

6-2013

Toward a Theology of Beauty

Jo Ann Davidson
Andrews University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/theology-christian-philosophy-pubs>



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Davidson, Jo Ann, "Toward a Theology of Beauty" (2013). *Faculty Publications*. 26.
<https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/theology-christian-philosophy-pubs/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology & Christian Philosophy at Digital Commons @ Andrews University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Andrews University. For more information, please contact repository@andrews.edu.

Toward a Theology of Beauty

God intended that religion and art should be complementary expressions of His own character.

Jo Ann Davidson

The natural world exhibits God's artistic nature. Though God designed and appointed the great beauty of both the desert sanctuary and the Jerusalem temple, He insists that the exquisite lily from His own hand is still more beautiful than the greatest artistic manifestation from Solomon's time (Luke 12:27). Thus it is not surprising that both the Old and New Testaments include rejoicing over the beauty of the created world. The poetic Psalter, along with many biblical books, brim with praise for the Creator and His creation. Accordingly, we are instructed that the study of the natural world can aid in lifting our minds to our Creator, the Master Artist.

God Himself announces to Job:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?

Tell Me, if you have understanding.

Who determined its measurements?

Surely you know!

Or who stretched the line upon it?

To what were its foundations fastened?

Or who laid its cornerstone,

When the morning stars sang together,

And all the sons of God shouted for joy?" (Job 38:4-7).¹

He then describes some vigorous members of the animal kingdom. Many have noted these amazing chapters, and the profound nature of the Creator's discussion:

"The teasing irony of God's speech," writes Vinoth Ramachandra, "expresses the childish pretentiousness of Job and his friends. They are not the centre of reality. And the doctrine of retribution, though it has a legitimate place in God's government of things, is not the key to understanding the universe. The free and gratuitous love of God is the hinge on which the universe turns. The world expresses the freedom and delight of God in creating. Utility is not the reason behind creation: not everything that exists was made to be useful to human beings, and therefore their meaning can never be fathomed within an anthropocentric world-view."²

In the New Testament, Paul also draws attention to nature's ability (even though fallen) to instruct about God: "Since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20).

Nature, though glorious, is never worshiped by biblical writers, however. The Creator and created beings are seen enjoying its beauty. This is in distinctive variance from some thinking (past and present), in which nature is almost—and sometimes actually is—deified, positing a "spirituality" without God. Modern human deification of nature, though unbiblical, does serve to underscore the profound beauty still found in an

imperfect world, which even secular minds are constrained to extol.

God also refers to Himself as a potter, surely alluding to His "sculpting" Adam and Eve from earthen materials. Though now fallen, these human beings created originally by God's own hand, are still a marvel. So much so that human beings are often tempted to place themselves at the center of the universe, denying God's sovereignty. Yet God has never abandoned rebellious humanity. Scripture indicates that He still longs to restore in humankind, through the process of redemption, the *imago Dei*. He has forbidden any material representation of His own being. Thus it is all the more startling that His salvific purpose is for fallen human beings to reflect something of the divine.

Redemption was most costly to the Master Artist, for it involved God's condescension to become incarnated in human form. This astounding act not only makes possible the transformation of the human character but also enriches the human conception of God. Both Testaments are saturated with the exhibition of His renowned skills in the remolding of sinful human beings into "the beauty of holiness" (Ps. 96:9).

Even Christ's very incarnation into human flesh is a profound aesthetic statement. Generally within the doctrine of God, the Incarnation is readily included, yet rarely extolled for its beauty. As a few theologians have noted, however, not only Christ and His Incarnation, but also the Godhead itself is true, good, and also "beautiful." Karl Barth writes of the beauty of God. He identifies it as God's glory.³ Yet, reflecting the common attitude of denying aesthetic value equal weight with theological argument, he refrains from speaking of beauty as an attribute of God.

Early American theologian Jonathan Edwards also wrote of the beauty of God. Differing from Barth, Edwards acknowledges beauty as one of the pre-eminent attributes of God, setting forth "his view that God can be fully known only to the extent that he is genuinely enjoyed. When placed at the center of the conception of God, beauty has the peculiar merit of offering at once a way of conceiving of the nature of God in structural and ontological terms and of so conceiving of that divine object as to make it not only dogmatically but also philosophically clear that (and why) God can be fully known only if he is the direct object of enjoyment."⁴

Edwards appears to be a rare theological voice attributing ontological weight to beauty within the Godhead. Canonical evidence indicates that Edwards is correct. The ancient psalmist already was convinced:

"One thing I have desired of the Lord,
That will I seek:
That I may dwell in the house of the Lord
All the days of my life,
To behold the beauty of the Lord" (Ps. 27:4).

Because of the beauty of the natural world (Genesis 1, 2), God's aesthetic being should not be unexpected.

The weight of evidence is further documented with the different literary aspects of the canon. Parallel and narrative writing are convincing and valid tools within the biblical aesthetic. Biblical poetry and vocabulary are also significant; their aesthetic value is already widely acknowledged both within and without theological studies.

Aesthetic expression is an all-encompassing phenomenon within Scripture. The literary manifestation alone is pervasive. Even a cursory survey of the artful construction of simple sentences, a chapter, chapters,

or entire books through parallel writing, finely crafted poetry, and narratives, is compelling. The very words and instruction spoken by God through His prophets are often expressed in poetry. Interpreters who want to read the text correctly would do well to determine the conventions that govern each literary practice.

The literary nature of the biblical materials substantiates its veracity: "In line with his self-effacing policy, the biblical narrator no more lays any explicit claim to inspiration than he makes other mentions of himself and his terms of reference. But the empirical evidence, historical and sociocultural as well as compositional, leaves no doubt about his inspired standing."⁵

God as Artist

The overwhelming impression gained from Scripture, the sole document on which the Christian faith is established, is that of the aesthetic nature of God flooding His revealed Word and created world. In fact, God expresses Himself more as the consummate artist than systematic theologian. Many have written on this phenomenon, both Protestant and Catholic. "For all this Scripture has its own language, which is largely that not of metaphysics but of poetry. . . . In the images of the Bible [God] takes as his media their linguistic equivalents—verbal icons—to communicate his gracious truth. This befits our nature and situation. It bestows dignity on the material realities in whose setting we live."⁶ The nature of God's revelation in either Testament is regularly revealed through artistic manifestation instead of analytical treatises and logical discourse.

Unfortunately, however, the church has sometimes rejected aesthetics as antagonistic to theology. This attitude was formed prior to the Christian era, gaining entrance into Western and Christian thought through the influence of Plato. His claims have often been echoed by Christian writers. One result is that aesthetics has often been viewed as a dangerous influence.

"It sometimes seems," writes T. R. Wright, "that there are two different ways of thinking: one that assumes literary forms, whether narrative, poetic, or dramatic, and another that argues 'systematically' in terms of concepts. Many theologians certainly have fallen into this second category but my thesis is that theology need not be confined to this; it is possible and even necessary to talk about God in the form of stories, poems, and plays. . . the Bible itself, the most obvious example of a text, or collection of texts, which relies on a variety of literary forms to express theological thought."⁷

Wright's concluding point above can hardly be denied. Yet, the question is sometimes asked: What significance is the biblical aesthetic to theology? Much modern thinking reflects the position that the canon is merely a collection of well-crafted but disparate materials. Does its aesthetic expression have a purpose beyond merely bringing literary pleasure or sating emotional needs? The truths of Scripture are expressed more through the aesthetic medium than systematic treatises. Is there reason for this? Several points may be argued:

- *Intensification*

Some suggest that for persons sensitive to artistic dimensions, aesthetic expression can intensify experience. Harold Hannum, for example, writes: "Aesthetic pleasure and a sensitiveness to beauty do not contradict religion, nor is it a frill or unnecessary adornment. A true appreciation of beauty is a deeper experience which will enhance all spiritual values."⁸

This aesthetic intensification could arguably be an important facet of the divine intent. Literary devices may even be the superior medium to express theological truth, enhancing biblical and theological

understanding.

Paul Brand and Philip Yancey concur: "A writer employs metaphor to point to a truth, not to its opposite. Abraham Heschel, a Jewish theologian, concludes, 'The statements about pathos are not a compromise—ways of accommodating higher meanings to the lower level of human understanding. They are rather the accommodations of words to higher meanings.'"⁹

The extensive aesthetic expression of Scripture provides an intensification of experience and thinking. Each literary genre operates within a complex cognitive strategy that does more than merely convey information; it also organizes and processes it to increase perception.

"Art and religion," writes T. R. Martland, "do not so much express fundamental feelings common to mankind as determine these feelings; they do not so much provide explanations for phenomena which men cannot otherwise understand as provide those data which men have difficulty understanding. . . . Art and religion provide the patterns of meaning, the frames of perception, by which society interprets its experiences and from which it makes conclusions about the nature of its world. They tell us what is; they do not respond to what."¹⁰

- *Beauty and Truth*

The connection between beauty and truth has been struggling to reunite since Immanuel Kant, a most influential philosopher of the Enlightenment. In his famous *Critiques*, Kant argued that human reason and sensory experience are unavoidably severed. His discussion has been persuasive ever since, with the philosophical realms of truth, goodness, and beauty radically ruptured. The different properties of the human being are supposedly splintered into abstract, non-communicating faculties of reason, will, and emotion. Assuming that scientific reasoning delivers objective truth, the emotions thereby become the channel for aesthetic perception. Thus the world of actual "facts" is supposedly separated from that of "values." As a result, knowledge and facts have supposedly parted company from faith, and aesthetics becomes a matter of purely subjective judgment.

Kant's position has been pervasive and dominant ever since. Repercussions still reverberate from this split: "The eighteenth-century 'Enlightenment,'" writes John Wilson, "was a period of intense philosophical and literary activity. Reason became the new god. As knowledge became more 'scientific' the very concept of a God who had to reveal Himself was considered to be against reason and unacceptable; to believe in such a God, or in miracles, was dismissed as unreasonable. Although many of the philosophers still used the concept of God it was no longer the God of the Bible, but the God of the philosophers, the unknown God of the Deists, or the 'Supreme Reason' of the intellectuals of the French revolution."¹¹

Since then, the Christian Church has seldom acknowledged the extensive aesthetic manifestation of God in Scripture. It has persistently ordered its theological thinking philosophically, usually relegating aesthetic value to the emotional needs of the believer. This, however, is in noticeable contrast to God's means of revelation in the canon and in Christ Himself. In fact, the aesthetic nature of the scriptural books has a decisive bearing on Christian theology. How and why is a critical issue: "A Christian theology without apocalyptic, or prophecy, or wisdom, not to mention narrative, would be unthinkable. . . . It is precisely the canonical forms that mediate to the reader the capacity to see, taste, and feel *biblically*."¹²

There are also various indicators in both Testaments that aesthetic expression can be evaluated and judged. For example, during the Exodus from Egypt, just as Moses was coming down from lengthy

communion with God on Mt. Sinai, he and Joshua heard sounds from the encampment below the mountain. To Joshua, the soldier, the first thought was of an attack from enemies: “There is a noise of war in the camp” (Ex. 32:17). But Moses realized more truly the nature of the commotion: “It is not the noise of the shout of victory, nor the noise of the cry of defeat, but the sound of singing I hear” (vs. 18).

As they drew near, they beheld the people shouting and dancing around the golden calf, probably in imitation of the idolatrous feasts of Egypt of which they had been so long exposed. Moses was furious. He had just come from the presence of God’s glory, and had been warned there of what was taking place (vss. 7-9). Having been trained for 40 years in Egypt as the son of the king’s daughter, he was well able to recognize the expression of Egyptian revelry, and immediately evaluated the situation correctly. Accordingly, we are instructed that music expression can be evaluated.

At a later time, but before Israel entered Canaan, the power of aesthetic expression is again found in the Pentateuch. Balak, king of Moab, sought the services of Balaam to curse the Israelites, for the country of Moab was concerned lest they fall to the same fate as the Amorites. Balaam was determined to curse the Israelites for Balak. Yet he was so controlled by divine power that he was constrained to utter, instead of the imprecations he intended, the richest promises through sublime poetry (Numbers 22–24). The Moabite king knew the difference.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul instructs that aesthetic expression can be evaluated and judged. Writing to the Philippian church, no doubt composed of a mixture of Hebrew and Gentile believers, he counseled: “Whatever things are true, whatever things are *noble*, whatever things are just, whatever things are *pure*, whatever things are *lovely*, whatever things are of good report, if there is any *virtue* and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (Phil. 4:8, italics supplied).

Paul instructs believers from different cultures that it is important to evaluate and discriminate between worthy and less worthy aspects of aesthetic expression. A believer is not floundering in a miasma of personal choices and standards with no absolutes to guide. “The gospel is no cosmetic facelift,” writes Calvin Johansson, “but a matter of life-changing orientation running deep and swift in its cleansing, shaping, and loving power. It shows to man the fallacy of phoniness and of being concerned for the effect without concern for the cause. The gospel of Jesus Christ stands for the integrity, wholeness, and creativity. Genuine newness is the result of an inward dynamic at work—a creativity that breaks new ground with imagination and integrity. . . . The gospel requires the highest standard of living.”¹³

Concomitantly, though aesthetic value is ordained by God and given wide exposure in Scripture, there is never suggestion that any aesthetic expression is superior spiritually and/or meritorious. Nor are poets intrinsically more pleasing to God than factory workers and farmers. Human value comes from our glorious origin at the hands of God.

- *Misuse Possible*

God sometimes denounces aesthetically perfect worship—which He Himself commissioned—when it is not a transparent expression of a devout inner motivation. This is noticeably different from Greek and some modern thinking in which aesthetic beauty is perceived as salvific in itself.

God pointedly established an elaborate, lavish system of corporate worship in the Old Testament. Yet, over and over again He censured through His prophets the glorious worship that He Himself designed and implemented but that was now being used to disguise a degenerate life. The internal condition of the

participant is critical: "Take away from Me the noise of your songs, for I will not hear the melody of your stringed instruments. But let justice run down like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream" (Amos 5:23, 24).

It was not enough that the golden ark and the glorious sanctuary were in the midst of Israel. It was not enough that the aesthetically attired priests offered sacrifices, and that the people were called the children of God. The Lord is not fooled by those who celebrate aesthetically perfect worship but cherish iniquity in the heart. It is written: "One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer is an abomination" (Prov. 28:9).

Thus, many of the Old Testament prophetic messages condemned the worship of God, despite its great beauty. Though designed and commanded by God, He at times found it offensive. For example, Jeremiah proclaimed: "What purpose to Me comes frankincense from Sheba, and sweet cane from a far country? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable, nor your sacrifices sweet to Me" (Jer. 6:20).

During the Babylonian captivity, God warns about aesthetic abuse: "As for the beauty of his ornaments, He set it in majesty; but they made from it the images of their abominations—their detestable things; therefore I have made it like refuse to them" (Eze. 7:20).

God's words through Ezekiel are passionate. The outer profession of a believer cannot camouflage a degenerate heart: "As for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking about you beside the walls and in the doors of the houses; and they speak to one another, everyone saying to his brother, 'Please come and hear what the word is that comes from the Lord.'" So they come to you as people do, they sit before you as My people, and *they hear your words, but they do not do them*; for with their mouth they show much love, but their hearts pursue their own gain. Indeed you are to them as a very lovely song of one who has *a pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument*; for they hear your words, but they do not do them. And when this comes to pass—surely it will come—then they will know that a prophet has been among them" (Eze. 33:30-33, italics supplied).

Thereby it is seen that though aesthetic values are extensive and prominent in God-ordained corporate worship and in Scripture, they are never salvific. Divine messengers protest an elegant worship that lacks transparent correspondence to the inner experience of the believer. God rejects aesthetic forms of worship if they disguise injustice and other moral evils. The very potency and influence of aesthetic expression can tend to promote an "easy religion." The profound impact that aesthetic values have on the human being can supplant the religion it is supposed to convey.

Johansson is perceptive: "Idolatry, whether it be a homemade religion of positive thinking or a comfortable aestheticism, can thus offer a sort of domesticated spirituality. Our human need for transcendence, for meaning, for value, can be met to a degree, in for example a majestic symphony without the pain of repentance and the cost of discipleship, without what Flannery O'Connor has called 'the sweat and stink of the cross.' Properly, the sense of transcendence in a symphony, the sensation of being swept out of ourselves into something high and beautiful, can and should make us mindful of the transcendent realm of the infinite Lord. Yet it need not. Many people are satisfied with the 'richness of life' offered by aesthetic stimulation which by its nature can make few self-consuming demands."¹⁴

This is an important point, for undeniably art and religion have often been linked with each other. Though some in the church have denigrated the importance of aesthetic function, religion and the arts have

actually been closely entwined: "We tend to classify together our concepts of art and religion as twin institutions," writes Harry Lee, "since they afford experiences to our inner life which resemble each other much more closely than either resembles our experience of any other social institution. . . . We attend to both as exercises of the spirit; they are alike in being experiences which are noble, passionate, and serene, and which absorb our interest most fully which we turn to them for solace and with a spirit of humility and devotion."¹⁵

- *Biblical Aesthetic Wholism*

Contra Kant, God affirms the nature of each human creature wholistically as He communicates. Surely, the human mind is a critical aspect of human nature. However, God rarely limits His communication to the human creature through abstract reasoning or systematic discourse as Scripture. Rather, He regularly utilizes aesthetic means, thus affirming wholistically the entire human being. God engages not only the mind but also the entire person.

"Biblical metaphors—*panting* after God, *tasting* God, *drinking* living water, *eating* bread from heaven—make it clear that finding God is not merely academic," writes Larry Crabb. "We are to do more than understand truth about God; we are to encounter him, as a bride encounters her husband on their wedding night. Finding God is a sensual experience."¹⁶

The aesthetic expression in Scripture mitigates against humanistic dualism. There is no emphasis, within either Testament, on the mental cognitive powers as sole receptor of truth. Indeed, the mind, heart, and body are all engaged. There is no gnostic urging anywhere in the canon to escape a "bodily prison" to allow a closer proximity to God. Rather, in both the Old and New Testaments, explicitly and implicitly, divine truth is conveyed to the person through the mind and the senses. The many biblical writers assume that each human being is capable of understanding and accepting that truth. Through the dominance of aesthetic expression in Scripture, it can be argued that the human body, rather than being a "prison," is capable, indeed necessary, for the reception of divine truth. The biblical canon is a "communicative practice" conveying propositional content and also the "way of processing it (e.g., thinking, imagining, feeling)."¹⁷

- *Great Influence*

The influence of the Greek philosophers on the aesthetic discipline is extensive. Several centuries before Christ, this philosophy developed. The resultant focus on aesthetic matters has influenced all subsequent thinking within and without the church. Dorothy Sayers argues that Plato's aesthetic "has influenced . . . the attitude of the Church more than the Church perhaps knows."¹⁸

There is no debate on the impact of Greek philosophy on the study of aesthetics. Yet, in spite of Greek observations, some of their philosophical positions are in contrast to the indicators in Scripture: "The results of modern classical scholarship," writes John Marshall, "have made it abundantly clear that Aristotle's *Poetics* does not present us with an aesthetics, but with an analysis of poetic creation. There is a danger in constructing a theory of aesthetics from the *Poetics*, because the idea of imitation is not the source of Aristotle's philosophy of beauty. Imitation is a method of artistic construction, but it is not the criterion of beauty."¹⁹

Moreover, within Greek thinking, the body was deemed evil, dangerous, and a prison house for the soul, whereas the canonical perspective assumes the human body can be addressed and entrusted with the most sublime truths. Indeed, it can be argued that Greek philosophy is inconsistent on this point. If the human

body is something evil and necessary to be escaped, how can aesthetic influences be effectual? And why should they? Should the senses of the body be engaged if they are to be escaped? Furthermore, the denigrating of the physical human body has at times led to asceticism that itself mitigates aesthetic value.

The Greek philosophers and biblical writers acknowledge that human nature needs conversion to better values. However, Scripture teaches a different means to how this can be achieved—only through divine salvation. The ritual of the Old Testament sanctuary/temple symbolized this. For the Greeks, “salvation” was obtained through self-attempts of which the power of aesthetic influence was prominent.

However, the Greeks were astute in identifying the three fundamental values of truth, goodness, and beauty. They were also right that beauty is a powerful instrument. Beauty was valued for bringing salvation to the soul.

Scripture also lays great stress on aesthetic media. However, this is never presumed to have the salvific power that it does within Greek philosophy. As already noted, God Himself warns many times that aesthetic function can never take the place of the heart’s conversion. Rather, He intends that aesthetic manifestation should instruct and make vivid the very expression of God’s salvific power, and bring a yearning for it.

Aesthetic value is not a peripheral option in the canon. Nor is it disparaged in any way. The idea that theology and aesthetics are incompatible does not come from Scripture. Leland Ryken argues this point as it relates to literature: “When we turn to the example of the Bible as the basis for integrating literature and the Christian faith, one generalization that we can make at once is that there is no antithesis between Christianity *per se*. The tradition of opposing literature and religion is either pre-Christian (Platonic) or post-biblical (the patristic era and following). The Bible itself is emphatically not a part of any such tradition. There is no trace in the Bible of a negative attitude toward literature. It is worthy of note that Paul, writing in a context of Greek culture and consumed with a moral and spiritual vision much higher than paganism, does not share the Platonic antipathy to literature.”²⁰

Biblical writers, however, were not pursuing acclaim for their literary skills. Nor were they merely seeking to soothe the emotional needs of human nature. Instead, their desire was to point to the Messiah and His glorious salvation. John Sailhamer argues that the very details each writer included (within the terse narrative style of the canon) are indicative of this. The New Testament writers’ use of the Old Testament psalms hints at this.

Jesus Himself substantiates this point on at least two occasions, by placing Himself as the central focus of the Old Testament: “You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39). And, following His resurrection, to the two walking to Emmaus, He said: “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! . . . And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:25, 27). And, further: “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me.’ And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures” (Luke 24:44, 45).

Moreover, Jesus provided a way to celebrate His salvation gift after His ascension: the Lord’s Supper. Through our senses of touch, taste, smell, and hearing, we are encouraged to rejoice in His atoning act.

Modern discussion of aesthetics sometimes mitigates against the full-orbed biblical aesthetic. Whereas values operating within Scripture are extensive, comprehensive, and many faceted, philosophical discussion

of aesthetics is often reduced to a single theory. For example, within the Intuitive Theory, the recognition of beauty is considered to be a matter of "intuition." The various aesthetic values such as "beautiful," "good," or "ugly" are "intuited" because they refer to nonempirical qualities. Plato's theory of the beautiful is viewed as an initial version of "intuition."

Other philosophical theories argue that aesthetic values are a matter of "subjectivism," determined by the human being's personal likes and dislikes, or perhaps the consensus of a group of people. A third theory of "emotivism" infers that aesthetic determinations such as "good" or "beautiful" do not refer to anything concrete outside the human mind. Positivists propose the Emotive Theory, which maintains that metaphors are unverifiable and thus meaningless. These metaphors, though lacking cognitive content, still interest us because they possess emotive content, expressing personal experience or preference rather than stating truth.

"Instrumentalism," or "formalism," shifts the focus from the person to the object and whether or not the object produces in the observer an aesthetic experience. This theory locates beauty in certain qualities. It is assumed that a certain kind of experience can be identified as aesthetic and thus good. The "relational theory" locates beauty, as the name suggests, in the relationship of the objective qualities that are often identified as being inherent in the reality described as beautiful.

The biblical aesthetic is strikingly unique. It does not allow for an either/or bifurcation, but envelopes both the subjective and objective.

Another central idea regularly assumed in the modern aesthetic discipline is that of "disinterestedness." Kant was the first to describe the experience a work of art elicits as "disinterestedness." This posture has been enormously influential in aesthetics ever since.

Eddy Zemach vigorously tackled this longstanding maxim, and in doing so, moved much closer to the biblical perspective: "Trait 1 of the aesthetic attitude (heralded by contemporary Kantians such as Francis Coleman or Jerome Stolnitz), is entirely bogus; the argument for it is a clever sleight of hand. Saying that Smith does something without concern for her own interest, we mean that she is altruistic: she sacrifices her own gratification for the sake of others. But in watching a play or reading a novel, one does not sacrifice one's interests for the sake of others; to engage in these activities is to indulge one's own interests. The sleight of hand is to call every interest (economic, sexual, etc.) that motivates self-serving action, except the aesthetic interest, 'interested' and then 'discover' that the aesthetic interest alone is disinterested! Thus a new monster, disinterested interest, is born. The 'disinterestedness' of the aesthetic interest is based on mere verbal prestidigitation. To have culinary or sexual interests is to wish to engage in certain activities, suffer if one is denied them, be ready to give up other satisfactions in order to have them, and so on. The same is true of our aesthetic interests. Aesthetic needs are no different from needs for love, power, or food. Some people like to play music or read poetry even when they are not compensated for their effort. We often forgo satisfaction of other needs so as to satisfy aesthetic needs; we suffer when we cannot pursue our aesthetic interests. It is entirely disingenuous to classify as self-serving all human interests except the aesthetic interest alone, which is glorified as 'disinterested.'

"If you listen to music for its own sake," Zemach continues, "that does not mean that you do not listen to it for your sake, for by listening to it you satisfy yourself, not the music! I may attend a concert for your sake, but not for the concert's sake, the concert gains nothing by my attending it. Therefore, to listen to

music for its own sake is not to have a 'disinterested interest' in music (whatever that means); it is to have genuine interest in music. I do not listen to music in order to attain some other end, for example to please you, but listening to music itself satisfies me, just as eating, having sex, playing with my children, and meeting friends are activities that satisfy me in and of themselves. To engage in an activity for its own sake is to be genuinely interested in it, not the opposite, as Kant has it."²¹

Zemach suggests why "disinterested" aesthetics remained so dominant. Culture has become more secular: "The notion of the aesthetic disinterested interest is perhaps one aspect of the great romanticist attempt to secularize European culture, with art as a substitute for religion. Romanticism has tried to model art of religious institutions, and to a great extent it has succeeded; we dress for the opera as we would for church, assume an attitude of reverence toward art and artists as was traditionally accorded God and his ministers, treat art as lofty and spiritual, etc. Now religion teaches that it is wrong to worship God in order to serve one's own interests. God should be worshiped because he deserves to be worshiped; it is sacrilegious to treat worship as a profitable transaction. We are supposed to love God for what he is, and love is unselfish. Aspiring to replace religion, romanticism needed a new selfless interest that transcends mundane interest. Thence the 'disinterested interest.' But that is a hoax; art lovers engage in self-gratification, not in worship. Aesthetic enjoyment is no less mundane and self-serving than any other enjoyment."²²

Thus, Zemach argues, as does Scripture, for the wholistic nature of the human being. That the truth of God through Scripture comes clothed aesthetically says much about the nature of biblical truth and God Himself: His truth can be known, believed, felt, loved, and followed. Our whole person/being is involved.

Zemach also makes the audacious suggestion that it is aesthetic qualities that verify scientific theory, and not empirical data, as commonly assumed. Aesthetic function is foundational for establishing truth. In fact, it is the only way it can be done.

"If you subscribe," he says, "to any kind of realism, scientific or metaphysical, aesthetic features are a part of it. That is, if any predicates correctly describe objective reality, aesthetic predicates are among them. . . . Scientists and artists try to make sense of experience by weaving it into aesthetically good years; the aesthetic appeal of the story vindicates its way of formatting data."²³

He supports his argument by describing how "science aspires for two kinds of beauty, internal beauty, i.e., elegance, is having internal design that manifests a maximal unity in variety: a rich variety of theorems derivable for a few and simple axioms. The theory's external beauty is its compatibility with other entrenched theories (including common sense and folk beliefs): this, too, is a unity in variety. Now unity in variety is, of course, how Plato (and scores of other classical and modern aestheticians) defined beauty."²⁴

John Wilson concurs with this fundamental principle: "Even apparently objective activities such as mathematics and scientific research are affected and influenced by aesthetic factors. In their writings scientists often refer to the harmony, simplicity, elegance and beauty that they find in their researches and theories. The norms of art are not absent from their considerations. Einstein said of Isaac Newton that he combined, in himself, the experimenter, the theorist, the mechanic and, 'not least, the artist.' Another scientist, Hinshelwood, once argued that chemistry was not only a mental discipline but an adventure and an 'aesthetic experience.'"²⁵

Accordingly, as Zemach and others insist, science itself "is a pursuit of beauty, not of truth. To borrow Kant's terminology, one may say that beauty serves us as a schema for truth, a postulated substitute for a

reality which we cannot fathom.”²⁶

Therefore, aesthetic value, though rightly studied extensively within philosophy, has wrongly been restricted and reduced to appeal only to human emotional needs, and unable to bear the weight of propositional truth. This was based on the assumption that such values are grounded on experiences located only in the affective side of human nature. However, in the perspective observed in Scripture, and further argued by Zemach and others, this is not adequate. The relationship of beauty to that of truth and goodness is foundational, not peripheral.

And if this is true, one can begin to understand why God employs, almost exclusively, aesthetic media to communicate His truth to human beings. For, as Zemach states above, “Beauty serves us as a schema for truth, a postulated substitute for a reality which we cannot fathom.”²⁷ Aesthetic value, as observed in Scripture, is more correctly viewed as the foundational value to structure and substantiates truth itself, rather than merely a peripheral issue of the emotions. Perhaps the poet Keats was right after all: “Beauty is truth, truth, beauty:— that is all ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”²⁸

The biblical aesthetic is a wholistic discipline, affirming the whole being. The senses, rather than being a peripheral aspect of human nature, are critical for grasping truth. The mind and human reason are not extolled as the primary avenue for receiving divine revelation. Kevin Vanhoozer rightly suggests that “propositionalism seems inadequate given the variety of biblical texts. . . . To speak merely in terms of ‘informing’ fails to do full justice to God’s complex relation to Scripture. The Bible is more than divine data. . . . We do not have to choose between the Bible’s truth and its affective power!”²⁹

In Scripture, divine revelation is diffused and filtered through aesthetic means, which thereby undergirds and substantiates the identification of truth within the human mind and heart, affirming the wholeness of the human person. Accordingly, of the three main values of truth, goodness, and beauty, in the biblical aesthetic, it can be argued, beauty, though not salvific and though susceptible to misuse, is a fundamentally critical value.

Does this matter? Will this make a difference in the life of a Christian?

With the extensive evidence of aesthetic aspects within Scripture, a person can learn to appreciate that God’s involvement in His creation is not limited to the beauty of rosebuds, lilies of the field, and brilliant sunsets. It also extends to structure and content of His verbal revelation as well. It is impressive that secular scholars, who may not acknowledge a divine being or even a “primal force,” are constrained to recognize the profound beauty in the literary expression of the biblical writers. This is true whether considering the verbal locution in poetry and narrative, or the literary structures.

The human mind, often extolled in theological studies as the paramount feature of human nature, is accorded an exalted position. However, the whole person also has supreme value. The physical aspects of being human are not expendable. Rather, both body and mind are inseparable in discerning and comprehending and experiencing the beauty of divine truth. A “full-orbed theology” is made possible through a “full-orbed humanity.”

The biblical canon closes with the Book of Revelation and its vast visual panoramas, concluding with descriptions of the rich aesthetic blessings of heaven. The portrayals mirror the beautiful blessings of the first Eden with which the Bible opens. Parallel references to both heaven and earth suggest that heaven must also have literal space, as does the earth. Christ Himself states: “Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth

as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The redeemed are invited to a meal to be shared with God (26:29). The New Jerusalem comes “down out of heaven” (Rev. 21:2). The details of this city are described with rich aesthetic language that echoes the data of the Old Testament sanctuaries and even the original Garden of Eden. Mention of precious metals and jewels, the Tree of Life, open fellowship with God, and more, is made.

Moreover, the Apocalypse links a literal new earth with the resurrection of the body. A literal creation implies a literal re-creation. Heaven is not just a state; it is a literal place. God has established His dealings with His children in a very tangible, physical manner through salvation history. The aesthetic descriptions in the Book of Revelation serve to remind us that this will not cease when we enter the heavenly realms. In fact, Stephen Webb presents a profound aesthetic claim regarding heaven: “Because all of our senses will be engaged by God’s glory, our senses will no longer be fragmented and disconnected. And because God is infinite, our perception of God will also be an infinite process wherein our senses will not know exhaustion or limitation. Their merging together will set them free for forms of knowledge that we can only dream of now.”³⁰

The Bible closes, as it opens, with no false antithesis between the physical and spiritual realms. Many aesthetic lines of evidence in Scripture reinforce this. Our understanding of history will be affected.

Throughout Scripture we hear God speaking in aesthetic language about what He is actually doing in our literal world. The account is consistently compelling, with a cosmic historic sweep. And Paul counsels the reader: “Whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4).

The aesthetic of Scripture instructs that we must not permit the analytical and logical sphere of cognitive processing to restrict our vision of reality. Instead, we are shown what it truly means to be human, and to be created in the image of God. And though our humanity is now fallen, its aesthetic nature is still capable of much joy and feasting in this earth, to be followed by genuine though presently unfathomable glory to come.

The biblical aesthetic restores human life to its exalted origins from the hand of God, and links it to a future restoration in the earth made new. And through multiple aesthetic means, the canon connects its interwoven tapestry of otherwise seemingly disparate materials, yielding a comprehensive interpretation, enhancing and enriching the gift of salvation itself.

The biblical aesthetic does not display the modernist tendency to put beauty on a quasi-religious pedestal where its formal properties alone are merely thought to enlighten and transform society. Nor is it a matter of the biblical writers merely attempting to write elegant and beautiful literature. The Bible exhibits literary qualities, but these qualities are not employed to parade the talents of the writers.

Though the Bible is a literary masterpiece, it is more than literature. It makes claims to absolute truth, which is pointedly expressed in a matter to allure and capture the senses and convince the mind. The biblical aesthetic affirms our human wholeness. It aligns us with our Creator, reveals that we are created in His very image. God employs the biblical aesthetic to aid us in comprehending Him and grasping divine truth, a reality which we would otherwise not be able to fathom.

Jo Ann Davidson, Ph.D., teaches Systematic Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary in Berrien Springs, Michigan. This article is adapted with permission from Jo Ann Davidson, “Toward a Theology

of Beauty: Conclusions and Implications," *Toward a Theology of Beauty* (Lanham, Md.: The Rowman and Littlefield Publishing Group, 2008).

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are quoted from the *New King James Version* of the Bible.
2. Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996) p. 12.
3. Karl Barth, in G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, eds., *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), pp. 650, 651.
4. Roland Andre Delattre, *Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 132, 133.
5. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 77.
6. Aidan Nichols, *The Splendour of Doctrine: The Catechism of the Catholic Church on Christian Believing* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 105.
7. T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature: Signposts in Theology* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1988), p. 2.
8. Harold Byron Hannum, *Christian Search for Beauty* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publ. Assn., 1975), p. 39.
9. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, *In His Image* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1987), p. 282.
10. T. R. Martland, *Religion as Art: An Interpretation* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1981), p. 175.
11. John Wilson, *One of the Richest Gifts: An Introductory Study of the Arts From a Christian World View* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, Ltd., 1981), p. 3.
12. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville, Ky.:Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), p. 285, italics supplied.
13. Calvin M. Johansson, *Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), pp. 43, 44.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
15. Harry B. Lee, "The Cultural Lag in Aesthetics," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (December 1947):120, 121.
16. Larry Crabb, Jr., *Finding God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1993), p. 181, italics in the original.
17. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, op. cit., p. 290.
18. Dorothy Sayers, *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World: A Selection of Essays* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1969), p. 71.
19. John S. Marshall, "Art and Aesthetic in Aristotle," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (December 1953):228.
20. Leland Ryken, *Triumphs of the Imagination: Literature in Christian Perspective* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 21, 22.
21. Eddy M. Zemach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), pp. 33, 34.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
23. *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 199.
24. _____, "Truth and Beauty," *The Philosophical Forum* (Fall 1986), p. 25.
25. Wilson, *One of the Richest Gifts*, op. cit., p. 21.
26. Zemach, op. cit., p. 36.
27. *Ibid.*
28. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," in C. A. Enroth, ed., *Major British Authors* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, 1970), p. 409.
29. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine*, op. cit., p. 215.

30. Stephen H. Webb, *The Divine Voice: Christian Proclamation and the Theology of Sound* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2004), p. 232.

▶ [Back to top](#)