

The Bible as a Poetic Text: A Study of Selected Books and Chapters **By**

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Abstract

The Holy Bible is a set of books written by many authors for Christian teaching and worship. It is divided into two main sections respectively called Old Testament and New Testament. The first contains 39 books while the second comprises 27. Overall, there are 52 books in the Holy Bible. Poetry, on the other hand, is a literary work written in verse with rhyme, rhythm, beauty, etc. This makes it to have its special language that enables it to deviate from the normal language. This has been consciously or sometimes unconsciously done by poets in order to create style. Therefore, in this study, we intend to see to what extent the Holy Bible authors adopted the characteristics of the poetic language through the exercise of poetic licence.

Keywords: Poetry, text, poetic text, Bible, poetic language.

Introduction

A given literary work cannot be well understood without a thorough knowledge of the language, as a medium of expression. This implies that literature cannot be studied apart from language (Notal, 2014). Through the exercise of what is called poetic licence, poets deviate from some linguistic rules or norms. However, some

modern poets have successfully freed themselves from the constraints of the so called poetic language (Sharma, 2009). This is because the language of poetry is different from those of other literary genres, that is, drama and prose. The language of poetry is differently ordered. This means that the grammar of poetry would result in that different from that which linguistic analysis of ordinary language would permit (Levin, 1969).

The Book of Genesis tells us about the creation of the universe, the origin of the human race, the beginning of sin and suffering of the world, and God's way of dealing with people. It is divided into two main parts: the creation of the world and the early history of the human race and the history of the early ancestors of the Israelites, namely, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It ends with the promise that God will show concern for his people. Throughout the book, the main character is God, who judges and punishes those who do wrong (Holy Bible, KJV, 2014)

The Book of Psalms is the hymn and prayer book of the Bible. It was written by different authors over a long period of time. The Israelites kept and used these hymns for their worship, and eventually include this collection in their scriptures. The psalms are hymns of praise and worship of God; prayers for help, protection, and salvation; pleas for forgiveness; songs of thanksgiving for God's blessings; and petitions for punishment of enemies. These prayers are both personal and national. (The Bible, KJV, 2014:721).

The Gospel according to Matthew tells us about the good news of Jesus as the promised saviour, the one through whom God fulfilled the promises he made to his people in Old Testament. The outline of contents of the book of Matthew include: the birth, baptism and temptation of Jesus; his ministry, instruction to the twelve disciples, parables about the kingdom of heaven; the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus (The Bible, KJV, 2014:1185).

The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians focuses on the problems of Christian life and faith in the church which Paul built at Corinth, a great cosmopolitan Greek city. It covers mainly factions in the church, sexual immorality and family life, Christians and pagans, church life and worship, the resurrection of Christ and of

the believers and the offering for the Christians in Judea. (The Bible, KJV, 2014:1428).

This study aims to investigate stylistically the characteristics of the biblical text that makes it qualify as poetry. We shall adopt the grammatical aspect of stylistic analysis together with figures of speech in order to ascertain the poeticity or otherwise of the biblical texts chosen for this study. It is divided into introduction, literature review, methodology, the Bible as a poetic text, findings, and conclusion.

Literature Review

i. Poetry

Many definitions have been offered for the term “poetry”. Each poet has his own. For example, the Robert Dictionary (2004) defines the term thus: “the art of language generally associated with versification targeting to explain something by means of verbal combinations where rhythm, harmony and imagery have much and sometimes more importance than the intelligible content itself”. The word “poetry” etymologically comes from the Greek word “poien”, meaning “produce” or “create”. This implies that the poet gives himself the power of invention of a verbal creation while exploiting all the language resources. Again, it means that the poet invents new words that have more sense and density than in their usual usage. Peyrouet (1994) sees poetry as the research into an ideal language far from current communication and its aim is not usefulness or effectiveness. T.S. Elliot says that “poetry is not the assertion that something is true but making of that truth more fully real to us”. As for Maduka and Eyo (2000), poetry is a game of words.

ii. Poetic language

As earlier mentioned above, the language of poetry is different from that of drama or prose. This is because poets distort the normal order of words and clauses in a sentence by the exercise of poetic licence. They make syntactic deviation in the course of their poetic production. This is done to create new words and phrases that suit their styles.

Poets are artists that work with words, guiding themselves with the events and views of the society in which they live. This is why Theodore de Banville (2008)

talks of a poet as a thinker who does both intellectual and manual work. This means that a poet thinks well before writing. This agrees with the Boileau's view in *Poetic Art (Art Poétique)* that we must think well before writing a given text.

Mora (2014) asserts that a poet cannot modify the structure of a work without changing its essential style. He adds that "the language of poetry is special and unchangeable. Like science, poetry has its rules that must be followed and its language cannot easily exchange with those of other domains or registers.

Crystal (1999) affirms that "the language of poetry is characterized by archaism, syntactic inversion, neologism and figures of speech". He adds that poets use old words to create new words and cause syntactic deviation because of poetic licence. Further, he says that poets combine both denotative and connotative meaning of words and phrases in their artistic creation.

Mukarovsky, cited in Busse, Montoro and Norgaard (2010) believes that "the violation of the standard is what makes possible the poetic use of language; without this possibility there would be no poetry". According to him, we must change the normal use of language in order to foreground meaning of words or phrases.

Roman Jakobson, cited in Esser (1953:56) emphasizes that it is cohesion that counts in poetry. He adds that this cohesion is created through rime, repetition, comparison and metre while considering the sense and word-order in each verse of the poem. Again, he adds that the use of figures of speech is important in poetic cohesion. Further, he stresses the relevance of parallelism to poetic cohesion, achieved through rhythm, emphasis, imagery and syntax.

Poetic forms are violators of grammatical rules because poets suspend the grammatical restriction on co-occurrence possibilities (Haynes, 1968). Poets tend to destroy the distinction between denotation and connotation in order to create hybrid meaning (Widdowson, 1006). Also, poets find that using language of a poet flouts some of the shared rules of a collective langue (Akakuru, 2009).

From all the definitions proposed above, one can infer that poetic language is deviant because of adherence to its rules, foregrounding and poetic licence.

iii. Text

A text is a series of oral or written words perceived as constituting a coherent whole, with meaning and using the conventional structures of language (Wikipedia, 2014). It is also defined as an autonomous linguistic series (oral or written) constituting an empirical unit, and produced by one or more speakers in a given social situation (Ratier, 2001:302). In semiotics, Courtes (1976) defines text as "a discursive realization of a system of signs or meanings" a discursive realization of a system of signs or meaning". Barthes (1973), in *Universal Encyclopedia* (2000) sees "text" as a "meaningful production resulting from a writing from a language which constitutes the creation of meaning and modification of signs and judgements". Etymologically "text" comes from the Latin word "textum", meaning to weave. For Halliday and Hasan (1976), in Kamalu (2015), a text is "a unit of passage in use whose relevance lies in the realization of meaning"

iv. Poetic text

A poetic text is that which emphasizes the choice of words, image and sonority (Wikipedia, 2017). It expresses feeling and emotions; plays with words and creates some images. It is characterized by the presence of refrains or complets, unequal verse, rhymes, stanza; repetition of sounds, words and number of syllables, the use of rhythm, sonority, musicality and figures of speech. (*Universal Encyclopedia*, 2000).

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on functionalism. This is a sociological theory borrowed into linguistics by Michael Halliday in his systemic functional linguistics. Sociologically, functionalism claims that the society is made up of parts that function like a biological organism (Lamm & Schaefer, 1998). But in linguistics, Halliday sees functionalism as a theory that focuses on how people use language with one another to accompany every day social life and how social worlds are, in turn, created in and through language. Systemic functional linguistics, therefore, focuses on texts, considered in relationship to the social context in which they

occur (McCarthy, Mathiessen & Slade) in Schmitt (2010:63). It concerns the explanation of the internal organization of language in terms of the functions that it has evolved to serve (Halliday, 1978, 1994). Halliday describes language as a social semiotic involving the interdependence of meaning and context of situation. Generally, systemic functional linguistics sees language use as functional, that this function is to make meaning, that meanings are governed by social and cultural context and that language use is semiotic and based on choice (Kamalu, 2018)

Methodology

In this study, we adopted the stylistic method. We studied the use of language in the selected chapters of Books of the Holy Bible (Genesis, Psalms, Matthew and I Corinthians). The texts were selected at random and analyzed by the syntactic approach which enabled us to identify the deviant forms arising from the use of figures of speech and foregrounding through poetic licence.

The Bible as a Poetic Text

In this section, we intend to see to what extent the Bible adheres to and contains the characteristics of poetic language or text. We shall consider the following texts chosen at random from the Bible: Proverbs 30:25-30; Psalm 23:1-6; Genesis 1:1-7 and Matthew 5:1-6. All these provide the corpus for this study, let us, therefore, present and analyze them the one after the other, starting with that of the book of Genesis.

Text I (Genesis 1:1-7)

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.
3. And God said, let there be light; and there was light.
4. And God saw the light, and it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.
5. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and morning were the first day.
6. And God said, let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.

- 7 And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so.

On the whole, the text contains fifteen (15) sentences. The first verse comprises only a simple sentence. The second verse has three (3) simple sentences. The third verse contains two (2) sentences while verse IV has three (3) sentences. The fifth verse contains three (3) sentences while the sixth verse bears three sentences. Finally, verse VIII contains three (3) Most of the sentences correspond to the normal SV, SVO, SVOA, etc, patterns. However, the first sentence is of the type ASV. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. This is because, the adjunct “in the beginning” is mobile within the sentence and can occupy any of initial, medial and final positions. Again, the text lacks archaism, syntactic inversion and neologism. Forms such as; thou, saith, seekest, thine, mine, etc, which characterize the Shakespearian era. Nevertheless, from chapter 41 of the same Genesis, one can find words such as ye, shalt, shewed, thou, etc, in some verses while others are written in standard British English.

Concerning the stylistic devices, we have the use of anaphora, parallelism, substitution, personification, metaphor and repetition among others as in:

i. **Anaphora**

This is the repetition of a word, phrase or clause at the beginning of two or more neighbouring sentences. The example of anaphora include:

And God said, let there be light... (v3)

And God saw the light... (v4)

And God made the firmament (v7)

ii. **Parallelism**

In this figure of speech, there is the repetition of identical syntactic, morphological or phonological structures in a text. It is an important aspect of foregrounding. Examples of the stylistic device include:

And God called the light Day... (v5)

And God made the firmament... (v7)

And God divided the light... (v4)

Upon the face of the deep... (v2)

Upon the face of the waters...(vs)

iii. Personification

This is the giving of human attributes to animals, plants and inanimate objects as in the following examples:

And God called the light Day, and the darkness
He called Night (v5)
And the spirit of God moved upon the surface of the waters (v2)

iv. Imagery

There is the use of imagery in the text where we have words such as form, light, darkness, deep firmament and waters. All these present a picture of what the world looked like as at the time of creation by God.

Text II (Psalm 23:1-6)

1. The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
2. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: He leadeth me beside the still waters.
3. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
4. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.
5. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil,; my cup runneth over.
6. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever.

In all, the above text popularly called "The Lord is my shepherd", contains 15 simple sentences. The first verse comprises two (2) of them. The second verse has two (2) and the third one has two (2). Verse III bears two (2) while verse IV comprises four (4) of them. The fifth verse has three (3) and the sixth has two (2). Like the first text, all the sentences respect the SV, SVO, SVOO, SVOA, etc, patterns. It can be observed that the SVOA sentences pattern dominate as in verses 2 and 3 shown below:

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures (v3)
He leadeth me beside the still waters (v2)
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness ... (v3)

In the fourth verse, 'thy rod and they staff' is used appositively with the pronoun "they". This third person's plural "they" refer back to the antecedent "thy rod and they staff". The simple present tense is used more than the simple future.

One can find the old English words such as maketh, leadeth (v2); restoreth, leadeth (v3); yea, thou, thy (v4); thou, mine and runneth (v5). This reflects the presence of archaism. The adjunct "in the presence of mine enemies" (v5) would have been "in the presence of my enemies" in standard British English but the Old English uses mine (possessive pronoun) instead of my (possessive adjective). This is a form of lexical deviation allowed by poetic licence.

The stylistic devices used in the text include the following parallelism, substitution, personification, imagery and repetition (anaphora, consonance, assonance). Let us see their examples as follows:

(1) **Parallelism**

Parallel grammatical structures can be seen in the text thus:

I shall not want (v1)
I will fear no evil (v4)
I will dwell in the house of the Lord (v6)

(2) **Substitution**

Substitution involves the replacement of a noun, verb or clause by their identical syntactic elements as follows:

He leadeth me ... (v2)
He maketh me... (2)

(3) **Personification**

This is found in the following examples from the text:

For thou art with me... (v4)
Thou anointeth head with oil... (v5)
Thou prepareth a table before me... (v5)

(4) Imagery

One can see the use of imagery in the following examples:

Shepherd (v1), green pastures (v2), still waters (v2), valley of the shadow of death (v4), thy rod, thy staff (v4), my cup, oil (v5), etc.

(5) Repetition

Various forms of repetition are found in the text as follows:

He maketh ... (v2)

He leadeth ... (v2)

He restoreth... (3)

These examples are called anaphora

Secondly, we have the repetition of vowels as in:

He leadeth me beside the still waters /e/.

Thou anointest my head with oil /o/.

My cup runneth over /u/.

These examples form assonance.

Again, we have the repetition of consonant sounds as in:

His names sake /s/

Shadow of death /d/

Text III (Matthew 5:1-6)

1. And seeing the multitudes, he went up into the mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him.
2. And he opened his mouth and taught them saying.
3. Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
5. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.
6. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.
7. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

The above passage popularly called "The Beatitudes", though not complete here, contains 14 simple sentences which are conjoined into seven (7) complex sentences

with the aid of the colon. In each sentence, the subordinate clause follows the main clause.

This passage is also called "Sermon on the mount". In it, Jesus used parables to teach his disciples about how those who suffer with him on earth will enjoy in heaven after his second coming theologically called "the advent of Jesus". The passage starts with a participial phrase "and seeing the multitudes" followed by an independent clause, a subordinate clause and another independent clause.

The second verse has the SVO pattern. From verse III onwards, we have the inverted form "Blessed are..." with the pattern CVS (complement, verb, subject). In all these remaining verses, the independent clause comes before the subordinate clause as in:

Blessed are those that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are they which hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

Another feature of this text is that archaic expressions are absent. Neologisms are also absent. The text is written in New British English using a plain style. The level of the language is simple and popular.

Some poetic devices such as anaphora, substitution, parallelism, consonance, alliteration and oxymoron as in the following examples:

(i) **Anaphora**

This repetition of the expression "Blessed are" in almost all the verses is anaphoric in the text thus:

Blessed are the poor in spirit... (v2)

Blessed are the merciful ... (v7)

(ii) This is found in some of the verses too as in the following examples:

Blessed are those that mourn: for they shall be comforted (v4)

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth (v5)

(iii) Parallelism

Parallel structures are found in the text as in the following examples:

- ... for they shall be comforted
- ... for they shall be filled
- ... for they shall obtain mercy

(iv) Consonance

The repetition of consonant sounds is seen in a number of verses in the text as shown below:

- And he opened his mouth and taught them... /t/
- ... for they shall be comforted... /f/
- Blessed are the poor in spirit... /p/

(6) Assonance

Certain vowel sounds are repeated in a number of verses in the text as shown by the examples given below:

- ... and when he was set... /e/
- ... Blessed are the meek /e/

It can be observed that the personal pronoun "they" is repeated from verses 4 to 7. This is a stylistic device which is for both harmony or rhythm and emphasis. The rime formed by this expression, "for they shall", is musical.

(7) Finally, the repetition of the conjunction 'and' in some of the verses has a stylistic effect on the comprehension and reading of the text.

Text IV (I Corinthians 15:1 – 6)

1. Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also you have received, and wherein ye stand.
2. By which also you are saved, if you keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.
3. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.
4. And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.
5. And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve.

6. After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep.

The above passage about the Resurrection of Christ contains eleven (11) simple sentences. They combine to form six complex sentences using commas and colons. All the sentences are declarative and have the SV, SVO, SVOA, etc pattern.

From verse I, there is an emphasis on the preaching of the gospel by the writer or author of the text. He talks about declaring, preaching and receiving of the gospel. In verse II, the author says that Christians at Corinth would be save if only they remember and believe what he had preached to them. From verse IV, we have only subordinate clauses with the exception of the first clause in verse VI. There are no inversions and neologisms in the text. The only archaic word found there is "ye". The style is plain and grammar is simple. There is the repetition of the connector "and that" in verses IV and V.

Some poetic devices are seen in this text.

One can see substitution, parallelism, hyperbole, repetition, etc. We can cite the following examples of the said figures of speech:

Substitution

This is found in the following verses:

- ... which I preached to you (v1)
- ... which also you have received (v1)
- ... which also you are saved (v2)

Parallelism

This poetic device can be seen in the following examples:

- And that he was buried
- And that he rose again
- And that he was seen of Cephas

Hyperbole

Some verse are emphasized to enable the Christians understand well the mission of Jesus on earth. This is to enable the people of Corinth accept Jesus as their Lord and saviour. Below are examples of hyperbole in the passage.

“And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures. And that he was seen of Cephas...” (v4 – 5)

Findings and Discussion

The first major observation of this content analysis of these biblical texts is that some of them contain ancient words borrowed from Old English of the Shakespearean era. This is an inheritance from the Roman Empire which spread to other parts of Europe and the entire world. Certain styles of writing spread with the culture and politics of people in different civilizations. This is particularly true of religion, law, diplomacy and education. The doctrine of decorum has been passed down to us from the Greek and Roman rhetoricians, who applied it first to oratory and then to written language (Nofal, 2014). The authorized King James Version, the Book of Common Prayer or Psalms and the works of Shakespeare all contain this archaic English, and can also be seen in the works of Chaucer, Hardy, Yeats, etc.

Secondly, parallelism is found in all the studied biblical texts. It is very often connected with rhetorical emphasis. It is found in ballads, nursery rhymes, proverbs and slogans. Roman Jackson said that ‘any form of parallelism is an apportionment of invariants and variables’. This implies that in a parallelism, there must be an element of identity and another of contrast.

Thirdly, it was found that the dominant figures of speech used in the studied texts are anaphora, substitution, parallelism, assonance and consonance. All these produce rhymes and rhythm in the verses of the texts.

Further, all the studied texts contain the normal SV, SVO, SVOA, etc patterns which make the sentences well-formed. The deviations have, however, come from the stylistic devices used by the authors of the biblical texts used in this study. There are no neologisms and inversions.

Furthermore, the studied texts have all the characteristics of a poetic language such as stanza, verse, rhyme, rhythm, beauty etc. One can also see that the denotative and connotative meaning of some of the words needs to be known for their understanding. This enables us to derive pleasure from poetic texts.

Conclusion

In this study, we tried to investigate whether the biblical texts qualify for poetry. Using the content analysis method, we found that the Old English occurs in some of the studied texts such as those of Genesis, Psalms and first Book of Corinthians. There is also the Book of Matthew where chapter V uses Standard English only. Still, some other biblical texts combine both Old and Standard English, even in the same chapter. Further, there are figures of speech in the texts under study, especially anaphora, parallelism, substitution, imagery, and hyperbole. Furthermore, the texts are all written in verse.

This paper concludes that since the studied texts have rhyme, rhythm, versification, beauty and emotion, we can describe them as poetic. Also, they contain poetic or stylistic devices which involve the secondary use of meaning of words for the purpose of foregrounding, as in most part of the Synoptic Gospels and the Epistles of Paul, they represent poems. Therefore, one can say that the Holy Bible qualifies as poetic text or poetry.

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