POTTERY, POETRY, AND PROPHECY:
AN ESSAY ON BIBLICAL POETRY*

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POETRY is not only central in the title, but for the study of the Hebrew Bible. There is no intention here of disvaluing the prose of the Bible, which constitutes the first major literary composition in that medium ever produced, so far as I am aware, whether we speak of the so-called Court History and the J source of the Pentateuch of the 10th century B.C., or the composite whole which we may call the Primary History (Genesis through Kings) of the 6th century.[1] The preponderance of prose is even greater in the NT, whether we speak of the narratives of the Gospels and Acts, or the essays on religion and ethics contained in the Epistles.[2] There is little danger that the prose of the Bible will be lost or forgotten, neglected or abandoned by scholars, much less by the vast constituency which holds this literature sacred. On the contrary, the Bible will be read and studied, admired and absorbed, primarily as a prose work in the future as in the past.

The case with the great poetic tradition of the Bible is far otherwise. While particular compositions and certain books of the Bible have always been identified and acknowledged as poetic in form and content, much of the poetry of the Bible has been incorporated into the prose tradition. The rediscovery of the poetry of the prophets is a major contribution of modern scholarship, as is the recognition of the poetic tradition behind the earliest prose narratives.[3] Since some large fraction, perhaps a quarter to a third of the Hebrew Bible, must be reckoned as poetry or poetic in character, just its bulk would demand serious attention, but its quality and difficulty make it even more important. In many respects it is older and more basic than the prose materials; at the same time it is more obscure and challenging. The form and style, the selection

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*The Presidential Address delivered 29 October 1976, at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held at Stouffer's Riverfront Towers, Saint Louis, MO.

[1] D. N. Freedman, "The Law and the Prophets," *Congress Volume, Bonn 1962* (VT Sup 9; Leiden: Brill, 1963) 250-65; also "Pentateuch," *IDB* 3 (1962) 711-27.

[2] Nevertheless, there is an important poetic component in the NT, which will be discussed later in the paper.

[3] Bishop Lowth, while not the first to make this observation, nevertheless marked a turning point in the study of the prophetic literature and the poetry of the Bible generally. See G. B. Gray, *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry* (New York: Ktav, 1972; reprint of original edition 1915) 6-7; also my comments, "Prolegomenon," to Gray's volume (p. viii).

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and order of words, all play a vital role in conveying content, meaning, and feeling. In poetry, the medium and message are inseparably intertwined to produce multiple effects at different levels of discourse and evoke a whole range of responses: intellectual, emotional, and spiritual.

In the present paper, I intend to discuss two aspects of Hebrew poetry in the light of recent research and discussion: (1) its character, including (a) definition; (b) sequence-dating; (c) forms and structures; (2) its function as the vehicle of revelation, including (a) pagan patterns: myth, epic, ritual, oracle; (b) Israelite adaptation: echoes and remnants of epic traditions, surviving poems; (c) continuation: worship (Psalms), wisdom (Proverbs, Job), oracles (Prophets).

I. *The Character of Hebrew Poetry*

(a) *Definition.* Poetry is well delimited by its differences from prose. While there is an area of overlap, generally it is not difficult to distinguish the two without precisely defining the difference. Since the distinction is often quantitative rather than qualitative, and in terms of degree rather than kind, it may be asked why it is important to draw the line at all and try to separate one corpus from the other. The answer is that in spite of some blending of types and blurring of the lines of demarcation, prose and poetry are basically two different ways of using language. Each has its own rules of operation, and it is obligatory to understand each category according to its own pattern, even if the dividing line is not always certain.

We have devised recently a mechanical test to separate poetry from prose in the Bible, and preliminary tests show that it will work efficiently in most cases. The particles ʾēt (the sign of the definite direct object), ʾăšer (the relative pronoun), and ha- (the definite article) all have been identified as prosaic elements, not common in or suitable to poetry.[4] But with one partial exception, no systematic study of the distribution of these elements in biblical literature has been made.[5] In a comprehensive investigation, the results of which are now being prepared for publication, a graduate student of mine, working with statisticians at the University of Michigan, has collected extensive samples of prose and poetry in the Bible, has determined the frequency with which these particles occur, and their distribution and ratios between prose and poetry. Then on the basis of standard formulas and tables, she has been able to fix the value of these particles as a discriminant and calculate the probability that their distribution in the Bible is the result of

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[4] W. F. Albright routinely eliminated these particles in his reconstructions of Hebrew poetry, and scholars associated with the Baltimore School have followed the same practice.

[5] The study by Y. T. Radday of the Technion in Haifa was limited to the occurrences of the definite article. In counting, the author made no distinction between the instances of the article indicated by the letter *he*, and those implied by the Masoretic vocalization of the preposition with following nouns. In spite of this qualification, Radday's results are very impressive: poetic books are grouped at the low end of the chart (with minimal use of the article), and prose books at the high end. Books that are mixtures of prose and poetry (as, e.g., Jeremiah and Ezekiel) fall between the extremes.

chance or convention. The conclusion is that the criterion works, *grosso modo*, very effectively and serves to separate prose from poetry without difficulty. Prose passages cluster at the high end of the frequency spectrum while poetry is found at the other extreme. There are exceptions and some overlapping; and we must reckon with a modest amount of contamination: i.e., the addition of one or more of these particles where they did not originally occur, and more rarely their omission where they were present. There is no evidence, however, for the normalization of prose practice through the text or the wholesale revision of "poetry" into "prose," even though no distinction was made in the manner of copying the material, or most of it, in the manuscripts. Otherwise the distinction could not have been preserved, as in fact it has been. In general, these particles occur six to eight times more frequently in prose passages than in poetic ones. Statistically the results are even more important, since they establish beyond cavil that the occurrence of these particles is a valid discriminant, and the difference in distribution reflects an intrinsic distinction between prose and poetry.[6] What it means is that, when a writer composed a prose work, he naturally and inescapably used these particles in the normal fashion described in the grammars; but when he or anyone composed poetry, he naturally did not use them, or if he did, very sparingly. Some of these exceptions can be explained as the result of transmissional errors, since the tendency of scribes would be in the direction of normal prose practice. But the residue would require further investigation and explanation.

Refinements in the use of this criterion may show some fluctuation in the occurrence of these particles in poetry and offer clues to a more discriminating classification of the poems in the Bible. Hypothetically, we might expect this difference between prose and poetry to break down gradually during the long period of biblical composition and compilation. Thus a higher incidence of these particles in poetry might point to a later date of composition, but other potential influences must be reckoned with, screened out, or otherwise accommodated.

We must issue a *caveat* at this point concerning the possible use of this statistically important criterion in textual restoration and in the care and cure of ailing passages in poetry. It would be irresponsible to conclude that these particles were never used in poetry and that all such occurrences in the present text are the result of editorial revision or scribal error. At the same time, some contamination has occurred, and the elimination of intrusive particles will be justified in specific cases, especially where supporting data are available.[7] There must have been a slight tendency to add particles in poetry, chiefly

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[6] The key figure for each particle taken separately is less than .001 (and for all three taken together, which is the strongest criterion, even less than for the others), which means that the probability that this is a deliberate difference in the treatment of prose and poetry is so great as to be certain.

[7] Compare Num 24:4b with 24:16c, which are identical except that the particle ʾšr occurs before *mhzh* in v. 4b, whereas it is omitted in v. 16. In view of the metrical balance of the bicolon v. 16cd, we must omit ʾšr in v. 4b as a secondary addition. There may be some connection between

because most of the poetry was copied as prose, which would blur this distinction. Furthermore, the Masoretes seem not to have recognized the difference between prose and poetry except where tradition had preserved it in stichometric writing, or in some other fashion.[8] While it is clear that they did not tamper with the existing text (the *kĕtîb*), when it came to vocalization, they followed a uniform pattern marking the presence of the article indiscriminately in prose and poetry wherever it seemed grammatically appropriate.[9]

(b) *Sequence-Dating.* This leads directly to a discussion of sequence-dating in poetry, and the reference to pottery in the title of the paper. Before proceeding on this fragile topic, however, I had best make a more emphatic disclaimer than usual with regard to lack of expertise, especially in the presence of qualified archaeologists. No one — friend or foe — has ever accused me of knowing more than the rudiments of pottery identification or dating. My acquaintance with this intricate science is so passive as to be inert. Nevertheless, the principles of sequence-dating of pottery are simple enough, and the application over the years has proved remarkably successful and perduring. Pottery chronology remains the best and most exact standard of measurement for all periods of the Bronze and Iron Ages (roughly from before 3000 to about 600 B.C.). What makes the lowly potsherd so valuable is that it has extraordinary durability (a quality that also attaches to clay tablets with cuneiform writing on them, as we are being reminded repeatedly in these latter days), occurs in enormous quantities everywhere human beings lived for the last 6000 years and more, and in great varieties of types, sizes, and shapes, and with all kinds of decorations. In addition to these statistically significant characteristics, they also underwent continuous and measurable change and thus constitute an ideal instrument for determining chronological sequence. When combined with accurate stratigraphic analysis, pottery dating is entirely reliable within necessary limits. Except in the most unusual circumstances, dates deriving from the study of pottery cannot be fixed more precisely than within a range of 50 to 100 years. Pottery analysis and sequence dating has been a critical factor in establishing archaeology as a reasonably exact science

the insertion of *šr* in v. 4b and the fact that the colon v. 16b(*wᵉdᶜ dᶜt ᶜlywn*), which is parallel to v. 16a = v. 4a, is missing in v. 4.

[8] Some MSS with stichometric writing have been found at Qumran, e.g., Deuteronomy 32. Cf. P.W. Skehan, "A Fragment of the 'Song of Moses' (Deut. 32) from Qumran," *BASOR* 136 (1954) 12-15.

[9] The statistics show a startling reversal from the pattern established for the use of the three particles, where the proportion is overwhelming, when prose is compared with poetry. When it comes to Masoretic vocalization, however, the difference between prose and poetry is practically erased. If one counts those cases in which, according to the Masoretes, the *he* has been elided and its presence indicated by the appropriate vowels and dagesh forte, the frequency is practically the same (for the entire sample there were 229 occurrences in prose, and 219 in poetry). Even when the greater overall incidence of prepositions in poetry as distinguished from prose is taken into account, the ratio is about 3:2 which is a far cry from the ratio of almost 7:1, which we find when we count only those instances in which the *he* of the article actually appears. It is clear that the Masoretes seriously affected the results where they were able to do so.

and in permitting the material findings to be integrated into the historical framework of the ancient Near East.

In principle, it should be possible to establish criteria for the sequence-dating of Hebrew poetry. As the late W. F. Albright was fond of saying, everything human beings set their minds to and their hands on is susceptible of typological classification and chronological ordering. Everything humans touch evolves in one way or another, and it only requires some experience with the material and the application of good sense to isolate those factors which are diagnostic for the process of change in the phenomena under investigation. By using these criteria adroitly, it should then be possible for us to measure both the direction and the degree of change from one period to the next. What may be relatively simple in principle, however, can turn out to be deucedly difficult in practice.

Albright himself attempted to establish a viable sequence-dating of Hebrew poetry, using as criteria certain widespread stylistic phenomena: repetitive parallelism and paronomasia.[10] As a pioneering effort, it was a brilliant *tour de force* and another example of his extraordinary ability to create new areas of research. The net results, however, can only be regarded as mixed, and he continued to refine the method and reorder the poems during the remaining years of his life. Using the same corpus of early Hebrew poetry, essentially, but applying an entirely different set of criteria, I also have worked out a sequence-dating of these poems, partly as a check on Albright's findings, and to develop a mechanism for dealing with other poems. My study, embodied in a major article, "Divine Names and Titles in Early Hebrew Poetry," has just appeared in the G. E. Wright Memorial Volume (edited by Frank M. Cross and others). I will refrain from repeating myself *in extenso*, except to say that the value for biblical studies of recovering a securely dated corpus of pre-monarchic poetry would be very great and should have an important impact on previous and current reconstructions of early Israelite history.

I can also report a subsidiary gain from the application of the techniques developed in that study to poems outside the corpus mentioned. In a recent examination of the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1-10), another graduate student of mine and I had occasion to compare it with Psalm 113 in view of the close literary connections between them.[11] Converging tests show that the relationship is sequential, though not necessarily direct, and all the relevant indicia point to the Psalm as the older of the two poems. Since the Song, independently of this comparison, has been dated to the period of the United Monarchy (10th century),[12] we are required to date the Psalm earlier, in the

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[10] W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968), chap. 1.

[11] I wish to acknowledge the extensive assistance of Mr. Clayton Libolt, a graduate student at the University of Michigan, in the preparation of this article, "Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah," which is to appear in the H. L. Ginsberg *Festschrift*, to be published as one of the volumes in the Eretz Israel series.

[12] Cf. "Divine Names and Titles in Early Hebrew Poetry," *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of*

11th or even the 12th century, a conclusion which was quite unexpected. In the Song of Hannah, there is an explicit reference to the "king . . . anointed one," along with the use of divine names characteristic of the monarchic period; in the Psalm, on the other hand, along with other archaic features, the divine name Yahweh is used repeatedly and exclusively, which is characteristic of the earliest phase of Israelite poetry.

Other scholars have developed different criteria for determining the relative and absolute dates for the ten poems embedded in the narratives of the Pentateuch and Former Prophets (through 2 Samuel). Gradually a consensus is emerging that these poems are to be dated in the Iron I period (from about 1200 to about 900 B.C.), though there are differences about the placement of individual poems.[13] Sequence-dating of poems in the Bible is still in its infancy, but all the ingredients for a successful resolution of one of the most persistent and troubling problems in literary criticism are in hand: an adequate sample of materials, a sufficiently long period of time for the measurement of change, some dated and more datable poems to provide fixed points of reference, and a tested group of criteria which can be used independently or together to fix dates and check results.

(c) *Forms and Structures.* The quest for the key to Hebrew metrics may have reached a turning point. Hitherto the search and the struggle among scholars have been to uncover that governing principle or universal truth that not only would encompass all cases, but would also recover the fundamental patterns adopted by the biblical poets. Needless to say, the quest has proved futile, like some other scholarly quests of the past century; no such magic key has ever been found, or is likely to be. The actual situation is somewhat different. No regular, fairly rigid system will work with any large sample without extensive reshaping of individual poems and verses. The pages of scholarly journals and commentaries are strewn with the wreckage left by the advocates of this approach, and there is a general feeling that while the investment of time, effort, and ingenuity was great, the returns have proved to be small. Not many poetic reconstructions have survived critical scrutiny very long. While newer approaches and methods have been more respectful and conservative regarding the established text and successes have been registered in the case of individual poems, overall the gains have not been impressive. Some poems exhibit formal metrical features, and even regular stanza structure, but it is rare indeed when two or more poems share the same structure. Many poems do not seem to have clear-cut metrical or strophic patterns and may never yield to this sort of analysis. Since an essentially

God (eds. F. M. Cross, W. E. Lemke, P. D. Miller; Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 55-107; esp. 71-72, 96.

[13] See discussion and bibliography in the following articles: "Divine Names and Titles in Early Hebrew Poetry"; "Early Israelite History in the Light of Early Israelite Poetry," *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (eds. H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1975) 3-35; "Early Israelite Poetry and Historical Reconstructions," which is to appear in the Jerusalem Symposium volume to be published by the American Schools of Oriental Research.

descriptive and inductive method requires painstaking treatment of a large number of units, it will be a long time before syntheses and worthwhile generalizations are possible. In the meantime, we should restrict ourselves to modest statements and small claims.

Since we cannot resolve the problem at least on the terms which have been used in the past, we may try to redefine it in ways more appropriate to the tools at our disposal. Our objective is not to find or devise a key to Hebrew metrics, but rather to achieve an adequate description of the phenomena. This is much less ambitious, but by scaling down our expectations we may be surprised by the achievable results. There are three points to be made, and in the process we hope to focus attention on the attainable and dispel some illusions along the way:

(1) There is no single solution to the problem of Hebrew meter and poetic structure, but there are many possible descriptions, some more adequate than others, some more pertinent for different sets of questions than others. In comparing systems, we should give up the notion that the poets of Israel used any of them deliberately, or that our task is to find out which one it was. Lacking any useful literature from antiquity on the subject or clear-cut internal data, the best we can hope for is an evaluation of different systems in terms of economy (or parsimony), efficiency, utility, precision, and comprehensiveness. In general, the system which satisfies these criteria best should be adopted, but different systems may be used for different purposes, and it is always wise to check the results derived from one system by another. It is interesting and may be instructive that practically all the systems which have been devised in the past century have produced positive results in measuring and describing aspects of Hebrew poetry. At the same time none has been generally satisfactory, and all have demonstrable weaknesses. The conclusion is that there is no single best system, but that acceptable results will depend to a great extent on the purpose of the measurement and the kind of description desired. Since all systems reflect a certain rhythmic regularity in much of Hebrew poetry, the principal object is to devise a measuring system that is symmetry-sensitive and will describe the metrical pattern as clearly and as simply as the data permit. That is why I have opted for a syllable-counting system in preference to the more traditional stress-system used by most scholars.[14] Basically, the two methods describe the same phenomena in much the same way, but there are more arguments about the number of stresses than about the number of syllables, or I should say that syllable-counters tend to be more accommodating and less dedicated because one syllable more or less does not make as much difference as one stress more or less. In addition, the

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[14] I have described the system in a number of articles: e.g., "Strophe and Meter in Exodus 15," *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers* (eds. H. N. Bream, R. D. Heim, C. A. Moore; Philadelphia: Temple University, 1974) 163-203, esp. pp. 168-75; "Acrostics and Metrics in Hebrew Poetry," *HTR* 65 (1972) 367-92, esp. pp. 368-69; with C. F. Hyland, "Psalm 29: A Structural Analysis," *HTR* 66 (1973) 237-56, esp. pp. 238-39; "The Structure of Psalm 137," *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (ed. H. Goedicke; Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University, 1971) 187-205, esp. pp. 188-90.

picture provided by syllable-counting is more precise. An equally simple system that also works with large samples is word-counting. We can define a word as any sequence of Hebrew letters between white spaces on a printed page, leaving open the question of the effect of a *maqqēp* (which is roughly equivalent to a hyphen). I have tried more complex methods of counting, distinguishing between long and short vowels, and even adding in consonants in order to secure an exact calculation of the time-span of a poetic unit. For the most part, I think it has been wasted effort, as poets notoriously bend the rules, written and unwritten, and the point of diminishing returns is reached very rapidly in view of the extraordinary arithmetical effort required.[15]

(2) It is difficult if not impossible to draw the line between the conscious intention of the poet and what the attentive reader finds in a poem. On the whole, I think we have given insufficient credit to the poet for subtleties and intricacies in his artistic creation, and it is better to err on that side for a while. If we find some clever device or elaborate internal structure, why not assume that the poet's ingenuity, rather than our own, is responsible? It is a different matter if it is our ingenuity in restoring or reconstructing the text. In many cases, however, I believe that the process by which the poet achieves an effect is different from the process by which the scholar recognizes and describes it. What is the result of conscious effort on our part, may be spontaneous in the poet, or second nature. For one who is steeped in the tradition and draws on long experience in creating poems, it is not necessary to start from scratch, and the associations and intricate arrangements, which we discover only after painstaking investigation, may be byproducts of which he is not fully aware, while he centers attention on other aspects of composition. Since there is no way finally to resolve such questions about the intention of the poet, it is a safer and better procedure to restrict or extend ourselves to the visible data and describe what we see there, rather than try to probe the recesses of the poet's mind.

(3) Questions concerning oral or written composition and transmission cannot easily be resolved one way or another, and the common discussion does not shed much light on the nature of the process or the end result. These are very important matters, but with respect to Hebrew poetry at least it is difficult if not impossible to disentangle oral and written elements. Both processes are at work in the history of composition and presentation of any biblical poem; all of them finally were written down, no matter how they were composed or how they were transmitted. So there is a written factor at the end of the line, if not earlier, for biblical poems, and undoubtedly an oral factor at some point in the process as well. Needless to say these factors affect each other: oral composition and transmission are very different in a community in which there is a strong writing-tradition from what they are in a community without any writing at all. In the case of the oracles which Jeremiah dictated to the scribe Baruch, there is a mutually interdependent process at work. The original oracles presumably were composed orally. Then they were dictated

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[15] See the discussion of these matters throughout the article, "Strophe and Meter in Exodus 15," and especially the tables at the end, pp. 193-201.

by the prophet and written down by the scribe; in principle this was only a change in procedure not in substance. Once written, they begin a new career in manuscript form, with a history to come of editorial revision and scribal alteration. When the autograph is destroyed by the king, another copy has to be compiled, again at Jeremiah's dictation. Is the second version another instance of oral composition, or something else, viz., an effort to reconstitute a previously existing written work, itself a compilation of earlier composed oral pieces. Even without the special complications of the Jeremiah-Baruch composition, the process of composing, reciting, recording, and transmitting is endlessly involved. Rarely if ever can oral and written categories be kept separate, especially in the Near East where writing was a compulsive habit long before the time of the patriarchs.

Thus far I have been able to identify two basic structural types in Hebrew poetry: (1) In the first group are poems of a more traditional type, at least in comparison with the poetry of other cultures. These poems have fairly regular metrical patterns and symmetrical stanza structures, ranging from simple to complex and ornate. To illustrate this type we may consider Psalm 113 in relation to the Song of Hannah.[16] Psalm 113 has a very simple metrical and strophic structure: it consists of three stanzas of three bicola each. The standard line-length is 14 syllables, divided in the middle, 7:7; there is a slight variation in some bicola, which divide 8:6. No alterations or emendations in the text are needed, and except for the question whether the poem is complete or only a fragment, we can consider it a prime example of classic metrical Hebrew poetry. It apparently belongs to the earliest phase of Israelite verse, when presumably poems of this type were prevalent. There are slight deviations from the norm, but these can be regarded as reluctant concessions to the ultimate intractability of language when pressed into metrical patterns or the resistance of the poet to metrical requirements. We can also include transmissional errors as an element in the occurrence of such irregularities, but unless there is other compelling testimony, we need not appeal to such a contingency in order to achieve metrical conformity. Artistic freedom is a more persuasive alternative, or in fact artistic necessity as a guard against mechanical composition and the constant threat of monotony in the creation of metrically repetitive poetry.

Turning to the Song of Hannah, we find a much more complex strophic structure; even after the most painstaking efforts to recover the original, or a more original, form of the poem, it may have eluded us. Still it is possible to identify the basic three-line stanza of 42 syllables in vv. 4-5, and 8a-f. There are elaborations and embellishments, including a formal introduction (vv. 1-2) and complementary closing (vv. 9-10). Similar, though in no case identical, strophic patterns have been identified in other short Psalms (23, 29, 137), all of which have a striking chiasm at the midpoint of the poem. The net effect of these features is to produce an X-like structure within a frame.[17]

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[16] See the forthcoming study, "Psalm 113 and the Song of Hannah."

[17] See the following articles: "The Twenty-Third Psalm," *Michigan Oriental Studies in Honor*

(2) Another type of poem exhibits much greater variation in line length and stanza construction, while at the same time there is an overall consistency and regularity which ensure that the poem generally is intact and that the pattern is deliberate. The problem is how to account for the great internal freedom and variety, on the one hand, and the predictable and repeated patterning of the poems as a whole, on the other. The best examples of such poems are the alphabetic acrostics of Lamentations 1–3.[18] Without repeating the extensive analysis of G. B. Gray or my own observations already published, it can be said that within an established framework of 22 stanzas per poem there is considerable freedom in the matter of line length (measured in syllables) and in stanza structure and length. In view of the mechanical structure of the poem, however, such free variations may have been regarded as welcome or obligatory relief from monotony. The great surprise, at least initially, was to discover that in spite of the wide variations from line to line and from stanza to stanza the three poems as a whole were virtually identical in length, again measured by the number of syllables (I: 865; II: 863; III: 868).[19] However we try to explain the matter, the facts are beyond dispute; nor is the situation unique with respect to these three poems. The same results are obtained when eight other acrostic poems are compared: the internal range of variation in line and stanza length is great but the total length of the poems or the averages are again practically identical.[20]

When the distribution of line and stanza lengths (but not the position of the lines) is plotted on a graph, the results overall and for specific poems are the same: an almost perfect bell-shaped curve, which, as we all know, is the pattern for random distribution of practically everything. In this pattern, the bulk of instances will be concentrated around the mean or average figure; the remainder will be spread out above and below the center point, with short lines balancing long ones, thus producing the familiar curve. How do we account for this peculiar phenomenon and correlate a carefully wrought poem with a random-distribution curve for its metrical model? What factors produce uniformity in the overall configuration but a wide range of variation in the component parts?

Parts of the answer lie in the nature and structure of the Hebrew language, and other parts in the complex process of poetry composition. It is difficult to imagine that there was a set of rules governing such a poetic structure. After all, the bell-curve is a description after the fact, not a prescription for would-be

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of George G. Cameron (eds. L. L. Orlin et al.; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1976) 129-66; "Psalm 29: A Structural Analysis"; "The Structure of Psalm 137."

[18] See Gray's discussion in chap. 3 of *The Forms of Hebrew Poetry*, and elsewhere in his book; cf. my comments in the "Prolegomenon," pp. xi-xxiv.

[19] The variation among the poems is less than 1%. Essentially the same results are achieved if we count words, i.e., the combinations of letters between spaces: I: 376; II: 381; III:381. We have ignored the presence of the *maqqēp*, but if we take this Masoretic flourish seriously and regard it as binding words together into single units, then the totals are somewhat different: I: 329; II: 332; III:350. The effect of the Masoretic intrusion is to obscure the equivalence of the poems, but the basic pattern is still visible.

[20] D. N. Freedman, "Acrostics and Metrics in Hebrew Poetry," 367-92.

poets to follow. In the case of the poet responsible for Lamentations 1–3, it might be argued that the special metrical pattern reflects the way in which he conceived and executed his work. The whole is a product of his genius, and many of the details are distinctive of this poet. But the distributional pattern we have described seems to be independent of the particular poet. It is observable in practically all the acrostic poems, which cover a wide range of subjects and which were composed by a number of poets, and is clearly the established pattern for poems of this type. For the present, the evidence links the pattern with acrostics, but I am sure that many other poems of different types conform to the same model. Since it is inconceivable that poets counted words or syllables into the hundreds (or thousands) to determine the shape of their poems, especially when they allowed themselves such wide variation in the matter of line and stanza length, we must reckon with a fundamental control deeply ingrained in the consciousness of poets generally. The result was a format at once regular and flexible, within whose fixed but not consciously recognized limts the poet was free to practice his art and express his individuality.

We may summarize the findings in these terms: There is a predictable and repeated total configuration (measured by syllable or word counts), fixed by tradition, experience, and practice. Poets in different places and times conform to this pattern, consciously or not, but inevitably. Within the large structure, however, there is a wide area of free choice, and variation is not only permitted but encouraged. The poet exercises his personal prerogatives in the internal arrangements and expresses his originality not only in the choice and arrangement of words and phrases and clauses, but also in the organization of lines and stanzas. This combination of rigid external control and of internal variety and freedom is distinctive; its roots lie deep in the nature of language, music, and poetry, and it belongs in its history to the sphere of oral composition. Whatever its origin and rationale, the "random-distribution" phenomenon must be reckoned with in the discussion of the nature of Hebrew poetry.

II. *The Function of Hebrew Poetry as a Vehicle of Revelation*

(a) *Pagan Patterns.* From time immemorial the language of heaven and of heroes has been poetic in form. In the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean basin, poetry has served as the vehicle of myth and epic alike; reflecting the same awareness, ritual and liturgy share this quality: oracles, incantations, prayers and hymns customarily appear in poetic guise. The basic and persistent medium of classic religion and revelation is poetry. But this intrinsic association has been obscured somewhat in the Bible, for several reasons: (1) The basic narrative, which is the story of Yahweh and his people Israel, is the first and great prose classic of antiquity. The genre itself is the creation of the biblical writers. There was never anything like it earlier, and there have only been imitators since. The fact that the Primary History — the first Bible — is a prose work has dominated the approach to and evaluation of

all the biblical literature. (2) Much of the remainder of the Bible, though actually poetic in character, was copied as prose. (3) The treatment of the Bible as sacred, canonical literature has tended to erase all distinctions among the various types of literature, including the basic one between prose and poetry. Whether the concern was legislative or theological, the objective was to fix the exact wording of the text and establish an authoritative interpretation to settle questions and cases. In the process of making the Bible a constitutional authority, poetry was levelled out as prose. Reverence for the text nearly killed off its spirit and effectively suppressed the special features of its poetry.

(b) *Israelite Adaptation.* Without debating the question of prose versus poetry or denying the predominance of the prose tradition in the Bible, it is legitimate to call attention to the poetic element, which not only lies behind the prose end-product but always persisted alongside of it. With regard to the primary prose narrative, critical scholars have always recognized an important poetic component in it or aspect of it. Various attempts have been made to identify and classify that element: (1) E. Sievers (followed in general respects by E. Brønno) just read the narrative as poetry, in accordance with a very complicated set of rules, to which there was an equally complicated set of exceptions or modifications. The results were very mixed and few contemporary scholars, if any, accept either the premises or the conclusions, much less the rules. But we are all impressed by the incredible energy and ingenuity demonstrated by Sievers. In spite of the shortcomings of the system and of our misgivings about the procedure, we must acknowledge that the exercise has not been in vain; and if he erred, he erred on the right side by emphasizing the presence of poetry in the prose tradition.[21] (2) A second and more successful effort is represented by names like R. Kittel, U. Cassuto, and W. F. Albright, who believed that behind the present prose agglomerate there was a poetic substratum.[22] Moreover, bits and pieces of the original epic have survived, especially in the set speeches or sayings preserved in the present prose framework. Examples may be found by leafing through the pages of the Kittel Bible in which poetic passages have been set off from the prose. Succeeding editions of the Bible have identified more poetic passages but the net effect is about the same: poetry embedded in prose, most often in passages containing dialogue. While the work of the scholars mentioned, and of many others since, has had a massive impact on current scholarship — and a *prima facie* case must be acknowledged — there are difficulties with the position in

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[21] E. Sievers, *Metrische Studien* (Leipzig:Teubner, I [1901], II [1904-5], III [1907]). E. Brønno, *Die Bücher Genesis-Exodus: Eine rhythmische Untersuchung* (Stockholm: 1954). There are many other volumes, which include Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Psalms.

[22] Albright's views are scattered among his many writings on the subject; Kittel's observations are embodied in his edition of the text of the book of Genesis in the Bible which bears his name. For Cassuto the basic works are: *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis:* Part I: *From Adam to Noah* (English translation; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961); Part II: *From Noah to Abraham* (English translation; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964); *Biblical and Oriental Studies. Vol. 1: Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1973). The translator in all cases was Israel Abrahams.

whatever form it has been advocated. The theory of a poetic substratum or an underlying epic poem remains attractive, but so far it is not only unproved but unprovable. I doubt that this epic ever existed, although I am sure that there were many poems, perhaps some of considerable length, which arose out of and described the early experiences of Israel and its forebears, which did not survive, but which influenced the formation of the prose accounts. In addition there are numerous short passages, mainly in dialogue form, which are clearly poetic, and which form part of the prose narrative. This is simply a fact, but how is the prose-poetry combination to be explained? It is possible that these passages are remnants of an earlier stage of transmission and that the prose writers incorporated these dramatic and lyrical elements from the oral tradition into the larger works. The premise and the argument, however, are open to question: Do the theory and the data really match up? Is not the notion of such carpentering of a narrative rather artificial and out-of-date? (3) These inquiries lead to a third possibility, which combines features of the views just mentioned but presents the case for a poetic component in the prose narrative in a more appealing and less artificial manner. It also reflects the reality of the end-product, which is a genuine work of literature. The essential argument is that the same author is responsible for both prose and poetry in composing his work and has combined them deliberately to enhance the literary quality and dramatic impact. E. F. Campbell, Jr. has proposed just such a solution to the literary problem of the Book of Ruth, which in small compass has many of the same features as the Primary History: a prose framework and narrative with poetic elements (some of extraordinary beauty) embedded in it.[23] It is not necessary or desirable to think in terms of an original poem or poetic narrative, subsequently cast in prose form, while some elements of the older poem have been retained. It is better to regard the work as an independent prose composition in which the convention of putting some of the speeches, especially those of the central characters, in poetic form has been observed. It may be mentioned that in Elizabethan drama, for example, the nobles and other leading characters typically speak in poetry, whereas commoners and comedians are relegated to prose. The same person who composed the prose of Ruth is also responsible for the poetry; no doubt the whole story is based on older oral poetic traditions from the region of Bethlehem and the family of Boaz and his successors. The story itself was not invented, but it was handed down from the time when "the judges judged" in Israel.

Happily, we can leave the question of the poetic elements embedded in the larger prose narratives of the Bible and pursue the great poetic tradition of early Israel in a more fruitful way, by examining several major poems which have been preserved in the Pentateuch and Former Prophets. These poems are independent of their prose contexts, although in each case a title or framework has been provided, indicating that the poem was incorporated into the larger work when the prose narrative had already been composed. In these poems, we have authentic reminiscences of a time earlier than the prose narrative and

[23] E. F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (AB 7; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975) 5-23.

examples of hymnic and lyric composition from the formative period of Israel's existence. The poems, which form a coherent group highlighting the great events and experiences of the early period, are as follows: the Testament of Jacob (Genesis 49); the Song of the Sea (Moses and Miriam, Exodus 15); the Oracles of Balaam (Numbers 23–24); the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32); the Blessing of Moses (Deuteronomy 33); the Song of Deborah (Judges 5). The survival and preservation of these poems are quite understandable, even though the prose accounts cover much the same ground (explicitly in the case of Exodus 15 and Judges 5, and in the story of Balaam in which the poems are interspersed among the prose paragraphs, Numbers 22-24). The poems were central and basic to Israel's life and could not be lost or forgotten. They mirrored Israel's self-consciousness as the people of Yahweh, who had led them out of bondage in Egypt, to freedom at Sinai and to nationhood in Canaan. For later generations they remained the fundamental expression of Israel's faith and commitment and served as a constant reminder of its origins and reason for existence. They share in and convey the enthusiasm and exuberance of the early days of Israel and also portray the conflicts and crises of that era. Taken together, the poems form a corpus of tradition about the beginnings of Israel, which is free of later interpretation and adaptation to other situations and circumstances, a unique source from and for the pre-monarchic period in Israel.

Two aspects of the poetry may be distinguished: (1) The date of composition: on the basis of different analyses and by the use of a variety of criteria, it is possible to arrange these poems in a relative order of composition and then fit the whole group into a framework of fixed dates between the 12th and 10th centuries B.C. Since the subject has been treated in some detail elsewhere, I shall only summarize the conclusions. I distinguish three phases of composition, which may be assigned to the 12th, 11th, and 10th centuries respectively: (i) the period of militant Mosaic Yahwism: the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), during the first half of the 12th century, and the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), during the second half of the same century; (ii) the archaic period, with the revival of patriarchal names and titles for God: the Testament of Jacob (Genesis 49), during the first half of the 11th century, and the Testament of Moses (Deuteronomy 33), during the latter part of the same century; the Oracles of Balaam (Numbers 23–24), perhaps in the middle of the century; (iii) the period of the monarchy: the Song of Moses (Deuteronomy 32), difficult to date, but there are tell-tale signs of later composition in the selection of divine names, which indicate that it belongs to phase iii, not earlier than the 10th-9th centuries, perhaps around 900 B.C.[24] (2) The contents: the poems describe the critical events in the early history of the sacred community, from its origins until its settlement in the land of Canaan.[25] These do not constitute a connected narrative, even in the sense of the prose accounts, but are rather the raw materials of history, selected, collected, reflected, and refracted in poetic form. The poems are only slightly later than the period which they describe

[24] "Divine Names and Titles in Early Hebrew Poetry," pp. 77-80, 96.
[25] "Early Israelite Poetry and Historical Reconstructions."

and are themselves active elements in the material they transmit. The era they cover runs from perhaps the first half of the 13th century B.C. with the formation of the 12 tribe league in Canaan (reflected in the reference to Israel's presence there in the Marniptaḥ stele) to the latter part of the 12th century, when Canaanite resistance to Israelite settlement was crushed at the battle of Taanach by the waters of Megiddo. The Testament of Jacob reflects the establishment of a pre-Mosaic, pre-Yahwistic tribal federation in Canaan, apparently the creation of the patriarchal hero, Jacob. The Song of the Sea recounts the climactic episode in the flight from Egypt, the miraculous deliverance at the crossing of the Red Sea and its aftermath, the journey to the holy mountain of Yahweh, and the initial settlement there. The Oracles of Balaam recall a later phase of this settlement, presumably in trans-Jordan, though details are lacking. The Song of Moses is a long historical and theological survey of Israel's experience in the wilderness, with special concern for the generation that failed, the group that was delivered from bondage, but that was guilty of apostasy and rebellion against its redeemer and suffered the consequences. The Testament of Moses describes a tribal assembly at the time when the two groups and their traditions (patriarchal and Israelite from Canaan, on the one hand; Mosaic and Yahwistic from Egypt by way of the wilderness, on the other) were merged to form Israel, the people of Yahweh.[26] The Song of Deborah records the decisive victory of Yahweh and his people over the kings of Canaan, whereby possession of the land was finally secured, and title was transferred from one people to the other.

These poems were part of a larger corpus, the scope and contents of which are indicated by quotations and references found in the prose narrative, and which were gathered in collections like the Book of Jashar and the Book of the Wars of Yahweh.[27] The emergence of Israel as a small nation-state in the 13th-12th centuries may be one of the minor effects of the great upheaval all along the littoral of the eastern Mediterranean and the surrounding areas, but it must be linked with the saga of the exodus from Egypt and the religious pilgrimage to Sinai, the holy mountain of Yahweh. It is this combination of a new faith embodied in a reconstituted community which gives the story its unique importance and establishes the tradition of exodus, wanderings, and settlement, however difficult it may be to reconstruct it as history, as the major

[26] The setting of the poem is the plains of Moab shortly before the death of Moses, but it already reflects the transition to his successors and is doubtless of later composition, presumably the 11th century.

[27] If Albright was correct in identifying Psalm 68 as a catalogue of *incipits* or opening lines of many different poems, then we have an indication of the extent and variety of ancient Israelite poetry; the Psalm itself may be dated in the 10th century, but that would mean that many of the poems mentioned in it were of pre-monarchic date. The Book of the Wars of Yahweh is mentioned in Num 21:14, in connection with some poetic pieces including the Song of the Well (21:17-18) and the victory song of Sihon (21:27-30); the unnamed book mentioned in connection with the diatribe against Amalek (Exod 17:14) may have been the same, and poems like the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) and the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) may have been included in such a collection. The Book of Jashar is mentioned in Josh 10:13, in connection with the spectacular miracle of the sun and the moon, and again in 2 Sam. 1:18, in connection with the Lament of David over Saul and Jonathan.

formative factor in the development of Western Civilization. The point which we have been approaching with all deliberate speed is that this handful of biblical poems (along with a few bits and pieces of others now lost) constitute the Israelite version of the mythic-epic tradition of the ancient Near East; this episodic account in poetry was itself superseded by the great prose narrative. Nevertheless, some wise editor preserved the poems alongside the prose, as artifacts and mementos of that creative age when Israel came to be.[28]

The great battle hymns, the Song of the Sea and the Song of Deborah, describe events in Israel's history, victories that were crucial to Israel's survival and success and attributable to the direct intervention of Yahweh. This miracle or wonder, which is at the center of the story in both cases, consists in a sudden rain-storm with a following flood which disables and destroys the chariot force of the enemy, which otherwise would overwhelm the militia of Israel. But it is much more than a natural cataclysm: the violence, the split-minute timing, the complete reversal of fortunes, all point to the hand of God. When a miracle occurs, the causal connection between heaven and earth becomes visible and immediate, as explosive contact is made. As in any mythic or epic situation, involving the divine and the human and communication or action between heaven and earth, the appropriate language is that of poetry. Prose may be adequate to describe setting and circumstances and to sketch historical effects and residues; only poetry can convey the mystery of the miraculous and its meaning for those present. Just as the miraculous participates in history with the mundane and also transcends it, so poetry participates in language with prose but also transcends it. The miraculous action and the poetic utterance have a common source in the powerful spirit of God.

We may summarize this excursus into the realm of esthetics and apologetics by affirming that poetry is the traditional means of expressing and transmitting religious experience: in myth and epic, in ritual and liturgy. In the biblical tradition, the vehicle of communication of the action and word of God is predominantly the prose narrative of the Primary History, but the original medium was poetry (and this pattern persisted through the period of the First Temple), which, like the extraordinary events it embodied and depicted, is also a product of the divine spirit. The chosen leader can only produce signs and wonders through the power of the Spirit, and the poet can only produce his works through the power of the same Spirit. The poetry of religious saga is as much the work of God as the miraculous events it describes. Potentate and poet tend to merge into the same person, so far as tradition is concerned, because the same inspiration is present in the mighty deed as in the mighty word.

[28] Comparison with the great Greek epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, which constitute a literary cornerstone for western culture, is inevitable and necessary. These works are the finest literary achievements of the ancient world (we draw the line in the 6th century B.C. between ancient and modern), with the exception of the Bible, but in terms of poetic art and esthetic quality they are unsurpassed. But they were products of their age and were suited to it; when that world perished, they became relics of a by-gone era.

(c) *Continuations.* This brings us to the next and last proposition: that poetry and prophecy in the biblical tradition share so many of the same features and overlap to such an extent that one cannot be understood except in terms of the other; in short, they are different aspects or categories of the same basic phenomenon, viz., the personal contact between God and man, and the verbal expression of it through the action of the Holy Spirit. The argument is essentially that the prophets were the inheritors of the great poetic tradition of Israel's adventure in faith and maintained, enhanced, renewed, and recreated it in the face of increasingly bitter opposition of those who preferred their religion in more manageable prose forms and who conceded (grudgingly) only the realms of liturgy (hymnody) and wisdom (gnomic and speculative verse) to the poets. There are two points, though not of equal value or importance; nevertheless they complement each other: The first is that the old poems were captured for the prophetic tradition. With few exceptions, the authors were identified as prophets or presented as having prophetic powers, the poem itself being evidence of divine inspiration. Among the poems we have been considering, three are attributed to Moses (Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 32 and 33), who is the prophet par excellence and nonpareil of the Hebrew Bible. Miriam, who is assigned a collaborative role in the presentation and presumably the composition of the Song of the Sea, is explicitly called "prophetess" in that connection (Exod 15:20). Deborah, the composer of the song which bears her name, is also called "prophetess" (Judg 4:4). As for her collaborator, Barak, we are not informed about any prophetic tendencies on his part, only about his military status and prowess. Balaam was a well-known diviner from Aram, whose role in the biblical tradition, however reluctant, was that of an authentic messenger of God. While the term "prophet" or "prophecy" is not used, we may claim his oracles (Numbers 23-24) for that category. A similar argument can be made in the case of Jacob and the Testament attributed to him (Genesis 49). While the term is not used of him directly, the poem is introduced as a prophetic oracle concerning the last times (Gen 49:1).

The correlation between poetry and prophecy is maintained elsewhere in the tradition. David is credited with the composition of several poems which are preserved in 2 Samuel (the Lament over Saul and Jonathan, the Lament over Abner, the Psalm of Salvation, 2 Samuel 22 = Psalm 18, and the Testament of David, 2 Samuel 23:1-7), as well as almost half of the Psalms. The question is whether he also was considered to be a prophet. Generally speaking, the latter role is a late assignment, finding explicit notice in the NT (e.g., Acts 2:30 in connection with the citation of Psalm 110 which was regarded as a messianic, i.e., prophetic utterance). But there is much earlier evidence supporting David's prophetic status. The Testament of David begins with the same words as two of the oracles of Balaam (Num 24:3, 15): *nĕʾum dāwīd,* "oracle of David." The term *nĕʾum* is used almost exclusively of divine oracles in the prophetic literature; and the more archaic usage here, as in the case of Balaam, reflects the conscious recognition that the person named was the bearer of an authentic word from God, precisely the role of the prophet.

The conclusion is confirmed by the passage, 2 Sam 23:2, which reads:

rûaḥ yahweh dibber-bî	Yahweh's spirit has spoken by me,
ûmillātô ʿal-lĕšônî	and his word is upon my tongue.

The first colon is both difficult and ambiguous: rûaḥ is regularly feminine and therefore can hardly be the subject of the verb dibber; but even if we took Yahweh as the subject, the meaning would not be affected seriously. Just how to interpret the prepositional phrase bî is difficult to decide, but in this case the parallel passage makes it clear that the poet considers himself the messenger by whom God delivers his word. In other words he has a prophetic role. The same expression is used in Hos 1:2, where we read:

tĕḥillat dibber-yahweh bĕhôšēaʿ	At the beginning (i.e., the first time) when Yahweh spoke by Hosea

The roles of the poet (David) and the prophet (Hosea) are hardly distinguishable.

Among others credited as authors of Psalms, we find the names of Asaph (Psalms 50, 73-83), Heman (Psalm 88), and Ethan (Psalm 89). The first two were called seers, while the third is grouped with them at other places, and no doubt was thought of as having the same status and powers.[29] To sum up, many of the poets of the Bible were considered to be prophets or to have prophetic powers, and in some cases at least, the only tangible evidence for this identification is the poetry itself. On the other hand, most of the prophets for whom we have evidence in the form of speeches or oracles, were in fact poets. While the prose narratives about the prophets in the later historical books (Samuel and Kings) contain very little information about the formal utterances or oracles, there are hints here and there that the prophets composed poems, and were expected to do so in certain circumstances: e.g., Samuel (1 Sam 15:23, which may be authentic); Nathan (the parable of the lamb may be described as poetic prose or prose-poetry, 2 Sam 12:1-4); Micaiah (1 Kgs 22:17); Elisha (2 Kgs 13:17).

The main evidence for prophets as poets comes from the great corpus of the major and minor prophets. While a good deal of prose has been mixed in with the poetry, especially in the Books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel and of postexilic prophets like Zechariah and Haggai, most of these prophets were poets, and their oracles were delivered and have been preserved in poetic form. Most of the prose materials are narratives about the prophets (e.g., the Book of Jonah, which however contains a poem, probably not by the prophet) or paraphrases of their messages written down by others. The fact that a person was a prophet and a poet does not in itself rule out the possibility or even the likelihood that he spoke occasionally in prose, both formally and informally, and might have dictated or written in the same mode. The question is whether the primary equation of prophecy and poetry holds, and I think it is safe to say that from the beginnings of prophecy in Israel at least until the exile, poetry

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[29] On Asaph as prophet and seer, see 1 Chr 25:2 and 2 Chr 29:30; on Heman as seer, see 1 Chr 25:5.

was the central medium of prophecy. The pattern persisted after the exile, but the data are less clear; in any case by the 5th century prophecy itself had declined so much that the question becomes academic and irrelevant. The great spiritual leaders of the postexilic period, Ezra and Nehemiah, regarded themselves as conservers and restorers of the old traditions, but by no stretch of the imagination could either have been considered a prophet or a poet. An age had ended.

It may be noted that in subsequent centuries the revival of prophecy brought with it a revival of poetry. The presence of the Holy Spirit of God was considered the necessary sign of the inauguration of a new age of revelation, and in turn prophecy and poetry were products of the Spirit's power. The new form of prophecy in the Greco-Roman age was apocalyptic, and it is in these mostly pseudonymous writings that the genre of prophetic poetry is renewed: the Enoch literature, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, The Psalms of Solomon,* etc. The Qumran community also provides an instructive example. The Teacher of Righteousness is not called a prophet (that role is reserved for an eschatological figure of the future) but he is described as an inspired interpreter of the words of the canonical prophets, especially in forecasting future events; in other words he was regarded as having prophetic powers. At the same time, he is apparently the author of the *Hodayot,* or Thanksgiving Psalms, a poet like David.[30]

We may add a cautious note about the NT. With the appearance of John the Baptist and Jesus of Nazareth, it was believed that the age of prophecy had returned in the context of eschatological fulfillment. Luke especially emphasizes this theme in the nativity stories, and true to tradition the speeches of angels and other inspired persons are in the form of poetry, even though the Gospel itself is a prose narrative. Thus the angel makes the first announcement to Zechariah about John in Luke 1:14-17, and to Mary about Jesus in 1:28-34 (several small pieces). Mary herself makes a prophetic announcement in 1:46-55, while Zechariah prophesies under the power of the Holy Spirit in 1:68-79. Simeon, empowered by the same spirit, utters an oracle in 2:29-32, and another in 2:34-35. Anna is not quoted directly, but since she is called a prophetess we may suppose that in her case too there was poetry in the picture.

More difficult and more important is the question concerning the utterances of John the Baptist and Jesus. Here we must be very cautious indeed, but there is some evidence to consider. Probably there is too little left of John's prophetic utterances to make a judgment, but in the case of Jesus a substantial corpus of authentic sayings has survived. How much of what he said belongs to the category of prophecy or apocalyptic, and how much to other categories like wisdom teaching, are serious questions which, however, need not detain us at this point. The classical prophets were not too careful about their categories and wandered from genre to genre in the delivery of

[30] The relevant passage in the Habakkuk *pesher* is 7:1-5: "...its meaning concerns the Teacher of Righteousness to whom God has made known all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets. . ." The translation is from W. H. Brownlee. "The Jerusalem Habakkuk Scroll," BASOR 112 (1958) 10.

their oracles. If Jesus was regarded as a prophet, and he seems to have been, then the question with which we are concerned is, Was he also a poet? While the efforts of competent scholars like C. F. Burney and J. Jeremias to recover an original Aramaic substratum in poetic form from the present Greek of the gospels have not achieved universal acceptance, and many details have been rejected or questioned, on the whole the results seem to me plausible and often persuasive.[31] Without pressing the point, it can be argued that there is a poetic quality and perhaps something more rhythmic and regular in many of his utterances. The parables strike me as a kind of prose poetry; while the sayings belong to the category of free verse. While neither his poetry nor his prophecy are in the classic mold, there are haunting reminiscences of both in his recorded utterances. Nor is poetry lacking in other parts of the NT: hymns of one sort or another are embedded in different epistles (e.g., Phil 2:6-10); more specifically the Book of Revelation is a mosaic of poetic compositions within a prose framework. At the same time it is a prophetic work, attributed to John the servant of Jesus.[32]

Our last example may be the most appropriate because while it belongs to the biblical tradition, it lies outside the Bible entirely. In Islam there is one final authentic prophet, Mohammed. The sacred scripture, the Quran, is a transcript of his utterances, and while they vary greatly in length and shape, they are all considered poetic. In this case, prophet and poet are one, and the two categories are coterminous. In the Quran, poetry and prophecy are the same.

What after all was the purpose of this exercise in demonstrating the obvious, that there is a close correlation between classical prophecy and poetry? The answer lies in the effort to come to grips with the larger underlying problem of inspiration, which in turn is related to questions of authority and canonicity. During the period of classical prophecy in Israel, there was a pressing existential question: Did God indeed communicate his will to men as tradition maintained? And how could one choose among the many self-styled messengers of the deity? The test of the prophet was the presence of the Spirit: by the power of the Spirit authentic miracles were performed and authentic oracles were uttered. The miracle or wonder validated the message, and the message interpreted the miracle. It is no accident that miracles and oracles are the province of the prophets. So the prophet could authenticate his mission by wonder as well as by word; but in these latter days miracles were part of the problem rather than the solution. Those in the past were safely embedded in tradition, but in the present, mastery of miracles seemed to have passed into unscrupulous hands, and the subject itself was suspect in the eyes of many. So

[31] C. F. Burney, The Poetry of Our Lord (Oxford: Clarendon, 1925); The Aramaic Origin of the Fourth Gospel (Oxford: Clarendon, 1922); J. Jeremias, The Parables of Jesus (rev. ed.; London: SCM, 1963). For a discussion and evaluation see M. Black, An Aramaic Approach to the Gospels and Acts (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), esp. part III, "Semitic Poetic Form."

[32] Cf. R.H. Charles, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John (ICC; 2 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1920); J. M. Ford, Revelation (AB 38; Garden City: Doubleday, 1975).

we find frequent warnings in the Old and New Testaments against false prophets and false messiahs who in spite of being false have access to sources of supernatural power and can produce signs and wonders; but they are not to be believed or followed. The Book of Deuteronomy offers two pragmatic tests for dealing with prophets and their claims: (1) They must speak in the name of Yahweh, and not of other gods; (2) Their predictions must come true. Although these tests are simple and clear, they are not workable in all situations. While the first test will screen out interlopers who represent foreign deities, the real problem is with the prophets who speak in the name of Yahweh, but say different and conflicting things. The case of Hananiah and Jeremiah, both of whom claimed to be prophets of Yahweh and who nevertheless offered contradictory diagnoses of the current situation and predictions about the future, exposes the weakness of this test (cf. Jeremiah 28). The second test will work when circumstances allow the community the leisure of delaying a decision about the challenge or the warning of the prophet until his predictions can be checked by events. Most prophecies mix a summons to decide with warnings or predictions about the future, so that people must respond immediately and settle the question as to whether the prophet is true or false long before the test can be applied. There are other ways in which the test might fail: It is entirely possible for a false prophet to make a true prediction; in fact, if two false prophets make opposite predictions, one is certain to be false, but the other may be true. It can also happen that a true prophet makes a false prediction. This may be a little more difficult to explain, but mistakes happen, and a prophet's career and standing could hardly be nullified by one stray prediction. While the situation is complicated, Ezekiel seems to have missed on a prediction about Nebuchadnezzar and the siege of Tyre (cf. Ezek 26:7-14 with 29:17-20); the prophet does not seem to have been unduly disturbed by the outcome and modified his prediction accordingly. There is no clear evidence that the latter forecast, that Nebuchadnezzar would conquer Egypt, was fulfilled either.

This quest too seems to have ended in failure. There are no certain tests, and no infallible guarantees by which to distinguish between true and false prophets. If we revise the question, however, we may find an answer. Instead of trying to decide the ultimate issues of truth and falsehood, which are best left to the *eschaton* and to the Almighty, we may examine the more immediate question facing Israel: the test of a prophet was the presence and power of the Spirit in his message, what he said, and how he said it. Since the Spirit was the direct source of both prophecy and poetry, they were the basic indicators and primary evidence of its presence and activity. In the case of the great prophets, there is a remarkable congruence between content and form, a welding of prophecy and poetry which authenticated both messenger and message. For Israel, the high points of its historical experience were represented, on the one hand, by the great poems of its formative period; and on the other hand, by the prophetic oracles of its later years, in both cases by a happy union of message and medium which directly confirmed the presence and action of the Spirit of God. These compositions, doubly validated as poetry and prophecy,

constitute a basic Scripture within the Scriptures, the direct word of God, like one of his thunderbolts hurled from on high.

Pottery, poetry, prophecy. There is an old word-building game called "Anagrams," which can be played in a variety of ways. Here is one: If you add a "t" to "poetry," you can make "pottery." Then if you add a "c" (and make a few other emendations), you can produce "prophecy." As we have suggested, there is more to the connection than mere alliteration and assonance.