David is not only small in stature, but he is also inexperienced in war. Yet he engages Goliath without an armorbearer, carrying with him a sling and five stones. This calls to mind Israel, in the book of Exodus, also outnumbered by the Egyptians, inexperienced in warfare, and infe-

²⁰ Linda M. Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity in Ancient Israel: A Social Identity Approach* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018), 35.

²¹ Stargel, *The Construction of Exodus Identity in Ancient Israel*, 51.

²² Franz V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch’s Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israel’s Identity*, JSOTSS 361 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), 103.

²³ Peter Enns, *Exodus*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 274–75.

²⁴ Hauser, “Parataxis,” 34–38.

²⁵ Hauser, “Two Songs of Victory,” 278.

²⁶ Hauser, “Two Songs of Victory,” 278.

²⁷ Longman and Reid, *God Is a Warrior*, 38.

rior in weaponry. As with the previous combat, David believes it is Yahweh who fights the battle for him: “You come against me with sword and spear and javelin, but I come against you in the name of the LORD Almighty, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the LORD will deliver you into my hands, and I’ll strike you down and cut off your head” (1 Sam 17:45–46).

Similarly, such a victory is greeted with celebrative song: 1 Samuel 18:7 informs us that the women greet Saul and his comrades with dancing and music, as they sing, “Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.” Unlike the songs of Exodus 15 and Judges 5, where God is the protagonist, now Saul and David are the subject matter of the song. Despite David’s insistence that it is the Lord who has delivered Goliath into their hands (1 Sam 17:45), the women choose to downplay the role of God, attributing the success to David and Saul.²⁸

Further, unlike the previous songs that are sung by all of Israel, including the men and the women, the song here is performed only by the women. As for the men, not everyone is in agreement with the chorus, with the primary case in point being Saul. Many scholars have argued that the women’s song is not meant to insult Saul or show favoritism to David.²⁹ In a sense, they are correct: the song is a poetic doublet employing synonymous parallelism, such that the women are actually giving equal credit to both Saul and David for the victory over the Philistines. Gevirtz surmises that “the song contains no insult. It is a lavish praise of both Saul and David, utilizing the largest (single) equivalent numerals available in Syro-Palestinian poetic diction; the fixed pair of ‘thousands’//‘ten-thousands.’”³⁰

However, as Freedman has observed, the fact that David is accorded equal treatment with Saul in the song is enough to arouse the suspicions of any monarch.³¹ The pairing of David with the king is the reason Saul responds with jealousy and rage. Moreover, while it may be correct that the poetic convention of the song should not be pressed in a too literal direction, and while it may be true that the women have no malicious intention to discredit Saul, the second line of the song is still an “intensification” of the first.³²

Thus, it is not surprising for Saul to hear the song as elevating David, placing him in the climactic position. Nevertheless, the way Saul interprets the song reveals Saul’s disposition towards David: he is jealous and fearful of the shepherd lad, and he sees David as a threat to his throne.

²⁸ Cf. David Jobling, *1 Samuel*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 93.

²⁹ Diana Vikander Edelman, *King Saul in the Historiography of Judah*, JSOTSup 121 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 137–38; Stanley Gevirtz, *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*, SAOC 32 (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963), 14–24; Walter Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1990), 136; P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *1 Samuel: A New Translation*, AB 8 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 312; J. P. Fokkema, *Narrative Art and Poetry in the Books of Samuel*, vol. 4: *Vow and Desire (1 Sam. 1–12)*, SSN 31 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1993), 214.

³⁰ Gevirtz, *Patterns*, 24.

³¹ David Noel Freedman, review of *Patterns in the Early Poetry of Israel*, by Stanley Gevirtz, *JBL* 83.2 (1964), 201–3.

³² This reading is taken up by Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999), 113; V. Philips Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, TOTC 8 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 189.

If the songs in Exodus 15 and Judges 5 function to reveal who is on God's side (and who is not), Saul's reading and response to the song reveal where the king stands: on the side of the enemy. As a result of the song, Saul begins his assault on David. The next verses depict how the jealous monarch takes "the spear" (הַחֶנֶת) in his hand and hurls it (at David), saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall" (1 Sam 18:11). Thus far in the book of Samuel, only two people have been in possession of a "spear": Goliath and Saul. The transfer of the spear from Goliath to Saul, as Roberts and Wilson have observed, shows that "the mantle of oppression has passed from Goliath to Saul."³³ Just as Goliath has used his spear to oppress Israel (17:7), so now Saul hurls it at David.³⁴

Therefore, we can see that the song of the women serves three functions within the narrative of 1 Samuel 18:6–11. First, unlike the songs of Exodus 15 and Judges 5, where God is unambiguously hailed as the victor, the women's song places the accent of victory upon David and Saul. This leads Saul to interpret the song as reflecting a contest between himself and David, resulting in his anger, jealousy, and fear. Second, Saul's jealousy not only prevents him from celebrating with the rest of Israel, but it also causes him to persecute David. Third, the women's song reveals Saul's disposition: he finds more affinity with Israel's enemies, such as Goliath and the Philistines, than with God and Israel.

2. *First Samuel 21:10–15*. First Samuel 21 commences David's wilderness years as he flees from the persecution of Saul. Yet such uncertain times are not devoid of God's grace. Doeg is also identified as Saul's "chief shepherd" (אביר הרעים) (1 Sam 21:8 [7]).³⁵ In the next chapter, we see what the role of being Saul's "chief shepherd" entails. Doeg functions as Saul's "eyes" as he reports to Saul all that has transpired between David and Ahimelek.³⁶ Doeg builds as damaging a case as possible against Ahimelek and David. He sets up the meeting between David and Ahimelek as a political platform. Using the verb וישאל, Doeg claims that Ahimelek "inquired of Yahweh" on David's behalf, gave him provisions, and handed Goliath's sword to David. Edelman is right in pointing out that Doeg's words are carefully chosen to cast David and Ahimelek in the worse possible light.³⁷ By using the verb וישאל, which is a play on the king's name, Doeg reminds Saul of his inability to consult Yahweh and his subsequent fall from grace.

The specific mention of Goliath's sword is also an attempt to jolt Saul's memory of how David (and not he) is the one who defeated the champion of the Philistines. Moreover, the mention of the sword can also lead the king to believe that David is armed and dangerous rather than a fearful fugitive. Doeg is not only

³³ Alastair J. Roberts and Andrew Wilson, *Echoes of Exodus: Tracing Themes of Redemption through Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 90.

³⁴ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 187.

³⁵ On the role of Doeg in Saul's court, see Kenton F. Williams, "How an Understanding of the Term *Utullu* Might Provide Insight into the Role of Doeg, the Edomite, in 1 Samuel 21:8," *Conversations with the Biblical World* 37 (2017): 56–67.

³⁶ Joseph Lozovyy, *Saul, Doeg, Nabal, and the 'Son of Jesse': Readings in 1 Samuel 16–25*, LHBOTS 497 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 84.

³⁷ Edelman, *King Saul*, 175.

baleful with his words, but his actions show that he does not blink at the sight of mass murder. When Saul's officials find it too abhorrent to kill the priests, Doeg slays eighty-five without any hesitation.

Despite Doeg's propensity for violence, he does no harm to David in 1 Samuel 21:8 (7). The narrator tells us that this is not because Doeg experiences a lapse of malignancy. Rather, it is because he has "been detained (נֶעְצָר) before the Lord" (21:8 [7]), such that he has been restrained by the Lord from harming David. The phrase "before the Lord" is an echo of 1 Samuel 21:7 (6) where the "bread of the presence" is also placed "before the Lord." As the twelve loaves of consecrated bread that represent the twelve tribes of Israel are kept safe in God's presence, Doeg is detained so that Israel's future king is kept safe in God's presence.³⁸

Even though God's providence overshadows the chapter, David's faith wavers. David's spiritual crisis is heightened when he asks Ahimelek for "a spear or a sword" (1 Sam 21:9 [8]). The request is significant because both weapons are related to Goliath. As we are informed in 21:9 (8), the sword belongs to Goliath. Not only is the spear symbolic of Goliath's oppression of Israel, but it is also hurled at David by Saul in 19:10.³⁹ In requesting Goliath's sword and a spear, is David aligning himself with Goliath and Saul? Is the oppressed trying to be the oppressor? Also, what does such a request say of David who once proclaimed, "All those gathered here will know that it is not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's, and he will give all of you into our hands" (17:47)?

In another attempt of defiance, David decides to find refuge not in the Lord but in Gath, the city of Goliath. Thinking that Saul would never search for him in the heart of Philistine territory, David thinks he can live safely in Gath incognito. However, David's identity is exposed by none other than the servants of Achish as they report to their king, "Isn't this David, the king of Israel? Isn't he the one they sing about in their dances: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?'" (1 Sam 21:11). The repetition of the women's song ends David's attempt to find refuge among the Philistines.

As the women's song becomes a stumbling block for Saul, driving him to anger, jealousy, and fear, the same song sends David into an emotional breakdown. When David heard the song, he "took these words to heart and was very much afraid" (1 Sam 21:22). This is because the women's song places the success of the victory over Goliath on the shoulders on David and Saul. To bring to remembrance that David was once the "butcher of the Philistines" before Achish and Philistines is enough to drive David to extreme fear.⁴⁰ Added to that, David's anx-

³⁸ On the symbolic meaning of the "bread of presence," see Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 205–6; J. Gerald Janzen, *Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 197–204; Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist: Unlocking the Secrets of the Last Supper* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 116–48.

³⁹ Roberts and Wilson, *Echoes of Exodus*, 90.

⁴⁰ G. D. Vreeland, *The Darker Side of Samuel, Saul and David: Narrative Artistry and the Depiction of Flawed Leadership, Volume 1: First Samuel* (Maitland, FL: Xulon, 2007), 290.

ity may also be tied to his “surgical exploits in Philistine territory” when David collected two hundred Philistine foreskins as a bride-price for Michal in 18:27.⁴¹

In a move to save himself from being assaulted by the Philistines, David feigns insanity. Pretending to be mentally unwell, David makes marks on the doors of the gate and lets his saliva run down his cheeks. Seeing David's strange antics, Achish is filled with contempt. Instead of welcoming David with open arms, he shows David the door: “Look at the man! He is insane! Why bring him to me? Am I so short of madmen that you have to bring this fellow here to carry on like this in front of me? Must this man come into my house?” (1 Sam 21:14–15). This puts to an end David's notion that he can find refuge in Gath.

Moreover, as the songs in Exodus 15 and Judges 5 have a revealing effect, marking out who belongs to the Lord (and who does not), the women's song reveals the status of David. In a time when David has a severe bout of self-doubt and in a time when King Achish can only see David as a lunatic, the servants make two affirmations about David: (1) they refer to David as the “king of the land” (מֶלֶךְ הָאָרֶץ, 1 Sam 21:12); (2) they remember David as a victorious warrior who had the power to have “slain tens of thousands.” According to Hildebrandt, it is often the minor, transient, and unnamed servants in the book of Samuel who “demonstrate great spiritual awareness and insights.”⁴² Such a statement could not resound with more truth than with the servants of Achish.

What is interesting is that the courtiers refer to David as “king of the land” rather than “king of Israel.” Though Fokkelman is right in suggesting that we should not read too much into the expression “king of the land,” which could simply be a half-metaphor to signify that David has the reputation of being a great king, one cannot help but agree with Bodner that there is a hint of “prophetic resonance in light of the larger storyline.”⁴³ Auld agrees when he writes, “The courtiers may think of David as only a local kinglet; however, the expression they use appears prescient of his future greatness.”⁴⁴

In summary, the women's song functions positively and negatively in 1 Samuel 21:10–15. Negatively, the women's song gives the credit for victory not to Yahweh but to David, and it drives David to extreme fear as he feels helpless before Achish in Gath. Moreover, while the women's victory song should be celebrated by the entire community, David's fear and feigned madness keep him from such a privilege. However, the song also functions positively within the narrative: despite David's wavering faith, the song, through the reminder of Achish's servants, offers affirmation to David that he is still the promised “king of the land.” Further, the song rescues David from seeking refuge in Gath among the Philistines.

3. *First Samuel 29*. First Samuel 29 occupies a critical place in the book. In this chapter, the Philistines launch an all-out attack on Israel, an assault that will lead to

⁴¹ Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2008), 229.

⁴² Hildebrandt, “The Servants of Saul,” 198.

⁴³ Fokkelman, *Vow and Desire*, 366; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 229.

⁴⁴ A. Graeme Auld, *I and II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 263.

carnage that costs the lives of Israel's first king Saul and his three sons. Many scholars have noticed that events in 1 Samuel 29 recall an earlier narrative in 1 Samuel 4.⁴⁵ Both accounts begin with the Philistines gathering at Aphek as they prepare to fight Israel (4:1; 29:1). In the earlier narrative, the ark of God is captured by the Philistines and placed in the temple of Dagon (1 Sam 5). In the present battle, the armor of the slain Saul will be deposited in the temple of Ashtoreth and his decapitated body, together with the corpses of his sons, will be placed on display on the wall of Beth Shan (31:10). As the capture of the ark signaled the demise of the house of Eli, the defeat of Saul puts an end to the house of Saul.

Polzin further points out that as the ark remains in Philistine country for six months (1 Sam 6:1), David the Lord's anointed spends sixteen months on foreign soil (27:7). Both presences are destructive in nature: while the ark is in the Philistine pentapolis, a series of plagues follow. While David sojourns in Philistine territory, he conducts a series of deadly raids (1 Sam 27 and 30).

However, in the earlier narrative, when the Philistines see the ark entering their territory, they react with dismay: "'A god has come into the camp,' they said. 'Oh no! Nothing like this has happened before. We're doomed! Who will deliver us from the hand of these mighty gods? They are the gods who struck the Egyptians with all kinds of plagues in the wilderness'" (1 Sam 4:7–8). Though the Philistines may not be good theologians ("god" or "gods") or historians ("plagues in the wilderness"), they do acknowledge that the God of the Hebrews is the one who once struck the Egyptians with plagues.⁴⁶

After the Philistines are struck with tumors reminiscent of the plagues that once struck Egypt, the Philistines provide cows for burnt offerings as the ark is being returned to Israel. Throughout this entire episode, two surmising observations can be made: first, the Philistines realize that the ark is not just an ordinary box. Rather they see it as "god or gods" (1 Sam 4:7). Second, the Philistines do not regard the plagues as nature gone awry. Like the Egyptians in the book of Exodus, they see "the hand of the Lord" behind the plagues (Exod 10:25; 1 Sam 6:14).⁴⁷

As the Philistines in 1 Samuel 4 realize that the ark is not just an ordinary box, the Philistine overlords suspect that David is not just one of "these Hebrews" (29:3).⁴⁸ Though the overlords do not know that David has lied about the raids, they realize that David is immensely popular in Israel. He can easily turn against the Philistines if allowed to join the Philistine army.⁴⁹ After all, even Achish calls David "Saul's servant" (29:3). Such a notion is brought to bear when the overlords cite the

⁴⁵ Robert Polzin, *Samuel and the Deuteronomist: A Literary Study of the Deuteronomistic History, Part Two: 1 Samuel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); 221–23; Alter, *The David Story*, 179; Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 262; Naphtali Herz Tur-Sinai, "Ark of God at Beit Shemesh (1 Samuel 6) and Peres 'Uzza (2 Samuel 6, 1 Chronicles 13)," *VT* 1.4 (1951): 275–86; Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 304.

⁴⁶ Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 74.

⁴⁷ Harvey, "Tendenz," 75.

⁴⁸ Brueggemann is correct in suggesting that the word "Hebrews" (28:3) carries with a derogatory reference to "scavengers who disrupt Philistine order and who threaten Philistine well-being and prosperity." Brueggemann, *First and Second Samuel*, 197.

⁴⁹ Walter Brueggemann, "Narrative Intentionality in 1 Samuel 29," *JOT* 43 (1989): 21–35, here 26.

women's song as they ask: "Isn't this the David they sang about in their dances: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands?'" (29:5).

Congruent with the previous accounts, where the women's song becomes a stumbling block to Saul and to David, the song of the women functions similarly for the Philistine commanders. Since the accent of the women's song is on both Saul and David as renowned fighters, the commanders are afraid that David might team up again with his former lord. As an invincible duo, the overlords fear, Saul and David can easily decapitate the members of the Philistine forces. Klein points out the irony of such a thought: "The one whom Achish proposed to make 'the keeper of his head' (or bodyguard) in 1 Sam 28:2 might actually cost many Philistines their heads."⁵⁰ As a result, the commanders unanimously decide that David and his men should not be allowed to join forces with Philistine army.

However, the commanders also give instruction that David should return to his usual outpost in Ziklag (1 Sam 29:4). This decision is in stark contrast to the decision the Philistines made earlier in 6:14 to send the ark back to Israel accompanied by an offering of five golden tumors and rats (6:4). While the ark is seen as a "god" or "gods," the women's song presents David only as a famed warrior and not as the Lord's *nagid*. While in the earlier narrative, the Philistines recognize that the "hand of the Lord" was behind the plagues, the commanders in chapter 29 not only have no clue about David's raids, but also they have no clue that the Lord is with David (8:12–14, 28).⁵¹ As a result, instead of sending David back to Israel with accompanying gifts and putting an end to their assault on the Israelites, they continue to hold David hostage and persist in bringing carnage to God's people.

As the preceding songs reveal the identity of those who are associated with them, likewise the women's song identifies David as a friend rather than a foe of Israel. Brueggemann is right in pointing out that ever since 1 Samuel 28, David is at risk of betraying Israel and Saul. Will David, who has on numerous occasions refused to lay hands on Saul, now joined the Philistines to annihilate his former master and Israel?⁵² First Samuel 28:1–2 starts off with Achish summoning David to join the Philistines in their attack against Israel. In his second address Achish makes David his bodyguard. Then we are left in limbo as the rest of the chapter proceeds. The tension crescendos in chapter 29 when David and his contingent are depicted as marching with Achish behind the Philistine army. Achish's confidence in David as a faultless servant to him (29:3) further pushes David to the precipice of betrayal. Has David been so trapped by Achish and the Philistines that he must fight against Saul and the Israelites?

⁵⁰ Klein, *1 Samuel*, 493.

⁵¹ David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 474.

⁵² Brueggemann, "Narrative Intentionality," 25. Some have questioned David's loyalty toward Israel and Saul. However, Shemesh has convincingly provided nine proofs testifying to David's loyalty towards Saul and Israel. Shemesh surmises: "David never even considered the possibility of fighting against Saul and Israel. The narrator provides many hints that had David not been released from the army, at the urging of the Philistine commanders, he would have turned his arms against Achish and fought for Saul, just as they allege." Yed Shemesh, "David in the Service of King Achish of Gath: Renegade to His People or a Fifth Column in the Philistine Army?," *V/T* 57.1 (2007): 89.

David is saved from committing such atrocities by the women's song. Despite Achish's recommendation, the Philistine commanders are reminded by the women's song how dangerous and powerful David can be. David can easily turn on them in battle (cf. 14:21) and sever the heads of the Philistines.⁵³ As the women's song had previously incurred outbursts of emotions from both Saul and David, the commanders are said to become "angry" (29:4) at Achish for his naivete in trusting in David. As the women's song functions as a mark of distinction, the song here distinguishes David from the rest of the Philistines, thereby saving David from fighting against his own people.

In sum, the women's song functions both positively and negatively in 1 Samuel 29: as the lyrics of the song focus on David as a mighty warrior rather than the Lord's *nagid*, the Philistine commanders fail to put to an end to David's wanderings and cease their onslaught against Saul and the Israelites. However, what the song does for David is single out David from the Philistines, thereby saving the Lord's *nagid* from fighting against his own people.

III. CONCLUSION

From our preceding discussion, we can see that a song is not merely words set to a melodic score. Rather, a song, particularly the women's song, functions both negatively and positively in the narratives of Samuel. To begin with, the women's song, like the songs in Exodus 15 and Judges 5, are victory songs celebrating the Lord's triumph over his enemies by all of Israel. However, when Yahweh is not acknowledged and when the victory is not celebrated by all, events go awry. The accent of the women's song being placed on Saul and David rather than God allows Saul to interpret it as reflecting badly on himself, driving him towards extreme emotions of hatred and jealousy. Meanwhile, David interprets the song as a reminder of the carnage he has done to Philistines, causing him to give in to extreme fear in the sight of Achish. Since the song centers on David's prowess as a mighty warrior, the Philistine overlords do not see David as God's *nagid*, thereby failing to send David safely home to Israel and cease their attack on Saul and the Israelites.

However, the women's song does function positively in the narratives. In a time when fear overwhelms, the song redeems David from seeking refuge in Gath among the Philistines. Further, the song reminds David that he is still God's *nagid* and "the king of the land." Finally, in 1 Samuel 29 when David and his men are about to be assimilated into the Philistine army, the song distinguishes David from the Philistines, saving him from attacking Saul and his fellow Israelites.⁵⁴

⁵³ Long, *1 and 2 Samuel*, 264.

⁵⁴ I would like to thank my former Sunday school teacher Ms. Ng Beng Choo for helping me purchase my first Bible when I was ten years old and for teaching me to read the Bible for myself. A word of appreciation goes to Dr. Gregory Goswell, Tom and Karina Hawtrey, Blessing, and my parents Robert and Siew Hiong Yap for their encouragements and prayers. For offering his insights to this article, I thank my brother Terence Yap, who has always been one of my greatest supporters. This article is dedicated to my late cousin Raelene Teo who loved to write and sing the Lord's victory songs.