

Toward a Biblical Theory of Aesthetics

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By definition, aesthetics is the philosophy of beauty and art. It is the discipline which uses human reason to study the nature of beauty and the principles which determine its expression and critique. As such, in Lutheran terminology, it is a discipline that belongs to the kingdom of the left. Consequently, the Scriptures do not give an explicit definition or philosophy of beauty. The biblical writers assume its presence as a characteristic in God's creation, as well as, it may be argued, demonstrate/employ its principles of expression in their writing. Perhaps the best example of this is biblical poetry. Clearly, the nature and principles of beauty are operative and exemplified in the psalms, as well as much of the wisdom and prophetic literature of the Old Testament and their parallels in the New Testament.

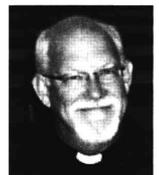
This is not to say that the writers of the Bible are silent about beauty. They testify to it as a characteristic both of God and his creation. Moreover, they particularly witness God's valuing of beauty in the role of God-ordained worship.

It is the presupposition of this study that where Scripture does (often incidentally) reveal knowledge of the kingdom of the left, it would seem wise to take advantage of it as an accurate, helpful and insightful (even if not exhaustive) source.

To that end, even though Scripture does not intend or purport to give an explicitly developed philosophy of aesthetics, it does give Spirit-inspired (i.e., divine) accounts and literature in which beauty is either profoundly referenced (i.e., witnessed to and implicitly described) or demonstrated (as in the poetic literature). Consequently, human reason (especially sanctified human reason) may well be able to deduce some aspects of aesthetic theory from biblical revelation. This would not be a *theology* of aesthetics as much as a *biblical theory* of aesthetics—i.e., some fundamental principles of aesthetics deduced from biblical accounts referencing beauty.

The particular focus of this study is to deduce *some characteristics* of beauty itself (*ontology*) on the basis of the creation accounts given in the first two chapters of Genesis (especially chapter 1). This seems an obvious place to begin since, other than revelations of God himself (theology), this is as close as we can get to a description of a pristine expression of beauty, of beauty unmarred by the introduction of sin.

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Characteristics of Beauty in the Creation Accounts

This study operates with the conviction that the biblical creation accounts in Genesis 1–2 are *historical* narratives. Consequently, what they report are descriptions of the universe as it actually appeared upon its first existence before the creation was corrupted by any consequences and effects of the fall. While much of this can still be observed in creation in its fallen state, certainly the characteristics would be much more obvious and magnificent in the original, *perfect* creation, much as they will be in the new creation.

At various junctures, the creation account of Genesis 1 gives summary evaluations of God's creative work as he initially creates a primary matter that is "without form and void" (v. 2) and then in six days progressively gives it form(s) and fills it. At each juncture of evaluation (days 1, 3, 4, 5, and 6), the account gives the Creator's own judgment of what he has made, based upon what he saw. That judgment is uniformly/consistently "good" (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21 and 25) and finally, with respect to all that he had made (the whole) "very good" (v. 31). Within this context, no doubt, *to v* is an evaluation of God's creative work in many respects (aesthetic, moral, ontological, functional, teleological, God-delighting, etc.). Nor can these aspects of God's creative work necessarily be separated from one another, much as all of the characteristics of God himself, as revealed to us, are bound together and form one manifestation of *glory*. All of these characteristics together express the "goodness" of God's creative work. But, certainly *aesthetic* goodness is part of that total package. After all, the biblical writer records God's evaluation in connection with what God *saw*.

To be sure, this *altogether* nature of the goodness of creation does make it somewhat challenging to isolate a particular perspective, such as *aesthetic*, and develop a list of definitive characteristics that does not include the characteristics of the other perspectives, such as, morality, etc. (Thus, the issue of whether something that is immoral in some characteristics can also be aesthetically beautiful is inherently problematic.) But, for the purposes of this study, aesthetic will be taken as a separate category or attribute subset of the *overall goodness* description given in the creation account, with the assumption that, if nothing else, it *highlights* certain aspects of the goodness of creation—namely, those which can be perceived by human *senses* and appreciated/valued with the faculty/ability that identifies the quality of beauty (which we will attempt to delineate).

As stated previously, it is the assumption/belief of this study that while the creation itself and the human faculty for perceiving beauty are both seriously marred by the fall, nonetheless, enough of the "goodness" (including aesthetic) remains that what is beautiful to the Creator can still be (imperfectly/incompletely) perceived by the human being whose senses and aesthetic faculty are still functional.

So, what are some of the aesthetic characteristics of the original/perfect creation (still imperfectly perceptible) as described in Genesis 1–2? Since we have no *visual* record of the original creation, we must make our deductions on the basis of the *written* record. This will likely not lead us to an *exhaustive* list of the criteria of beauty, but it will

give us at least *some* criteria, so that for those who accept the biblical description of creation as an expression of the divine aesthetic standard, there is a normative canon with which to begin. This study will limit itself to the criteria of beauty as these are experienced through the sense of *sight*. Presumably, in many respects, they would also apply to the experience of beauty in the other four human senses.

Perhaps, it should be underscored once again that the standard of beautiful criteria developed here are *deductions* developed from the biblical account of the creation. Since these criteria are not explicitly dictated, they are, of course, subject to the limitations of human reason. Thus, the deduced criteria are certainly open to critique. But, despite this limitation, the benefit remains that there is an objective basis for all to analyze and discuss. This gives at least some prospect for an agreed upon basis for determining what is beautiful. The apostle Paul, for one, assumes this can/should be done when he urges Christians: “Whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8).

Differentiation

As noted above, the evaluation of the goodness of God’s creative work (including its aesthetic goodness or beauty) occurs first in the creation account of Genesis 1 at verse 4. Specifically, the text observes that God saw the *light* was good. The creation of light itself introduced the first *differentiation* or distinction in the primary matter. Whether one views this as the creation of energy or a literal light as we typically experience it (despite the fact that the sun, moon and stars are not set in place until day 4), the result is a distinction or difference so profound and fundamental that the resulting realities are given distinct names—namely, *Day* and *Night* (v. 5). It may be that the Hebrew text, which can be read, “God called *to* the Day” and “He called *to* the Night,” underscores the personal intentionality of this first differentiating/creative act. In the very least, this first act of creation, resulting in an aesthetic goodness, emphasizes a primary characteristic of beautiful matter. It is differentiated. There are definite, observable distinctions or boundaries set in place to mark off one created form from another. This is a characteristic which continues to describe the creation to a greater and greater degree as God’s creative work progresses. Finally, on day six when the complete set of differentiations is finished, the sum of all the boundaries/distinctions is said to be *very good* (v. 31).

Thus, a primary/fundamental characteristic of the aesthetic good is that it expresses differentiation, distinction, or boundaries. Day is distinct from night (v. 5). Evening is distinct from morning (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, and 31). The waters above the expanse are distinct from the waters below it (v. 7). Earth is distinct from the seas (v. 10). Plants are distinct from fruit trees (v. 11). The greater light that rules the day (sun) is distinct from the lesser light that rules the night (moon) and both are distinct from the stars (v. 16). The birds (v. 20), the living creatures that swarm in the waters (v. 20), and the living creatures brought forth from the earth (v. 24) are each distinct from the others. Most distinct from the rest of God’s creation is man, who alone is made in the Creator’s image and after his likeness and who governs the earth as the Creator’s repre-

sentative and partner (v. 26). Specifically, it is said of the human creatures that they are made with the God-intended primary distinction of being *male* and *female* (v. 27).

Consequently, that which is aesthetically good, or beautiful, always involves differentiation, distinction, or boundaries. The aesthetic good leads the perceiver to notice, appreciate, value and enjoy the distinctions in God's creation. Theologically, this is grounds for the human creature to experience the multifaceted nature of God's glory and creative activity and render thanks and praise. When no distinctions are clear, the perceiver experiences the creation as an undifferentiated mass that brings no aesthetic satisfaction, no experience of beauty.

Contrast

Differentiation in its most extreme or profound expressions is experienced as *contrast*. The most fundamental expression of this in the creation accounts is the contrast between light and darkness. These may be described as polar opposites. Both are creations of God. They are aesthetically good/beautiful when they are experienced vis-à-vis each other. Together they emphasize the unique qualities of each. Thus, one of the primary skills in the visual arts is expressing this contrast. Visual objects are perceived pleasingly (noticed, appreciated, valued and enjoyed) when they express the characteristic of light distinguished from/contrasted to dark. Expressions of complete darkness or light may be experienced as beautiful, but partly because their opposite is inferred. Similarly, a specific color in its radical purity or singularity may be experienced as beautiful (e.g., a perfectly blue sky) partly because of its distinction from/contrast to other colors (even if the other colors are not in the immediate visual context).

This contrast is also expressed in fundamental *line forms*. No doubt, one of the first contrasts Adam perceived and enjoyed was the stark difference between the forms of the sun or moon (parabola or circle) and the earth's horizon (straight line from Adam's perspective). These too may be seen as visual opposites. The contrast between the two, endlessly expressed in God's creation and human artistic expressions, highlights the unique qualities of each and the goodness of their experience together.

This may be the best place also to identify the contrast expressed in the *dimensions of space*. Theoretically, these dimensions could exist along with time at the first appearance of the fundamental, undifferentiated matter. Perhaps this is implied when the original matter is identified as having a *face (paneh)* "over" the *deep (tehom)* and the Spirit of God is described as hovering "over" the *face (paneh)* of the *waters (mayim)* (v. 2). Together these words suggest the three dimensions we commonly experience as space. Certainly, the description of day two makes multidimensionality apparent. The distinctions made in the waters involve "midst," "under" and "above" (vv. 6–7). As well, it might be argued that "Heaven" (v. 8) (creation beyond the earth) is uniformly used in Scripture in reference to the creation as a place exhibiting height, breadth, and depth. In any case, these dimensions express fundamentally contrasting aspects of creation. They would be among the first distinctions Adam perceived and experienced as *good*. In particular, the visual arts, let alone beauty, are unimaginable without at least the two contrasting dimensions of horizontal and vertical.

Again, part of the aesthetic experience, then, involves the perception of contrasting elements in God's creation. While little, subtle gradations in form can be experienced as beautiful, it is partly because they are perceived in the visual context (whether external or mental) of the contrast of the fundamental forms.

Diversity

As the differentiation of God's creation progresses and, especially, as it concludes, a prominent and obvious characteristic of the creation that is aesthetically good is its tremendous *diversity* or variety. Not only are there major *types* of differentiation/distinction that stand in stark contrast (light and dark; land, sky and seas; plants and animals; humans and non-humans), but there is seemingly endless diversity or variety *within* each major differentiation. In other words, the *quantity* of distinctions within the creation is *practically* infinite. Again, one might observe this as the extreme of differentiation.

The account of day three of creation begins to bring this aspect of goodness into fuller expression. And, once again, it reaches its fullest expression on day six (with, by way of reminder, the fullest expression of the Creator's approval, *very good* [v. 31]). On day three, the accent of God's aesthetically good creative activity shifts from *forming* to *filling*. These two basic creative activities have been hinted at/anticipated already in verse 2 when the state of the basic matter is described as *without form and void*, but the activity of *filling*, with its result of diversity, now comes to the fore and receives emphasis throughout the rest of the account.

As God begins the filling activity for his creation, the first focus is on planet earth. "Vegetation" (v. 11) is a collective term, indicating multiple types of plants and trees. The distinctive categories of *plant* and *fruit tree* are identified with plurals (v. 11). Day three of the account brings the first use of *kind* (v. 11) to describe a broad category of creatures that can reproduce with each other. Verse 12 indicates that there is a multiplicity of these kinds or interbreeding groups. Moreover, the *multiplication* of the quantity of these plants and trees are part of the Creator's intention, provided for through their seeds (vv. 11–12).

Day four shifts the attention away from planet earth (although the creative activity is identified as being for the sake of earth) to the world beyond (the *heavens*) (v. 14). It is interesting to note that even the creation beyond earth, although taken as a whole, is described in the plural. That is, there is diversity/variety also in the rest of the creation. Not only are there two lights (sun and moon) for ruling/governing earth, but there are also *multiple lights/stars* "to give light on the earth" (v. 17). Not only do these various lights give light upon the earth and distinguish day from night and one day from another, but they also mark multiple distinct periods of time—i.e., *seasons* and *years* (v. 14). Time itself is marked into multiple divisions.

The great diversity among God's creatures continues to be detailed and highlighted as the narrative shifts focus back on earth for the two concluding creative days. Thus, the Creator commands the waters (plural) to swarm with swarms (plural) of living creatures (plural) (v. 20). Birds (plural) are spoken into existence and told to fly across the heavens (plural) (v. 20). Special identification is made of the *great sea creatures*

(plural) (v. 21). In addition, God commands the earth to bring forth living creatures (plural), livestock (collective), creeping things (plural), and beasts (plural) (v. 24). Once more, each of the basic categories of birds, swimming creatures, and land creatures are said to be created in various *kinds* (plural) (vv. 21 and 24–25). And, as with the green world, so all the living creatures of sea, sky and land are designed with the means and given the command to *multiply* (v. 22). Finally, also the human creatures are commanded by the Creator to “be fruitful and *multiply* and *fill* the earth” (v. 28).

All of this detailed description of the filling activity of the Creator emphasizes that a very primary characteristic of the aesthetically good creation is its tremendous *diversity*. Consequently, a fundamental criterion for judging beauty is its expression of diversity. Overall, beauty highlights and celebrates diversity, the manifold/abundant/profuse number of distinctions in God’s creation. Beauty is expressed in the sheer *quantity* of distinctions among God’s creatures (individual creations). Thus, that which is beautiful will lead the perceiver to notice, appreciate, value, enjoy (and, in Christians, give thanks and praise to the Creator for) the astounding variety within the perceivable world.

This does not mean that every single creature of God or every human creation must by or in itself express the *full* variety of creation’s distinctions in order to be beautiful. Nor does it mean that the more distinctions there are in a given creature or human creative expression, the more beautiful it is. What it does mean is that a given creature of God or human creative expression is beautiful to the extent that it leads the perceiver to take note of, appreciate, value and enjoy the *overall diversity* of God’s creation. Thus, beauty claims the whole of creation as its context. Every beautiful work will in some way lead the perceiver to appreciate and value the diversity of perceived reality as a whole. This may be accomplished by the focus upon a few distinctions in contrast to the many, or by the inclusion of a great many distinctions, highlighting diversity as such. Thus, the singularity of color in a freshly fallen snow, covering everything in sight with uniform color, may be perceived as beautiful, but so may the blend of the vast diversity of colors in a fall forest. In their own way, each draws attention to the characteristic of diversity.

Unity and Harmony

Yet, given the almost incomprehensible diversity described in the Creator’s world, the text also underscores that there is, at the same time, a marvelous *unity and harmony* to it all. The individual creatures of God’s world, while being distinct, exist and function well together, as a whole. While there are almost innumerable distinctions and strong contrasts, there is no isolation of any creature nor opposition/competition among the creatures. Each has its place and contributes to the whole. The relationships among the diverse creatures are complementary and supplementary. To repeat, at the several junctures during the progress of creation, while increasing quantity and variety of creatures are introduced, each evaluation of the Creator is *good*. And, at the end of the account, it is reported that God looks at his creative work both in its diversity and multiplicity (*everything*) and as one (*it*), and pronounces that it is *very good* (v. 31). There is a togetherness or oneness to the creation that is good (including aesthetically good).

Genesis 1 underscores the oneness in several ways. At the very outset, the Creator is identified as God (*Elohim*) (v. 1). Throughout the account, the creative activity is attributed some thirty times to this same *Elohim*. To be sure, in verse 2, the Spirit (*ruah*) is very significantly identified as present and operative in the creation, but he is the Spirit of *Elohim*. Likewise, while in verse 26 it is significant that *Elohim* refers to himself in the plural (*us* and *our*), he claims a singular image and likeness—i.e., *Elohim* is only one God. Consequently, all of creation comes into being through the activity of the one, same God. In addition, with the very significant exception of the human creature, God employs the same means for creating—namely, he *speaks* his creatures into existence (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, and 24). With the exception of the creation of man, there is a sameness to the manner of God's creating.

Further, the creation itself is identified as a unity. In the summary introduction to the account in verse 1, the one creation is combined in the phrase *heavens and earth* (cf. Gn 2:1 and 4). This heavens and earth unity is then described as the product of one creative process of God taking place over six days (cf. Gn 2:3).

Before the individuating work of the Creator begins, the whole creation is one undifferentiated substance, described as *darkness*, the *deep* and *waters* (v. 2). From it comes all the differentiated creatures detailed in the following verses. Hence, the creation comes from the same basic stuff. The account highlights unity with specific reference to the yet-to-be-shaped earth that at the beginning is *without form* (shapeless) and *void* (empty). Yet, even at this point, it is described as one earth. All the differentiated forms are related to one another in that they all are created from the same primary matter.

The unity of the creation in terms of its sharing of a fundamental substance is underscored a number of times in the creation account. Thus, the form of matter above the dividing expanse (*raqia*) is identified with the same word as the form of matter below the expanse—namely, *waters* (*mayim*) (vv. 6–7). Plants and fruit trees are “brought forth” from the matter that has been shaped into *earth* (*eres*) (vv. 11–12). From this earth (*eres*) are “brought forth” also all the living creatures that live on the earth—namely, all the various *kinds of livestock*, *creeping things*, and *beasts of the earth* (v. 24), as well as “*every bird of the heavens*” (see Gn 2:19). It is especially striking that even *man*, the creature that is made in the very image and likeness of the Creator, is shaped from the same fundamental material as the rest of the creation (see Gn 2:7). Substantially, in terms of its basic building blocks, all of the creation is one.

Not only are the diversity of created forms (creatures) related in substance, but they are created to *function together* in a complementary and supplementary unity. Thus, evening and morning continually work together to make each new day (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23 and 31). The “lights of the heavens” (i.e. sun, moon and stars) function together “to give light upon the earth” (vv. 15 and 17) and to provide seasons (v. 14). “Rain” (likely mist or dew) is provided for plants (see Gn 2:5). Living creatures are created to swarm in the waters (v. 20) and to “multiply and fill the waters in the seas” (v. 22). While birds are created to “fly above the earth across the expanse of the heavens” (v. 20), they are also given the earth on which to reproduce (v. 22). Creeping things are made to creep “on the ground” (vv. 25, 26, 28 and 30). “Every green plant” is given for food for

“everything that has the breath of life” (v. 30). Most significantly, the human creature has a relationship to all the other creatures of the earth in which he (and she) are to “have dominion” over them—i.e., to represent the Creator/Ruler and work with him to care for the earth and its creatures (v. 26; cf. Gn 2:5 and 15). This last relationship is prominently featured when the Creator brings every ground and air creature to Adam for him to name (see Gn2:19).

The complementary/supplementary relationship among all the creatures is given particular emphasis in the union of man and woman. This is not surprising since they are most reflective of the nature of the Creator who is both one and plural. Together they are given the categorical name *man (adam)* (vv. 26–27). Together they are in the image and likeness of God (vv. 26–27). Together they are given the command to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth” (v. 28). Together they are to *subdue* the earth and exercise *dominion* over all the living creatures (v. 28). Moreover, Eve is specifically created as a *helper (ezer)* for Adam (see Gn 2:18 and 20). Eve is even specially crafted by the Creator from the substance/rib of Adam and personally brought by God to Adam (see Gn 2:21–22). Adam himself underscores their unity in diversity when he exclaims that the woman was made from his substance/bone/flesh (see Gn 2:23) and poetically identifies her as *woman (ishah)* because “she was taken out of” *man (ish)* (see Gn 2:23). To cap it off, the biblical account concludes that the man and woman “shall become *one flesh*” (see Gn 2:24).

To sum up, the creation accounts make it abundantly clear that, although there is a great deal of diversity within God’s creation, nonetheless, it is also prominently characterized by a unity and harmony both in substance and function. Consequently, it is a prominent feature of that which is aesthetic/beautiful that it displays unity and harmony. Such unity is not just a matter of being together, but being together in a way that pleasingly *works together*, that benefits each of the creatures so joined. So, with respect to the Creator’s overall composition of the earth, it is beautiful not just because sky, land, seas, plants, and living creatures are together in one location, but because they harmoniously work together. They “fit.” Among other things, they *look good* together, as in the combination of sky, sun, and earth in a sunset or in the combination of grasses, wildflowers and singing birds in a meadow. Similarly, human created works are experienced as beautiful to the extent that the various elements from which they are composed “fit/work together.” To the extent that they clash or are incongruent, to the degree that the elements just don’t “work together,” we perceive them as aesthetically unpleasing or ugly.

Balance

Closely related to harmony is *balance*. As the creative work of God progresses throughout the six days, differentiation of the matter becomes more and more diverse, while still being one creation. The increasing quantity and diversity of differentiations work in ways that are complementary and supplementary (including aesthetically) such that the unity is maintained. Not only do the incredible quantity and variety of God’s creatures exist and work together, but they do so in ways that are right/pleasing/satisfying, allowing each to be perfectly and fully what the Creator intended, as well

as bringing the whole to perfectly and fully express its potential together. Expressed dynamically, one creature of God does not overwhelm/overcome another. Expressed quantitatively, there is not too much or too little of any particular creature. Each creature is present in the right/pleasing/satisfying amount, including the creature of *movement* or *change* (such as day into night, seed into plant, matter into energy, or shift of matter from one space to another).

Again, the first such balance created is that between dark and light (paralleled in the creatures evening and morning) (vv. 4, 5 and 8). In the instance of day and night, the proportions seem to be equal. In any case, the balance is just right. To God's vision and for his purposes, there is just the right amount of dark and light, of day and night. They work together in *balance*. They perform a pleasing dance. Darkness does not dominate light and night does not outweigh day.

While the proportions among the rest of the creatures are not given, it is clear that there is a balance, according to the Creator's standard and intentions. Thus, by the end of the third day, sky (the heavens), earth and seas (waters) are in the right proportions so that, for example, seas are gathered together in one place where they belong and dry land appears in its proper place (vv. 6–10). The amount of plants and fruit trees are appropriate for the earth, so that each has the resources of light, water and earth for it to properly do what God created it to do. The heavens, while vastly bigger than the earth, are in the right proportion to the earth so that the sun, moon and stars can be at the proper distance to give the right amount of light on the earth (vv. 14–18). The living creatures of the water, sky, and land live together in proportions such that each has and will have (after fruitfulness and multiplication) enough of the resources of air, water, and plants to thrive, without destroying the others or depleting the resources (vv. 29–30). Each is given the green light to reproduce and do their share of filling the earth.

Again, perhaps nowhere is this balance better displayed than in the combination of man and woman. As originally created for each other, while Adam chronologically comes first and Eve is created as his helper, the man does not dominate the woman. There is not too much man or woman in the relationship. In fact, many of their characteristics overlap. The distinctions that are there enable them to function as *one flesh* (see Gn 2:24). They are similar enough, but different enough that together they can reproduce and fulfill their calling to help *fill* the earth. They are similar enough, but different enough that they can recognize each other as an *other*, communicate with each *other*, and work with each other to care for God's creation. Their differences are essential to be able to carry out their unique and combined callings. But, the differences are just right. Adam is not too much man and Eve is not too much woman. Together in just the right amounts they can express the image of God. Together they can be *human*. Together they *dance*.

The fall into sin, of course, has radically disrupted the right proportions and put the whole earth and its creatures out of balance as compared to the original composition of God. Frequently, the creation suffers from too much or too little of one creature or another. But the very fact that this imbalance is experienced as such is testimony to an original standard of the proper proportions and influences among all God's creatures.

As in God's creation, so in human creations, balance is an important characteristic for a particular work to be perceived as beautiful. While in some instances this may be expressed in equal proportions among elements, many times the proportions will not be equal, but will occur in the right/pleasing/satisfying proportions/amount (thus, the beauty of *asymmetry*). Not every beautiful work will highlight every element. Likewise, some beautiful elements may be present in a work that is not overall beautiful. But, in those that are as a whole aesthetically good, each element will be in balance. The perception of movement from one element to another will not be overwhelming. The quantity of each element will be experienced as just right. There will not be too much or too little of any given element (e.g., not too light or dark, not too busy or static, not too crowded or empty, not overwhelmed by a given form). The force or quantity of each element will enable each element to be perceived at its best while together they produce the best possible combination when so joined. A beautiful work will reflect the balance, the beautiful dance of the original creation.

Pattern/Design

As God's creation unfolds throughout the six days, certain relationships of order repeat. Especially highlighted in the biblical account are repeating relationships (sequences) of time, matter, and persons. The repetition of these ordered, sequential relationships results in overall *patterns* or *designs*.

Perhaps most obvious in Genesis 1 are the repeated relationships of *time*. The first repeating time relationship appears after the first differentiation, recorded in verse 5: "And there was *evening* and there was *morning*." This pattern, corresponding to a repetition of the conditions of darkness and light, is identified as a *day* (*yom*). The remainder of God's creative activity occurs in the repetition of the same sequence five more times, with the result that there are six equal periods of creating time, six repetitions of the sequence of evening and morning, of night and day (vv. 5, 8, 13, 19, 23 and 31). That these are intended to be sequential is indicated with the assignment to them of ordinal numbers. The sequence/pattern is ended with the inclusion of one more *day* on which no activity of forming and filling takes place (see Gn 2:2). This is specifically identified as the *seventh day* in continuity with the other six days. Moreover, this day is given special accent, being declared by the Creator to be *holy* (*qadosh*), set apart as distinct from the other days because it is the day on which the Creator rested from His original creation work (see Gn 2:1–3). Together these seven days form a pattern that is later legislated to be observed by Israel (see Ex 20:8–11), but is already a designated pattern.

Furthermore, time is patterned into the repeated periods of "*seasons, days* (here, possibly, recurring repetitions of the unit of seven days—i.e., months) and *years*" (v. 14), determined by the regular movements of the moon and (phenomenologically speaking) sun and stars (vv. 14–18).

In addition to patterns or designs of time, there are also repeated relationships in *matter*. The fundamental forms of seas (waters), dry lands (earth) and expanse/heaven (sky) are first *formed*, and then *filled* with creatures that depend on them for the resources to live and thrive. In fact, all living creatures *come from* the pre-existing forms.

It is specifically stated that all vegetation, land animals, birds, and humans are made of the stuff of earth (vv. 11–12 and 24; see Gn 2:7, 9 and 19). Again, the fundamental forms each precede the living creatures as the places or habitats/homes in which the living creatures live. Thus, the seas are designated and given as the place for all the living creatures that move and swarm in them (vv. 20–21). The sky is given as the place for birds to fly (v. 20) and the earth is given as the place for them to reproduce (v. 22). Livestock, creeping things and beasts of the earth are given the earth to move upon (vv. 24, 26, 28 and 30). As usual, the human creatures are given special attention. Not only the earth in general is given as their habitat (v. 28), but the Creator fashions a particular place for them to call home as they begin their existence, a park named *Eden* (see Gn 2: 8 and 15). It might also be noted that, similarly, the heavens are designated as the space for the non-living creatures of sun, moon and stars (vv. 14–18).

Likewise, there is a *reproduction pattern* or sequence among all living creatures. That is, new living creatures are brought into being by the living creatures that precede them. Moreover, reproduction always takes place within the major kinds or categories to which a particular creature belongs. Plants and trees reproduce plants and trees, “according to their kinds” (v. 12). The living creatures of the earth bring forth offspring, each “according to their kinds” (v. 24). Man and woman are specifically given the order together as a unit to “be fruitful and multiply” (v. 28). The same design for reproduction pertains across the diverse forms of living creatures.

Finally, there are very significant patterns or relationships of order between the personal Creator and human persons. The human creatures have in common with the whole rest of creation that they are *creatures*, i.e., particular creations of God. God preceded them and brought them into existence. They, like the rest of creation, are dependent upon the Creator for existence, original and ongoing.

But, the human creatures are also profoundly different from the rest of the creatures. They alone are made in God’s image and likeness (vv. 26–27). Whatever the exact nature of this image, it includes a whole series of similarities or likenesses that the Creator repeats between himself and man. In their existence together, the man and woman reflect or repeat the divine pattern of plurality of persons in oneness. Thus, Genesis 1 witnesses that the one God Elohim, the single Creator, is also plural in his identity (vv. 2 and 26). Likewise, man and woman are *distinct persons*, but together form *one flesh* (see Gn 2:24). The Creator is the ruler over all his creation, but he has made man and woman his *representatives* on the earth, to exercise his type of caring rule over it and all its creatures (v. 26 and 28; see Gn 2:5, 15 and 20). The Creator speaks meaningful language (vv. 3, 6, 9, etc.) and man speaks meaningful language (see Genesis 2:23). As both man and woman are the Creator’s helpers, so the woman is the man’s helper (see Gn 2:18 and 20–22).

By observance of the creation itself, any human perceiver can multiply examples of repetitive orders of relationship within the creation, but the above are explicitly described in the creation accounts of Genesis. Thus, the astute observer of snowflakes on the winter window sees that they all have the same basic crystalline shape, repeated over and over, as all crystals do. Or, we may employ a refractor of light, like a prism, and observe that, no matter what the source of light, it divides into the same order

of colors. Whether from the biblical description of the original creation or by direct observations of the creation now, it is apparent that a frequent characteristic of God's work is that there are patterns or designs. In fact, it is not uncommon to hear believers of creation speak of the one, great, grand design of God's universe. Thus, a characteristic of the aesthetic goodness of God's creation is pattern or design. Such patterns or designs do not necessarily appear in every single creature (although one might argue that at an atomic and molecular level they do), but part of the beauty of any creature is its placement within the overall matrix of creation where it does appear as a part of many patterns. Thus, every creature points to or calls us to see (in the larger context of creation) pattern and design.

Likewise, human works of creation are beautiful because they express pattern or design. Sometimes, such patterns are explicit and a prominent feature of the beautiful work, as in rococo art or detailed filigree. At other times, the element of pattern may be very simple, involving very few repetitions or not apparent in a given work, but inferred vis-à-vis a larger body of work, or mentally visualized. But, pattern or design is always either an explicit or contextual element of the beautiful.

Personhood/Personality

From the very *beginning*, creating—whether being brought into existence from nothing (*bara*) (v. 1) or being given original shape from the created matter (vv. 3ff.)—creating and God go together: “In the beginning, *God created* the heavens and the earth” (v. 1). There is no creation, no creature, apart from God. Before the beginning, before the creative activity of God (actions outside himself), God indeed exists—by himself (with much activity going on within himself—e.g. loving, communicating, and willing). But, before the beginning, there is no matter. The Creator *precedes* all matter and form that has a *beginning*. The very existence of matter (with its characteristic of beauty) is totally dependent upon *Elohim* who brings it into existence and maintains its existence. The creation accounts emphasize that matter exists, exists in its diverse forms, works together harmoniously (with complementarity and supplementarity), in balance/dance, and with patterns (in other words, exists in a way that is characterized by aesthetic goodness/beauty) *only* because *Elohim* is causing/creating/empowering it do so. It is inherent in the biblical worldview that one cannot perceive/think/talk about the creation (with its beauty) apart from association with God. One cannot abstract the work of/reflection upon the creation from its Creator. Perhaps for Lutherans in particular, it needs to be emphasized that the so-called kingdom of God's left hand and kingdom of God's right hand are both kingdoms of *God*. While God operates differently in each kingdom, nonetheless it is *God* who is at work. In the Biblical worldview, there is no such thing as secular (i.e., separate/apart from God). No discipline that studies God's creation can ever be secular.

As *Elohim*, God creates as a *personal* being. His *personhood* is expressed continuously throughout the creation accounts in expressions of:

- *speaking* (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26 and 28–29 [“said/saying”]; see also Gn 2:16-18),

- *willing/causing* (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14-15, 20, 24 and 26 [“Let there be”]; see also Gn 2:5 and 21 [“caused”]),
- *perceiving* (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31[“saw”]),
- *judging* (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 [“it was good”] and 31 [“it was very good”]; see also Gn 2:18 [“it is not good”]),
- *communicating* (vv. 26 [God within himself] and 28–30 [God to Adam and Eve]; see also Gn 2:15–17 [God to Adam] and 18 [God within himself]), and
- *self-awareness* (v. 26; see also Gn 2:18).

In addition to these, a wide array of verbs indicating personal actions are attributed to God throughout the creation accounts: create (vv. 1, 21 and 27), hover (v. 2), make (vv. 7, 16 and 25-26; see also Gn 2:4 and 18), separate (v. 4), call (vv. 5, 8 and 10), set (v. 17), bless (vv. 22 and 28; see also Gn 2:3), give (vv. 29–30), finish (see Gn 2:2), rest (see Gn 2:2–3), sanctify (see Gn 2:3), form (see Gn 2:7–8 and 19), breathe (see Gn 2:7), plant (see Gn 2:8), put (see Gn 2:8 and 15), take (see Gn 2:15 and 22), command (see Gn 2:16), bring (see Gn 2:19 and 22), and close (see Gn 2:21).

Of special interest is the description of the Spirit of *Elohim* in verse 2. The action attributed to the Spirit takes place after the basic matter has been created, but *before* God begins to do any shaping or filling. At this point, the Spirit is *hovering* over the unshaped/unfilled newly created matter. The particular verb (*haraf*) is used in Deuteronomy 32:11 to describe an eagle fluttering over its young in the nest. Whatever else Moses may intend with this verb, it certainly indicates personal intimacy and attentiveness between the Spirit and his medium that is as yet undifferentiated.

Also noteworthy is the Creator’s very personal and intimate creation of the first two human beings. As it were, God confers within himself before creating Adam and Eve, focusing especially on his plan to make them in his own image (vv. 26–27). He personally crafts Adam from the dust of the ground and very personally and intimately initiates Adam’s life with his breath into Adam’s nostrils (see Gn 2:7). God personally assesses Adam’s need for a compatible partner and then performs surgery to remove a rib and fashion from it the woman made just for Adam. God personally brings the woman to Adam as a gift (see Gn 2: 18 and 20–22). After the man and woman’s creation, God personally addresses them, giving them fundamental directions concerning reproduction, their assigned work and the food source for them and all other living creatures (vv. 28–30).

In short, the creation account emphasizes that from beginning to end, God’s creation and shaping of matter is very *personal*. He brings creation into existence as an act of free will. He bonds to his material. He plans and deliberates in the shaping of the material. He forms some of the material to specifically reflect his own identity and then shares his life with it. He evaluates his work as he progresses and is pleased with it. He intentionally concludes his creative activity and then “takes time” to enjoy it. Nothing about the creation happens by chance. God is attentive to every detail, making sure it is perfect, just what he *intends*.

Consequently, beauty is not impersonal or accidental. Within all of God’s creation, it is personal; it is an intentional expression and statement about the Creator him-

self. Therefore, a fundamental characteristic of anything beautiful is that it witnesses to a personal maker—whether that maker is the original maker of all things or the human maker who creates by reshaping God’s material/s. Thus, there is no such thing as chance or accidental beauty. All beauty found within nature is the personal expression of God, the original Creator. For example, the beautifully shaped and polished stone that washes up on a lake’s shore doesn’t come about by chance or impersonal forces. It is the result of the personal action of God, crafting through a long (from human perspective) and complex process.

Likewise, beauty in human creations is always personal. It expresses and communicates something about its maker/s. Painters who fling paint upon a canvas do not do so entirely randomly. Some choice/control/intentionality/passion (even if minimal) is exercised. Even computer generated art is ultimately the product of a personal maker. Someone designed/created a program and applied it to materials. It did not occur all by itself. A basic characteristic of beauty is that it is always a personal product—either created by the three-personed God or one of the persons he has made in his image. With respect to human works, they will be beautiful to the extent that they are a product of human intelligence, will, affect, and skill. The less human investment, the less beautiful they will be. This, of course, does not exclude the use of tools, including very complex tools, such as computers. But the tools themselves will produce no beautiful works apart from their use by persons.

Personality Plus

In the above description, previous to personality, we attempted to identify some characteristics within the creation that we could more or less single out and individually define—namely: differentiation, contrast, diversity, unity and harmony, balance, and pattern. Personality as such (i.e., the characteristic of expressing personhood or personal origin) may also be identified as a single, identifiable, objective characteristic. With the certainty that the creation as described in Genesis 1–2 is beautiful or aesthetically good, we have argued that these are at least some of the identifiable, objective characteristics of beauty. These can be perceived and deduced in the description of the original creation as well as in human creative works that are beautiful. Thus, they can serve as an objective basis for perceiving, evaluating and appreciating beauty in creation and human creative works.

However, with the introduction of the last characteristic, personality, we encounter a characteristic that by its very nature is a complex combination of many attributes. In the above demonstration of the personality of the Creator, as described in his creative work in Genesis 1–2, we have specifically mentioned or implied some of his essential characteristics as revealed in his work—e.g., self-existence/awareness/expression, free will, intentionality, intelligence, power, affect, and relationship with persons. Since God is infinite, these cannot by any means be taken as an exhaustive list of all the Creator’s attributes. Yet, it can be seen that even these can be “combined” in a very diverse number of ways, highlighting a diverse number of unique accents. For example, the combination alone of God as an intelligent, intentional, self-expressive God with a

sense of unity in diversity, contrast, and balance can easily be seen to result in creative work that expresses *order*, *design*, and *pattern*. Likewise, combining the characteristics that God is infinite, intelligent, self-expressive and affective certainly implies an infinite *imagination*. Or, considering that God is all-powerful, absolutely free, and intentional, it is not hard to see this combination expressed in the total *novelty* of the original creation and endless newness within steady/repeated forms.

Just as there are numerous diverse combinations of God's personal characteristics resulting in a broad variety of unique personal accents, it may be expected that if these are expressed in the works he has made, then beauty will have some combined characteristics that will be experienced/perceived in multidimensional accents. Some characteristics, such as harmony and balance, may be readily identifiable. Others, such as imagination or order, will likely be more challenging. Some expressions of beauty may be so complex that it may not be possible to completely or clearly identify the profundities that make them beautiful. In the end, likely, some room will have to be left for absolute, overwhelming, indescribable beauty (hence the descriptions of some of the Creator's works as breathtaking—like a starry night, mountain grandeur, or sunset beach—leaving one *speechless* or *mind boggled*). The response to such is not objective analysis of beautiful characteristics, but wonder, awe, and joy at the Creator whose complete personality, likewise, is ultimately a mystery—beyond comprehension or description.

After an occasion of viewing the Creator's beauty manifested in the moon and stars, David, himself an artist who penned some beautiful words and composed some beautiful melodies, exclaimed in wonder to God, "What is man that you are mindful of him" casting him in the Creator's very image with the capacity to mimic the Creator's beautiful works (Ps 8:4)? Indeed, the Creator's gifts to humans are so great and generous that, at times, they also may produce works whose beauty cannot be exhaustively analyzed. While such aesthetic characteristics as differentiation, contrast, diversity, unity and harmony, balance, pattern, and personality will capture some of the nature of their beauty; even among human works there will be occasions of beauty sublime. The image of God in the human creator beckons this.

Leaving room for such experiences of beauty, however, does not mean that there is no use/need/possibility at all for descriptions of aesthetic good. The record of God's aesthetic evaluations at progressive junctures in the Genesis creation accounts, as well as the final evaluation of *very good*, affirm that God invites, at least, his human creatures to recognize and take delight in the elements that go together to make his creation beautiful, and by mimicry their own creations, as well. No doubt, such was and remains a primary intention for any well spent Sabbath time. And, if we take our cue from the psalmists, such is also a major component of praise. Seeing beauty inspired them to write beautiful words and invite their fellow creatures to offer beautiful praise. This is the good, the very good end of a theory (especially a *biblical* theory) of aesthetics.



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