

“WORSHIPING GOD IN TRUTH AND BEAUTY”

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Christians have often neglected serious scrutiny of the study of Beauty or Aesthetics. Why?

Concern for those in poverty leads some to conclude that any interest in such a topic is objectionable. The “luxury” of Beauty is not appropriate when so many people are still in such desperate need of food, shelter and justice. Others suggest that the urgency of Christ’s second coming makes “unnecessary” considerations of Aesthetics. Some believe that the second commandment of the Decalogue forbids art/artworks. Others argue that since the study of aesthetics emerged with the ancient Greek philosophers it is a pagan concern. Moreover, since critical studies dominate most theological thinking during the 20th century, followed presently with “Post Modernism,” seeking for any fundamentals (Truth, Goodness or Beauty) is thought impossible.

Whatever the motivation, it appears that Christianity’s foundational Book, the Holy Scriptures, is not studied for its insights of aesthetics/beauty. This is surprising for the canon is rich with aesthetic phenomena. For example, up to 40% of the Old Testament involves poetic language.¹

Significantly, from its very commencement as a nation, Israel’s artistic genius was expended in religious architecture and decor. Almost fifty chapters in the first five books of the Old Testament alone record God directing the construction of a lavishly

¹Aidan Nichols is one of various voices that affirms this: “For all this Scripture has its own language, which is largely that not of metaphysics but of poetry. Just as in the sacraments God uses material things and gestures to communicate his gracious life, so in the images of the bible he 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.” Aidan Nichols, O.P., The Splendour of Doctrine: The Catechism of The Catholic Church on Christian Believing (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 105.

appointed sanctuary.

Nearly another fifty chapters within the historical books of the Old Testament consist of the artistic magnificence of Solomon's Temple. Ezekiel also devotes several chapters to the glories of a "third" temple.

The New Testament continues to manifest aesthetic expression within the Gospels, Pauline materials and the Apocalypse. The canon concludes with the book of Revelation and the pointed focus again on (heavenly) sanctuary imagery. Scripture is enveloped with the glories of God's earthly and heavenly sanctuaries.

The manifestation of aesthetic phenomena in Scripture cannot be brushed aside as an unnecessary luxury. The exposure is too extensive. God, the author of Scripture has an aesthetic nature. Evidence for this is vast. For example, in Scripture God is portrayed as a **potter**:

"But now, O LORD ... We are the clay, and You our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand." (Is 64:8)

Jeremiah also:

"Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying: 'O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?' says the LORD. 'Look, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel!'" (Jer 18:6)

The Apostle Paul echoes the same sentiment in the NT:

"But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed it, 'Why have you made me like this?' Does not the potter have power over the clay ...?" (Rom 9:20-24)²

² Titus Burckhardt rightly suggests: "From the Christian point of view God is similarly 'artist' in the most exalted sense of the word, because He created man 'in His own image' (Gen i.27)." Titus Burckhardt,

God not only is a “potter” but also involves Himself in the creation of human artworks. He commissions lavish works of art when commanding the Israelites to construct an extravagant Sanctuary. He provides not only the architectural blueprints, but also the instructions for all its furnishings.³ At Mount Sinai God gave the Decalogue along with civil ordinances including assistance to the poor along with specific directions to construct a lavish structure necessitating the use of almost every type of artistic skill.

Israel was commanded to construct an elaborate portable sanctuary with precise specifications for the woods, fabrics, dye colors, costly metals and precious gems. Within these directions, God urges “And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain” (Ex 25:9). God was architect of it all. Absolutely nothing was left to human devising. There are more chapters regarding the plans for and subsequent building of this sanctuary and its furnishings than any other subject in the Pentateuch.⁴

Even the garments of the officiating priests were specifically designed for

Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods, Lord Northbourne, transl. (London: Perennial Books, 1967), 11.

³ “Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: ‘Speak to the children of Israel, that they bring Me an offering. From everyone who gives it willingly with his heart you shall take My offering. And this is the offering which you shall take from them: gold, silver, and bronze; blue and purple and scarlet yarn, fine linen thread and goats' hair; rams' skins dyed red, badger skins and acacia wood; oil for the light, and spices for the anointing oil and for the sweet incense; onyx stones, and stones to be set in the ephod and in the breastplate. And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them. According to all that I show you, the pattern of the tabernacle and the pattern of all its furnishings, just so you shall make it” (Ex 25:1-9). These instructions are followed by Ex 25:10-31:11 of God's instructions for the tent temple and its furnishings, including priests' attire; from 35:1 to the end of the book (40:38) are the detailed descriptions of the accomplishment of God's instructions, again with abundant details of the art forms employed, the artists commissioned and the lavish materials utilized.

⁴ For example, the book of Exodus [in the Pentateuch] divides neatly into two main sections: chapters 1-18 recount the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Chapters 19-40 records God's instructions. Three-fourths of this second section includes God's lengthy directives regarding the aesthetic particulars of His sanctuary and its officiants. Thus, it is hard to consider these furnishings of great beauty as unnecessary luxurious embellishments for Israelite worship, the instructions are too extensive.

aesthetic appeal. God instructs Moses: “And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your, brother, for glory and for beauty. For Aaron's sons you shall make ... them ... for glory and beauty.” (Ex 28:2, 40, emphasis added). Besides manifesting glory, the priestly vestments were to be made ‘for beauty,’ specifically mentioned two times. The Creator of colors, form, and textures, the author of all natural beauty, clearly values the aesthetic dimension. It has a place within the will of God.

Constructing the sanctuary required a great number of artistic techniques. How was this to be accomplished? We are informed of God’s direct involvement with the desert sanctuary:

“And Moses said to the children of Israel, ‘See, the LORD has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah; and He has filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom and understanding, in knowledge and all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of artistic workmanship. And He has put in his heart the ability to teach ... He has filled [him] with skill to do all manner of work ...’ (Ex 35:30-35)

This is a compelling passage with intriguing details. Art is within God's will. The Tabernacle, designed by God, involved ‘artistic designs.’ The God of heaven was not to be worshiped in a bare, unfurnished tent. The unending details of the “blueprints” are often tedious reading to modern readers. But it pleased God not only to precisely instruct the Israelites concerning sacred architecture and its furnishings but also to record these very details in His holy Word.

Moreover, being an artist can be a vocation from God. Not only ministers, teachers and missionaries, even **artistic** occupations can be God-given callings. Exodus 35 plainly states that God ‘called’ Bezalel for the work of constructing and furnishing the Tabernacle. Bezalel was specifically called by God to be an artist: “And Moses called

Bezalel ... in whose mind the Lord had put ability ..." (Ex 36:2, RSV). We are instructed that artistic talent is not some innate human skill, nor the accomplishment of individual genius, but a gift of God.

Moreover, "He [God] has filled him with the Spirit of God" (Ex 35:31). The ministry of the Holy Spirit is not regularly linked to artistic talent. However, Bezalel is the very first person recorded in the Old Testament, in all Scripture, as inspired by the Holy Spirit. And he is not a priest or a prophet, nor a preacher, but an artist. In the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is given to all Christians and bears fruit in many areas of life. Elsewhere in Scripture, the Spirit of God came upon certain prophets, judges, or a preachers. Here in the book of Exodus, the Spirit of God empowers Bezalel "to devise artistic designs." The implication is that the works of Bezalel will also express, through the medium and language of art, the will and mind of God.

Later, even Solomon's magnificent temple was also designed by God, as King David insists:

"Consider now [Solomon], for the LORD has chosen you to build a house for the sanctuary; be strong and do it." Then David gave his son Solomon, the plans for the vestibule, its houses, its treasuries, its upper chambers, its inner chambers, and the place of the mercy seat; and the plans for all that he had, David declares, by the Spirit, of the courts ..., of all the chambers ..., of the treasuries ..., also for the division of the priests and the Levites, for all the work of the service of the house of the LORD, and for all the articles of service in the house of the LORD ... (more details follow, then he concludes—giving the reason!) ... "All this," said David, "the LORD made me understand in writing, by His hand upon me, all the works of these plans." (1 Chr 28:10-13, 19). "... and the work is great, because the temple [[literally, PALACE]] is not for man but for the LORD God." (1 Chr 29:1)

Not surprisingly, the text includes myriad aesthetic details:

"And he [Solomon] decorated the house with precious stones for beauty, and the gold was ... from Parvaim. He also overlaid the house – the beams and doorposts, its walls and doors – with gold; and he carved cherubim on the walls. ... the great molten sea [with its brim] shaped ... like a lily

blossom. ... He made wreaths of chainwork, as in the inner sanctuary, and put them on top of the pillars; and he made one hundred pomegranates, and put them on the wreaths of chainwork. Then he set up two pillars before the temple, one on the right hand and the other on the left.” (2 Chr 3:5-7, 16-17)

Why did beauty figure so largely in the Old Testament sanctuaries? What was God seeking to accomplish? Why did He record it in Scripture? Scholars in the aesthetic discipline suggest that aesthetic expression can intensify experience. For example, Harold Hannum writes: “Aesthetic pleasure and a sensitiveness to beauty does 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.”⁵

This intensification could arguably be an important facet of the divine intent. T. R. Martland argues that there is even more involved:

My thesis says that art and religion 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 is.⁶

Apparently there is a close connection between Beauty and Truth.⁷

Furthermore, through aesthetic expression God affirms the wholistic nature of each human being. Surely, the mind is an important aspect of human nature. However, God does not limit His communication to the human being through abstract reasoning or systematic discourse in Scripture. Rather, He employs aesthetic avenues, thereby

⁵ Harold Byron Hannum, The Christian Search For Beauty (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1975), 39.

⁶ T.R. Martland, Religion As Art: An Interpretation (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1981), 12. Meter Ames suggests a similar idea: “... art remains itself a timeless present of realization amid the incompleteness of existence.” Van Meter Ames, “Expression and Aesthetic Expression” in The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 6 (December 1947), 175.

⁷ Zemach terms this “a Keatsian (“Truth is Beauty, Beauty Truth”) thesis.” E.M. Zemach, Studies in Analytical Aesthetics (Tel Aviv: Daga Books, 1970), iv.

affirming the human being wholistically, assuming the whole person (even though fallen) as capable of knowing Him and understanding truth.⁸ Larry Crabb is right:

Biblical metaphors—*panting* after God, *tasting* God, *drinking* living water, *eating* bread from heaven—make it clear that finding God is not merely academic. 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.⁹

There is no emphasis, within either testament, on the mental cognitive powers as the sole receptor of truth. Indeed, the primary avenue for truth-teaching appears to be through aesthetic value. Nowhere in Scripture is there instruction to escape a “bodily prison” to allow a closer proximity to the mind of God. Divine truth is regularly conveyed to the human being through aesthetic expression.¹⁰ One might even say that beauty can serve as a *schema* for truth, for a reality which we cannot otherwise fully fathom.”¹¹

Therefore, aesthetic value, though rightly studied extensively within philosophy, has often been excluded by Christian deliberation as appealing only to the human’s

⁸ It is not necessary within this study to enter the dichotomy/trichotomy debate. This discussion is only commenting on the facets of human nature.

⁹ Larry Crabb, Jr., Finding God (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 181 (emphasis Crabb’s). Robin Skelton is another who comments insightfully on this point: “Berdyaeu states that ‘Truth is apprehended not by abstract, partial man who is referred to as reason, mind in general and universal spirit, but by the whole man, transcendental man, the image of God.’ [fn: Nicolas Berdyaeu, Truth and Revelation, trans. R.M. French, Geoffrey Bless, 1953, p. 20]. We can agree that the ‘whole man’ is the perceiver of truth. We have been saying this all along, and we have argued that it is in poetry that the ‘whole man’ is brought into view.... ‘I am the way, the truth and the life.’ What does this mean? It means that the nature of truth ... must be grasped integrally by the whole personality; it means that truth is existential. [fn: Berdyaeu, *ibid.*, 22]. He goes on to point out that existentialist philosophy is reductionist in that it limits itself to expressing only the cognitive mind.” Robin Skelton, Poetic Truth (London: Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd., 1978), 120.

¹⁰ It can be argued, contra the Greek philosophical position, that the human body is capable, indeed necessary for the reception of divine truth and not merely a “prison” to be escaped.

¹¹ Zemach, “Truth in Beauty”, 36. Heidegger also suggests that aesthetic values are the superior revealer of truth: “Truth is the truth of being. Beauty does not occur alongside this truth. When truth sets itself into the work, it appears. Appearance—as this being of truth in the work and as work—is beauty.” Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of a Work of Art” in Philosophies of Art and Beauty, ed. Hofstadter and Kuhns (New York: Modern Library Giant), 700.

emotional needs, and unable to bear the weight of propositional truth.¹² However, in the perspective found in Scripture, this is not adequate. The relationship of beauty to that of truth and goodness is fundamental. 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.”¹³

Conclusion

The biblical aesthetic is a wholistic discipline, affirming the whole being of each person. The mind and human reason are not extolled as the primary avenue for receiving divine revelation in Scripture. Indeed, this revelation is diffused and structured through aesthetic expression and thereby undergirds and substantiates the truth. Aesthetic pleasure is even offered as some of the rewards of salvation!¹⁴ Our worship habits should reflect this, and thereby be enhanced!

*Why take the artistic way to prove so much?
Because, it is the glory and good of Art,
That Art remains the one way possible
Of speaking truth, to mouths like mine at least.*
—Robert Browning¹⁵

¹² For example, Susanne K. Langer claims that works of art are expressions of human *feeling* in a sensuous form presented for perception and contemplation. Her broad assumptions are similar to theories presented by Croce, Collingwood, Dewey and others. Aesthetics is generally related to emotive values, as Dorter summarizes: “There are at least four levels of experience at which art seems to express a certain kind of truth: those of 1) our emotions, 2) cultural values, 3) sensory experience, and 4) the elusive *significance* of our experience.” Kenneth Dorter, “Conceptual Truth and Aesthetic Truth,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 48 (Winter 1990), 37 (emphasis Dorter’s).

¹³ from his “Ode to a Grecian Urn.”

¹⁴ Reward promises to Israel in the OT and to the Church in the NT include extensive recounting of physical and material blessings. The first heavenly blessing granted the redeemed, according to the book of Revelation, is a banquet!

¹⁵ Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book, close of XII.