

Make a Noise Joyful: Cirm in the Old English Exodus

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Blog post published June 13, 2016 in *Sounding Out!*

<https://doi.org/10.59350/dyckh-06e12>

Abstract

Series co-editors Dorothy Kim and Christopher Roman When the narrator of the Old English poem *Exodus* declares “Gehyre se ðe wille” (Let him hear who will), what sounds is he asking us to attend to? [Note: Text from Peter Lucas’s edition, 7b. All translations are author’s own.] This post argues that the Old English noun *cirm* (noise, shout, outcry) challenges our conceptualization of noise.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Archival, Article, History, Language, Medieval Sounds



Recommended citation

jlzweck. (2016, June 13). Make a Noise Joyful: Cirm in the Old English Exodus. *Sounding Out!*.

<https://doi.org/10.59350/dyckh-06e12>

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When the narrator of the Old English poem *Exodus* declares “Gehyre se ðe wille” (Let him hear who will), what sounds is he asking us to attend to? [Note: Text from [Peter Lucas’s edition](#), 7b. All translations are author’s own.] This post argues that the Old English noun *cirm* (noise, shout,

outcry) challenges our conceptualization of noise. In the Anglo-Saxon corpus, *cirm* most often refers to the indistinguishable, non-linguistic hum of a crowd, rather than the meaningful utterance of an individual. This accords with the popular view of noise in sound studies: whether medieval or modern, noise (as opposed to meaningful sound) is associated with alterity, disruption, and violence.

However, and strikingly, in the Old English *Exodus*, words for noise describe not only the terrible sounds of the drowning Egyptians as the roaring waters of the Red Sea rush over them, but also the survival of the Israelites. I argue that this *cirm* is a mark of the Israelites' triumphal assertion of their continued presence and plenitude, a celebration of the fact that they can still be a *multitude* despite captivity. That *cirm* may not sit easily within our definition of noise should provoke not a redefinition of *cirm*'s joyful use, but a reconceptualization of Anglo-Saxon noise.



'Amalek Attacks Israel and Is Defeated', in the Old English Hexateuch, British Library, MS Cotton Claudius B IV

What is Noise?

“Noise” has a range of meanings, but most often implies “unwanted sound” as R. Murray Schafer argues in *The Soundscape* (73). Following the work of [Jacques Attali](#) and [Jeffrey J. Cohen](#), noise has been associated with alterity, difference, and monstrosity. Noise, as opposed to sound, may be non-linguistic or disordered: nonsense, babble, the roar of a jet engine. According to David Novak’s contribution to *Keywords in Sound*, noise is not present in nature, but is created by modern technology (129). In the modern world, noise is often considered negative: cities have rules about noise pollution, apartment buildings set quiet hours, and airplane passengers don noise-cancelling headphones. In the pre-industrial age, noise was not exempt from criticism, though the word could also be applied to more pleasant sounds, like birdsong.

In the European Middle Ages, Valerie J. Allen argues in *“Broken Air,”* noise was often figured as violent, transgressing boundaries, inappropriately closing the distance between sound producer and sound receiver (310 and 317-318). According to [Macrobius](#), it was not silence that was the opposite of sound, but noise (311). Grammar, which was “devoted to the pursuance of *ratio* through sound,” was ethical; noise was therefore considered “a kind of audible violence; corruption [wa]s something one can hear” (305). But some medieval noises were more ambiguous: the Old English word *dream* (joy, joyful sound) could also be applied to the terrible sounds of Hell or the terror of Judgment Day, as in Kazutomo Karasawa’s analysis in *“OE dream for Horrible Noise in the Vercelli Homilies.”* Likewise, “clamor,” which originated as a (mostly) negative noise, became an important legal instrument, as discussed by Richard Barton in *“Making a Clamor to the Lord: Noise, Justice and Power in Eleventh- and Twelfth-Century France.”* But in general, we tend to assume medieval noise is negative, or marks its producer as other.

Noises in Exodus

The Old English *Exodus*, found in the c. 1000 manuscript known as [Bodleian MS Junius 11](#), is a notoriously difficult and complex poetic adaptation of the Old Testament Exodus 12-14. The author and date of composition are unknown, though it is often considered quite early, perhaps as early as the eighth century as [Paul Remley](#) and Lucas argue. Few institutions were rich enough to own a complete Bible. The author of *Exodus* may have had access to a written Latin version of Exodus, or may have been exposed to the text via the liturgy, especially the liturgy of the Easter Vigil.



The Junius Manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Junius 11, pp. 84-5

Exodus delights in sensory details, but until recently, I had always thought of *Exodus* as primarily visual – the gleaming of war-gear, the glittering of Egyptian spoils washed up on the shore, tents and a pillar of cloud to protect the Israelites from the desert sun, and a pillar of fire to guide them. But the poet is also attentive to the larger sensory world, including the world of sound and noise. Those who accept the poet’s opening challenge to his audience (“Gehyre se ðe wille!” [Let him hear who will!]) will recognize that the poem is in fact filled with sounds – the battle trumpets that provide order and structure to the movements of the army, the rushing and later silencing of waters, the terrible evening songs of wolves eager for battle, the awful rasping of the blade Abraham draws to sacrifice Isaac in the poem’s digression on the patriarchs, the triumphant songs produced by Israelite men and women in praise of God after the Egyptians are defeated. In what follows, I focus on the multiple deployments of a single word for noise (*cirm*), applied to both Israelites and Egyptians, asking what this word can reveal about Anglo-Saxon conceptions of noise.

It has often been remarked that the poet resists easy distinctions between Israelites and Egyptians, applying similar vocabulary to both, and this is certainly illustrated by the poet’s sonic play. In a climactic scene near the end of the poem, the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea is accompanied by horrible noises:

Storm up gewat

heah to heofonum, herewopa mæst;

laðe cyrmdon (lyft up geswearc)

fægum stæfnum. Flod blod gewod:

randbyrig wæron rofene, rodor swipode

meredeaða mæst. Modige swulton,

cýningas on corðre. Cýrm swiðrode

wæges æt ende; wigbord scinon.

[A storm went up high to the heavens, the greatest of cries of the army; the hostile ones cried out with doomed voices (the air grew dark above). Blood pervaded the water: ramparts were broken, the greatest of sea-deaths lashed the sky. The brave ones died, kings in a troop. The noise fell silent at the end of the water; battle-boards shone. (460b-467; emphasis added)]



The Junius Manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Junius 11, p. 66.

Cirm occurs twice in this passage, first as a verb (*cyrmdon*) and then as a noun (*cýrm*). The manuscript reading in 466b is *cyre* (choice). Lucas emends to *cýrm* because *cyre* is not a poetic word, and I would argue that the echo with the Israelites' *cýrm* (107) must be deliberate. Even if we accept MS *cyre*, the passage still includes the verb *cyrmdon* (462a), and other sonic vocabulary

(*herewopa*, “army’s cries” [461], and *fægnum stefnum*, “doomed voices” [463]). The noun occurs roughly 60 times in the corpus; the verb 17 times (DOE).

In the Old English corpus, *cirm* is often negative, applied to the tortures of hell or the terror of Judgment Day, and indicates a particularly loud sound (DOE, Lucas). According to the DOE, the noun means “shout, cry, shriek” or “noise of non-human origin, clamour.” The Egyptian *cirm* is obviously threatening, the meaningless cries of men who, like a raging storm, lash out in terror as the waters close over their heads. Even the visual horror of blood mingling with water maintains sonic affiliations: this line is a rare example of internal rhyme in Old English poetry (*flod blod gewod*). The end of the Egyptian threat is marked by the silencing of their voices and *cirm*, metaphorically a silencing of the army’s advance against the Israelites.

Given the negative associations with noise in both medieval and modern sound theory, that the Egyptian defeat is accompanied by their terrible *cirm* may not seem particularly surprising. Strikingly, this is not the only such noise in the poem. Near the beginning of the poem, the Israelites celebrate their initial escape from Egypt by producing not just any noise, but *cirm*. On the third day, after the pillar of cloud has appeared, the Israelites awaken with trumpets, and seeing the pillar,

Folc wæs on salum,

hlud herges cirm.

[*The people were joyful, loud was the noise of the army. (106b-107a; emphasis added)*]

If *cirm* is threatening, loud noise, associated with difference and violence, why would the Israelites produce it? I would like to suggest that *cirm* suggests not merely loud noise, but crowd noise. The Israelites’ *cirm* is not an assertion of difference, or the meaningless babble of a drowning, almost non-human army, but an assertion of triumphant plenitude. Their joyful *cirm* is a fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham, which the poet will remind us of later in the poem (435-442). Just as God promised Abraham innumerable offspring, his support of the Israelites in their exodus signals that they will continue to be a multitude (as they certainly are in this battle, in which they have 600,000 fighting men (224-233).



The Junius Manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Junius 11, p. 81.

In fact, the Israelites' triumphant crowd noise is echoed at the end of the poem as well. After the defeat of the Egyptians, who make terrible *cirm* as they perish in the Red Sea (460b-467), the Israelites issue more celebratory sound, this time transformed from crowd noise to harmonious music:

Æfter þam wordum – werod wæs on salum –
sungon sigebyman (segnas stodon),
fægerne sweg

[After these words – the troop was joyful – victorious trumpets sang a beautiful sound (battle-standards stood). (565-67a; emphasis added)]

The Israelites' *cirm* (107), which they produced while *on salum* (joyful), is balanced and echoed by the celebratory sounds of the end of the poem, also produced by a people who are *on salum* (565). Whatever threat the Israelites' assertion of plenitude and *cirm* may have made possible is mitigated by replacing that *cirm* (noise) with a beautiful sound (*fægerne sweg*), a harmonious, if also loud and multiple, expression.

According to Attali, music can be used to produce order, but “noise is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder” (26). In this sense, the Israelites' crowd noise in the desert is violent – it threatens the order of the Egyptians, or the hierarchy the Egyptians have sought to impose on the Israelites in their captivity. But because this story ends in the triumph of the Israelites, told from the point of view of their Christian descendants, it celebrates this assertion of communal power and communal violence without fully othering them. The true violence is inflicted on the Egyptians by God in the Red Sea, allowing the Israelites to reassert their normativity, their cohesion, their power, and their non-otherness. While the drowning Egyptians produce *cirm*, it is silenced because the *cirm* of the Israelites has conquered them. Noise, or at least *cirm*, is therefore not merely negative or disruptive; it is a powerful claim to be blessed by God, an assertion of belonging rather than a boundary crossing.

Featured Image: Detail of a miniature of the plague of hail (Exodus 9:22-25), Add MS 15277, f. 7r

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