

BEAUTY AND THE BIBLE

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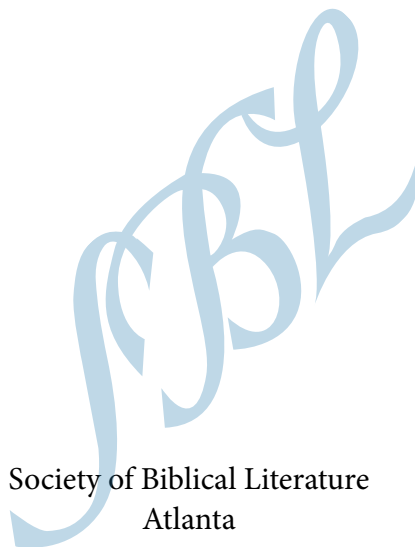
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BEAUTY AND THE BIBLE

TOWARD A HERMENEUTICS OF BIBLICAL AESTHETICS

Edited by

Richard J. Bauckham and Jean-François Racine



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For Gina Hens-Piazza and David Penchansky

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ABBREVIATIONS

AA	Ann Arbor Paperbacks
AB	Anchor Bible
AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBA	Catholic Biblical Association
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
EKKNT	Evangelisch-katholischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
<i>ExAud</i>	<i>Ex auditu</i>
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
<i>JETS</i>	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
<i>JSJ</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic, and Roman Periods</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LHBOTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
LXX	Septuagint
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
PEQ	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>

PhB	Philosophischen Bibliothek
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue biblique</i>
RelArts	Religion and the Arts
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
UTB	Uni-Taschenbücher
ZRGG	Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte



INTRODUCTION

There are distinct challenges involved in articulating a hermeneutics of biblical aesthetics in the twenty-first century. *Beauty and the Bible: Toward a Hermeneutics of Biblical Aesthetics* is conceived as a response to three such challenges. First, the turn to subjectivity in the philosophy of the Enlightenment must be addressed in terms of its impact on the notion of beauty, biblical and otherwise. Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, for example, is crucial background for understanding modern aesthetic concepts like sublimity and for engaging approaches to the text, such as reader response, that are informed by critical theory. Critical theory in general has decentered aesthetics and highlighted the subject's role in the determination of beauty. These developments are traced back to Kant and his impact on modern thought.

A second challenge relates to context, the aggregate of historical factors that prevent us from ever again conceiving of "art for art's sake." The composition of each biblical book, along with the history of its reception, is fraught with the minutiae of politics, economics, gender, and global interdependencies. These factors can create a context that is morally ambiguous with evidence of inequity, exploitation, and even atrocity. How does beauty function in such circumstances? Although there are many possibilities, lest beauty become the veneer that conceals all manner of inconvenient truths, it should be viewed through the lenses of new historicism, postcolonialism, and similar hermeneutics of suspicion. Such approaches attend to ideologies that may mark the biblical texts and their interpretation.

The pendulum's swing signals a third challenge, to approach the biblical text postcritically. Increasingly, there are readers of the Bible with eyes wide open but looking beyond the learning of philosophers or critical theorists. Such reading may sidestep the epistemological turn made by Kant in order to recover a concept of beauty said to be more relevant to the ancient mind. A postcritical reading seeks, among other things, an under-

standing of the nature of beauty that is grounded in semantics and the language of the text. With this type of reading, beauty's power of attraction provides the grounds for aesthetic theology.

In short, a volume on contemporary biblical aesthetics with the requisite breadth and depth will delve into modern philosophy, contextual criticism, and the postcritical return to beauty's intrinsic qualities. While these three perspectives are quite different and not to be harmonized, exploring them concurrently in this volume serves each in turn and produces a study with intriguing methodological tensions. These are the type of tensions that can be profitably explored for the insights they may yield. *Beauty and the Bible: Toward a Hermeneutics of Biblical Aesthetics* is designed to serve a wide readership, with each reader resonating with one or perhaps two of the challenges indicated above. Additionally, readers may have an unanticipated and uncanny engagement with that "other" approach to biblical beauty that they might otherwise discount. These essays offer new perspectives on beauty in the Bible and a range of hermeneutical tools to advance the study of aesthetics.

In its complement of essays on beauty in the Bible, this book introduces readers to modern philosophy, to contextual criticism, and to the postcritical return to beauty. Modern philosophy informs "The Potential of the Category of Sublime for Reading the Episodes of the Stilling of the Storm (Luke 8:22–25) and of the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36)," by Jean-François Racine. After reviewing the association of the sublime and terror in Western thought, this essay reads the stories of the calming of the storm and the transfiguration in Luke as prompting an experience of the sublime. "The Sublime Art of Prophetic Seeing and the Word in the Book of Jeremiah," by Mark Brummitt, continues in this vein. Brummitt considers the proliferation of meanings in Jeremiah's words and body as an instance of the sublime. He finds resonance of this phenomenon in the British painter Francis Bacon (1908–1992), whose work serves as a lens to look at Jeremiah. The role of subjectivity in critical theory is at the center of "Perceiving Beauty in Mark 5:21–43," by Antonio Portalatín. This essay turns to Wolfgang Iser's theory of reading as an aesthetic response to highlight the pleasurable aspects of reading the story of the hemorrhaging woman and the resurrection of Jairus's daughter in the fifth chapter of Mark.

David Penchansky's essay, "Beauty, Power, and Attraction: Aesthetics and the Hebrew Bible," serves as a primer on contextual criticism. Penchansky examines the vocabulary of beauty in the Hebrew Bible and uses the test cases of Rachel and David to investigate further the relationship

between beauty and power. Embedded in Penchansky's analysis is the presupposition that texts, particularly old, sacred texts that have passed through many hands and many communities, are sites of conflict. Rather than looking for a particular objective meaning, a reading should uncover the conflicts, contradictions, and places of dissonance within a text. Paired with Penchansky's essay is an empirical study, "Yachin and Boaz in Jerusalem and Rome" by Richard Bautch. This essay deals with the columns Yachin and Boaz in the Solomonic Temple, curiously described in 1 Kings and 2 Chronicles. Bautch first looks at how these columns were rearticulated in Christian architecture and argues that what made the Solomonic columns especially attractive to artists of the Renaissance was that the two pillars reflected aesthetic and political dimensions of the society that created them. A broader conclusion is that history provides multiple examples of a leader seeking political gain by associating himself with a stunning architectural feature from the temple of Solomon.

Jo-Ann Brant's postcritical reading of beauty in the Gospel of John identifies an aesthetic dimension to Johannine theology and Christology. Such an aesthetic, she indicates, is essential to the Johannine notion of glory and revelation. Moreover, as an aesthetic object, the Gospel of John is not simply an account of what happened but a work of art that imparts a sense of divine beauty by means of the beauty of the prose. That is, the biblical writer seems to understand that God's glory is perceivable to the physical senses and not simply the mind's eye. Brant's essay is informed by the thought of Simone Weil and Han Urs von Balthasar.

The final essay, by Peter Spitaler, serves as an epilogue to the volume. Responding to all the essays, Spitaler highlights common themes and motifs in the various biblical narratives and underscores hermeneutical insights that are shared by the contributors. Without imposing unity, Spitaler synthesizes the studies in this collection by focusing on three aspects: the historical, social, and cultural boundedness of beauty constructs; the subjective dimension in the perception of beauty; and the relationships between the beautiful and the sublime. Spitaler concludes with suggestions for further research on beauty, Bible, method, and hermeneutics. The collection of essays as a whole underscores the significance of aesthetics and related considerations for the ancient writers of sacred texts and for individuals and communities who read them today with modern and postmodern sensibilities.

These explorations into the aesthetic qualities of seven discrete biblical texts signal a fresh, interdisciplinary understanding of scripture. More

than ever, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder to suggest great diversity in the field of aesthetics and new challenges for readers of the Bible. Moreover, *Beauty and the Bible: Toward a Hermeneutics of Biblical Aesthetics* catalogs the plurality of methods currently in use to elaborate and comment on beauty in the biblical text. The diversity reflected on these pages parallels that of the volume's contributors in the aggregate. That is, while two of the authors are from the continental United States, five come from other cultural contexts that include the Caribbean, continental Europe, French-speaking Canada, and Great Britain. Amid this diversity, there has been an abiding center: many of these essays were conceived within a working group on hermeneutics that meets as part of the international meeting of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. In sessions from 2008 to 2010, the group considered and critiqued one another's studies on biblical aesthetics, and the project developed into *Beauty and the Bible: Toward a Hermeneutics of Biblical Aesthetics*.

The editors acknowledge and express gratitude to the Catholic Biblical Association of America for its support of this project. We also thank the editors at Semeia Studies, Jennifer Koosed and Gerald West, along with the editorial staff at the Society of Biblical Literature, especially Kathie Klein, Bob Buller, and Leigh Andersen. We thank as well our research assistant, Peter Claver Ajer, for his work on the indices. Finally, we dedicate this volume to Gina Hens-Piazza and David Penchansky. For many years Gina and David led the study of hermeneutics within the Catholic Biblical Association of America by convening the group that meets annually at the international meeting. In this role, they were among the first to conceive and articulate a synthesis between biblical studies and critical theory. Their leadership advanced the study of biblical hermeneutics at a critical time in its development, and under their influence an entire cohort of scholars came to approach the biblical text with methodological savvy and a concomitant desire to be of service, to the world and to communities of faith. In the field of hermeneutics, the legacy of Gina and David is a thing of beauty.