

Chapter Twenty Six

BIBLICAL POETRY AS ETHICAL REFLECTION: AN X-RAY

P.E. Nmah

Introduction

Some people may be amazed why certain books of the Bible are regarded as poetics, which denotes poetry. When one is filled with these wonders, the question that readily comes into mind is what is poetry? According to Douglas (1980), “poetry, especially in the form of song or hymn, occupies an importance place in Hebrew literature” (p. 1007). There are many definitions of poetry, but all of them point at man, his environment, his destiny, his ethics and nature. One might go as far as confronting one with this question, that does it mean that one’s activities center on poetry? This particular question is answered in Heidegger’s “Holderlin and the Essence of Poetry”, (Akwanya, 2005).

Poetry is not merely an ornament accompanying existence, not merely a temporary enthusiasm or nothing but an interest and amusement. Poetry is the foundation which supports history, and therefore it is not a mere appearance of culture; and absolutely not the mere ‘expression’ of a culture-soul (p. 150).

What is said here is that poetry is the foundation that supports history. According to Akwanya (2005), “We, and everything, come under the sway of poetry” (p.150). The primordiality of poetry could not be argued after the first poetic conversation in the Bible which is presented with hendiadystic lint in Genesis 1:26a, “Let us make man in our own image, after our likeness”. There are two synonymous words in the line-image and likeness – the first one completes the intended meaning of the line. The second sequestered from the main by a terminal caesura which shows it is being placed there for emphasis.

It is necessary that this usage only applies in poetry, and would be tautological when attempted in prose. This validates Akwanya’s (2005) account of poetry which says,

In poetry, when man becomes a conversation, language is not merely understood; it is here that the rules of language are brought into being, and change. It is simultaneously when a map becomes speech (poetry) that language is born (p.151).

What he is saying in the above passage is that the ‘rules of language could not hold in poetry, as it is in other genre, because ‘poetry never takes language as a raw material readily to hand, rather it is poetry which first makes language possible’ (Heidegger, 1949, pp. 282-128). Therefore poetry is not an embodiment of language but the maker of language. It is not always easy for those of us who read only translations of the Bible, whether in English or other languages, to recognize Hebrew poetry. It has a different structure, form and style from anything that we call English poetry (Hinson, 1994).

For the purposes of this research work, we need only note that in some versions of the English Bible, those which are poetic in Hebrew are set out differently from the prose. The prose is divided into paragraphs which run straight on, filling the whole width of the page or column. But the poetry is divided into separate lines, with some of them indented in such a method to show the verse form (Hinson, 1994). If you turn over the pages of the Torah, you will find that most pages are filled with prose. But on some pages poetry has been included. Some poetic passages are very brief: only a single verse perhaps; others take up most of a chapter.

It is not known exactly how or when these passages of poetry came to be included. Some are very old indeed, and may have been written down earlier than any of the stories, or most of the laws. Others came from much later times, and may have been added to one or other of the groups of written traditions on which the Torah is based. In the course of this research paper, we have to depend on the writers of commentaries as indicated in the following sub-headings to guide us in understanding the origin of the poetry of Torah. Indeed, they tell us that some of the oldest passages of poetry are found in Genesis 4: 22-24, Exodus 15:21 and Numbers 21: 17-18. There may be the very first of the verses of the Bible that were written down. A longer process of writing and editing has followed (Hinson, 1994, p. 55). We have seen that the Torah is composed of a number of codes of law, several groups of traditions, and some isolated passages of poetry.

Between former and latter prophets come five books which could be described as miscellaneous collection: Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon. Each is different in style and content from the others of the group. They all belong to the writings in the Jewish Canon, and were only adopted formally as authoritative Scripture after the life time of Jesus. Like other Old Testament books, they each had a long history of development. Two of them, Proverbs and Psalms, are anthologies; that is, they were collections of material from different sources. All of them contain some poetry, ranging from human love-songs to hymns in praise of God. Three of them, Job, Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, are concerned with wisdom, that is, the results of human efforts to understand life and the problems raised for people of faith by their experiences of suffering (Hinson, 1994).

In the proceeding paragraphs, we note the practical difficulties in distinguishing poetry when we read the Old Testament in English. Not all versions of the Bible indicate where the Hebrew text consists of poetry. Those versions which do indicate where poetry is used do not

always agree with each other about which passages of scripture are poetic in the Hebrew. For example, compare Proverbs 1-7 in the Bible (RSV) with the same chapters in the Good News Bible. This is partly because Hebrew manuscripts do not normally set out poetry in the style we are used to in English, but fill every line with writing whether or not the breaks in the poetry fall at the end of the line.

Types of Hebrew Poetry

To McCain (2002), the Bible is one of the greatest collections of literature in the world. It has prose, biography, autobiography, prophecy, epistle, poetry, and wisdom literature. A significant part of the poetic literature is known as “wisdom literature”. This is a type of literature that deals with the specific problems that humanity faces in a memorable manner. A large portion of the Bible, perhaps as much as twenty five percent is made up of poetry. According to McCain (2002) there are three basic types of Hebrew poetry found in the Old Testament namely:

- i. **Lyric poetry:** It is primarily poetry that was written to be accompanied by a lyre or other musical instrument. This is often called songs today.
- ii. **Didactic poetry:** It is primarily poetry whose object is to teach a particular truth or ethics of conduct.
- iii. **Dramatic poetry:** This poetry is designed in such a way that various speakers/actors interact with one another to convey a certain message. In most Hebrew grammar, the action is largely limited to conversations between the major players. In other words, Hebrew drama tends to focus more on the words of the actors than the actions.

Some of the Characteristics of Hebrew Poetry

It is often stated that ancient Hebrew poetry contains almost no rhyme. This assertion is understandable, because the ancient texts preserved in the Hebrew Bible were written over a period of at least a millennium. Over that length of time, the pronunciation of every language changes, words that rhymed pairs at the beginning of that period may no longer rhyme at the end of that period. Further different tribal groups or other groups of Hebrew speakers undoubtedly pronounced words differently in one and the same era.

One fine example of rhyme and meter in ancient Hebrew texts is found in the Book of Proverbs 6:9-10 points out these two verses split into four lines of poetry demonstrate both internal rhymes (common to biblical Hebrew texts). Thus, the last word of the first line (AD MaTAI 'aTZEL tishKAV) rhymes with the last word of the last line (me'AT KhibBUQ yaDAYM lishKAV). In the third line, the second and fourth words create an internal rhyme with each other (me'AT sheNOT, me'AT tenuMOT). Finally, the first word of the second line (maTAI taQUM mishshena TEKsgha) is identical to the first word of the first line, linking those two lines even without obvious rhyme.

The poetry of the ancient Hebrews is not distinguished from the other parts of the Old Testament by rhythm based on quantity, though in view of Greek and Roman poetry it was natural to seek such a rhythm in the songs and Psalms of the Old Testament. There is also accentual rhythm, which many scholars hold that the Hebrew poet considered only the syllables receiving the main accent, and did not count the intervening ones.

Another part of the characteristics of the Hebrew poetry are the dirges, songs sung at a burial or for a dead person. A special kind of rhythm may be observed in the dirges, called by the Hebrew “Kinot”. A whole book of these elegies is contained in the Hebrew Bible, the first of them beginning thus: “How does the city sit solitary – that was full of people – how is she become as a widow – she that was great among the nations – and princess among the provinces – how is she become tributary” (Lamentations 1:1). Other aspects of characteristics of ancient Hebrew poetry include anadiplosis, and acrostics.

Some of the characteristics of Hebrew poetry include parallelism, figurative language, rhythm and meter, and other literary and stylistic devices such as alliteration (e.g. using words or phrases that begin with similar sounds such as, Peter Piper picked a peck of pick led peppers”). Others include Onomatopoeia, and paronomasia, e.g. Amos 8: If,

Thus the Lord God showed me:

Behold, a basket of summon for fruit;

and figures of speech such as simile (it is a comparison using “like” or “as” e.g. Ps. 103:13, as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him” cf. Ps. 1:3, 1Peter 5:8). There are also metaphor and metonymy (a substitution of one name for another e.g. Job 34:6, KJV, “My arrow is incurable (wounds)”, cf. 2Cor. 3:15 “When Moses is read”, meaning the author, Ex. 12:21 (KJV), ‘kill the Passover’ refers to the killing ‘the Passover lamb, and so on) There are also hyperbole, personification, synecdoche (it is a part used for a while or a whole for a part e.g. Lk. 2:1 (KJV), “all the world” is used for the Roman Empire), apostrophe, interrogation (or rhetorical question, irony, euphemism, litotes, it is stressing a certain point by denying the opposite e.g. Ps. 51:17; 1Sam. 20:8 etc.), pleonasm (it is the superfluous or unnecessary use of words e.g. 2Sam. 7:22; Deut. 3:27 etc.), and lastly anthropomorphism (McCain, 2002).

At this juncture, let me highlight some types of parallelism in the Bible.

- a. Synonymous parallelism the second line repeats the first line except it uses different words e.g. Ps. 24:1, “the earth is the Lord’s and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it”.

- b. Another form of complete parallelism is known as antithetic parallelism, because the one ‘stichos’ gives the observe of the other. A good example is found in Proverbs 15:20:

A-wise son makes-a-glad father
But-a-foolish man despises his-mother

Antithetic parallelism is a situation whereby the second line makes a contrast with the first line. The second line will begin with ‘but’ or similar contrasting conjunction e.g. Ps. 1:6,

For the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish cf Ps. 30:5,
Prov. 10:1, 15:1

- c. Synthetic parallelism – Here the second line adds to or completes the thought of the first e.g. Prov. 16:3,

Commit to the Lord whatever you do,
And your plans will succeed cf. Ps. 1:2, 2:6, 19.7

- d. One form of parallelism which we have not mentioned yet is what is called step-parallelism or climatic parallelism; it is found where one member (or part of a member) in one line is repeated in the second, and made the starting-point for a fresh step’ (Robinson, 1947). A good example is found in the opening ‘stichoi’ of Psalm 29, with the step-effect produced by the repeated ‘Ascribe to Yahweh; another is provided by Ps. 29:9-

For-lo, thy-enemies, Yahweh,
For-lo, thy-enemies shall-perish;
All-evildoers shall-be-scattered-

which is of special interest because it shows so close a similarity in form to a passage from the Baal epic discovered among the Ras Shamra tablet (Guthrie and Motyer, 1980).

Lo thy – enemies O – Baal,
Lo they – enemies thou-shalt-slay,

Lo thou-shall-destroy thy-foes.

In the case of non-biblical parallels, we have quoted parallels between certain poetical passages from the OT and passages from the Canaanite poems discovered at Ras Shamra.

Climatic parallelism – In this case, the first line is incomplete and it needs something from the second line to complete and emphasize the thought e.g. Ps. 29:1,

Ascribe to the Lord, O mighty ones,
Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.

- e. Yet another kind of parallelism is that known as ‘emblematic’ parallelism, where one ‘stichos’ makes a statement in literal terms and the other repeats it in figurative terms (Ps. 103: 13):

As-a-father pities his-children,
So-Yahweh pities those-who-fear-him.

Here there are three accented syllables in each ‘stichos’. It is opposite here to remark that much of the genius of Hebrew poetry lies in its employment of vivid and concrete similes or metaphors which (like parables, but more briefly) convey truth to the hearer pungently and effectively. Occasionally the parallelism may be more elaborate, and take an introverted or chiastic form. Psalm 30: 8-10 is commonly cited as an example of this:

To-thee, Yahweh, I-cry; and to-Yahweh
I-make supplication.

What-profit (is there) in-my-blood if-I-go-down to-the-pit?
Will-the-dust praise-thee? Will-it-tell-of thy-faithfulness?
Hear, Yahweh, and-be-gracious-to-me;
Yahweh, be a-helper to-me.

Here ‘stichos’ 1 is paralleled by ‘stichos’ 4, and ‘stichos’ 2 by ‘stichos’ 3, the accentual pattern being 5:4:4:5. A similar but not identical chiasmus appears in the sayings of Jesus, example in Mathew 7:6:

Do not give dogs what is holy;
And do not throw your pearls before swine,
Lest they (the swine) trample them under foot
And they (the dogs) turn to attack you.

Emblematic parallelism – One of the lines gives an illustration to explain the other line but does so without any words of contrast e.g. Prov. 11:22,

A gold ring in a swine’s snout – a fair woman and without understanding. cf. Prov. 25:25.

- f. There are other multiple types of parallelism such as double parallelism e.g. Ps. 32:1-2, Ps. 24: 7-10; and chiastic parallelism e.g. Ps 51:1.

Hebrew poetry does not rhyme (McCain, 2002). Instead of having parallel sounds, it has parallel thoughts. In fact, the key word all Hebrew poetry is parallelism. Hebrew poetry like nearly all poetry is made up of different lines. The minimum number of lines to make a verse is two (known as distich). Tristichs (three lines), are, however, also known as well as tetrastichs (four lines) and even pentastichs (five lines).

Another characteristic of Hebrew poetry is in figurative language. Nearly all poetic literature contains highly figurative language. Sometimes it is called “flowery” e.g. Ps 91:4, “He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge” cf. Ps. 92; 11:2, 7:14, Ps. 90:3-6 and Ps. 23 which is a classic Psalm of descriptive language.

Structure of Hebrew Poetry

It is the very nature of poetry that makes it memorable and penetrating. Poetry is required to follow certain ground rules. Hebrew poetry uses rhythming and meter. However rhyme in Hebrew poetry tends to be not at the end of the line, but in successive words. Hebrew poetry often also uses alphabetical acronyms, where each line starts with a different letter of the alphabet (e.g. Psalm 119). The most distinguishing characteristic of Hebrew poetry is parallelism. A Hebrew poem is divided into lines which repeat the point of the author in different words. This repetitive style is the most distinguishing mark of Hebrew poetry because, unlike rhyme and meter, it transcends translation. For example, in Psalm 19: 7-9, each line in these 3 verses is really saying the same thing in a repetitive fashion.

- 7. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.
- 8. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes.
- 9. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.

Here, the psalmist is trying to penetrate our heart and get us to feel his point rather than making a rationalistic argument to make his point. Therefore, when studying Hebrew poetry, we do not dissect each line and try to determine the subtle differences in each word. Rather we let the overall sense of each parallel section give us an overall sense of what the author intends for us to feel about the passage.

Among the terms used for poetic compositions are: sir, song (with or without an instrument); mizmor, ‘psalm’ or ‘hymn’ (with instruments); ‘hymn’ qina, ‘elegy’ or ‘lament’; tehillah, ‘hymn of praise’; masal, in addition to its more usual meaning of ‘proverb’, is a ‘satirical song’ (Douglas, 1980).

The largest collection of Hebrew poetry is in the book of Psalms, and it is here that we have the richest material for the study of poetic forms. Other sources of biblical poetry could be found in Proverbs and Job.

The poetry of the Bible is not restricted to those books which we usually distinguish as ‘the poetical books – Job, Psalms, the Song of Solomon and Lamentations, with the versified wisdom of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes. A great part of the books of the Prophets consists of prophetic oracles in poetic form; and here and there throughout the historical narrative we come upon longer or shorter passages of poetry. The New Testament, too, has a greater poetical element than is often realized. The five canticles of Luke’s nativity narrative are well known, but the prologue of John is probably based on Christian hymn (Guthrie, and Motyer, 1980).

Hebrew poetry, as that of other literatures of the ancient Near East, is characterized by parallelism or rhythmic balance of thought. Its metre is dependent on accentuation, the unit being the couplet, in which the members may be of equal or varying length. There is often a further arrangement of couplets into strophes. Of this poetry the fundamental category is the shir, ‘song, lyric’ (Black, and Rowley, 1981). The song was accompanied by music, example Genesis 31:27; Is. 30:29; Amos 6:5, and associated with the dance, example Ex. 15:20f; Ps. 87:7. The song of the Well (Num. 21:17f), the Taunt song Number 21: 27-30; Is. 47; the Watchman’s song (Is. 21:11f), in all of which the content suggests the situation in life.

According to Black and Rowley (1981), in his final classification of the psalms Gunkel distinguished five principal and five subsidiary types – namely:

- (i) The hymn in praise of God, ritual (Psalms 8, 19, 29). Additional three groups are added
 - (a) Songs of Zion Ps. 46, 48, 76, 87,
 - (b) Enthronement songs, Ps. 47, 93, 97, 99 dealing with Yahweh’s enthronement as the universal king and eschatological in character, and
 - (c) Songs of deliverance (1Sam. 2: 1-10).
- (ii) The community lament of an expiatory character and having as its situation in life such threats to the national weal as famine or invasion (Ps. 44, 74).
- (iii) The Royal Psalm (Ps. 132, 2, 45, 20, 18).
- (iv) The individual lament (Ps. 3, 5, 6, 13, 17, 22).
- (v) Individual song of thanksgiving.

Poetry in the Old and New Testaments

The Old Testament repeatedly breaks out into poetry. Even its narratives are graced here and there with a couplet or a longer sequence of verse to make some memorable point (cf. e.g. Gen. 2-4 in any modern version), and its prophecies predominantly take this form. While the Psalms are the main body of poems in Scripture, and were given (with Job and Proverbs) a distinctive system of accounts by the Massoretes to mark the fact, they are themselves surrounded by poetry and rooted in a long and popular poetic tradition.

By its suppleness of form, Hebrew poetry lent itself well to this widespread use. A proverbial saying, a riddle, an orator's appeal, a prayer, a thanksgiving, to mention only a few varieties of speech, could all slip into its rhythms almost effortlessly, for its metre was not parceled out in "feet" or in a prescribe arrangement of strong and weak syllables, but heard in the sound of, say, three or four stresses in a short sentence or phrase, matched by an answering line of about the length. Example, the Revised Standard Version of Psalm 26:2,

Prove me, O Lord, and try me;

Test my heart and my mind.

The next Psalm to this, Psalm 27, is mostly in a 3:2 rhythm, which again has left its mark on the translation. Example, in verse 1,

The Lord is my light and my salvation;

Whom shall I fear?

This pattern of 3:2 is often referred to as qina (lament), because its falling cadence, with its suggestion of finality made it a favourite measure for elegies (as in the book of Lamentations) and for taunt-songs (e.g. Is. 14:12ff); but this finality could equally express joy and confidence as Psalm 27 fully demonstrates. But the fundamental characteristic of this poetry was not its external forms or rhythms, but its way of matching or echoing one thought with another. This has been described as thought-rhyme, but more often as 'parallelism', a term introduced by Bishop Robert Lowth in the eighteenth century (Kidner, 1973). It is recognizable at once in such a couplet as Psalm 103:10, where the two lines are synonymous:

He does not deal with us according to our sins,

Nor requite us according to our Iniquities.

In this form of parallelism; the second line (or sometimes a second verse) simply reinforces the first, so that its content is enriched and the total effect becomes spacious and impressive. The climatic parallelism of, e.g; Psalm 93:3, or of 92:9 quoted above, shows the powerful effect of letting the second line, like a second wave, mount higher than the first, perhaps to be outstripped in turn by a third. In various other ways the regularity of the matching lines can be modified, so that the second, for instance, enlarges on a single feature of the first, as in 145:18,

*The Lord is near to all who call upon him,
To all who call upon him in truth.*

- or else perhaps is its complement or counterpart, as in 63:8, rather than its echo:
*My soul clings to thee:
Thy right hand upholds me.*

This last example has something in common with Lowth's second category, 'antithetic parallelism, on which less needs to be said. It is most familiar to us from the sayings of Proverbs 10ff, and most characteristic of the didactive psalms; e.g. 37:21:

*The wicked borrows, and cannot pay back,
But the righteous is generous and gives.*

To these two classes, synonymous and antithetic, Lowth added a third, which he, named 'synthetic or constructive parallelism', where 'the sentences answer to each other merely by the form of construction'. He assigned to these first two groups, and in this he has been followed by various modern exponents (Kidner, 1973). But some of Lowth's most telling examples might well be classed as virtually synonymous parallels (e.g. Ps. 19:7 ff; 62:11a), and for the rest it would seem better to discard the term 'parallelism', and merely speak of couplets or bicola, in the many cases where the thought and diction move straight on in the second line of a pair, without a backward glance.

A final point deserves emphasis, and this too was one of Lowth's observations. It is the striking fact that this type of poetry loses less than perhaps any other in the process of translation. In many literatures the appeal of a poem lies chiefly in verbal felicities and associations, or in metrical subtleties, which tend to fail of their effect even in a related language. But the poetry of the Psalms has a broad simplicity of rhythm and imagery which survives transplanting into almost any soil. Above all, the fact that its parallelisms are those

of sense rather than of sound allows it to produce its chief effects with very little loss of either force or beauty. It is well fitted by God's providence to invite all the earth to 'sing the glory of his name'.

In the New Testament, three, perhaps four, typical Hebrew hymns are preserved in Luke's gospel: the Magnificat (Lk. 1:46-55), the Benedictus (Lk. 1:68-79), the Nunc Dimittis (Lk.2: 29-32), and the Gloria (Lk.2: 14). All of these passages are in the style and spirit of Old Testament psalms, majestic in language, and constructed on the pattern of verbal parallelism proper to Hebrew poetry. Luke viewed Magnificat as Mary's song regarding Christ. This lyrical poem is modeled upon Old Testament psalms and has also a special affinity to the song of Hannah (1Sam. 2:1-10). It is divided into four strophes, describing:

1. Mary's joyous exaltation, gratitude, and praise for her personal blessing;
2. The character and gracious disposition of God to all who reverence him;
3. His sovereignty and his special love for the lowly in the world of Mary's song is that God has designed to choose her a peasant maid of low estate, to fulfill the hope of every Jewish maiden.

In the Benedictus, Messiah's work is particularly a spiritual deliverance (Douglas, 1980), while the Nunc Dimittis, the prophecies accompanying Christ's advent occur not (as with John the Baptist) at circumcision, but at the rites of purification a month later. Perhaps in this setting Simeon, taking the Lord Jesus, uttered his Nunc Dimittis (Lk.2: 29-35). There are three specific 'acts of the spirit' occur namely:

- (1) he receives by divine revelation assurance that he shall see the Lord's messiah;
- (2) under the influence of the Spirit (cf. Rev. 1:10) he is led to encounter and recognize Jesus as Messiah (cf. 1Sam. 16:6ff);
- (3) he utters a prayer and prediction, which in Luke's context, is clearly to be regarded as prophetic. In Simeon's prophecy to Mary the concept of a suffering Messiah appears. Israel's destiny is glorious, but it is one of conflict.

Biblical Poetry as Ethical Reflection

The Bible contains examples of wills given by great sages, especially that of Jacob (Gen. 49), but they possess no special religious or ethical theme. This holds true for the Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs, one of the major works in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha written during the second Temple period and shortly after its destruction. The prototype of the medieval ethical will may be found in the Book of Proverbs, where much of the practical ethical advice is given in the manner of instructions from a father to his son.

Ethical wills differ from other kinds of ethical literature in several ways. Whereas ethical literature usually gives a lengthy theoretical basis for behavioural requirements, ethical wills

ordinarily only point out the right way, disregarding the ideological foundations. Thus they are a more practical, behavioural type of literature, close in some respect to the literature of the hanhagot whose role aim is to instruct the reader in right behaviour in the manner of halakhic literature. Biblical poetry could be seen as ethical wills. Ethical wills, therefore, comprise short ethical treatises, very practical in character (Ben-Sasson, 1959).

In many ethical wills, every paragraph opens with the words “my son”. Some wills are described as letters sent by a father, who was far away (in Palestine, for instance), to his sons, instructing them in the basic moral and ethical teachings. It was later accepted literary form for any short work dealing with the basic ethical norms in later generations (Abrahams, 1948).

It is a notable characteristic of Christianity that the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ are inseparably connected with his religious teachings. “Thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself” is not given by him as a separate and detached precept, but as one of two. “Thou shall love the Lord thy God with all they heart; and with all thy soul, and with thy entire mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second like unto it is this; thou shall love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hamgeth the whole law and the prophets” (Mk. 12:29-31).

Ethical obligation, according to Jesus’ teachings, is enforced by the yet higher religious obligation. Our duties to men are really a part of our all-comprehensive duty to God. The Old Testament ethical teachings he assumes as already received among his hearers, and in a general way endorses. The two foundation precepts, as to love of God and love of our neighbour, were both drawn from the Law of Moses. He expressly declared in the sermon on the Mount, that he came not to destroy the law, as some Jews imagined the messiah would do in order to make life easier, but came to complete the law (Matt. 5:17).

Some sayings of Jesus have often been taken for rules which were meant only as striking statements of a principle. For example, “Resist not him that is evil”, and many have taken this as a rule and have inferred that war is always wrong, and that a man must never defend himself when attacked. Yet Jesus did not tell the believing centurion at Capernaum to abandon his calling, nor in any case intimate that it was wrong to be a soldier. Again he said, “Give to him that asks thee”. People suppose that here is a rule for unrestricted observance, though perhaps no one in real life ever attempted to carry it out. But in the same discourse he said, “Ask, and it shall be given you”.

In this latter case he goes on to compare the heavenly father’s giving to that of parents. These, with all their human infirmity, “know how” to give good things to their children, and will not weakly give what the children ask through mistake; much more must the father in heaven know how to give, and withhold where that would be truer kindness.

We turn now to consider the great motive which Jesus connects with his ethical teachings. That motive, as already intimated, and as well known, is love. The love of God is to be supreme. The love of one's neighbour is to be in equipoise with the love of self. This makes a distinct recognition of self-love as essentially right. God's moral standards are never arbitrary or capricious, but are all consistent with and derived from his own moral character (Eph. 5:1). This theme of imitating God's moral character is found throughout the Bible (1Jn. 4:19; Luke. 6:36; 1Pet. 1:5 cf. Lev. 11:44).

The overall goal for making ethical decisions should be to understand and then obey the teaching of the entire Bible with regard to any particular situation. God's people were warned not to imitate their neighbours who committed infanticide through abortion or child sacrifice, patricide, matricide or murder (Ex. 20:13), armed robbery, and remarriage, suicide, immorality, divorce, homosexuality, and other vices.

Since the moral standards of the Bible come from the God of all creation, who holds all people in all societies accountable to him, Christians should act upon opportunities given them to influence government to make laws consistent with the Bible's moral standards (cf. Dan. 4:27; Luke. 3: 18-19; Acts 24: 24-25; also the prophetic warning to pagan nations in Isaiah 13-23; Ezekiel 25-32; Amos 1-2; Obadiah; Jonah; Nahum; Habakkuk; Zephaniah 2). Influencing a government to make good laws is one way of obeying Jesus' command, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matt. 22:39), for good laws bring many benefits to people. With regard to war, war is a large-scale armed conflict between countries or between groups within a country aiming at changing or dividing established government. Throughout history, wars have frequently been started by rulers seeking to expand their territory and power, but wars can be started for a variety of economic, political, religious, or ethnic reasons such as in Sudan, Libya, Somalia, Ethiopia and Eritrea among others. No recognized Christian group or leader today argues that any government should engage in war to compel people to support the Christian religion. This is because of the recognition that Christian faith, by its nature, must be voluntary if it is to be genuine (Ezek. 3 3:11; Matt. 11: 28-30; Rev. 22:17). Jesus distinguished between "the things that are Caesar's" and "the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21), thus establishing that the civil government ("Caesar") and the church ("the things that are God's) have different responsibilities and different tasks, and that the government should not use its power to attempt to control people's religious faith. Jesus himself refused to use deadly force to advance his kingdom or compel allegiance to him, (Matt. 26: 52-55; Jn. 18:36).

God does give civil government the responsibility and the authority to use superior force, even deadly force, to protect its citizens from evil. This is because until Jesus returns (Dan. 9:26; Matt. 24:6), there are some people so deeply committed to doing evil that they can be restrained, not by reason and persuasion, but only by superior force. Before in the Old Testament God says that rulers must "give justice to the weak" and must "deliver them from

the hand of the wicked” (Ps. 82: 3-4). The New Testament maintains that the civil government has been established by God with responsibility for maintaining justice. This is why the government has a rightful duty to “bear the word” (Rom 13:4), to be “a terror” to bad conduct, and thus to be “God’s servant” to do “good” for its citizens (Rom. 13: 3-4).

The crusade ethic treats war as the most effective means for destroying all resistance to establishing some idealistic vision of social order; it does so by religious authority, it is led by a religious figure, it ignores all odds, it demonizes opponents and it distinguishes only between friend and foe. This idea may be contrary to the doctrine of pacifism which denounces participating in war at least for Christians (Matt. 5:39, 22:39, 26: 52-53).

As a symbiosis of ethical reflection, it deals with life’s situation relating to Christian responses in the face of joy, festivity, work, persecution, conflict and suffering among others. In the book of Job, the poet suffers, not because he has done anything wrong, but because that is what should be. The suffering is symbolic in the poetic world; death of his children, the dissertation of his friends and his wife, and eventual sickness of the poet serve as a transit that transcends the intended meaning to an understandable world. The meaning of those mishaps is that the poet (Job) must ‘remain the minority among men cast out in confrontation with the gods’ (Akwanya 153), and the sickness is psychological impalement which makes Job ask some questions which his God replies because the environment is conducive to do so. So the issue of poetry making is between the poet and his God.

The Jews were evidently a music-loving people and famous for their songs. Hezekiah in 701BC included in his tribute to Sennacherib male and female musicians, and the exiles in Babylon were pressed by their captors to sing one of their songs, of whose fame they must have heard (Ps. 137:3). Little of their secular poetry has remained, but reference to it in the Old Testament seems to indicate that it was of considerable volume. The ‘Song of the Well’ (Numbers 21: 17-18) was probably a work-song or chorus used at the well or by well-diggers. ‘In spite of the above, there are other marks or features which often appear in Hebrew poetry;

- i. There is a widespread use of metaphors, that is, of picture language used to express important ideas about God and about life. Psalm 23 and John 10:1-21 give the qualities of a good shepherd which helped the people of Israel and Christians to understand God.
- ii. There can be a refrain, or chorus, which is repeated throughout a poem. Psalm 107 uses, ‘let them thank God for his steadfast love’ in verses 8, 15, 21, and 31.
- iii. Some poems are acrostics. Each line or each couplet begins with a different letter of the alphabet in its normal order. Psalm 119 has eight line of poetry for each letter of the alphabet.
- iv. Unusual words, or words no longer used in ordinary conversation, are sometimes included in poetry. Psalm 74:14 refers to ‘Leviathan’, a many-headed sea monster mentioned in Canaanite literature, which was a symbol of chaos or evil.

Conclusion

From the foregoing hypothesis, one can deduce that the biblical poetry as an ethical reflection examined why the righteous suffers, the efficacy of prayers and praises, wisdom in right living, the meaninglessness of life apart from God and the love between bride and groom, which symbolizes God's love for his people. Psalms as prayers and praises is a collection of religious poetry for public worship and for private devotion. It has been called "the inspired prayer and praise book of Israel" (Emenike, 2003:26). The proverbs as a collection of wise sayings and good advice, is specifically to guide people in their daily living especially to teach the young people on how to live a good successful life (Emenike, 2003). The biblical poetry, for example, Solomon's testimony in Ecclesiastes of how empty life is without God portrays how pleasures, riches, accomplishments, and power cannot satisfy one's quest in this world (Emenike, 2003). There are certain rules for interpreting Hebrew poetry.

- i. Recognize it in order to be able to interpret it properly.
- ii. Analyze it. This can be done in several ways viz identifying the types of parallelism, the literary devices, the types of figures of speech, and the central truth for doctrinal purposes in which the message of the poetry is more important than the form. In addition, one should always interpret poetic passages in the light of didactic passages rather than words, create your theology from the teaching passages and illustrate it from poetry is also necessary to identify any unique characteristics.

To Henn (1981), the main theme of the Hebrew poetry is to be described as the relationship of man of God: Man's perception (growing slowly in the direction of understanding and love) of the nature of God. Across these run the minor related actions, adventures in spiritual and moral evil; the art and practice of ritual living society today. There is also the individual tragedy of Job (the sole drama among countries dramatic incidents); ballads, sacred songs, rhapsodies, oracular utterances; all interspersed with the codified wisdom, the proverbial distillation of experience, from which the Hebrew tradition renewed continually its characteristic life.

There is the theme of death, which carries no great charge of emotion save the simplicity of loss, for the thought of eternity does not often come in the Old Testament to bring the fears and hopes from beyond the grave. Men are gathered to their fathers, or go down into the darkness. Exceptions are the famous Isa. 26:19 and Dan. 12:2.

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*The Seduced – and – abandoned
prostitute is the one that suffers a
loss of virginity that leads her to a
life in the streets.*