CHAPTER FIVE

THE SONG OF THE SEA (EXOD 15:1–18)

5.1. INTRODUCTION: DISCOURSE STRUCTURE

The genre definition and literary structure of Exod 15:1–18 has been a focus of scholarly discussion.1 As for the genre, scholars have observed that the Song demonstrates features of a thanksgiving hymn, on the one hand, and of a historical victory-song, on the other.2 As for the literary structure, most scholars divide the Song into two parts on the basis of combined thematic and poetic criteria: from v. 1 to v. 11 or 12 and from v. 12 or 13 to v. 18.3 This literary heterogeneity has given birth to theories on the alleged composite character of the Song.4 The present approach to the Song’s discursive structure, based on the five discursive criteria presented in the introductory part, exposes considerable overlapping with

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1 Cf. Dozeman 1999: 96: “The genre of the present form of Exod 15:1–18 is unclear” (see n. 4 there with a broad bibliographical review on this matter); Fischer 1996: 36: “Angesichts des komplexes, vielgestaltigen Aufbaus von Exod 15 fällt die Bestimmung seiner Form schwer” (see also n. 18 there); Houtman 1996: 244–45.

2 Cf. Dozeman 1999: 96: “Problems include a mixture of hymnic phrases and ballad” and n. 5 with a bibliographic review; Houtman 1996: 245: “The song looks like a hymn and thanksgiving song and, since it offers something of a sketch of salvation history, it somewhat recalls the historical songs”; see also Mullenburg 1966: 242ff.


4 The literary unity of the Song has been challenged from different perspectives; see the review in Propp 1999: 508. Durham 1987: 203 claimed that the generic heterogeneity of the Song proves its composite nature. Propp 1999: 507–9 counters this opinion and demonstrates that Ancient Near Eastern literature reveals composite generic characteristics and can combine elements of hymnal and epic poetry within a single composition. Caquot 1990: 70 employs the distinction between the 2nd and 3rd person references to the Lord as a tool to separate between different compositional layers of the Song. Dozeman 1999: 100–1 interprets the first and the second part of the Song as pre-Deuteronomistic and Deuteronomistic redactions, respectively. Alternatively, Giles and Doan 2009: 22–49 address the problem of compositional and generic heterogeneity in the Song from the perspective of ‘performance criticism’.
the structural analysis of other scholars, but suggests seeing the composition as a dynamic arrangement of different discourse modes.

The Song has one speaker (not to mention a short direct discourse quotation in v. 9) and one addressee. The speaker is identified as Moses (with the Israelites) in the prose framework (v. 1a), but remains anonymous outside of this framework. Although the speaker is regularly marked by egocentric 1cs elements, especially in vv. 1–2 (אָשִׁירָה, עָזִי, לִי, אֵלִי, אַנְוֵהוּ, אָבִי, וַאֲרֹמֲמֶהוּ), some scholars characterize this 1cs as collective.\(^5\) The speaker explicitly expresses the main pragmatic intention of the speech, namely to praise the Lord (‘אָשִׁירָה לְךָ v. 1).\(^6\) In v. 6 the addressee of the speech, the Lord, is marked by the second person (ךָיְמִינְ v. 6 etc.);\(^7\) the Lord is both the addressee and the main topic of the discourse.\(^8\) These elements of the 

The conversational framework introduces monologue-blocks of different kinds; see table 1. To start with, it systematically develops into poetic argument (e.g., vv. 2–3, 6, 11, 18). Poetic argument is identified due to its characteristic discursive features:

1. a deictic temporal pattern (marked by the enveloping conversational framework);
2. general statives and abstract entities (see generics and generalizing sentences in vv. 2–3, 6, or 11);
3. metaphorical text-progression through the main topics of the hymn: divine attributes as matters of praise (Divine Identity, Military Strength, Superiority, Kingdom).

Another discourse mode introduced by the conversational framework is a report about the Lord’s deeds (vv. 1bβ, 4–5 etc.). The report incorporates

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5 Thus already Ibn Ezra; see also Propp 1999: 509. Russell 2007 calls the text ‘The Song of Moses and the Israelites’.
6 MT has 1cs, but most ancient versions translate with a 1cpl form, emphasizing the collective character of the speaker; Muilenburg 1966: 238 characterizes the pragmatics of the Song’s opening as ‘self-summon to singing’. Note that the collective character of speech is emphasized in the Song of Miriam (v. 21): שִׁירֵי.
7 See Dozeman 1999: 96: “References to God also shift between third and second person”; Fischer 1996 connects pronominal shifts in reference to God to the problem of literary structure; see p. 35: “Der Rahmen spricht über Gott in der 3. Person (v. 1–5. 18); im Zentrum (v. 6–17) findet sich direkte Anrede an ihn in der 2. Person.”
8 Cf. Durham 1987: 205: “The song of praise for Yahweh’s victory is addressed to Yahweh, as the hymns of praise and thanksgiving always are in OT worship. Yahweh is both the subject and the object of this psalm.”