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Chapter 1
INTRODUCTION

Philosophers and theologians have long pursued ultimate realities. Significant discussion in both spheres generally revolves around the three main (philosophical) categories of Truth, Goodness and Beauty. Both philosophical and theological inquiry typically systematize their investigations within classifications established by the ancient Greeks. It is commonly conceded that the Greek philosophical system has furnished the basic framework within which both Western and Christian thought have subsequently been structured and conveyed.

Theologians, along with philosophers, regularly grapple with Truth and Goodness. However, theology, unlike philosophy, has neglected serious scrutiny of the study of Beauty (or Aesthetics, the philosophical designation). Frank Gaebelein is but one who has noted this:

> The bulk of the work being done in the field of Christian aesthetics represents Roman and Anglo-Catholic thought. Its roots go deep into sacramental theology, Thomism, Greek philosophy, and such great writers as Dante. But in large part it is extra biblical. There is a radical difference between the thought-forms of the Bible and those of Western philosophy and humanistic culture. . . . [The Bible's] basic insights must provide not only the foundation for an authentic Christian aesthetic but also the corrective for artistic theory derived from other sources, however excellent these may be.[1]

That a Christian aesthetic should be based on Scripture seems obvious. Christian faith insists that Scripture is the ultimate and only source for truth. However, probing beauty/aesthetics in Scripture is generally neglected by theologians. And most of the work being done in Christian aesthetics employs Western philosophical rather than biblical categories. The thought-forms of the Bible should be allowed to shape the fundamental parameters. Discussions within theology invariably focus on truth and goodness (ethics). Such investigation is not unimportant. Could the additional investigation of aesthetic considerations contribute anything to the ongoing search for a more comprehensive perception of the divine?

In this study I will contend that theology is incomplete and impoverished without the inclusion of aesthetic values. As it will be seen below, there is extensive aesthetic exposure within the biblical canon. An evaluation of this aesthetic phenomenon should necessarily be included within theological deliberations.

The question naturally arises: why are the concepts of aesthetics/beauty usually ignored by theological studies? Several reasons could be suggested:

1. The ethical concern for those in poverty leads some to consider that any interest in aesthetics is inappropriate. The rationale is sometimes suggested that one should not clamor for the "luxury" of beauty when so many people are still in such desperate need of food, shelter and justice.[2]
2. Others suppose that the admonitions included in the second commandment of the Decalogue regarding the making of any images warns against the beauty of artistic creations. P. T. Forsyth is one example:

> The second commandment passes the death sentence on Hebrew art. In killing idolatry, it killed plastic imagination. At least it placed it under such a disadvantage that it could hardly live and certainly could not grow. . . . Neither painter, sculptor, nor dramatist could live under the shadow of this stern law, or in the midst of this grimly earnest people. Such is the complaint of both Philo and Origen in speaking of the Jews.[3]

3. Still others insist that the urgency of Christian eschatology cannot honestly countenance "unnecessary" or "peripheral" considerations of aesthetics.
4. Sometimes it is suggested that since aesthetic concerns emerged with the ancient Greek philosophical system, it is not a theological concern at all.
5. Furthermore, with critical studies dominating most theological schools much of the last century, followed now with "postmodernism," seeking for *any* fundamentals (truth, ethics or aesthetics) is seen as impossible.
6. Henton Davies reflects yet another concern: "Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament has any theory of the beautiful."[4]

Whatever the motivation, it appears that theology's foundational material, the biblical canon, is examined for wide-ranging issues with the exception of aesthetic values. Gerhard von Rad insightfully remarks that "no aesthetic of the Old Testament has yet been written."[5] He at least recognized the problem. It still exists.

The same observation could also be made for the New Testament, and the biblical corpus as a whole. For example, Millard J. Erickson's massive 1247-page *Christian Theology* includes only one paragraph on the last page regarding the aesthetics of Scripture.[6]

Much has been debated about the philosophical theories of beauty, but as yet there is no systematic study of the canonical aesthetic. It appears that theology, by and large, does not yet realize the extent to which it might be informed and/or enriched by the biblical aesthetic.

Church history and historical theology rightly study the interweaving of political and intellectual threads that mingle with and affect the life and thought of the Christian Church. Aesthetic considerations are not so included. Yet the most obvious manifestation of the Judeo-Christian religion within Scripture is aesthetic language or phenomena.[7]

This study proposes that theological understanding has often been unnecessarily confined exclusively to its rational dimension, thus ignoring or limiting God's revelation of Himself by other means. Indeed, there are systems of meaning outside of the cognitive. In Scripture, God does not encounter the human creature exclusively through abstract concepts, but also as an Artist.[8] He is "the Word," but also a passionate Lover. This is vital to our theological understanding. Evidence in the canon suggests that aesthetic conventions assist, serve, express and illumine theological considerations. Rationality alone is not adequate. I will argue that aesthetic expression

> may be fruitful . . . and altogether beneficial when we are forced to deal with facets of experience that defy direct verbal expression, that make us stammer in our struggle for understanding and coherence—not because we are feeble intellectually but because reality in all its diversity will not bow to our thought-forming categories.[9]

The body of Scripture has no dearth of aesthetic phenomena. For example, up to 40 percent of the Old Testament is in some variety of poetic language. Disciplines outside of theology readily acknowledge that Israel's capacity for beauty involves the gift of language, including narrative description, preaching, and the lyrical expressions of psalmist and prophet. Aidan Nichols is sensitive:

> 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.[10]

Furthermore, Israel's artistic genius, from its very commencement as a nation, was also expended in religious architecture and decorations. The New Testament contains its own unique aesthetic manifestation through the apostles and the Messiah Himself. A systematic study of the biblical aesthetic begs for consideration.

Much contemporary deliberation in philosophical aesthetics involves the critical review of individual works of art and analyzing an artist's particular style. This study, however, will be restricted to exploring an aesthetic presumed to be operant throughout Scripture. I will assume that: (1) beauty as perceived by human senses and mind exists; (2) as Scripture is the norm for Christian truth

and ethics, so it should be for aesthetical considerations; and (3) the correct comprehension of a biblical aesthetic will vitally affect one's theology.

As we saw above, von Rad's statement alerts us that an aesthetic of Scripture has not yet been written. Exploring biblical aesthetics philosophically is sometimes attempted,[11] but no systematic scriptural work has been done. Moreover, much modern theological endeavor has been dominated by theologians employing historical critical methodology in which the biblical text is dissected and criticized. This orientation naturally excludes any comprehensive integrative work.[12]

In recent decades, however, there has been a helpful shift to a literary paradigm (i.e., rhetorical criticism, new literary criticism, "close reading of the text," etc.) which rightly addresses the significance of the entire canon as an existing phenomenon. However, these helpful disciplines yet express little interest in systematizing work. The task remains to be done.

The manifestation of aesthetic phenomena in Scripture cannot be brushed aside as an unnecessary luxury. The aesthetic exposure is broad and extensive, involving vast swaths of narratives and poetry. God used a complex of aesthetic patterns as He revealed Himself in Scripture. A systematic study should also include a consideration of the specific aesthetic terminology that Scripture writers employ. One finds at least twenty different word groups for "beauty/beautiful" in biblical Hebrew and Greek. These terms need to be explored in their contexts. Major biblical phenomena should also be noted such as the theophanies where God appears in His glory. Also the manifestation in God's two supreme triumphs—Creation and Redemption.

Moreover, almost fifty chapters in the Pentateuch alone are involved with God directing the construction of a lavish Sanctuary, involving architecture and numerous other artistic expressions, including music and poetic language. As von Rad correctly suggests:

> Her [Israel's] most intensive encounter with beauty was in the religious sphere, in the contemplation of Jahweh's revelation and action; and because of this concentration of the experience of beauty upon the *credenda*, Israel occupies a special place in the history of aesthetics. . . . All her hymns, all her songs of victory and all her artistically shaped narratives testify to the fact that she perceived a strong aesthetic element as well in the actions wrought by Jahweh.[13]

Close to another fifty chapters within the Old Testament involve the reader with the artistic details of Solomon's temple. Ezekiel also devotes numerous chapters to the glories of a "third" temple.

The canon closes in the New Testament with the Apocalypse and its pointed focus again on (heavenly) sanctuary imagery. Though often overlooked in this respect, the book of Revelation is a significant aspect of God's aesthetic disclosure. The canonic record of God's earthly and heavenly sanctuaries

envelops Scripture. Both testaments also include poetic prophetic utterances and Israelite hymnody. It will become very apparent that concern for aesthetic value within Scripture is an essential element in a "full-orbed" theology.

Encounter with and understanding of God will be unavoidably affected as theology is extensively informed with the aesthetic.

* * * * *

"Majestic God, our muse inspire,
And fill us with seraphic fire.
Augment our swells, our tones refine,
Performance ours, the glory thine."
– The Continental Harmony, Boston, 1794

NOTES

1. Frank E. Gaebelein, *The Christian, The Arts and Truth: Regaining the Vision of Greatness* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985), 56.

2. This attitude might need review. Wayne Muller offers an insightful perspective: "One day we were meeting in Old South Church, one of the fine, traditional houses of worship in Boston. One social activist was particularly enthusiastic in criticizing the great disparities of wealth in the city. In his evangelical fervor, he used the church we were sitting in as an offending example. "Take this church. It is obscene, all this stained glass and gold chalices and fine tapestries. If the church really cared about poor people, they should sell all of this and give it to the poor.' This argument is not new; it was made by Jesus' disciples themselves, and it clearly has some merit. But a woman from the neighborhood, who had lived there all her life, said quietly, "This is one of the most beautiful places in the city. It is one of the only places where poor folks can afford to be around beauty. All the other beauty in this city costs money. Here, we can be surrounded by beautiful things, and it all belongs to us. Don't even think about taking away what little beauty we have.'" Wayne Muller, *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (New York: Bantam, 1999), 161, 162.

3. Peter Taylor Forsyth, *Christ on Parnassus* (London: Independent Press, 1959), 43.

4. G. Henton Davies, "Beauty," *The Interpreter's Dictionary*, ed. George A. Buttrick, vol. 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 372.

5. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 English translation), 364. What von Rad wrote in 1962 is still valid.

6. Erickson writes: "Beyond the logical or rational character of theology, there is also its aesthetic character. There is the potential, as we survey the whole of God's truth, of grasping its artistic nature. There is a beauty to the great compass and the interrelatedness of the doctrines. The organic character of theology, its balanced depiction of the whole of reality and of human nature, should bring a sense of satisfaction to the human capacity to appreciate beauty in the form of symmetry, comprehensiveness, and coherence." Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989), 1245-1246.

7. Jewish writers have been more attentive to this issue. For example, Rabbi Menachem Schraeder of Efrat explains that the writing of the Torah is an art form. Not only are the letters beautiful calligraphy, but even the content follows the laws of rhyme and poetic structure. See Vehoshua Rubin, *Spiritual Awakenings: Illuminations on Shabbat and the Holidays*, (New York: Urim Publications, 2003), 172.

8. T. R. Wright rightly regards the aesthetic manifestation in biblical literature: "The way in which meaning is created in theology, then, is not through straightforward literal denotation, single words pointing to clearly defined 'objects'. The word 'God' operates within a complex linguistic system to refer to a reality which is not fully understood. But the belief that language does point to a 'real' referent, however indirectly, seems to me to be crucial to Christian faith. And one of the most powerful means of describing this reality, I want to suggest, is necessarily the most indirect: literature. It is through literary devices, narrative, metaphor, symbolism and so on, that we come closest to understanding the human predicament." T. R. Wright, *Theology and Literature* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1988), 32.

9. John Dillenberger, *A Theology of Artistic Sensibilities* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 234.

10. Aidan Nichols, O.P., *The Splendour of Doctrine: The Catechism of The Catholic Church on Christian Believing* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 105.

11. Hans von Balthasar has written the extensive seven volume *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics,* eds. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982). In his view, theology should abandon 'the extra-theological categories of secular philosophical aesthetics and develop its own 'theory of beauty' from the data of revelation itself. His goal was valid, but his work is a notable philosophical treatise.

12. With supposed "careless" or "sloppy" redactors editing the canonic materials, developing an integrative aesthetic would be impossible, *a priori*.

13. von Rad, 365.