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**THE BIBLE AND AESTHETICS**

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**“THE BIBLE AND AESTHETICS”**  
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**I. Issues**

Theologians along with philosophers, have long grappled with Truth and Goodness. However theology, unlike philosophy, has neglected serious scrutiny of the study of Beauty or Aesthetics. Frank Gaebelein is one of several noting this phenomenon:

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 extrabiblical. 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.<sup>1</sup>

Why is the aesthetic dimension excluded?

Concern for those in poverty leads some to the idea that any interest in Aesthetics 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 Christian eschatology cannot honestly countenance “unnecessary” or “peripheral” considerations of Aesthetics.

Henton Davies<sup>2</sup> reflects another avenue of thinking on this issue: “Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament has any theory of the beautiful.” Peter Forsyth expresses a related sentiment:

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<sup>1</sup>Frank E. Gaebelein, The Christian, The Arts and Truth: Regaining the Vision of Greatness. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1985, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>“Beauty”, The Interpreter’s Dictionary, George A. Buttrick, ed., Vol 1 (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962).

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.<sup>3</sup>

Others might believe that since aesthetical concerns emerged with the ancient Greek philosophical system, it is not a theological concern at all. Moreover, with critical studies dominating most theological schools much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century followed now with “Post Modernism”, seeking for any fundamentals (Truth, Goodness or Beauty) for some theologians becomes impossible.

Church History and Historical Theology are rightly studied in reference to the interweaving of political and intellectual threads that mingle with and affect the life and thought of the Christian Church. Aesthetic considerations are not included. Yet the most obvious manifestation of the Judaeo-Christian religion within Scripture is largely disclosed in aesthetic language or objects.

Whatever the motivation, it appears that theology’s foundational source material, the Holy Scriptures, is probed for numerous issues with the exception of aesthetical values. Gerhard von Rad insightfully remarks that “no aesthetic of the Old Testament has yet been written.”<sup>4</sup> The same observation could also be made for the New Testament, and the biblical corpus as a whole. For

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Taylor Forsyth, Christ on Parnassus (London: Independent Press, 1959), 43.

<sup>4</sup>Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 English translation), 364.

example, Millard J. Erickson's massive 1247-page Christian Theology includes only one paragraph on the last page regarding the aesthetics of Scripture.<sup>5</sup>

However, the canon has no dearth of aesthetic phenomena. For example, up to 40% of the Old Testament involves poetic language. Disciplines outside of theology readily acknowledge the aesthetic value of the biblical narratives and poetry of both psalmist and prophet.<sup>6</sup>

Furthermore, from its very commencement as a nation, Israel's artistic genius was expended in religious architecture and its decorations. Almost 50 chapters in the Pentateuch alone are involved with God directing the construction of a lavish Sanctuary, involving architecture and various artistic techniques.

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<sup>5</sup>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.

However, no mention is made of the extensive display of finely crafted poetry and narratives, nor of literary structures, which Gerhard von Rad is sensitive to:

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." Gerhard von Rad, Old Testament Theology, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1962 English translation), 364.

<sup>6</sup>Aidan 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.

Nearly another 50 chapters within the OT consist of the artistic manifestation of Solomon's Temple. Ezekiel also devotes several chapters to the glories of a "third" temple.

The New Testament contains its own unique exposure of the aesthetic 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. Thus 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 is rightly understood with many attributes including that of: 1) **Father**: Mt 6:9; 1 Ch 29:10f; Is 9:6; Mal 1:6; 2:10;<sup>7</sup> 2) **Judge**: Dan. 12; 2 Tm 4:1, 8; Heb 12:23; Gen 18:25; 1 Sm 2:10; Ps 51:6; Is 11:3-5; 3) **Warrior**: Bible writers sometime describe our spiritual lives in terms of warfare, and reveals a cosmic and redemptive significance to our everyday struggles. Many books of the Bible in both Testaments tell about God's warring activity: Gen 3:15; Ex 15:3; Col. 2:13-15; Rev. 12—"war" in heaven; 19:6-11.

God also has an aesthetic nature. Evidence for this is far more extensive than often recognized. 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)

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<sup>7</sup>Also: "As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust." Ps 103:13.

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)<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, God not only declares Himself a potter but also reveals Himself as involved in the creation of human artworks. He commissions lavish works of art, and commands the Israelites to construct an extravagant Sanctuary. He provides not only the architectural blueprints, but also the instructions for all its furnishings.<sup>9</sup>

At Mount Sinai God gave not only the Decalogue along with civil ordinances including assistance to the poor, but also specific directions to construct a lavish structure involving almost every type of artistic skill. It wasn’t an either/or situation, as Christ’s disciple Judas would later suggest regarding an expensive gift offered to Christ: “the money should have been given to the poor.”

Israel was commanded to construct an elaborate sanctuary with precise specifications for the woods, fabrics, dye colors, costly metals and precious gems. Within these directions, God urges

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<sup>8</sup>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 1:27).” Titus Burckhardt, *Sacred Art in East and West: Its Principles and Methods*, Lord Northbourne, transl. (London: Perennial Books, 1967), 11.

<sup>9</sup>“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 artforms employed, the artists commissioned and the lavish materials utilized.

"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, even minute details of construction. There are more chapters regarding the plans for and subsequent building of this sanctuary and its furnishings than any other subject in the Pentateuch. Absolutely nothing was left to human devising.<sup>10</sup>

Even the garments of the officiating priests were specifically designed for 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.

Besides manifesting glory, the priestly vestments were to be made 'for beauty.' This is specifically mentioned two times. BEAUTY is thereby perceived as an appropriate end in itself. The Creator of colors, form, and textures, the author of all natural beauty, clearly values the aesthetic dimension. They have a place within the will of God.

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).

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<sup>10</sup>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.

Thus it is not surprising that the text again records 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.

The text specifies that “[Solomon] also overlaid the house--the beams and doorposts, its walls and doors--with gold; and he carved cherubim on the walls.” (2 Chr 3:7). Francis Schaeffer correctly comments:

The temple was covered with precious stones for beauty [v. 5]. There was no pragmatic reason for the precious stones. They had no utilitarian purpose. God simply wanted beauty in the temple. God is interested in beauty. ... And beauty has a place in the worship of God.<sup>11</sup>

The passage also mentions two free-standing columns. They had no utilitarian engineering significance for they supported no architectural weight. They were there because God said they should be there as a thing of beauty. Fastened upon the capitals of the columns were chain wreaths with pomegranates. Art work upon art work. If we understand what we are reading here, it is something very beautiful.<sup>12</sup>

Constructing this temple and also the earlier desert sanctuary required a great number of artistic techniques. How was this to be accomplished? We are again informed of God’s direct involvement, regarding the desert sanctuary:

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<sup>11</sup>Francis A. Schaeffer, Art and the Bible (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), 15.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 16. Moreover, God Himself states: “The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the pine, and the box tree together, to beautify the place of My sanctuary; and I will make the place of My feet glorious.” Is 60:13



“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.<sup>13</sup> It contains several principles concerning the divine perspective on aesthetic value.

First, 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. Rather, the Israelites were instructed by God to “make [a] Tabernacle with ten curtains of finely twisted linen and blue, purple and scarlet yarn, with cherubim worked into them by a skilled craftsman” (Ex 26:1). The furnishings were to be constructed of pure gold, delicately carved wood, elegant tapestries, bronze and precious stones (Ex 25).

God's specifications for the desert Tabernacle, and later for Solomon's Temple, take up a good part of the OT, as mentioned above. The unending details include how many hooks to place in the curtains, how many cubits the frames must be, what to cover with beaten gold, and what to make from bronze. All these numerous chapters 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. He could have merely stated that the matter was accomplished. But instead God carefully includes within Scripture the particulars of design along with extensive comment of their detailed accomplishment.

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<sup>13</sup>the following material on Bezalel is adapted from Gene Edward Veith, Jr., “State of the Arts” From Bezalel to Mapplethorpe. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991, pp. 103-116.

The passage about Bezalel also indicates that being an artist can be a vocation from God, a ministry.

We think of people being called to the ministry or to mission service, but here we find that even **artistic** occupations can be God-given callings. Ex 35 plainly states that God ‘called’ Bezalel for the work of constructing and furnishing the Tabernacle. He issued an individual call to a particular person from a certain family and tribe by name. Bezalel was specifically called by God to be an artist:

See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah' (Ex 35:30, RSV).

Moreover, we see here that artistic ability is God's gift: “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.<sup>14</sup>

This passage then continues to detail the specific qualifications Bezalel was endowed with, providing us with the divine perspective on human artistry.

The first gift given to Bezalel is arresting. 'He/God has filled him with the Spirit of God' (Ex 35:31). The ministry of the Holy Spirit is not regularly ascribed to artistic talent. But here we find it as the initial gift given to Bezalel. In fact, Bezalel is the very first person recorded in the OT, in all Scripture, as inspired by the Holy Spirit. And he is not a priest or a prophet, nor a preacher, but an artist.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>The NT echoes the same sentiment: “every good and perfect gift is from above.” James 1:17.

<sup>15</sup>It could be argued that artistic skill is a “spiritual gift.”

In the NT, the Holy Spirit is given to all Christians and bears fruit in many areas of life.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere in Scripture, the Spirit of God came upon certain persons who thereby became a prophet, a judge, or a preacher.<sup>17</sup> 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.

The Exodus 35 passage also describes how God blessed Bezalel with talent [with skill to create], intelligence [for example, knowing the different ways to handle different metals: gold—how to beat it paper-thin, smoothly, without tearing it; silver; also, the many steps of casting bronze; and how to carve the different kinds of wood], and knowledge [for example, how to weave “cherubim” into the curtain tapestry, for cherubim are not the cute baby angels we see on Valentine cards. Bezalel would need to know how to depict in tapestry these mighty heavenly beings that have to assure human beings every time they appear, “Fear not!” “Don’t be afraid!”]

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<sup>16</sup>Gal 5:22-23 “But the fruit of the Spirit is ...”

Eph 5:9 “for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth.”

<sup>17</sup>Jud 6:34 “But the Spirit of the LORD came upon Gideon; then he blew the trumpet, and the Abiezrites gathered behind him.”

1 Sm 10:5-6 [Samuel speaking to Saul after his anointing] “After that you shall come to the hill of God where the Philistine garrison is. And it will happen, when you have come there to the city, that you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them; and they will be prophesying. Then the Spirit of the LORD will come upon you, and you will prophesy with them and be turned into another man.”

Lk 1:15 [Angel to Zacharias] “For he will be great in the sight of the Lord, and shall drink neither wine nor strong drink. He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb.”

Lk 1:41 “And it happened, when Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, that the babe leaped in her womb; and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit.”

Lk 1:67 “Now his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied ...”

Acts 1:16 [Peter speaking] “Men and brethren, this Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke before by the mouth of David ...”

Acts 4:8 “Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them ...”

Acts 28:25 “So when they did not agree among themselves, they departed after Paul had said one word: ‘The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah the prophet to our fathers, ...’”

Lastly, this important verse on artistry in Ex 35 instructs us that God 'inspired him [Bezalel] to teach' (Ex 35:34). Not only was he given the gifts necessary to construct and adorn the Tabernacle, but he was further empowered to instruct others. Here we find that God's gifts are brought to fruition through divine enlistment of human teachers!

Just as we have observed regarding the Israelites' sacred architecture and decoration, Israel's liturgy was also given by God. King David insists that the Holy Spirit inspired his psalms:

Thus says David the son of Jesse: Thus says the man raised up on high, the anointed of the God of Jacob, and the sweet psalmist of Israel: "The Spirit of the LORD spoke by me, and His word was on my tongue." (2 Sm 23:1-2).

The book of Psalms reveals the prominence of singing in Israelite worship. Phrases such as "sing praises unto the Lord" or "I will sing unto the Lord" occur multiple times. Elsewhere in the OT, when Israelite worship is recounted, music is evident and impressive. For example, 1 Chr. 23:1-5:

... and four thousand praised the LORD with musical instruments, 'which I made,' said David, 'for giving praise.'

Later we again are informed: 2 Chr 29:25, when Hezekiah restores Temple worship:

Then he [Hezekiah] stationed the Levites in the house of the LORD with cymbals, with stringed instruments, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, of Gad the king's seer, and of Nathan the prophet; for thus was the commandment of the LORD by his prophets.

Music is important in the will of God!

It might be argued that aesthetic dimensions are found in sacred worship throughout history in all nations in worship of their gods. However, Israel alone insists that their God designed every detail of His worship, including architecture, furnishings, priestly attire, and liturgy.

### Scripture as Art

God's involvement in Israel's architecture and liturgy is not the only evidence of His aesthetic nature. Nor was Israel's artistry restricted to the representational arts. There is widely-held recognition that "the supreme expression of Israel's capacity for beauty is in her gift of **language**."<sup>18</sup>

**Hebrew poetry** is highly extolled in both biblical and secular studies. The Book of Psalms is the classic collection. These psalms are generally considered as hymns and prayers to God. But even more importantly, the 150 psalms are God's words to humans. As David insists, "HIS word was upon my tongue." (2 Sm 23:1-2)

The Psalter itself is divided into 5 books. Some have suggested a correspondence between each one of the five books of the Psalms with each of the first five books of the Pentateuch. It is now frequently acknowledged that the Psalter is not just a random collection of songs and prayers, but rather a carefully ordered structure of key words and themes.

We must not neglect the striking fact that prophets also spoke in poetic language. Even the stern rebukes and challenges. This was harder to recognize in earlier English translations of Scripture. Newer versions now format prophetic speech in poetry as it should be.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>G. Henton Davies, The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. 1, George A. Buttrick, ed. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), 372.

<sup>19</sup>"Literary considerations are indispensable to any adequate study of the prophets. Poetry is the language of most of the literature. The messages were intended not to inform minds but to change hearts. It is therefore necessary to pay attention to the ways the poets spoke, the forms and techniques they used in their efforts to make their word as effective as possible."

"More than any other section of OT literature, the prophetic texts must be appreciated for their literary artistry as well as for the thoughts they contain." Alice L. Laffey, An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 149, 151.

One can also observe close ties of prophecy with music: In 1 Sm 10:5, the prophet Samuel informs newly-anointed Saul: “[when] you come to the hill of God where the Philistine garrison is, ... you will meet a group of prophets coming down from the high place with a stringed instrument, a tambourine, a flute, and a harp before them; and they will be prophesying.”

Later, Jehoshaphat inquires of Elisha for counsel from God in 2 Ki 3:14-15. And Elisha responds: “... bring me a musician.’ And it happened, when the musician played, that the hand of the LORD came upon him, and he said, ‘Thus says the LORD’”--- and then Elisha proceeds to declare God's future intentions.

The book PATRIARCHS AND PROPHETS informs us that the chief subjects of study in the Schools of the Prophets established by Samuel, “... were the law of God, with the instructions given to Moses, sacred history [this is understandable! but also—], sacred music, and poetry.” (PP 593). This assembly of experienced pedagogues should find this an intriguing curriculum ...

Beyond the considerable manifestation of biblical poetry, it is now widely acknowledged that even the biblical narratives or stories have been meticulously crafted.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the many narratives also seem to have been carefully woven together in a calculated sequence. Various scholars with literary sensitivity have begun to appreciate why, for example, the narrative of Judah

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<sup>20</sup>Sternberg is one of many who suggests that it is the literary nature of the biblical narratives for example, that substantiates its validity:

In line with his self-effacing policy, the biblical narrator no more lay 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. Meir Sternberg. The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 77.

and Tamar is suddenly sandwiched within the narratives of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis.<sup>21</sup> Or why, in the NT, the narrative of the woman at Samaria's well (Jn 4) follows immediately after that of Nicodemus seeking out the Messiah late one night (Jn 3). It is becoming increasingly recognized that the narrative linkages themselves reveal theological statement.<sup>22</sup>

In the NT, the Messiah Himself often employs the literary form of parables.<sup>23</sup> For example, when asked to define 'who is my neighbor', Jesus, rather than providing an abstract definition, recounts the parable of the Good Samaritan! Ellen White also mentions that the "words of Jesus were full of freshness, and truth and beauty." (DA 139)

In the Pauline materials one finds profound theological discourse laced with doxology. A good example of this is in the book of Romans. John Stott is perceptive:

"For eleven chapters Paul gives his comprehensive account of the gospel, and his horizons are vast. He considers time and eternity, history, Christ's Second coming, justification, sanctification and glorification. Now he stops, out of breath. Analysis and argument must give way to adoration. Like a traveller who has reached the summit of a high mountain, the apostle views the vast panorama of salvation history and bursts into praise.... Before Paul goes on to outline the practical implications of the gospel, he falls down before God in worship, chanting his doxology in poetic strains:

'O, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding

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<sup>21</sup>See Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (NY: Basic Books, Inc., 1981). Other examples: in the OT, the explicit instructions of heavenly aesthetics followed immediately by the misuse of music and art with Aaron and the Golden Calf.

<sup>22</sup>Faith and unbelief are major themes in John's Gospel. Implied explicitly and implicitly in John 3 and 4--the vibrant faith of a "pagan" female divorcee is contrasted with that of the hesitant faith of a prominent Jewish Pharisee, a religious leader.

<sup>23</sup> "The parable is Jesus' most characteristic method of teaching. It is a literary form akin to the fable but taken from the familiar areas of common life. To understand properly what Jesus has to say through this literary genre, the parable must be seen as a genuine art form and, as such, creative imagination is necessary in getting to the parable's intent." Calvin M. Johansson, Music & Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 79.

out! For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? ... For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen”<sup>24</sup>

Book of Revelation: Stark warnings and curses underscore the profound importance of the Apocalypse. The entire book displays an imposing mosaic of drama, architecture, and vivid panoramas in which God displays His perspective on Salvation History. There is hardly an original word. Instead one finds an extremely complex tapestry of words, phrases and sentences borrowed from the OT but woven together into an entirely new fabric. This final book in the NT is in a vastly different style than that which Paul and the Gospel writers use. One instead finds overwhelming aesthetic display. These 22 chapters are not an erratic jumble, but rather reveal a carefully structured document hinging on seven scenes of the heavenly sanctuary--each one opening with deeper access into the heavenly court.

God did not furnish John with a standard abstract theological or historical document. The phrases “And I saw” ... “and I heard” ... recur over and over again introducing dazzling scenes, and leaving one breathless! The stunning pictorial vistas portray the working out of the Great Controversy, expanding the imposing display given earlier to Daniel and Ezekiel.

The literary manifestation of Scripture also includes the artful construction of sentences, verses, chapters, and entire books with extensive usage of inclusios, chiasms, panel and parallel

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<sup>24</sup>From John Stott, Romans: God's Good News For the World. (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994), 309.

James Bailey and Lyle Vander Broek comment similarly:

One must not fail to notice, for example, that the rhetorical crescendo leading up to the doxology in Rom. 11:36 is the conclusion to an important section (Rom 9-11), and that ch. 12 begins a different discussion.

James L. Bailey and Lyle D. Vander Broek, Literary Forms in the New Testament: A Handbook (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 75.



writing. Sternberg is one of many who suggests that it is the literary nature of the biblical narratives for example, that substantiates its veracity:

In line with his self-effacing policy, the biblical narrator no more lay 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.<sup>25</sup>

The case study below will illustrate this point.

Scripture also instructs that God continues to restore in fallen human beings, through the process of redemption, the marred *imago Dei*. He has forbidden any material representation of His being. Thus it is startling that His salvific purpose is for fallen human beings to reflect something of the divine. Paul and Peter both elaborate on this point: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which

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<sup>25</sup>Meir Sternberg. The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 77.

G.B. Caird concurs: “There is, then, an accumulation of evidence that the biblical writers were not only skillful handlers of words (which is obvious) but were also well aware of the nature of their tools. Yet this conclusion would have been challenged by many Old and New Testament scholars who, whatever their differences of approach, were agreed about one thing: that biblical man was prescientific and therefore naive, that he inhabited a mythical world, and that his intellectual development was at the stage which some of them have designated ‘the mythopoeic mind’. This was the presupposition which prompted, for example, Bultmann’s influential essay on demythologising. In the opening paragraphs he summarised the ‘cosmology of the New Testament’, the pictorial framework within which men tried to make sense of their existence and history. The world is envisaged as a three-story house, in which mankind lives on the ground floor, God and his angels on the floor above, and some much less desirable tenants in the basement. So far from being his castle, man’s home is constantly being invaded by the occupants of the other two stories. History ‘is set in motion and controlled by these supernatural powers. This aeon is held in bondage by Satan, sin, and death ... and hastens towards its end. That end will come very soon, and will take the form of cosmic catastrophe ... All this is the language of mythology ... To this extent the kerygma is incredible to modern man, for he is convinced that the mythical view of the world is obsolete.’ [fn: Kerygma and Myth, 3ff.] Bultmann’s thesis contained two enormous and unargued assumptions: that the mythical creature he called ‘modern man’ would be more comfortable among the abstractions of existentialist philosophy than with the picture language of the Bible; and that biblical man took that picture language as flat statement of fact....

Unitary perception is, to be sure, a well-attested phenomenon, but it is characteristic not of the primitive but of the creative mind in all ages...” G.B. Caird, The Language and Imagery of the Bible (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980), 193, 197.

is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.” (Rom 12:1-2).<sup>26</sup>

This salvation makes possible the transformation the human character. Both Testaments are saturated with the exhibition of God’s renowned skills in remolding sinful human beings into “the beauty of holiness.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Christ’s incarnation into human flesh itself is a profound aesthetic statement.<sup>28</sup>

This Incarnation is rarely extolled for its beauty. However, as a few infrequent theologians have noted, not only Christ and His Incarnation, but also the Godhead itself is not only true and good, but also “beautiful.” Karl Barth writes of the beauty of God. He identifies it as God’s glory.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>Also, “Grace and peace be multiplied unto you through the knowledge of God, and of Jesus our Lord, according as his divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him that hath called us to glory and virtue: whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these you might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.” 2 Pet 1:2-4.

<sup>27</sup>As Paul writes: “We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus ... “ Eph. 2:10.

<sup>28</sup>Simone Weil is also sensitive to the Incarnation of Christ: “The longing to love the beauty of the world in a human being is essentially the longing for the Incarnation. It is mistaken if it thinks it is anything else. The Incarnation alone can satisfy it ... Beauty is eternity here below.” Simone Weil, *Waiting on God* (London: Fontana, 1959), 127.

<sup>29</sup>In identifying God’s glory with His beauty, Barth writes: “What is the more precise designation of the glory of God, of the way in which God’s light declares itself? ... that of beauty. If we can and must say that God is beautiful, to say this is to say how He enlightens and convinces and persuades us. It is to describe not merely the naked fact of His revelation or its power, but the shape and form in which it is a fact and is power. It is to say that God has his superior force, this power of attraction, which speaks for itself, which wins and conquers, in the fact that He is beautiful, divinely beautiful, beautiful in His own way, in a way that is His alone, beautiful as the unattainable primal beauty, yet really beautiful.... God loves us as the One who is worthy of love as God. This is what we mean when we say that God is beautiful.” Yet, reflecting the recurring attitude of denying aesthetic value equal weight with theological argument, he seems to refrain from speaking of beauty as an attribute of God:

The Bible neither requires nor permits us, because God is beautiful, to expound the beauty of God as the ultimate cause producing and moving all things, in the way in which we can and must

Early American theologian, Jonathan Edwards also writes of the beauty of God, though he is usually remembered only for his sermon on hellfire. In fact, Roland Delattre underscores the aesthetic stance within Edwards' theology:

Certainly one of the distinguishing marks—if it is not indeed *the* distinctive feature—of Edwards' theology, when looked at in relation to the whole history of Christian thought, is his radical elevation of beauty to preeminence among the divine perfections.<sup>30</sup>

Delattre argues that Jonathan Edwards' focus on the divine beauty should affect the believer's apprehension of God:

It is the genius of Edwards' settling upon beauty as the most distinguishing perfection or attribute of God that he has thereby a concept in terms of which to insist at once upon the objectivity of God and upon his view that God can be fully known only to the extent that he is genuinely enjoyed. When placed at the center of his 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. Beauty provides Edwards with a perfectly flexible category, at the very heart of the Divine Being itself, which also constitutes a definition or specification of the relation between the creature and the Creator.<sup>31</sup>

Edwards appears to be a rare theological voice attributing such ontological

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do this in regard to God's grace or holiness or eternity, or His omnipotent knowledge and will. Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, eds, T.H.L. Parker, et. al., transl. (Edinburgh, 1957), II, pt. 1, 650-651, 652.

<sup>30</sup>Roland Andre Delattre, Beauty and Sensibility in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards: An Essay in Aesthetics and Theological Ethics (New Haven: 1968), 117. Delattre continues: For Edwards, beauty is "first among the perfections of God; it constitutes in itself the perfection of all the other divine attributes; it provides a major clue to his doctrine of the Trinity; and it defines his understanding of the nature of the divine transcendence and immanence and of the relation between transcendence and immanence in God with respect to His creation, governance, and redemption of the world." *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup>Delattre, 132-133.

weight to the aspect of beauty within the Godhead.<sup>32</sup> The biblical perspective indicates Edwards is correct. As the psalmist David declares:

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 ... (Psalm 27:4, emphasis added)

### **Beauty of the Created World**

Though God had appointed the great beauty of both the desert sanctuary and the Jerusalem temple, He also insists that the exquisite lily from His own hand is still more beautiful than the greatest artworks He commissioned during Solomon's time (Lk 12:27). The beauty of the natural world is thereby recognized by Christ. Thus it is not surprising that both the Old and New Testaments include rejoicing for the beauty of nature. The Psalter, along with many other biblical books, brim with praise for the Creator and His created world. Accordingly, through the perspective espoused in Scripture, we are instructed that the study of the natural world can aid in lifting our minds to our Creator, the Master Artist.<sup>33</sup> God Himself announces to Job:

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<sup>32</sup>One European theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, acknowledges the aspect of beauty within theology: "On man's side, the corresponding terms [to God's beauty] are amazement, adoration and praise; that is freedom which expresses itself in gratitude, enjoyment and pleasure in the presence of beauty." Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, Reinhard Ulrich, transl. (New York: 1972), 38. He also suggests that the Western Protestant Church has "subjected Christian existence to judicial and moral categories," so that only little of the doxology and "transfiguration of Christ," which are of such importance to the Eastern Church, remain. *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>33</sup>For example, J. Clinton McCann is right in drawing our attention to the Psalter: "... important that we be instructed by the Psalms. They reveal to us a 'mode of existence' that is desperately lacking among us. The Psalms tell us both who God is and what God does, and thus who we are and what we are to do. To listen and to learn is to walk the way that leads to life. The result is not disappointment, but rather what Ps 1 means by 'happy.'" J. Clinton McCann, Jr. *A Theological Introduction to the book of Psalms: the Psalms at Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 55. And the entire Psalter instructs such theological principles through poetry.

Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?  
 Tell me, if you understand.  
 Who marked off its dimensions?  
 Surely you know!  
 Who stretched out a measuring line across it?  
 On what were its footings set,  
 or who laid its cornerstone—  
 while the morning stars sang together  
 and all the angels shouted for joy! (Jb 38:4-7)<sup>34</sup>

In the NT, Paul also draws attention to the power of nature (even though fallen) to instruct about God:

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<sup>34</sup>Many have gazed long at this amazing passage, and the profound nature of the Creator's discussion. Vinoth Ramachandra is one who sensitively comments:

The teasing irony of God's speech exposes 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 true meaning can never be fathomed within an anthropocentric world-view.

Vinoth Ramachandra, *Gods That Fail: Modern Idolatry and Christian Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996) 12. Robert Alter also concurs: "... what on earth descriptions of a hippopotamus and a crocodile are doing at the end of the Book of Job.... God's poetry enables Job to glimpse beyond his human plight an immense world of power and beauty and awesome warring forces. This world is permeated with God's ordering concern, but as the vividness of the verse makes clear, it presents to the human eye a welter of contradictions, dizzying variety, energies and entities that man cannot take in. Job surely does not have the sort of answer he expected, but he has a strong answer of another kind. Now at the end he will no longer presume to want to judge the Creator, having been brought through God's tremendous poetry to realize that creation can perhaps be sensed but not encompassed by the mind--like that final image of the crocodile already whipping away from our field of vision, leaving behind only a shining wake for us to see. If Job in his first response to the Lord (40:2, 4-5) merely confessed that he could not hope to contend with God and would henceforth hold his peace, in his second response (42:2-6), after the conclusion of the second divine speech, he humbly admits that he has been presumptuous, has in fact 'obscured counsel' about things he did not understand. Referring more specifically to the impact of God's visionary poem, he announces that he has been vouchsafed a gift of sight--the glimpse of an ungraspable creation surging with the power of its Creator: 'By what the ear hears I had heard You,/but now my eyes have seen You.'" Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 110.

For 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 (Rm 1:20).

However, nature, though glorious, is never worshiped by any biblical writers. The Creator and created human beings are seen enjoying its beauty. This is a distinctive variation from some thinking (past and present) where nature is almost (and sometimes actually is) deified,<sup>35</sup> positing a “spirituality” without God. Even so, this modern human deification of nature does serve to underscore the profound beauty still found in a fallen world constraining even secular minds (along with the biblical writers) to extol.

Indeed, 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

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<sup>35</sup>For example, Charles Metzger describes the American poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson’s ardent appreciation of nature: “Emerson conceived of Beauty as one of the ‘eternal trinity’ of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty, which, when joined together, form *the One*; and, further, Emerson considered each of these three in its perfection to include the other two. This is to say, of course, that Beauty, or Goodness, or Truth—any one of them—in its perfection approximates Deity. In view of this connection, and in view of the fact that to Emerson’s mind the terms Deity and Nature existed very nearly as synonyms, it is not surprising to discover that Emerson asserted Beauty to be not only a major aspect of Deity, but a major aspect of God’s handiwork (nature) as well.... Indeed, Emerson took Nature as both the author and the model of Beauty. He took Nature to be the author of Beauty, using the term ‘Nature,’ in its deific sense—meaning God ...” In so doing, he developed a subjective/fluctuating aesthetic: “In deriving a major part of his total conception of Beauty from his observation of phenomenal nature, Emerson came inevitably to see Beauty in terms of the same flux which characterizes the numberless phenomena which constitute nature. Emerson came, therefore, to see nature, and hence Beauty, not as fixed or static, but as dynamic of flowing.”—what Ames called “Emerson’s aesthetic faith.” Charles R. Metzger, Emerson’s Religious Conception of Beauty” in The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 11 (September 1952), 67, 68, 72.

and created world.<sup>36</sup> God is not revealed in Scripture as a systematic theologian.<sup>37</sup> The nature of His revelation in either testament is regularly expressed through artistic manifestation as opposed to analytical treatises and logical discourse.<sup>38</sup>

### Implications

Unfortunately, however, the Church has sometimes regarded aesthetics as antagonistic to religion. This attitude was formed prior to the Christian era, gaining entrance into Western and Christian thought through the influence of Plato. And Plato's claims have often been echoed by

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<sup>36</sup>Many have written on this phenomena, both Protestant and Catholic. One example: "For all this Scripture has its own language, which is largely that not of metaphysics but of poetry.... in the images of the Bible he [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 ..." Aidan Nichols, O.P., The Splendour of Doctrine: The Catechism of the Catholic Church on Christian Believing (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 105.

<sup>37</sup>J.I. Packer is one who has stressed the intimate connections between theology and aesthetic value: I question the adequacy of conceptualizing the subject-matter of systematic theology as simply revealed truths about God, and I challenge the assumption that has usually accompanied this form of statement, that the material, like other scientific data, is best studied in cool and clinical detachment. Detachment from what, you ask? Why, from the relational activity of trusting, loving, worshiping, obeying, serving and glorifying God: the activity that results from realizing that one is actually in God's presence, actually being addressed by him every time one opens the Bible or reflects on any divine truth whatsoever. This ... proceeds as if doctrinal study would only be muddled by introducing devotional concerns; it drives a wedge between ... knowing true notions about God and knowing the true God himself." James I. Packer, "An Introduction to Systematic Spirituality: in Crux 26.1 (March 1990), 6.

Alister McGrath concurs: "Any view of revelation which regards God's self-disclosure as the mere transmission of facts concerning God is seriously deficient, and risks making God an analogue of a corporate executive who disperses memoranda to underlings. Revelation is God's self-disclosure and self-involvement in history, and supremely God's decision to become incarnate in Jesus Christ, so that whoever has seen Jesus Christ has seen the Father. Revelation concerns the oracles of God, the acts of God, and the person and presence of God." Alister McGrath, A Passion for Truth: The Intellectual Conference of Evangelicalism (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1996), 107.

<sup>38</sup>von Balthasar is insightful that theology should abandon 'the extra-theological categories of a worldly philosophical aesthetics (above all poetry)' and envelop its own 'theory of beauty from the data of revelation itself.' Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, 7 vols., Edinburgh, 1982, vol. I, Seeing the Form, (Edinburgh: 1982), 9. However, within his seven formidable volumes he is not successful in extricating himself from philosophical discussion.

Christian writers. One result being that aesthetics has often been viewed as a dangerous influence to human salvation.<sup>39</sup> Another perspective suggests that artistic expression is not critically important, being lighter, or more “casual” in “weight” than intellectual discourse. T.R. Wright comments cogently:

It sometimes seems 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 insight.<sup>40</sup>

Wright’s concluding point above can hardly be denied. This raises questions: of what significance is the biblical aesthetic to theology? Why is the aesthetic expression so extensive? Does it have a purpose beyond merely bringing literary pleasure or sating emotional needs? We have argued that

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<sup>39</sup>The Reformers have often been misunderstood in some of their statements regarding Protestant liturgy. Their underlying concern was not to vilify aesthetic display, but to realize that Catholic extravagances had blinded believers to the importance of the Word:

The Protestant Reformation looked back to early Christianity. It was the aim of the leaders to restore Christianity to its former state. To accomplish this they proposed to cut away all the luxuriant growth which the Roman Catholic church had nurtured through the centuries.... The Reformation made Christianity a religion of the Bible. It emphasized the worship of the word. The Bible and the exposition of the Scripture in the sermon must have the dominant place in Protestant worship. Before the Reformation the Bible was only one of several sources of authority; the writings of the Church Fathers, the sacramental system of the Church, the decrees of councils and Popes, and the impressive tradition weighed down with a rich artistic heritage of liturgic art and music. All these existed as co-authorities with the Bible. Leslie P. Spelman, “Luther and the Arts,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 10 (December 1951), 166.

<sup>40</sup>T.R. Wright, *Theology and Literature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1988), 2. Others have noted the negative results of this type of thinking: “... a parabolic illustration of much of the history of Western thought. We have permitted the verbal, temporal, analytical, and logical sphere of cognitive processing to restrict our vision of reality. Especially since the rise of modern philosophy and modern science, we have been largely inattentive to the realities of the unseen, the intuitive, the affective, and the feeling depths of reality. Consequently the intuitive mode of consciousness has been denigrated and subordinated to the rational mode of consciousness.” Laurence W. Wood, “Recent Brain Research and the Mind-Body Dilemma,” *Ashbury Theological Journal, the Best in Theology* (Chicago: Carol Stream, n.p.d.), vol. 2, 215.



the truths of Scripture are expressed more through the aesthetic medium than systematic treatises.

But is there reason for this?

### **Intensification**

Many authors in the aesthetic discipline suggest that for a person sensitive to artistic dimensions, 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.<sup>41</sup>

This aesthetic intensification could arguably be an important facet of the divine intent.

But beyond this, literary devices may even be the superior medium to express theological truth, as

Wright, among others, hints:

one of the few principles on which all critics agree, is the inseparability of form and content, a belief staunchly defended against the heresy of paraphrase. 'A literary work is its meaning': its meaning cannot be 'abstracted' from it, cannot be paraphrased without loss. Any interpretation, therefore, although it can analyse the various effects achieved by certain formal devices, cannot say precisely what the work means. The whole point of reading literature, its importance as a human discipline, beyond that of giving pleasure (which is by no means unimportant), is that it says something about life which cannot be said in any other way. Literary devices, in other words, are not just ornamental, imparting additional eloquence to an otherwise bald and unconvincing statement or narrative. They have the capacity to generate new meaning by stretching language beyond its ordinary uses.<sup>42</sup>

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

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<sup>41</sup>Harold Byron Hannum, The Christian Search For Beauty (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1975), 39.

<sup>42</sup>T.R. Wright, Theology and Literature (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Ltd., 1988), 4.

compromise—ways of accommodating higher meanings to the lower level of human understanding. They are rather the accommodations of words to higher meanings.”<sup>43</sup>

Martland agrees that there is more involved in the aesthetic expression of theology than intensification:

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; they do not so much provide security or ways of adjusting to phenomena which men cannot otherwise handle as interpret the world in such a way that phenomena are delineated which men seem not to be able to handle. As I have said before: 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.... My thesis suggests a priority, not a parallel [with science]: Art and religion come first; the sciences follow. The first declares or determines what is, perhaps secondarily declaring or determining what needs to be done; the second responds, and does.<sup>44</sup>

This close connection between Beauty and Truth<sup>45</sup> however has been struggling since Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), perhaps the most influential philosopher of the Enlightenment. In his famous Critiques he attempted to establish that human reason and sensory experience are unavoidably severed. His discussion has been dominant ever since. So much so that the philosophical realms of truth, goodness and beauty have remained radically ruptured. The different properties of the human being are supposedly splintered into non-communicating faculties of reason, will and emotion.

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<sup>43</sup>Paul Brand and Philip Yancey, In His Image (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, year), 282.

<sup>44</sup>T.R. Martland, Religion As Art: An Interpretation (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1981), 12. Van 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.

<sup>45</sup>Zemach terms this “a Keatsian (“Truth is Beauty, Beauty Truth”) thesis.” E.M. Zemach, Studies in Analytical Aesthetics (Tel Aviv: Daga Books, 1970), iv.

Because of Kant it has since been assumed that scientific reasoning delivered objective truth.

The emotions are the channels 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 since. Repercussions still reverberate. John Wilson notes this Kantian split:

The eighteenth century ‘Enlightenment’ 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.

As knowledge became more rational and human reason supreme the arts retreated from the findings and theories of the philosophers and scientists. The arts became Romantic in their approach and search for truth. Romanticism was a widespread movement which, in general, emphasized emotion against reason, intuition against logic and saw imagination as being of more importance than intellect. It was a reaction, a protest against the scientific approach of the Enlightenment.<sup>46</sup>

For these and various other reasons noted earlier,<sup>47</sup> the Christian Church rarely acknowledges the extensive aesthetic manifestation of God in Scripture when constructing theological argument. Instead, it has persistently ordered its theological thinking philosophically, relegating aesthetic value,

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<sup>46</sup>John Wilson, One of the Richest Gifts: An Introductory Study of the Arts from a Christian World-View (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, Ltd., 1981), 3.

<sup>47</sup>During the Reformation, Calvin and others make strong statements against the arts. However, these must be seen against the backdrop of the Roman Catholic aesthetic extravagances masking spiritual famine that the reformers, since Huss, had deplored. See footnote 20 above.

even if only implicitly, to the emotional needs of the believer. However, this is in noticeable contrast to God's means of revelation in the canon.

Contra Kant, God affirms the wholistic nature of each human being as He communicates through the aesthetic manifestation of Scripture. Surely, the mind is an important aspect of human nature. However, God rarely limits His communication to the human being through abstract reasoning or systematic discourse in Scripture. Rather, He employs aesthetic avenues, thus affirming the wholistic nature of the human being, assuming the whole person (even though fallen) as capable of knowing Him and receiving theological truth.<sup>48</sup> Larry Crabb notes this:

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.<sup>49</sup>

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

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<sup>48</sup>It is not necessary within this study to enter the debate dichotomy/trichotomy debate. This discussion is only commenting on the facets of human nature.

<sup>49</sup>Larry Crabb, Jr., *Finding God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 181 (emphasis Crabb's). Robin Skelton is another who comments insightfully on this point: "Berdyaeв 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 Berdyaeв, *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 'hole 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: Berdyaeв, *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.

proximity to the mind of God. Rather, in both the Old and New Testaments, explicitly and implicitly, divine truth is regularly conveyed to the human being primarily through aesthetic value.<sup>50</sup>

### **Dangers**

God pointedly established an elaborate system of corporate worship. However, the internal condition of the participant is explicitly targeted. God rails against outward aesthetically perfect worship when such glorious expression camouflages inner motivation. This is noticeably different from Greek philosophy, and some modern thinking, where aesthetic beauty is viewed as salvific in itself.

Over and over again God thunders through His prophets against the glorious worship which He Himself designed and implemented but which was now being used to disguise a degenerate life:

I hate, I despise your feast days, and I do not savor your sacred assemblies.  
 Though you offer Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept  
 them, nor will I regard your fattened peace offerings.  
 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 a river, and righteousness like a mighty stream.  
 (Am 5:23-24)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup>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.

<sup>51</sup>Amos continues:

Woe to you who put far off the day of doom,  
 Who cause the seat of violence to come near;  
 Who lie on beds of ivory,  
 Stretch out on your couches,  
 Eat lambs from the flock  
 And calves from the midst of the stall;  
 Who chant to the sound of stringed instruments,  
 And invent for yourselves with the best ointments,  
 But are not grieved for the affliction of Joseph.  
 Therefore they shall now go captive as the first of the captives,  
 And those who recline at banquets shall be removed. (Am 6:3-7)

It was not enough that the sumptuous sanctuary and ark were in the midst of Israel. It was not enough that the priests in glorious vestments offered sacrifices, and that the people were called the children of God. The Lord is not fooled by those who observe aesthetically-crafted outward worship but cherish iniquity in the heart. It is written: “he that turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be abomination.” (Pr 28:9)

Thus we find many of the OT prophetic messages condemning the worship of God, despite its great beauty.<sup>52</sup> Though designed and commanded by God, He at times finds it offensive, as when He speaks through Jeremiah:

For 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 instructs the prophet Ezekiel 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  
And their detestable things;  
Therefore I have made it  
Like refuse to them. (Ezl 7:20)<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>For example, even before the monarchy, the Israelites as a nation were exhibiting one of their many cycles of unfaithfulness, and as a result suffered subjection to the Philistines, and the holy ark was captured. During this time the prophet Samuel visited the cities and villages throughout the land, seeking to turn the hearts of the people to the God of their fathers; and his efforts were not without good results. After suffering the oppression of their enemies for twenty years, the Israelites “mourned after the Lord.” Samuel counseled them, “If you do return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the strange gods and Astaroth from among you, and prepare your hearts to the Lord, and serve Him only.” Here it can be seen that heart religion was taught in the days of Samuel as it was by Christ when He was on the earth. The glorious forms of religion are ever valueless without true conversion of the heart.

<sup>53</sup>Ezl 16 is another extended passage on Israel’s heart-breaking misuse of the beauty God had given them: “ ... Your fame went out among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through My

Again, God speaks through Ezekiel:

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 pleasant voice and can play well on an instrument; for they hear your words, but they do not do them. (Ez1 30:30-33, emphasis added).

Though aesthetic values are extensive and prominent in Scripture they are never salvific.

Many divine messengers rail against an elegant outward worship experience that lacks transparent correspondence to the inner experience of the believer. God rejects aesthetic forms of worship if they cover injustice and other moral evils.

Another inherent danger seems to be that the power of aesthetic appeal can tend to promote an “superficial” religion supplanting the true faith it is supposed to convey. Calvin 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

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splendor which I had bestowed on you,” says the Lord GOD. “But you trusted in your own beauty, played the harlot because of your fame, and poured out your harlotry on everyone passing by who would have it....” (vv. 14-15).

satisfied with the 'richness of life' offered by aesthetic stimulation, which by its nature can make few self-consuming demands.<sup>54</sup>

This is an important point, for the arts and religion have undeniably affected each other.

As Harry Lee also observes:

We tend to classify together our concepts of art and religion as twin institutions, 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....

In viewing the outside world as the symbolic expressions of inner reality, art and religion are at once differentiated as a class apart from the practical, utilitarian institutions of our daily lives. 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 when we turn to them for solace and with a spirit of humility and devotion. By employing within formal frames a mode of thinking which ... makes the freest use of symbol, both provide in sensible form a focus for our contemplation of something other than ourselves. Each yields feelings of release and of elevation, similar in kind. Art, like religion, expresses the spiritual capacities of our human nature; we judge them as similar in their intent since they constitute our most salutary refuges from transient and contingent, from the practical and the pedestrian.<sup>55</sup>

There are also indicators in both testaments that aesthetic expression can be evaluated, and judged. For example, following the Exodus from Egypt, Moses was coming down from lengthy communion with God on Mt. Sinai. He and Joshua heard sounds from Israel's encampment below the mountain. To Joshua, the soldier, the first thought was of an attack from their enemies, and he said, 'There is a noise of war in the camp' (Ex. 32:17). But Moses evaluated more truly the nature of the commotion. The sound was not that of combat, but of revelry:

It is not the voice of those who shout in victory,

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<sup>54</sup>Calvin M. Johansson, Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 139.

<sup>55</sup>Harry B. Lee, "The Cultural Lag in Aesthetics," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 6 (December 1947), 120-121.



Nor is it the voice of those who cry out in defeat,  
But the voice of those who sing that I hear. (Ex 32:18)

As they drew near, they beheld the people shouting and dancing around the golden calf, probably imitating the idolatrous feasts of Egypt to 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 of what was taking place (Ex 32:7-9). Having been trained for forty years in Egypt as the son of the king's daughter,<sup>56</sup> he was well able to assess the situation immediately. Accordingly, we are instructed that music can be expressive of different emotions, and can be evaluated.

Later, Balak, king of Moab, sought the services of Balaam to curse the children of Israel. He was concerned lest they fall to the same fate as the Amorites. Balaam was determined to curse the Israelites. However, he was so controlled by divine power that he was constrained to utter, instead of the imprecations he intended, sublime and impassioned poetry of blessing (Nm 22-24). Again, God is seen directly involved in aesthetic utterance involving specific emotions.

The Apostle Paul also instructs us that aesthetic expression can be evaluated and judged. Writing to the Philippian church, no doubt composed of both Hebrew and Gentile cultures, he counsels in what is sometimes referred to as an "aesthetic mandate":

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<sup>56</sup>Since "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians ...." (Acts 7:22). one can safely assume that this included Egypt's worship, the visible aesthetics of which are still widely visible, carved in relief in the tombs of the Pharaohs. Through archaeologists we now know that the worship of Apis was accompanied with the grossest licentiousness, and the Scripture record indicates that the calf worship by the Israelites was attended with all the license usual in heathen worship. The text states: "Thy rose up early on the morrow, and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play." (Ex 32:6) The Hebrew word rendered "to play" signifies playing with leaping, singing, and dancing. This dancing, especially among the Egyptians, was sensual and indecent. The word rendered "corrupted" in the next verse, where it is said, "Thy people, which you brought out of the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves," is the same that is used in Gen 6:11, 12, where one reads that the earth was corrupt, "for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth." This helps to explain the terrible anger of the Lord, and why He desired to consume the people at once.

Finally, brethren, 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, emphasis added)

Paul is instructing believers that it is important to evaluate and discriminate between worthy and less worthy aspects of any culture.<sup>57</sup> A Christian is not left floundering in a miasma of personal choices and standards with no absolutes to guide, as Calvin Johansson (along with the Apostle Paul), suggests:

The gospel is no cosmetic facelift 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 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 costs something in terms of discipleship. Christ's death and resurrection put an awesome responsibility on those who accept Him as Saviour--a responsibility to give Him everything we have and are. Such a calling is often difficult, even painful. ... There is a cost to such discipleship and the gospel does not water down the requirements. Few are willing to pay the price. There are no short-cut methods, no easy ways, no getting around the fact that discipleship means discipline.... The gospel requires the highest standard of living.<sup>58</sup>

A 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 in a person as

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<sup>57</sup>It is assumed in this study that scriptural teaching is transcultural. McCann’s brief comment underscores this issue: “Psalm 23 is probably the most familiar passage in the entire Old Testament and perhaps in all of Scripture.... It is remarkable in a culture in which most people rarely see sheep and have never seen a shepherd that Psalm 23 functions so pervasively and powerfully. In a real sense Psalm 23 speaks for itself ...” J. Clinton McCann, Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abindgon, 1993), 127.

This is also assumed with the award of the Nobel Prize in literature, which suggests its transcultural value.

<sup>58</sup>Calvin M. Johansson, *Music and Ministry: A Biblical Counterpoint* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1988), 43, 44.

“disinterestedness.” This posture has been enormously influential in aesthetics ever since. However, Eddy Zemach vigorously tackled this long-standing maxim, and in doing so, moved much closer to the biblical perspective. For within the canon, as we have seen, we find God intimately involved in aesthetic values. Zemach argues:

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 slight 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, 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.<sup>59</sup>

Zemach goes on to suggest why “disinterested” aesthetics has remained so dominant:

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<sup>59</sup>Eddy M. Zemach, *Real Beauty* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 33-34.

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.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, Zemach also argues, as does Scripture, for the wholistic nature of the human being.

In fact, Zemach, through lengthy discussion and argument, makes the arresting suggestion that it is aesthetic qualities that verify scientific theory, and not empirical data, as commonly assumed. Instead, aesthetic function is foundational for establishing truth, and in fact, is the only way it can be done. He writes:

What I wish to do is prove that *if* you subscribe 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.<sup>61</sup>

He augments 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

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<sup>60</sup>Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., p. 56, 199. Indeed, this principle appears in Joseph's pronouncement of the certainty of his interpretation of Pharaoh's two dreams in Genesis 42: "God has shown Pharaoh what He is about to do. ... And the dream was *repeated* to Pharaoh *twice* [indicating the parallel control] because the thing is *established by God*, and God will shortly bring it to pass." (verses 28, 32, emphasis added).

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.<sup>62</sup>

Other voices concur. For example, John Wilson:

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.'<sup>63</sup>

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."<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>62</sup>Eddy M. Zemach, "Truth and Beauty" in *The Philosophical Forum* 18.1 (Fall 1986), 25. Even the coldly logical structure of mathematics has this aesthetic element. Bertrand Russell, who did so much work in mathematics, logic and philosophy, wrote: 'Mathematics possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture, without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, sublimely pure and capable of a stern perfection such as only the greatest art can show.' [fn: Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (Unwin Books, 1970), 49]." John Wilson, *One of the Richest Gifts: An Introductory Study of the Arts From a Christian World-View* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, Ltd., 1981), 21.

<sup>63</sup>John Wilson, *One of the Richest Gifts: An Introductory Study of the Arts From a Christian World-View* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, Ltd., 1981), 21. He continues: "Even the coldly logical structure of mathematics has this aesthetic element. Bertrand Russell, who did so much work in mathematics, logic and philosophy, wrote: 'Mathematics possesses not only truth, but supreme beauty—a beauty cold and austere, like that of sculpture, without appeal to any part of our weaker nature, sublimely pure and capable of a stern perfection such as only the greatest art can show.' [fn: Bertrand Russell, *Mysticism and Logic* (Unwin Books, 1970), 49]."

<sup>64</sup>Zemach, "Truth in Beauty", 36. Heidegger also suggests that aesthetic values is 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.

Therefore, aesthetic value, though rightly studied extensively within philosophy, has wrongly been restricted and reduced to appealing only to the human's emotional needs, and unable to bear the weight of propositional truth.<sup>65</sup> This was based on the assumption that such values are grounded on experiences located only in the affective side of human nature.<sup>66</sup> 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, and it is the position of this study that Zemach is right, one can begin to understand why God employs, almost exclusively, aesthetic media to communicate His truth to human beings. For, as Kant states above, "beauty serves us as a *schema* for truth, a postulated substitute for a reality which we cannot fathom."<sup>67</sup> 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."<sup>68</sup>

### Conclusion

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<sup>65</sup>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).

<sup>66</sup>Harold Osborne suggests how this view prevailed, in the modern era, among the British eighteenth-century Empiricists (including Hume), and the German Rationalists (including Leibniz and Baumgarten). Harold Osborne, "Some Theories of Aesthetic Judgment," The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism 38 (Winter 1979), 135-144.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>from his "Ode to a Grecian Urn."

The biblical aesthetic is a wholistic discipline, affirming the whole being of each person. The senses, rather than being a peripheral aspect of human nature, secondary to the mind, are the foundational means for grasping truth and knowledge. The mind and human reason are not extolled as the primary avenue for receiving divine revelation in Scripture. Indeed, this revelation is diffused and filtered through the aesthetic awareness of the human being which thereby undergirds and substantiates the identification of truth. Aesthetic pleasure is even offered as one of the rewards of salvation!<sup>69</sup>

Accordingly, of the three main values of Truth, Goodness and Beauty, it can be argued, Beauty, though not salvific and though susceptible for misuse, is a fundamentally critical value in the biblical aesthetic.

*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 Browning<sup>70</sup>

## II. Case Study of narrative literary quality in Scripture

Narrative Analysis is a more recent discipline in theology. During the years of dominance by the historical-critical method, biblical narratives were perceived as uneven confluents of variously assorted myths. With an increased understanding of the Hebrew language, narratives are

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<sup>69</sup>Reward promises to Israel in the OT and to the Church in the NT include extensive recounting of physical and material blessings.

<sup>70</sup>Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book, close of XII.

now increasingly appreciated as sophisticated writing informed by particular theological presuppositions. The following analysis of Genesis 22 illustrates this.

The comprehensive aesthetic manifestation of the OT writers was not devised to promote appreciation for their literary skills. Nor were the writers seeking to soothe the emotional needs of human nature. Instead, their desire was to point to the Messiah and His salvation. In fact, it can be argued substantively, as John Sailhamer and others do, that the actual details each writer includes (which are characteristic of the terse narrative style of the canon) are indicative of this. Jesus Himself seems to substantiate this, by placing Himself as the central focus of the OT: “You search the Scriptures [necessarily the OT at that time] ... and these are they which testify of Me.” (John 5:39) Also, following His resurrection, to the two walking to Emmaus:

“O foolish one, 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 24:27); and again later that day He said to them, “These things 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)<sup>71</sup>

This strongly suggests that the OT narrative materials are not simply an eclectic collection of unrelated and random details.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup>This is not a solitary reference. Early in Christ’s ministry, Philip expressed the same sentiment to Nathaniel: “We have found Him of whom Moses in the law, and also the prophets, wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” (Jn 1:45) Jesus also refers to this hermeneutic long before His resurrection: “For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me.” (Jn 5:46) The Apostles continued this hermeneutic. For example, Peter: “And He commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that it is He who was ordained by God to be Judge of the living and the dead. To Him all the prophets witness ...” (Acts 10:42).

<sup>72</sup>Calvin Seerveld so argues: “... the Bible is not a heterogeneous collection of fragments. The Bible is not shards of supernatural information, plus empirical insights, plus thrilling flights of fancy which, when absorbed, lead to the Christian life. No, the Bible, I believe is at bottom simply one true story of the great deeds of the Lord fraught with promises.” Christ, in Lk 24, brings the focus even closer—on



One additional caveat: narrative analysis is a valuable tool. However, I submit that a present weakness of this method, besides its leaning toward a non-historical interpretation of biblical narratives, is its proclivity to overlook the possibility of any overarching theological stance operant in the biblical writer's mind.

### Section I

Though interpretations vary, a long historical consensus exists in theological studies regarding the profound nature and significance of Genesis 22:1-19. There are wide differences in interpretation, but not over its supreme importance in biblical narratives. This attention has not been limited exclusively to Christianity. All three monotheistic traditions that claim Abraham as their "father" (Christianity, Judaism, Islam), insist on the significance of this passage for their theology.<sup>73</sup>

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Himself. Calvin Seerveld, Rainbows for the Fallen World: Aesthetic Life and Artistic Task (Toronto: Toronto Tuppence Press, 1980), 90.

Ellen White is eloquent: "In every page, whether history, or precept, or prophecy, the Old Testament Scriptures are irradiated with the glory of the Son of God. So far as it was of divine institution, the entire system of Judaism was a compacted prophecy of the gospel. To Christ 'give all the prophets witness.' Acts 10:43. From the promise given to Adam, down through the patriarchal line and the legal economy, heaven's glorious light made plain the footsteps of the Redeemer. Seers behold the Star of Bethlehem, the Shiloh to come, as future things swept before them in mysterious procession. In every sacrifice Christ's death was shown. In every cloud of incense His righteousness ascended. By every jubilee trumpet His name was sounded. In the awful mystery of the holy of holies His glory dwelt." Desire of Ages 211-212.

<sup>73</sup>For example, Islam's sacred Koran includes this narrative. However, the intended victim of Abraham's knife is unnamed. By the end of the third Islamic century, however, Ishmael has become the intended sacrifice. [R. Firestone, "Abraham's Son as the Intended Sacrifice: Issues in Quranic Exegesis," in Journal of Semitic Studies, 34 (1989): 117. References to the "Akedah" [the nomenclature given to the Gen 22 narrative in most Jewish writings; derived from the verb in v. 9, when Abraham "bound" Isaac] also appear in the earliest extra-biblical Jewish sources. Modern Jewish scholars continue probing Genesis 22 for discussions of their "martyrdom" in the Holocaust and other historical pogroms against their people. They frequently interpret the Gen 22 narrative to mean that in Isaac the Jewish people were thus "prophesied" and "destined" by God to be "sacrifice" for the world. However, since Isaac, there has been no halting of the knife from heaven. For one example, see Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 97.

### Narrative Analysis of Genesis 22:

verse 1: "Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham":

The formula, "after these things" is found only four times in the Pentateuch---all four in Genesis (15:1; 22:1; 22:20; 48:1)<sup>74</sup> Notably, two of these within the Abraham narratives.

This brings questions to mind, such as: after what "things"? And why is this pericope being singled out? With the many narratives in Genesis, what was the author's intent in "tagging" so few narratives in this particular manner?

In Gen 22:1, "after these things" introduces God speaking again to Abraham.

Perhaps this is to remind us of Abraham's long, complex life, as recorded in the nine preceding chapters.<sup>75</sup> Abraham now is well over 100 years old--an old man even for his generation. In his earlier years he had been strong to endure hardship and to brave danger, but now the ardor of his

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<sup>74</sup>The first follows Abraham's daring rescue of Lot and the subsequent worship of Yahweh by Abraham and Melchizedek (chapter 14). "After these things" also opens chapter 15 where Yahweh speaks again to Abraham and reaffirms His covenant, with its specific promise of numerous descendants. The third immediately follows Gen 22:1-19 so the reader will separate the next verses with the just completed event. The final appearance of "after these things" (chapter 48:1) introduces the reader to the blessings of Jacob upon Joseph's two sons following the narrative of Jacob's reunion in Egypt with his son Joseph.

<sup>75</sup>This is Calvin's understanding: "The expression, "after these things," is not to be restricted to his last vision; Moses rather intended to comprise in one word the various events by which Abraham had been tossed up and down; and again, the somewhat more quiet state of life which, in his old age, he had lately begun to obtain. He had passed an unsettled life in continued exile up to his eightieth year; having been harassed with many contumelies and injuries; he had endured with difficulty an . . . anxious existence, in continual trepidation; famine had driven him out of the land whither he had gone, by the command and under the auspices of God, into Egypt. Twice his wife had been torn from his bosom; he had been separated from his nephew; he had delivered this nephew, when captured in war, at the peril of his own life. He had lived childless with his wife, when yet all his hopes were suspended upon his having offspring. Having at length obtained a son, he was compelled to disinherit him, and to drive him far from home. Isaac alone remained . . . The meaning, therefore, of the passage is, that by this temptation, as if by the last act, the faith of Abraham was far more severely tried than before." Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948) p. 560-561).

youth has passed. The son of promise has grown to manhood by his side. Heaven seems to have crowned with blessing a life with hopes long-deferred.

But then comes the shock: "God tested Abraham". The reader is abruptly informed at the outset that the following harrowing experience comes from God. The subsequent lethal commands are not a figment of Abraham's imagination nor his misinterpretation of a dream. The test is not instigated by Satan.<sup>76</sup> Neither is it a matter of Abraham losing his mind. The explicit description of God's responsibility is underscored both by the reversal in the Hebrew of the usual verb-subject sequence, and also with the unusual use of the definite article with God's name.<sup>77</sup>

The verb "tested" is not uncommon in the OT. It is found 36 times in the Piel. These often point to other divinely-appointed "tests" which generally include explanations of why the test is permitted. The reader is often informed of its reasonableness (Ex 15:25; 16:4; 20:20; Dt 8:2, 6; 13:3, 4).<sup>78</sup> However, in this instance, we are not told why God is testing Abraham--perhaps suggesting that even Abraham himself wasn't told.

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<sup>76</sup>By comparison, the readers of the Job narratives are carefully informed (Job 1) that Job's severe trials come at Satan's provocation.

<sup>77</sup>Phyllis Tribble correctly notes:

"God, indeed God, tested Abraham." Though such a procedure is implicit throughout the preceding [Abrahamic] stories, only here does the verb "test" (nissah) appear. The explicit use startles the reader. It portends a crisis beyond the usual tumult. How many times does Abraham have to be tested? . . . After delays and obstacles Isaac, the child of promise, has come. Let the story now end happily, providing readers and characters respite from struggle and suspense. But that is not to be. Vocabulary and syntax show otherwise. The divine generic Elohim occurs with the definite article Ha suggesting "the God, the very God." Reversing the usual order of a Hebrew sentence, this subject precedes its verb. The narrator makes clear that an extraordinary divine act is taking place. "God, indeed God, tested Abraham." (emphasis Tribble's)

<sup>78</sup>i.e. "And Moses said to the people, "Do not fear; for God has come to test you, and that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin." Ex 20:20.

--"and He said to him, 'Abraham'": God has already spoken to Abraham on several occasions in the preceding narratives (12:-13; 13:14-17; 15, 17; 18;21). However, only this time does God address Abraham by name first—perhaps singling out the solemnity of this moment.

--"and he said, "*hineni*". This response by Abraham to God occurs in Gen 22 (vs. 1, 11). Only two additional times in the entire Pentateuch will an address by God be coupled with this response.<sup>79</sup> Abraham's atypical response perhaps suggests that he himself was recognizing the portent of this occasion, and also his posture of obedience. He responds to God in this manner only in this narrative.<sup>80</sup>

verse 2: "take now your son, your only/unique one, whom you love, Isaac": This is the fourth time God's commands to Abraham have involved his family ties.<sup>81</sup> As painful as the earlier sundering of these bonds must have been, this surely is the ultimate devastation. Even the arrangement of the nouns in the Hebrew conveys a particularly strong sense of gravity. The three-fold description increases and intensifies Abraham's attachment to his son Isaac: "Your son, your only/unique one, Isaac, whom you love."<sup>82</sup>

Moreover, the triple designation plus name rules out any possible confusion. Abraham couldn't evade the realization that God was clearly aware of what He was asking Abraham to do--and that He

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<sup>79</sup>when God addresses Moses at the burning bush (Ex 3:4), and when He addresses Jacob by name (Gen 31:11).

<sup>80</sup>Later, the lad Samuel responds with "*hineni*" to who he thinks is Eli calling, suggesting the attitude of obedience that Abraham exhibits in this narrative.

<sup>81</sup>1) Gen 12:1, leaving kindred. 2) Gen 13:5-18, separation from Lot. 3) Gen 17:17-18, separation from Ishmael.

<sup>82</sup>As God's initial 3-fold command to Abraham in Gen 12:1 increases intensity as it unfolds: "Get out of your country/from your kindred/from your father's house ..."

was specifically identifying the promised heir.<sup>83</sup> It could not be Eliezer, whom Abraham once suggested as his descendant (Gen 15:2). Nor could it be Ishmael, his son by Hagar, whom he begged God to let stand before Him (Gen 17:18).

The phrase--"who you love" involves the initial use of the word "love" in the OT. With the oft-noted verbal reticence of this narrative, the tender regard Abraham had for Isaac is surely highlighted. Moreover, God Himself is speaking. Thus, the first time He uses this word in all His recorded dialogues in the OT is significant.

--"and go forth" occurs two times in the Abrahamic narratives. Both at the outset of two signal commands to Abraham.<sup>84</sup> Gabriel Josipovici notes the alliteration:

... an arresting alliterative phrase urges us forward and leaves us no chance to pause or look back: *lekh lekha*, orders God, take yourself and go. It is a phrase which is used only once again in the bible, also by God and also to Abraham: 'Take your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and *lekh lekha* to the land of Moriah, and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell you of' (Gen. 22:2). This time the forward thrust of the alliteration is barely reined in by any

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<sup>83</sup>Phyllis Trible is sensitive to significance of this identification God announces: the object of the verb is not a simple word but heavy-laden language. It moves from the generic term of kinship, "your son," through the exclusivity of relationship, "your only one," through the intimacy of bonding, "whom you love," to climax in the name that fulfills promise, the name of laughter and joy, the name Yishaq (Isaac). Language accumulates attachments: "your son, your only one, whom you love, Isaac." Thus far every divine word (imperative, particle, and objects) shows the magnitude of the test." (Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) p. 2.

<sup>84</sup>Gen 12:1 "Go forth from your country and your kindred and your father's house." It is found only two more times in the OT (in Song of Songs 2:10, 13-- feminine form), obviously very rare usage (again underscoring the solemnity of the command).

"The phrase 'go forth' serves as a bridge between the 2 narratives about Abraham. The first tells about the demand at the beginning of his history that he detach himself from his land, his home and his father's house and go to the unknown country, at God's command, 'the land which I will show you.' The second, at the end of this history, describes the most difficult demand of all, that he go to the land of Moriah and sacrifice his only, beloved son on one of the mountains 'which I will tell you.' Shimon Bar-Efrat, The Art of the Biblical Story (New York: Almond Press, 1979), 213.

compensating sense of return: the brevity of the first word, *lekh*, forces the breath to leap on to *lekha*, and the repetition accentuates the urgency, an urgency carried over into the repeated *kha* sounds of the rest of the phrase: *lekh lekha me'arzkha umimoladtakha umibait avikha el ha'aretz asher arekha*.<sup>85</sup>

"to the land of Moriah": no further identification of the divinely-ordained location is given except the assurance that God will signal Abraham at the appropriate time. Again, as in chapter 12, Abraham is commanded to go on a mission with its final destination a mystery. Verse 4 informs the reader that the designated place for sacrifice was a three-days' journey away. Abraham would need to travel approximately 70 kilometers (45 miles) from Beer-sheva. However, traveling long distances was not new to Abraham as earlier Abrahamic narratives have shown..

--"and offer him as a burnt offering": The first two imperatives in verse 2 would not have been alarming for Abraham. He is described in Genesis as regularly offering sacrifices to God. But with the third imperative, the true horror of the command is now made clear. Furthermore, the term "burnt offerings" is used not less than six times in this and the next few verses, the repetition keeping before the reader's mind the extreme nature of the demand.<sup>86</sup>

verse 3: What is Abraham's response? "So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him."

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<sup>85</sup>Gabriel Josipovici, The Book of God: A Response to the Bible (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 71.

<sup>86</sup>Robert Alter, in The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1980), includes a whole chapter on biblical repetition. He makes the point that in sparse narratives (of which Gen 22 certainly is one), any repetition becomes even more significant.

From preceding narratives the reader knows Abraham as a mighty warrior, who readily speaks.<sup>87</sup> However, now he only responds “*hineni*”, v. 2, and then becomes uncharacteristically silent. There is no more discourse, only actions, until Moriah.<sup>88</sup>

The reader "sees" Abraham "saddle the donkey" and "cut the wood", and should recall how "it is rare to find routine tasks mentioned in biblical narrative."<sup>89</sup> Moreover, one wonders why Abraham at his advanced age, and with his great wealth, is doing these tedious chores. Surely these were tasks he didn't normally have to do for himself--this "mighty prince of God" (Gen 23:6) who could arm "318 trained servants who were born in his own house."

Why does Abraham saddle the donkey and cut the wood for the sacrifice himself? Is this giving a hint of Abraham's anguish? In his turmoil he perhaps doesn't want to explain the journey (and thus God's command) to anyone. Maybe he knows someone would try and persuade him not to go, telling him he must be mistaken about what God said. Or, perchance, he wants to be alone as he wrestles with his thoughts. Thus, he attends to the preparations himself.

Notice also how Isaac is brought into the narrative after the two servants, perhaps indicating that Abraham, in his distress, woke Isaac up last in his distress.

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<sup>87</sup>with his relatives to resolve difficulties (Lot, chapter 13), to royalty (kings of the Plains and Melchizedek, chapter 14 and king of Gerar, chapter 20), and most notably to God (chapters 15, 17, 18).

<sup>88</sup>For example: "So rose early Abraham in the morning": This is an identical response to 21:14 when Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away at God's directive. Even though both this command and that of chapter 21 were devastating for Abraham, one sees careful, prompt obedience. One cannot help but compare Abraham's careful obedience to an unwanted task to that of the prophet Jonah.

<sup>89</sup>Bar-Efrat, p. 80.

Suddenly the narrative alerts us to the fact that the journey to the unknown destination lasted three days. Verse 4: "On the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off." The distance traveled before arriving at Moriah surely prolongs the agony for Abraham. He must have reviewed the three-fold command from God over and over in his mind hoping he had made some mistake. There was plenty of time in three days to think. Yet the narrator passes over any mention of the journey. We are not permitted to view those three torturing days.<sup>90</sup>

"and Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place": possibly suggesting the height of the mountain that God revealed to Abraham. The more common OT description of "seeing" is "he looked . . . and saw". Thus, the author, by describing Abraham's "seeing" by "lift[ing] up his eyes" perhaps hints of Abraham's inner struggle, underscoring his deep mental anguish by implying his head was bowed down. Or, is the use of this particular expression possibly suggesting more than just physical sight?<sup>91</sup>

verse 5: "and then Abraham said to his young men, 'stay here with the donkey. I and the lad will go yonder and worship and come again to you.'"

Abraham, from his extensive household, brought only two young servants with him. Now having arrived at the hour of sacrifice, he leaves them with the donkey. Perhaps even yet they might try to restrain Abraham. Or, possibly, he didn't want them to view what was going to happen. Father and son must go alone.

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<sup>90</sup>“ ... a three-day journey—which according to Kierkegaard lasted longer than the four thousand years separating us from the event ...” Elie Wiesel, Messengers of God: Biblical Portraits and Legends. (New York: Random House, 1976), p. 72.

<sup>91</sup>Generally speaking commentators take this expression to indicate a literal upward movement of the eyes. A closer look at its actual usage, however, indicates that this might not necessarily be the case. See below, p. 17, for fuller discussion.



--"we will worship": the perceptive reader notices the first use of this word for "worship" in the Pentateuch. Abraham's faith apparently has not wavered throughout the three-day journey. Even with pain surely stabbing his heart, he can still affirm his intent to worship God.

--"We will return to you": this is an electrifying statement in light of what Abraham faces. The verbs are cohortative and thus reveal emphatic determination. The plural "we" should be shocking. Though the narrator never discloses Abraham's agony, this profound statement of faith perhaps gives a glimpse of Abraham's mental wrestling during the long three-day journey. The author of the book of Hebrews (11:17-19) suggests this when he writes: "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac . . . accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead." The nature of Abraham's faith on the mountain of sacrifice is astounding when one recalls that he had no precedent of any resurrection on which to base his faith. A 20th century person looking back through such miracles subsequent to Abraham can only marvel!

verse 6: "and Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son and he took in his hand the fire and the knife; so they went, two of them, together."

The verb, "and Abraham took" completes the divine command to "take" in v. 2. God has commanded Abraham, and Abraham has conscientiously obeyed. Notice too, how in this verse, the sacrificial implements "wood of the burnt offering" and "fire and knife", verbally surround 'Isaac his son."<sup>92</sup>

Isaac now takes the place of the beast of burden. Why is the donkey left behind? The poignant picture is that of the victim bearing the instrument of his death. Father and son go alone. The text states: "so they went, both of them, together."

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<sup>92</sup>Tribble, p. 5.

The wood has the heavier weight of those items that are needed for sacrifice and Abraham is elderly. Is this why Isaac carries the wood? Even so, notice how the father carries the knife and fire, as if to shield his son from their harm as long as possible.

Verses 7-8: "and Isaac said to Abraham his father and he said, 'My father,' and he said, 'hineni [here am I], my son'; and he said, 'behold, the fire and the wood but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' And Abraham said, 'God will see/provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering my son'; and they went, two of them, together."

At Isaac's question, Abraham again responds "hineni". Note this identical response of Abraham to God earlier. Is this alerting the reader to the intensity of this moment?<sup>93</sup>

The poignant dialogue: "My father" . . . "my son" reminds the reader again and again of the relationship between Abraham and Isaac in this narrative--four times in just these two verses. In fact the word "son" occurs ten times between verses 2-16. This constant reminder is not just a redundant reference to the blood relationship between Abraham and Isaac. Rather, this obvious repetition pointedly stresses the horror of a father going to sacrifice his son.<sup>94</sup>

--"God will see/provide himself": One of many times this narrative emphasizes "seeing." God's involvement dominates Abraham's guarded response to Isaac. Normal Hebrew syntax is again reversed and the subject precedes the verb. Note, also, how it includes a lingering ambiguity of

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<sup>93</sup>refer to comments v. 1, p 46.

<sup>94</sup>This is not a strained reading of this conspicuous repetition. It is an assumption of this paper that the Genesis book has one author. Thus we find another example of repetition for accentuation. Such is also evident in the narrative of the first murder (Cain and Abel) where in just three verses (Gen 4:8-10) the word "brother" is mentioned five times. The reader already knows Cain and Abel are brothers. Thus, again, repetition accentuates the horror of that scene even more. For the most shocking aspect of the incident is not only that murder has taken place (as terrible as that is), but that fratricide has been committed (point well-taken by Bar-Efrat, p. 213). In this pericope, the author again repeats family ties in another critical event.

aposition linking "burnt offering" and "my son". Was this the only way Abraham could yet speak of what was just ahead?

"and they went, two of them, together": this phrase is repeated the second time in just three verses. Was this the point where Isaac began to understand Abraham's enigmatic response? If so, he did not try to escape, for we are again reminded that *even yet* father and son "went together".

verses 9-10: "and they came to the place of which God had told them. Abraham built there an altar and laid in order the wood and bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar upon the wood and Abraham put forth his hand and took the knife to slay his son."

"and they came to the place of which God ["God" again with definite article as in v.1] had told them": once more we are reminded of the certainty of God's instructions and how carefully Abraham had carried them out.<sup>95</sup>

At this point the narrative slows down dramatically with the preparations on the mountain. Why are so many details included here? These preparations for a burnt offering would be unnecessary instruction to OT readers, well-familiar with sacrificial worship. Yet note the calculated accuracy depicted through this sequence of six verbs. Abraham alone is the subject of them all, with Isaac appearing as the object after each group of three.<sup>96</sup> Milgrom comments, "These are

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<sup>95</sup>Completing, thus, v. 2, that Abraham was to "... go to the land of Moriah ... on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

<sup>96</sup>Trible suggests a pattern which serves to heighten the tension:

Abraham built an altar

arranged wood

bound Isaac his son

laid him on the altar, on wood

put forth Abraham his hand,

took the knife to slay his son" (Phyllis Trible, Texts of Terror: Literary-

Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 7)

particularly desperate moments because at each of these pivots Abraham could have turned back."<sup>97</sup> Even the action of taking the knife is divided into two separate movements--putting forth his hand and then taking the knife--with the reader reminded yet again of Abraham's intention "to slay his son."<sup>98</sup>

We are never informed when Abraham told his son of the divine command, or what he said to Isaac. Whenever it occurred, there apparently was no resistance. For when Isaac is again mentioned, we find that Abraham has bound him for sacrifice. As a young man, Isaac could have easily over-powered his aged father. But instead, the reader becomes aware of a second profound act of faith and obedience. For Abraham's beloved son, heir of the promise, lies ready to die by his own father's hand. The father has yielded his son. The son has yielded his life. All Christian and Jewish writers pause long over these two verses.<sup>99</sup>

verses 11-12: "but the angel of Yahweh called to him from heaven and said, 'Abraham, Abraham,' and he said, 'hineni [here am I].' And he said, 'do not lay your hand on the lad or do to him anything. For now I know that you fear God; you have not withheld your son, your unique one from me.'"

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<sup>97</sup>in The Akedah: The Binding of Isaac. (Oakland, CA: BIBAL Press, 1988), p. 14.

<sup>98</sup>It is one of these six verbs יָקַח, with its solitary appearance in the OT in this form, that subsequently becomes title for this narrative in Jewish writings--"The Akedah." The narrative never reveals when Abraham told Isaac of God's command. Thus, perhaps this verb of the six identifies the last moment when Isaac would have had to know.

<sup>99</sup>i.e. "Few narratives in Genesis can equal this story in dramatic tension. The writer seems to prolong the tension of both Abraham and the reader in his depiction of the last moments before God interrupted the action and called the test to a halt." John H. Sailhammer in Pentateuch as Narrative. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), p. 178.

At this critical juncture one immediately notices the change of the name of God used up to this point. And this name will now be used until the end of the narrative.

The double vocative “Abraham, Abraham” reinforces the intervention from heaven,<sup>100</sup> as does the father's third “*hineni*” (as in vss. 1 and 7), all adding to the intensity of this moment.

Also punctuating God's urgent halt is the double negative to ensure the total safety of Isaac, “do not lay your hand on the lad/do not do anything to him.”

“now I know you fear God”: The divine being declares the meaning of Abraham's act. This direct characterization of Abraham uttered from heaven thus has absolute authority. The reader is left with no doubt that true fear of God consists in complete subjection to His sovereign will.<sup>101</sup>

“Your son, your only/unique one”: God repeats this designation of Isaac at this juncture (as in v. 2), repetition assuring the reader that God recognizes full well the nature of His command to Abraham.

verse 13 “and Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold a ram behind him caught in a thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.”

At this point, again “Abraham lifts up his eyes and sees.” The narrator utilizes the same formula as in v. 4 to mark off another poignant moment for Abraham. The first time he “lifted his

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<sup>100</sup>The double call is rare in the Pentateuch. Three other occasions of urgency employ it: Jacob, (Gen 46:2); Moses, (Ex 3:4); and Samuel (1 Sm 3:10). Very similar would be King David's mourning over his son (2 Sm 18:3). These occasions are also marked with high intensity.

<sup>101</sup>Nahum Sarna is eloquent on this point, describing it as the “definition of relationship between man and God . . . [which finds the] fullest expression in the realm of action.” (Understanding Genesis (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), p. 163.

eyes” his heart must have stopped as he saw the mountain God indicated. He knew then for sure that he had not been mistaken about God's command. And now, at this moment he sees the substitute for his son.

As alluded to above, the phrase “[he] looked ... and saw” is the most common way of depicting physical sight in the OT. It is used over 860 times; over 240 times in the Pentateuch; and almost 100 times in Genesis alone. Forms of “to see” also occur seven times within fifteen verses of Gen. 22. Thus it becomes tantalizing to notice the few times when the rare phrase “lifting up . . . eyes” is tagged to the already obvious word for “seeing.” Could this possibly imply something beyond mere physical sight?<sup>102</sup> The narrator could have written that Abraham “saw.” He writes in this manner almost 250 times in the Pentateuch. However, at this dramatic point in Gen. 22 there is added “lifted up the eyes” to the word “seeing.” Is this possibly indicating something beyond natural vision?<sup>103</sup>

In the NT, Jesus Himself declared that “Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” (Jn 8:56). Could He have been alluding to this instance of “lifting up the eyes and seeing”

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<sup>102</sup>Texts include: 1) Gen 13:10, Lot "lifting eyes" and seeing Sodom (hinting that he was seeing more than just the fertile valley, but was also considering what advantages there would be to living there). Also, he was in a position enabling him to look down into the valley and thus didn't need to "lift" his eyes in a physical sense; 2) Gen 24:63-64, used twice in two verses, as Isaac and Rebekah first encounter each other (possibly denoting deep emotions both might have been experiencing at this "arranged" marriage); 3) 33:1, when Jacob "lifted his eyes" and saw Esau approaching, thereby suggesting the anxiety he was experiencing (remembering his elder brother's fury at losing the birthright); 4) Gen 43:29; Joseph "lifted" his eyes and saw Benjamin as his brothers bowed before him (with complex emotions seeing his brother again plus remembering his past dreams and present fulfillment)--he certainly didn't need to raise his eyes to view prostrate people; 5) Num 24:2, Balaam "lifts his eyes" to view the Israelite camp in the valley beneath him.

<sup>103</sup>The "lifting up the eyes" seems enigmatic and deserves attention. Gudmundur Olafsson, "The Use of NS' in the Pentateuch and its Significance for the Biblical Understanding of Forgiveness", Ph.D. Dissertation, Andrews University, 1988) pp. 148-154, and C. S. Reif ("A Root to Look Up: A Study of the Hebrew nasa ayin" in VTS 36(1985) 230-244) both begin to turn in this direction.

of Gen 22:13? Was the Messiah's future mission of salvation something that Abraham began to “see” there on Moriah's mountain? The rare formula “lifting of the eyes,” used at two critical junctures in this narrative, could possibly signify something beyond mere natural sight. The narrator seems intentional that the reader “see” as Abraham did when he “went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son.” Ellen White so contends:

This terrible ordeal was imposed upon Abraham that he might see the day of Christ, and realize the great love of God for the world, so great that to raise it from its degradation, He gave His only-begotten Son to a most shameful death.

Abraham learned of God the greatest lesson ever given to mortals. His prayer that he might see Christ before he should die was answered. He saw Christ; he saw all that mortal can see, and live. By making an entire surrender, he was able to understand the vision of Christ, which had been given him. He was shown that in giving His only-begotten Son to save sinners from eternal ruin, God was making a greater and more wonderful sacrifice than ever man could make.

... In the words of Abraham, ‘My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering’ (Gen 22:8), and in God’s provision of a sacrifice instead of Isaac, it was declared that no man could make expiation for himself. The pagan system of sacrifice was wholly unacceptable to God. No father was to offer up his son or his daughter for a sin offering. The Son of God alone can bear the guilt of the world.

Through his own suffering, Abraham was enabled to behold the Savior’s mission of sacrifice.” (DA 469)

The drama of this substitution is also emphasized through the phrase “behold a ram,” answering earlier Isaac’s question: “behold . . . where is the lamb?” in v. 7. This is the first time the word for this sacrificial animal is used in Genesis.

verse 14: “and so Abraham called the name of that place Yahweh will see, as it is said to this day, on the mount of Yahweh, it shall be seen.”

Abraham now names the mountain. The “name draws attention to God, not Abraham. It is not Abraham-has-performed, but God-will-provide.”<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>Victor P. Hamilton, Handbook on the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982) p. 109.

verses 15-18: “and the angel of Yahweh called to Abraham a second time from heaven and said, ‘by Myself I have sworn’ says Yahweh, ‘because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only/unique one. With blessings indeed I will bless you and I will multiply your seed as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the shore of the sea and your seed shall possess the gate of his enemies. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed because you have obeyed my voice.’”

After the sacrifice, the “angel of the Lord” called out of heaven the second time to Abraham. Three times in just 19 verses God speaks to Abraham, two of them at this pivotal climax of the narrative.<sup>105</sup>

(verse 16) “I swear by Myself”: This is the solitary instance of God swearing this way in all of the Patriarchal narratives, crowning these words with extreme importance.<sup>106</sup> God is obviously reaffirming His earlier Covenant with Abraham but in a dramatically expanded manner. “And He said,” used over and over in these 19 verses, is now punctuated with “says Yahweh.”<sup>107</sup> Even the verbs are reinforced by the absolute infinitive--adding “most abundantly!” Noticeably, the blessing is now extended to Abraham's seed, and victory over enemies is mentioned for the first time. These blessings are also uniquely presented as the result of Abraham's actions, and not merely as God's gracious initiative, as in previous chapters. God specifically praises Abraham's obedience in this

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<sup>105</sup> And this is the last recorded time that God speaks to Abraham.

<sup>106</sup> This type of oath is extremely rare in all of Scripture. Three other examples: Is 45:23; Jer 22:5; 49:13; (Heb 6:13, 14, the NT reference to this important oath).

The Pentateuch subsequently has repeated references to this oath (24:7; 26:3; 50:24; Ex 8:5; 33:1).

<sup>107</sup> “saith the Lord” is used constantly by the prophets, but is rare in the historical books (Nu 14:28; 1 Sm 2:30; 2 Ki 9:26; 19:33).



Covenant statement. Note also the mention of “nations” for the first time in the covenant expression. A significant “hint” that the messianic gift was to extend beyond the Abrahamic line.

## Section 2

The narrative of Gen 22 is profound.<sup>108</sup> Each of the “particulars” beckons attention and interpretation. It seems very apparent that the narrator has displayed, as Robert Alter cogently remarks, “his omniscience with a drastic selectivity.”<sup>109</sup> It is the position of this paper that the accumulative effect of the various particulars of Gen 22 and its surrounding context cannot be brushed aside as merely coincidental.

1. Isaac's birth, in just the previous chapter (21), is announced in a very singular manner.<sup>110</sup>

Up to this birth, the author of Genesis has described the conception of a child as the result of the husband “knowing” his wife.<sup>111</sup> However, in this instance we are told that, “the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken.”

Sarah conceived, without the previously-used Genesis formula of her husband “knowing” her. This in no way suggests that Abraham was not involved! This is not a virgin birth. Sarah has, however, been pointedly depicted as well-beyond child-bearing years (chapter 18). Thus this birth

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<sup>108</sup>John Sailhamer is one of many who singles out the Gen 22: “Few narratives in Genesis can equal this story in dramatic tension.” John H. Sailhamer, The Pentateuch as Narrative. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992, 178.

<sup>109</sup>ibid., p. 126.

<sup>110</sup>“And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.” (21:1-2).

<sup>111</sup>Gen 4:1, 25--Adam and Eve; 4:17--Cain.

of Isaac is miraculous in that fact alone, pointing the perceptive reader to the later miracle involved in the Messiah's unusual birth.

2. The text declares that Isaac's miraculous birth also came “at the set time of which God had spoken to him” alluding to a later fulfillment of God's word when at “the fullness of time” the Messiah would be born (Gal 4:4).

3. The birth announcement involves both names for God that are found in Gen 22, the shift in names occurring there at the decisive interruption on Moriah.

4. God explicitly informs Abraham what he is to call his son: “Then God said: ‘No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.’” bringing to mind the later words of the angel to Joseph, “you shall call His name Jesus.” (Mt. 1:21) Matthew quotes the exact LXX phrase of Gen 17:19.

5. The word “love” is used for the first time in Genesis in this narrative, specifying a father’s love for his son. Surely fathers loved their sons before Abraham. However, this particular relationship is singled out.

6. Specific mention of Moriah: later readers would be reminded of when God halted the plague against Israel (2 Sm 24:15-25); where the Temple would stand (2 Ch 3:1), and thus, “in NT times, the vicinity of Calvary--where sin's great Plague would be halted.”<sup>112</sup>

7. Abraham's journey to Moriah is specifically pointed out as being a “three days’ journey.” “Three days” proves to be a significant marker in the Pentateuch, sensitizing the reader to the three days of Christ’s death and resurrection. (See footnote 90)

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<sup>112</sup>Derek Kidner, Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1976), p. 143.

8. The reader is given a double reminder linking a father and son-- “they went, two of them, together.”

9. The detail of Isaac carrying the wood to the place of sacrifice is explicitly noted, sensitizing the reader to Christ’s bearing of His cross to Calvary.

10. The dramatic slow-down in the narrative in verses 9-10, sensitizing readers of the only time “in history by which it is surpassed: that where the Great Father gave His Isaac to a death from which there was no deliverance.”<sup>113</sup>

11. Curiously, Isaac is silent. He speaks only once--on Moriah's mountain. Isaiah later writes of the Messiah: “Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter ...” (53:7)

12. The word for the “sacrificial ram” occurs first in this narrative.

13. It can be argued that the narrator develops a whole constellation of salvation images in Gen 22: a father giving his son; a son yielding to the father's will; a sacrifice, wood, altar, ram, love, faith and obedience. Taken in its entirety, the poignant details of this narrative seem to point to the Great Sacrifice of Christ.

### **Section 3: Theological Implications:**

Much current Narrative Analysis assumes the non-historical, mythical nature of OT events and personages with interest focused on probing the psychological nuances of the characters.<sup>114</sup> More importantly, the various details included by biblical narrators have not generally been allowed

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<sup>113</sup>James Montgomery Boice in Genesis: An Expository Commentary Volume 2, Genesis 12:1-36:43 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1985) p. 218.

<sup>114</sup>See Robert Alter, and David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewel, Narrative in the Hebrew Bible (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) for two examples.

to carry theological import. However, a “close reading of the text” suggests a deliberate hermeneutic pervading the Abrahamic narratives.<sup>115</sup>

New Testament materials also give evidence of linkage with Gen 22. It could be argued that it was some of the very particulars in Gen 22 that the NT writers pondered as they wrote of Christ and His death. The Apostle Paul seems to have lingered long over Gen 22 when he writes “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:32, emphasis supplied). Had John the Baptist been studying Gen 22:7-8 and pondering “My father . . . where is the lamb?” And coupled this with Is 53 when he announced, by the Jordan River, “Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world.” (Jn 1:29, 36, emphasis supplied)

Is the word “love” describing a father's heart initially used in Gen 22 so that when later God Himself calls from heaven twice, “This is My beloved Son”<sup>116</sup> we would better grasp what love was involved in His heart for His Son? The mention three times to Abraham by God in Gen 22 of Isaac

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<sup>115</sup>Within the surrounding chapters, we note that Isaac's name is given by a divine being before birth (Gen 17:19: as will happen with Christ, Mt 1:21); the miraculous conception (of both Isaac and Christ); the victims (both Isaac and Jesus) silent and yielding before death (Is 53:7); both Isaac and Christ bearing the wood to the place of sacrifice (Gen 22:6; Jn 19:17); resurrection on the “third day” (Isaac never dies; but he “miraculously” rises from the altar on the “third day.” Even Jewish Midrash ties the “third day” to resurrection with Hos 6:2. Genesis Rabbah, Vol. 1, 491. Also: “There are many three days mentioned in the Holy Scripture, of which one is the Resurrection of the Messiah.” (Bereshith Rabba); and “The Holy One doesn't leave His just men in sorrow more than three days,” as it is said, ‘After two days will He revive us; on the third day He will raise us up that we may live in His presence’” (Hos 6:2). (Parasha 56.1). Thus Josipovici rightly suggests: “[in the Bible] a section comes to a definite closure and is followed by another with a clear beginning, often years later and in another place. Yet gradually, as the new section unfolds, elements of the earlier section start to be picked up and we are made to sense a continuity between the two which is deeper than that of mere chronology, alerting us to the fact that at all times and in all cases chronology is but a weak joiner of two moments in time. There is ... in the Bible, a sense of the infinite depths of individual moments, and the awareness of the possibility of the perpetual enrichment of the material from within rather than by mere extension.” Josipovici, p. 86.

<sup>116</sup>Mt 3:17--Christ's baptism; 17:5--Christ's transfiguration.

as “your son, your only/unique one” also finds echo in Christ's words to Nicodemus when He tells him that “God so loved the world that He gave His only/unique Son.”

The Apostle Paul also does careful exegesis of Genesis. He notes (Gal 3:18) that “... the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand,” saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’” Of his several statements of the Abrahamic covenant, here Paul was distinctly referring to the blessing in Gen 22 and the final covenantal declaration with Abraham. Two previous times God's covenantal promise that through Abraham all the earth would be blessed: in chapter 12, all the “families” of the earth; but in chapter 22, all the “nations” of the earth (which rendering Paul quotes). For in Gen 22:18, God dramatically changes the destination of the blessing from “families” of Gen 12:3, to “nations.”

This important passage in Galatians also seems to validate the suggestion above that the “lifting up of the eyes” includes more than just physical sight. For Paul states that the “gospel” was “preached to Abraham” and pinpoints this exact time with a direct quote from Gen 22:18. There is no explicit mention of God “preaching” the “gospel” to Abraham in Genesis chapters 12-25. When does God “preach” the “gospel” to Abraham? If the enigmatic obscure formula “lifting up the eyes” can suggest something more than just natural eyesight, it could be hinting at Abraham's perception opening when he “lifted his eyes” and “sees” the substitute lamb on Mt. Moriah.

Paul's argument in later verses (Gal 3:15-16) must not go unnoticed in this context. He seems to continue his exegesis of Gen 22 when he points to the deliberate change to the singular “seed” in the Great Blessing of Gen 22. Paul is not careless. He has traced the “seed” through its several promises within the Abrahamic narratives and thus demonstrates a “close reading” of Gen 22:17, elaborating on a detail which many modern English versions do not translate precisely.

Paul apparently noticed that elsewhere in Genesis when the collective “seed” is used it appears with the pronoun “they” (i.e. Gen 15:13). In Gen 3:15, the first covenant promise, one finds the first mention of the “seed” (collective plural) but used with the 3rd person plural. When God blesses Hagar In Gen 16:10, no pronoun is used with “seed.” In 17:7, 9, “seed” is used with plural pronouns. Yet in 22:17 and 24:60, the text includes a deliberate use of the singular pronoun. This pronominal precision continues in the discussion of the “seed” beyond the Pentateuch. For example 2 Sm 7:12--“I will raise up your seed after you . . . I will establish his kingdom.” Also 2 Ki 17:20--“The Lord rejected all the “seed” of Israel--afflicted them, delivered them, etc.--when a nation is implied, the pronominal suffix is plural.

Further testimony can be found “indirectly” from the LXX. Of the 103 times where the Hebrew masculine pronoun is used in Genesis, never does the LXX violate the agreement of the pronoun and antecedent except in Gen 22--evidence, perhaps, of an anti-Messianic bias.<sup>117</sup> The RSV appropriately translates the pronoun “he”-- the Hebrew utilizes the third person singular pronominal suffix following the plural seed in Gen 22:18. This is an important textual nuance Paul noticed (and built his exegesis upon) but which is excluded by most modern English translations.

This is not an isolated incident. Pronominal suffixes in the Covenant blessings are not carelessly written. Subsequently in chapter 24, as Rebekah leaves her home to go and marry Isaac, she is blessed, “May you become the mother of ten thousands; and may your seed possess the gates

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<sup>117</sup>See Johan Lust, "Messianism and Septuagint" in Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, 36 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985) 174-195.

of those who hate him." (again, the 3rd person singular pronominal suffix!).<sup>118</sup> This deliberate focusing on a single "him" seems again to imply a Messianic understanding of these promises by the author of the Pentateuch--a significant detail upon which Paul builds his own argument.<sup>119</sup>

Many have seen Isaac as a type of Christ in this narrative. We also tentatively argue that in the carefully crafted Gen 22 narrative, the writer also seeks to rivet the attention of the reader upon the *father*. There is almost exclusive focus on Abraham. He is the subject of almost all of the verbs. Perhaps it was here in Genesis that the NT writers learned of the Heavenly Father's love for His Son, and how closely He was identified with Jesus in the Great Sacrifice.<sup>120</sup>

OT sacrifices for sin were God-ordained. They were a prominent part of Hebrew worship. However, in Gen 22 one is instructed that God does not need the bloody sacrifice to bring His heart to love and to forgive. It is because of the love already in His heart that He makes provision for the Atonement (Rom 5:8). And before any of the elaboration of the sacrificial ritual later in the

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<sup>118</sup>Max Wilcox "'Upon the Tree'--Deut 21:22-23 In the New Testament" in JBL 96/1[1977], especially pp. 94-99) notes this important point.

<sup>119</sup>Jewish writers indirectly validate this interpretation. They blow the shofar horn, recalling the ram caught in the Moriah thicket, in anticipation of Yom Kippur. Thus pointing forward to another divine event through Gen 22. Indeed, in addition to Gen 22, Christ's Atonement is prefigured all through the OT sacrificial system and the many types in the Israelite economy, and rightly so. The composition of the OT demonstrates one can not focus too much on what Christ's Salvation Act involves.

<sup>120</sup>The NT writers would have also noted (as we have) the constant repetition of "father" and "son" and the poignant repetition of "the two of them together"; and the first use of the word "love"--thus the pointed accent on a father's love. They also saw beneath the surface formula "he lifted up his eyes and saw"--realizing that on Mt. Moriah Abraham was "seeing" something more than just a mountain and a lamb. He was discerning not only the future Messiah but also now the Father's part in giving His Son. Thus Abraham named Moriah's mountain "The LORD sees . . . on the mountain of Yahweh, he will be seen" (with the insistent occurrences of variants of "to see" [vs. 2, 4, 12, 13], it makes sense to translate the verbs of v. 14 this way.--enhancing what the writer is trying to portray in both a primary and secondary sense. The three-fold repetition by God of "your son, your only/unique one" was also not lost on the NT writers (Jn 3:16; 1 Jn 4:9, etc.).

Pentateuch, God first revealed to Abraham, the father of the true seed, what would be in His heart as He offered His only Son in sacrifice for sin.

The NT writers have not “advanced” theologically beyond the OT when insisting that “God is Love.” They are not introducing some exalted new concept. Rather, it is the position of this paper that NT writers had lingered long over Gen 22 and had seen, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit who also inspired the Abrahamic narratives (2 Pt 1:20-21), that “the Father Himself loves you.” (Jn 16:27) The collective details in Genesis 22 are not randomly included, but instead serve as intriguing pointers toward the Messiah’s sacrifice issuing from His Father’s heart.

We moderns tend to pride ourselves on our access to the sophisticated tools of comparative linguistics, religion, psychology and archaeology in dealing with the biblical text. Yet we are humbled to recognize that the ancients saw all the angles, voiced all the questions and paradoxes, and emerged from the maze still one step ahead of us.<sup>121</sup>

A “close reading” of OT narratives helps to establish the aesthetic nature of Scripture structuring and expressing Truth.

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<sup>121</sup>Milgrom, *ibid.*, p. 62. Martin Buber says it equally well: "Scripture does not state its doctrine as doctrine but by telling a story and without exceeding the limits set by the nature of a story. It uses the method of story-telling to a degree, however, which literature has not yet learned to use; and its cross-references and inter-connections, while noticeable, are so unobtrusive that a perfect attention is needed to grasp its intent--an attentiveness so perfect that it has not yet been fully achieved. Hence, it remains for us latecomers to point out the significance of what has hitherto been overlooked, neglected, insufficiently valued." in "Abraham the Seer", *Judaism* 5 (1956) p. 296.



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Ellen G. White: there is no one that can match Ellen White's insight into biblical narratives. Her perceptions include details that can only be detected in the Hebrew text but which are lost in translation to English. Especially valuable: Patriarchs and Prophets, Prophets and Kings, Desire of Ages, and Acts of the Apostles.

Many biblical commentaries now include a new sensitivity to Hebrew narrative writing and also to the chiasmic structures within the texts.