

AESTHETICS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT: BEAUTY IN CONTEXT

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When it comes to understanding the Biblical material, our modern conceptions of beauty offer a great handicap to understanding. So difficult to assess are Biblical statements that some students have simply concluded that there are no descriptions of beauty at all in our sense of the word. Walter Grundmann concludes for example that the whole problem of the beautiful is of no concern to the OT: "Beauty (*kalon*) does not occur at all as an aesthetic quantity; this is linked with the low estimation of art in Biblical religion."¹ Perhaps because it plays no role in Israel's history of tradition Gerhard von Rad claims: "There is no particular significance in many of the statements which ancient Israel made about beauty; and the reason why there is nothing characteristic in them is that they move in the place of the experience of beauty common to all men."²

It is tempting to believe that this incomprehension results from our western Greek philosophical tradition.³ We may be looking for a theory of beauty as ideal form that is derived from Greek thought. For Plato art achieved its highest end in shedding its chaotic particularity and reflecting eternal reality; in Biblical thought all of God's ordered creation embodies its own special glory. Plato insists: "Now the nature of the ideal being was everlasting, but to bestow its attribute in its fullness upon a creature was impossible."⁴ So human experiences and physical images are only significant when they are "more than empirical, something transcendental, ideal, absolute."⁵ Art speaks to image this ideal reality. "Where there is definiteness of character, simplicity or unity, there is evidence of ideality."⁶

But one should not dismiss too quickly Plato's theory as a search for ideal form that cannot appreciate particularity. As Lodge points out, Plato understood very well the contextual character of beauty. Life and art can be lovely

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¹TDNT 3 (1965) 544. I would like to thank my colleague Barry Francolino for assistance with the transliteration of the Hebrew later in this article.

²G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (New York: Harper, 1962), 1. 364.

³See e.g. the comments of C. Westermann, "Biblische Aesthetik: Die Zeichen der Zeit" (1950) 278. For the Greeks, "die Schöne ist immer Objekt."

⁴Plato, *Timaeus* par. 37.

⁵R.C. Lodge, *Plato's Theory of Art* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953) 241.

⁶Ibid.

because they reflect a cosmic order.⁷ Moreover, the idea of mimesis that lies at the heart of Plato's art theory is not so much "reflection" as "enactment." Image in Plato's view always has behind it the idea of drama where meaning is conveyed through gesture of mimicry, rhythmic or otherwise.⁸ All of this is closer to the Biblical view of things than might first appear.

Perhaps we do better to say that Biblical aesthetics appears foreign because art seems to lack its referential (what we would call symbolic) quality and thus its independent status. OT art never seemed to rise above what we moderns disparagingly call decorative art. For the Hebrew, beauty was nothing special simply because it shared in the ordered meaning of God's creation. We will see that the loveliness of an object (or event) was simply its being what it was meant to be. The beautiful was often what we might call merely the "fitting." Only later in the OT period does beauty become an isolable entity (see Wis 13:3). This is because beauty is only the splendor of a system of relationships; it is an aspect of the totality of meaning of the created order, which for God's people was immediately evident in the whole and in the art.

To elaborate this viewpoint we intend to study seven basic word groups that refer to beauty and the enjoyment of beauty in the OT. We will seek then to establish a range of meanings from the actual usage of these terms in their context.⁹ In this way we may be able to understand what the Hebrews meant by ascribing loveliness or beauty to a particular object. We have selected for study those seven word groups that are most often employed in an aesthetic sense (the visibly pleasing or luminous). In a sense our choice of words is arbitrary, for the very selection reflects our understanding of what beauty is. For the Hebrew other words would be equally important: *Kābôd* ("glory") or *ṭôb* ("good"), to take two examples, would reflect the continuity between the good, the powerful and the lovely. But since these words rarely mean "beautiful" in our sense (insofar as I am able to tell, *kābôd* never and *ṭôb* only twice [2 Sam 11:2; Esth 2:7]—though one ought not discount connotations of verses like Gen 1:31), we have left them out of account. All of our study, however, must be done while bearing in mind that for the person of the ancient Near East there is a continuity between the concrete and the abstract, so that any process of abstraction for study will be artificial.¹⁰ But an examination of a range of expressions allows the breadth of meaning to be seen. Following the summaries of these studies we will be in a position of make some systematic observations.

⁷Ibid.

⁸E.C. Keuls, *Plato and Greek Painting* (Leiden: Brill, 1978) 10 ff.

⁹Taking account of recent studies in semantics since J. Barr's *Semantics of Biblical Language* (1961) we will use the methods employed by H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974) 3–9.

¹⁰Cf. O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 9 ff. As von Rad notes, instead of abstract terms, for the Hebrew by a "cumulation of [concrete] terms the desired extension of the conceptual range is achieved." *Wisdom in Israel* (ed. J. D. Martin; London: SCM, 1972) 13.

I. THE SEVEN WORD GROUPS

1. *Šēbi* (used to mean "beauty" or "honor" eighteen times, though it can also mean "gazelle"). Here beauty is the quality—often applied to nations—that sparks the admiration of people and nations. When David hears that Saul and Jonathan are dead he cries out (translations by the author unless otherwise indicated): "Thy beauty is slain upon the high places" (2 Sam 1:19). It combines the idea of honor with that of outward splendor. Most often it is applied to nations in two senses. On the one hand it is used of that of which one can properly boast, for which he or she is admired, but which God can eliminate by his judgment: "And Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, . . . will become like Sodom and Gomorrah" (Isa 13:19). On the other hand it is often used to characterize God's promised land, especially Jerusalem itself: "I thought how I would give you . . . a heritage most beautiful of all nations" (Jer 3:19 *RSV*; cf. Ezra 10:6, 15; Dan 11:45, "glorious holy mountain"). In Isa 28:5 the reference is to the Lord himself. He will be "a crown of beauty." And in 4:5 it applies to the eschatological Branch of the Lord. Beauty in these verses is that which sparks admiration but may also cause undue pride and thus merit destruction by God's judgment. But it will also be replaced by God himself in the eschatological kingdom, the glorious antitype of Canaan and Jerusalem.

2. *Pā'ar* (verb used thirteen times meaning "to glorify," "to crown," "to beautify"). To glorify in this sense is to make something into an object of adoration or praise, or to make it assume a place of honor. The king was praised for seeking this for God's house (Ezra 7:27). Though God's people may often improperly seek this for themselves ("vaunt themselves," Judg 7:2 *RSV*), they cannot achieve it on their own. So again God promises to beautify his people in the last days: "The Lord has redeemed Jacob and will be glorified in Israel" (Isa 44:23c *RSV*), and in this striking promise to Israel: "You are my servant in whom I will be beautiful" (49:3)—though even now God beautifies those who are humble in victory (Ps 149:4).

The noun *tip'ārā* appears forty-nine times meaning "ornament," "splendor" or "glory." The word is often used of that which has an outward splendor, such as Aaron's robes (Exod 28:2) or the lovely crown God put on Israel in the moving allegory of Ezek 16:12: "And I put . . . a beautiful crown on your head." It can be associated with the pomp and display of a king (Esth 1:4) or of beautiful idols (Ezek 16:17; note the same word that characterized the crown in v 12). In this case God promises to bring such glory low (Isa 3:18; 10:12). The word describes the temple in 1 Chr 22:5; Isa 60:7, and especially the sanctuary of the Lord (Ps 96:6) or even his delivering acts (Isa 63:12). This beauty God stripped from his people during the exile (Ps 78:61; Lam 2:1), but it will again characterize them in the last days (Jer 33:9; Isa 52:1). While it is most often associated with external appearance it does not always imply aesthetic qualities in the narrow sense. It may be that of which one may be justly proud, as an old man's gray head (Prov 16:31), or a young man's strength (Ps 71:8) or his name (1 Chr 29:13). Supremely it will characterize the Lord in the last day (Isa 28:5) and likewise his people: "Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion, put on your beautiful garments" (52:1 *RSV*), and "I will put salvation in Zion for Israel my beauty" (46:13c).

3. Words associated with the verb *hāmad*, “to desire,” “to delight in,” imply a desire with the intention of obtaining for one’s own. The root often refers to what is pleasant to one’s sight in such a way that it drives one to take action, to focus one’s efforts to obtain the object. It can be used in the positive sense in which all the trees God made for man in the garden were attractive (Gen 2:9), as the shadow of the beloved one is delightful (Cant 2:3), or to describe the mountain God desired for his dwelling (Ps 68:16). It can also be used of that which drives a person to seek what is forbidden. The serpent sought to portray the forbidden fruit as desirable (just as all the trees God made were desirable; Gen 3:6). Achan “coveted in gold” (Josh 7:21; Moses had specifically warned against this in Deut 7:25), and the wicked desired fields that did not belong to them—and so oppressed the poor (Mic 2:2). The scoffer sees his scoffing as attractive (Prov 1:22), and the immoral man desires beauty of an adventurous woman (6:25). All of this is summed up in the last commandment, which uses this word: “You shall not desire—see as attractive—anything that is your neighbor’s” (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21). Interestingly, covetousness and greed—which devours its object—may appear together, so that both one’s own greed (Job 20:20) and God’s judgment destroys what is coveted (Ps 39:11: God will consume what we have thought attractive). On the other hand desired things have a lasting quality when they are found in the house of the righteous (Prov 21:20). The law is spoken of as supremely lovely and worth desiring (Ps 19:1), but in God’s servant will be no beauty to desire (Isa 53:2).

The nouns derived from this verb (appearing twenty-two times) refer usually to what is pleasant or lovely and therefore precious. The land God gave to Israel is lovely (Ps 106:24; Isa 32:12), as are stones or precious vessels—what we might call “valuables” (2 Chr 32:27; 36:10). But it can also mean the desirable objects that lead to harlotry (Ezek 23:6, 12, 23) and thus will be destroyed in God’s judgment (Jer 25:34; Hos 13:15). It is clear, however, that God does not despise this beauty. In fact in the day of the Lord he promises to shake the nations as one would shake a fruit tree “so that the treasures (*hemdat*) of all nations will come into it. And I will fill this house with glory (*kābôd*), says the Lord of hosts. This silver is mine and the gold is mine, says the Lord of hosts” (Hag 2:7–8; cf. Rev 21:24).

4. The word group associated with the verb *yāpā*, “to be fair/beautiful,” appears eight times as a verb, nineteen times as a noun and thirty-six times as an adjective. These words are ordinarily associated with the outward beauty of a person and, less often, of an object. It is a very common description of the beloved one in the Canticles (“you are beautiful,” Cant 4:1, 10 *et passim*); it describes Sarah (Gen 12:11), Rachel (29:17), Joseph (39:6), Abigail (1 Sam 25:3) and Esther (Esth 2:7). Israel is called lovely because of God’s kindness to her (Ezek 16:13–14; Jer 11:16, “a green olive tree, fair with good fruit”). This beauty is dangerous only when it becomes a matter of pride, as in the moving progression in Ezekiel 16. Under God’s care Israel had become famous for her beauty (vv 12–14). Then she trusted in her beauty (v 15) so that soon she began to offer it to passersby in harlotry (v 25; cf. Jer 10:40).

So important is this beauty that it can refer to God’s very presence in Zion: “Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth” (Ps 50:2; cf. 48:2 *RSV*).

And again it is to characterize God's people in the last days (Zech 9:17).

Interesting is the use of this group in the wisdom literature (nineteen times excluding wisdom material in the Psalms). Here it indicates the highest natural perfection that God's ordered creation can reach. He has made everything beautiful in its time (Eccl 3:11). In the same manner enjoyment of this is also lovely. It is lovely to eat and drink and find enjoyment in all one's toil. But taken out of this context it becomes a snare: "Like a gold ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman with no discretion" (Prov 11:22; cf. 31:30).

5. The characteristic of what is fitting is especially evident in the word group associated with the verb *nā'ā*, which appears twelve times in all forms. It can mean the physically attractive (as in Cant 1:1; 6:4), but more often it means the pleasing, in the sense of what is perfectly suitable to the situation. Praise "suits" the righteous (Ps 33:1; BDB "is seemly" also in 147:1), holiness "belongs" in God's house (93:5; *NEB* "holiness is the beauty of thy house"), and the feet of the evangelist are "lovely" (Isa 52:7). By contrast fine or lovely speech does not "fit" in the mouth of a fool (Prov 17:7), nor are a fine house (19:10) or honor (26:1) "suitable" for a fool.

6. The word group from *nā'ēm* has the meaning "to be pleasant/lovely" (twenty-seven times in all forms). Usually an object or a condition is called pleasant: the land (Gen 49:15), the lyre (Ps 81:2), words (Prov 16:24; 23:8), the places the psalmist enjoys (Ps 16:2), even bread eaten in secret (Prov 9:17). When a person is called pleasant it seems to relate more to character than appearance. Jonathan was pleasant to David (2 Sam 1:26), and David was a lovely (talented?) psalmist (23:1). Or it is the pleasant in the sense of the morally appropriate: brothers dwelling together in unity (Ps 133:1), the righteous completing their years ("in pleasantness," Job 36:11), the path of wisdom (Prov 3:17). Even a rebuke for the wicked is pleasant in this sense (24:25). Here the moral dimension is clear, so much so that in a psalm influenced by the wisdom movement the psalmist notes: "When the wicked are given to those who will condemn them, then they will learn that God's word is pleasant" (Ps 141:6). Not without reason the *RSV* translates the word here as "true," for when God's words are put to the test they are found to be wholly appropriate, true in the highest sense.

By extension the word can also characterize God himself: "May the beauty of the Lord dwell among us" (90:17). "Our songs of praise suit his goodness" (135:3b). So the believer can look forward to fullness of joy and pleasures (lit. "delightful things," *nē'imôt*) when he or she enjoys the presence of God (16:11).

7. Finally we examine the thirty-seven occurrences of words related to the verb *hādar*, "to honor/glorify." This is that character of honor that is perceived by people and freely acknowledged especially with respect to God or the king. It can be used of fruit—the children of Israel are to take the fruit of goodly trees on the first day of the feast of booths (Lev 23:40)—or of cattle: Joseph's firstling cattle are good or have majesty (Deut 33:17). When referred to God this is that character of glory that appears as the visible expression of his power and holiness. It is perceived holiness "before him" (1 Chr 16:27); he is clothed with it (Ps 104:1). God asks Job whether perhaps he (Job) can deck himself with this glory (Job 40:10). Paradoxically, though a person cannot clothe him-

self with this honor, God can and does: "Thou hast crowned [man] with glory and honor" [*kābōd wēhādār*]; Ps 8:5b).

Likewise the king displays this character in his kingly splendor, but only because God bestows it upon him (21:5). Clearly any splendor a king has is a reflected glory (Dan 5:18). Since it is well suited to kingly glory it can be translated "majesty" (Ps 45:3; here as in 21:5 it is coupled with *hōd*, also meaning "splendor" or "vigor"), though interestingly a virtuous woman is also clothed with this honor (Prov 31:25). But of all the words for beauty, this one seems best suited to God himself and seems appropriate in people only when they reflect (visibly) something of his character. For God's works are full of his glory (Ps 111:3), especially his judgment (149:9). This aspect of God, however, threatens the person, and we are even advised to hide ourselves from it (Isa 2:10, 19, 21; "the glory of his majesty" *RSV*), though the fervent prayer of the psalmist is that this glory may be visible to his people (Ps 90:16).

Especially interesting for the question of aesthetics is the feminine noun (*hādārâ*), which BDB translates in the following as "holy adornment": "Worship the Lord in holy adornment" (Ps 29:2; 1 Chr 16:29; *RSV* "holy array"). The context of these references is public worship, and 2 Chr 20:21 seems to confirm that the word relates to the splendor of the dress of those leading temple worship. Yet the parallel in Ps 96:9—"Tremble before him, all the earth"—indicates that the splendor of temple worship was itself to inspire a proper sense of God's holiness and was not to be merely a spectacle.¹¹ Something of this majesty is captured in the description of the high priest Simon the son of Onias in Sir 50:7, 11: "Like the sun shining on the Temple of the Most High . . . [is the high priest] when he puts on his glorious vestments."

II. GOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL

The expression that "God is the author of all beauty" (Wis 13:3) reflects a conviction held all through Israel's history. He gives it; he can take it away. Still there is no feeling in the OT that the creature must be a lesser beauty because it is physical. Rather, it is able to display in its own creaturely way that quality or perfection that belongs to the character of God: "Thine, O Lord, is the glory" (*hattip'eret*; 1 Chr 29:11). And yet one can speak of Ephraim as "the fading flower of its glorious beauty" (Isa 28:4). While this confession of God focuses on the experience of worship, it is said to characterize all the works of God, especially those interventions on behalf of his people. These acts, which are at one time called "righteous acts" (Judg 5:11b), are also in another context called "lovely" (Ezek 16:13). The implication of verses like these is that the process of God's activity that we call redemption has as a part of its purpose a restoration of the integrity of the created order wherein it will (again) be char-

¹¹Another possible interpretation grows out of usage in cognate languages. In related terms the meaning can relate to an epiphany of God. See G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956) 136. In this case the order of the Hebrew may not be a construct, and the correct translation may be "worship in his holy manifestation" or "in the appearance of his holiness." Support for this lies in the command to tremble or writhe in awe (Ps 96:9b) and in the fact that angels too are to worship this way (92:1). They wear no special clothes.

acterized by beauty and wholeness. This is a part of the end sought in God's righteous judgment. The several words for "glory," which in our positivist age are so little understood, reflect a comprehensive reality that in the process of redemption comes into human history and establishes itself, transforming all it touches until a universal reign of goodness and brightness is realized, when "the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab 2:14 *RSV*).

This fact has led some to see the theophanies as the key to the understanding of beauty in the OT. Von Rad says in this connection:

The descriptions of theophanies are undoubtedly the most central subject of an OT aesthetic, for they reveal more clearly than all else how the special experience of God undergone by Israel became normative for the special features in the experience of beauty.¹²

Perhaps we can go even farther. While arguably it was the Hebrews' experience with God that supremely embodied beauty—especially as the splendor of God's appearance to Moses was reflected in the cult—it is more to the point to say that because of their experience of God's deliverance they were able to recover a sense of the integrity and fullness of the created order, to see there reflected God's own loveliness.

While beauty was often related to worship and to God's presence—as von Rad says, it is more of an event than an object—it is possible to exaggerate the functional character of beauty in the OT. Claus Westermann, for example, insists that beauty is entirely a happening between persons and not a quality of an object. The goodness and beauty of creation, he claims, consist only in relation and response to the creator. Creation is beautiful because it praises God, not—as we believe—the reverse.¹³ All of this is helpful in showing the final source and end of beauty and the unique connection of beauty with worship. But this should not be stressed to the point of denying all objectivity to beauty. For our understanding must allow for the fully material and integral character of creation indicated in Genesis 1–2. That creation exists to praise God is certainly true, but it does not follow that beauty does not reside objectively in the ordered creation of God.

III. BEAUTY AND WORSHIP

We have seen that the cult was characterized by its glory and splendor. We understand from the place of figures and images in the tabernacle and the temple—note how God's Spirit is said to endow Bezalel with his ability to create artistic designs (Exod 31:3–4)—how important that visual setting was to the experience of joyful praise. It is difficult, however, for us to be more specific. As H. Ringgren notes: "Unfortunately we no longer know the concrete meaning of beholding the beauty (*nō'am*) of Yahweh (Ps 27:4)." Nevertheless he goes on

¹²G. von Rad, *Theology*, 1. 366–367.

¹³Westermann, "Biblische" 279–280. "Die Schönheit des Geschaffenen steht im Lob."

to say: "What the worshipper experienced in the Temple filled him with joy and strength."¹⁴

Clearly the enjoyment of beauty was integrated into the whole experience of worship. There the believer joined the congregation in rejoicing before the Lord, an experience of worship. And its temporal setting (the Sabbath) may be the closest approximation to what we might call today an aesthetic experience, but it was also something more. It was a timeless present in which the worshiper enjoyed his or her liberty by sharing in the rest that God enjoyed after creation (Ps 46:10). Here was no concern for the past, no preparation for the future—simply a delight in the salvation of God and a recounting of his glorious deeds. But no particular object is anywhere described as beautiful. Rather, the whole experience is characterized as lovely. Of course by association the temple (where God's glory dwells), Jerusalem, Zion and even Canaan itself become beautiful. From the legislation concerning the various feasts and the constantly reiterated command to rejoice before the Lord—especially on the Sabbath (both the day and the year) and the jubilee year—it is clearly God's intention that the lovely experience of worship shed its glow over more and more of Israel's life. We will return to this theme presently.

IV. IMAGES AND OLD TESTAMENT AESTHETICS

A discussion of the place of images in the OT belongs in this context. It is sometimes implied that Israel's experience with God was so "spiritual" and personal that any dependence on images was avoided as a stumbling block. Here surely our Biblical interpretations reflect our Protestant heritage: Hearing the word of God and following that word makes all visible assistance unnecessary and even hazardous. Such a view could hardly be further from the OT conception of things.

In the first place the prohibition in the second commandment has primarily to do with false worship and not with the attempt to reflect God in images. The line is drawn between God and idols but not between God and images. In fact it is possible to argue that God refuses us the right to make an image of himself because he has made such attempts unnecessary. He himself has given adequate reflection of his character in his created order, especially in men and women.¹⁵ These "images" are to call forth praise for the maker (Psalms 8; 19). Human creators can even be commanded to make objects that reflect God's glory (in the tabernacle and temple).

In addition God's progressive revelation of himself was accompanied throughout by a great variety of visual experiences. These appearances are often introduced by the familiar formula: "And he appeared. . ."—so much so that God can say to the people before they cross into Canaan:

Has any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, by wonders . . . according to all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that

¹⁴H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966) 154–155.

¹⁵See W. A. Dyrness, "The Imago Dei and Biblical Aesthetics," *JETS* (Summer 1971).

you might know that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him. Out of heaven he let you hear his voice, that he might discipline you; and on earth he let you see his great fire . . . and you heard his words out of the midst of the fire (Deut 4:34–36 RSV).

Their visual experience was to accompany and elaborate God's word to them. There is a line that extends from Abraham's experience in Genesis 18, through Moses' encounter on Sinai, the cloud and fire in the wilderness, to the splendor of the temple and the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel. If, as H. U. von Balthasar has pointed out, one of God's purposes in the OT is to prepare his people for the actual appearance of God in the incarnation, we can see how vital the visible aspect of God's presence had to be. All of this of course anticipates and prepares for the realization on the mount of transfiguration, the darkness of Golgotha and the shimmering fire and pounding wind of Pentecost. So we can say with von Balthasar that images are not so much prohibited in the OT as integrated into the progressive revelation of God's purposes for the earth, pressed into service as the visible dimension of transcendent reality.¹⁶ As this kingdom was to be known for its righteousness, so it could be recognized by its beauty.

To properly assess OT images we must turn to the wisdom writings: Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Canticles. In the wisdom literature we see the concrete embodiment of Calvin's idea that the whole creation is a theatre for God's glory. Creation has an integrity, a wholeness that pleases. Moreover in this order the moral and aesthetic dimension are intertwined. A fool may run afoul of it but he cannot overthrow it. It is clear that there is a figural splendor to the created order and to revelation, but only as a dimension of the whole. Consider what is to us a supreme example of beauty: flowers or grasses. There is no instance in the OT where things like this are featured and enjoyed in their own right. The Hebrews for their part would be puzzled at our focus on such images. A flower cannot be enjoyed on its own for the simple reason that it does not exist on its own. Seen in the context in which it exists its most remarkable characteristic is that it fades and withers (Isa 40:8). On the other hand, how can a flock of goats running on the hillsides, or shorn sheep come up from washing, or a strong tower express the loveliness of hair, teeth and neck (Cant 6:5–6)? The explanation lies in the fact that the Hebrew image sought to capture the various roles the objects played in the natural order. As O. Keel comments, a person in the ancient Near East had a deep-seated "necessity to show things as they have been experienced by all the senses and internalized through long association."¹⁷ The tower represents purity, pride, inaccessibility and

¹⁶How important this quality of seeing and touching was to the early Church can be seen for example in 1 John 1:1–3, the same John sometimes thought to be the most "spiritual" of NT writers.

¹⁷O. Keel, *La gloire et la croix: les aspects esthétiques de la révélation* (Aubier: Ed. Montaigne, 1965), 1. 279–285. Cf. A. N. Wilder: "We underestimate the grace of God if we do not recognize that it blesses us not only with his presence and call, but also with illumination of the ways of the world and his ways with it." *Theopoetic: Theology and the Religious Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967) 92. J. Calvin understood this pedagogical purpose of images, as God takes us by the hand, leading us by the OT ceremonies to the mediator. Cf. L. Wencelius, *L'esthétique de Calvin* (Paris, 1936) 194.

strength.¹⁸ It brought all of these aspects together in a single image. In our modern images we feature surface and finish; OT images present structure and character. Modern images are narrow and restrictive; theirs were broad and inclusive. While we are interested primarily in appearance they were concerned with comprehensive content, which for them was a matter both of meaning and of beauty. For us beauty is primarily visual; their ideas included sensations of light, color, voice, smell and even taste.¹⁹

It is true that these characteristics Israel shared with many of her Near Eastern neighbors. But the uniqueness of their conceptions appears in the comprehensive images that express the unity of creation in judgment and renewal: exodus, Zion, the day of the Lord. It is difficult for us to imagine such a grand harmony and wholeness, for we have gotten out of the habit of seeing things as a whole. It is clear from this study that our modern error is at least in part an aesthetic one: We no longer understand the role beauty properly ought to play in our fragmented lives. So beauty only expresses our isolation. It does not provide the delight and comfort of integration. It expresses the sad truth that von Balthasar has pointed out: that where a sense of genuine beauty is lost, the good also loses its force of attraction.

V. BEAUTY AND MORALITY

While beauty is often associated with worship it is possible to overemphasize this connection. In fact in surveying the references to beauty in the OT one is impressed with the fact that most references have no connection to the cult. As we noted above, frequently the beautiful is simply what we would call the fitting or the proper: gray hair on an old man, strength in a youth, virtue in a woman, words well spoken, etc. Here is where the Biblical view and the Greek view stand in the greatest possible contrast. In the OT an object or event is not beautiful because it conforms to a formal ideal but because it reflects in its small way the wholeness of the created order. Something is lovely if it displays the integrity that characterizes creation and that in turn reflects God's own righteousness. On occasion righteousness and beauty are even used interchangeably. Paths of righteousness are simply walkable paths (Ps 23:3); trees of righteousness are lovely trees. The opposite of this would be trees that bear no fruit or stony paths, rather than ugly trees and paths.²⁰

This humble sense of beauty may be the reason OT aesthetics often appear unusual. The truth is simply that beauty can hardly be made the object of separate study at all in the OT without distorting the material. As Eric Werner once observed, beauty occupies a broad borderline between the aesthetic and

¹⁸Keel, *Symbolism* 20. Keel describes these images with the German word *Denkbild* ("thought picture").

¹⁹*Ibid.*, pp. 77 ff.

²⁰The idea of ugliness is virtually absent from the OT. The nearest equivalent is blemish or defect (*mûm* and *mē'ûmâ*), which can be physical (as in Dan 1:4) or moral (Job 31:7c) and can disqualify from priestly service (Lev 21:17; see also 2 Sam 14:25; Cant 4:7; Lev 24:19; Deut 5:21; Job 11:15). This kind of defect is anything that hinders something from being what it is naturally meant to be.

the moral.²¹ The key to much of modern aesthetics is the autonomy of form and the purity of aesthetic experience. In the OT the contrast that we have seen is not between beauty and ugliness but between beauty in its setting, serving God's purpose, and beauty that is prostituted by leading away from the just order that God intended.

In short, the experience of beauty was never an isolated, morally neutral experience in the OT. We saw how often beauty was related to what we might call "charm";²² beauty encourages us to take up a course of action with respect to it. The wise man warns: "Do not lust in your heart after her beauty" (Prov 6:25 RSV). And the course of action a person adopts toward this charm will surely reflect the allegiance of his or her heart. This is seen clearly in the command against coveting, where aesthetics and ethics show their deep interrelationship. The experiences of the temptation in the garden and of David's episode with Bathsheba display the melancholy progression of beauty as charm. Beauty gives rise to desire, which demands possession. Possession then can destroy the beauty of the object, which lies not in the object alone but in the system of righteous relations it enjoys. The case of Amnon is typical. After he had desired David's beautiful sister and forced her to lie with him, he hated her more deeply than he had loved her previously (2 Sam 13:15).

This interdependent quality of creation emphasizes the lovely mutuality God wished to display. As Westermann observes, the beauty of creation is best understood when creation is viewed as a brother rather than an object.²³ And given this interdependence it is also clear that the proper expression of the fullness of creation virtually demanded a poetic rather than an abstract terminology. As von Rad states:

The experiences of reality which confronted [Israel] could be appropriately presented only in artistic form. . . . A whole group of perceptions [of natural phenomena] . . . could apparently be expressed only in hymnic form.²⁴

Appropriately, then, God promises as a part of his judgment to take away the beauty he had given to Israel. She had played the harlot with her beauty (Ezekiel 16; Hosea), and her lovers would themselves strip away her fair jewels (Ezek 16:39). So the false pride in beauty leads to judgment, a judgment in which all beauty is lost: "I take from them their glory" (Ezek 24:25). "All who pass along the way clap their hands at you. . . . Is this the city that was called the personification of beauty?" (Lam 2:15). Beauty and the beautiful, then, are as much the character of an experience or an event as they are of an object. They partake of the larger dimension of the interaction of human and divine life in which all creation is made to play a part. Beauty can be sign of blessing, its absence a sign of judgment. Beauty shares in the purposeful movement of the person in which he or she constantly pulls events and objects into valuing

²¹E. Werner, *The Sacred Bridge* (New York: Columbia, 1958) 313.

²²Cf. T. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek* (London, 1960) 83.

²³Westermann, "Biblische" 280-281.

²⁴G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (London: SCM, 1972) 25.

pursuits. It reflects the fact that the OT portrays human life as a dynamic way of going in which each step reflects the delight and the moral seriousness of the whole.

VI. BEAUTY AND THE DAY OF THE LORD

Our study emphasized how often allusions to beauty have a future reference. The prophets make clear that the present order marred by sin is in conflict with itself. Accordingly the absence of beauty is sometimes associated with oppression of the poor (see Amos 2). But events were moving toward an earth-shaking settlement. For this the prophets offered symbols "adequate to the horror and massiveness of an experience which evokes numbness and requires denial."²⁵ This day of deliverance was called the day of the Lord. While the day was darkness as well as light (Amos 5:20), it can also be called lovely. In that day Israel would be a "crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord" (Isa 62:3). For a full understanding of how beauty can come from darkness we would have to turn to the NT teaching of Christ's death and resurrection and its anticipation of the day when all creation by resurrection power again voices its praise. Then not only would all the land and its people be fair, but the whole would be described as perfectly delightful: "Your God will be your glory" (Isa 60:19). All of this is featured in Jesus' teaching of the messianic banquet and elaborated in the heavenly worship of Revelation 7; 19. But even this final goal, by our kind words, our actions, our worship and praise, we are made by God's grace to anticipate.

²⁵W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 49; cf. pp. 77 ff. on prophetic images for hope.