

[MJTM 12 (2010–2011)]

BOOK REVIEW

Jo Ann Davidson. *Toward a Theology of Beauty: A Biblical Perspective*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008. 221 pp.

In her insightful book, *Toward a Theology of Beauty: A Biblical Perspective*, systematic theologian Jo Ann Davidson argues that a more comprehensive perception of the divine can be gleaned from an investigation of biblical aesthetics. She notes that theological discussions invariably focus on the philosophical categories of truth and goodness, while almost always ignoring the third category of beauty. This neglect owes largely to the view that aesthetics are superfluous to more pressing theological concerns, such as hunger, poverty, and warfare. But, as Davidson contends, “theology is incomplete and impoverished without the inclusion of aesthetic values” (11).

Central to Davidson’s view is an understanding of God as Artist. She observes that, in addition to familiar images of God as Father and Judge, the Bible frequently reveals God’s aesthetic nature. For example, the psalmist praises God as Master Craftsman of the universe: “How excellent is your name in all the earth . . . When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars that you have ordained . . .” (Ps 8:1, 3). Elsewhere, God is identified as Sculptor (Gen 2:7), Potter (Rom 9:20–24), Musician (Zeph 3:16–17), and even Fashion Designer (Exod 28:2). Nearly fifty chapters of Exodus contain God’s specific directions for the construction of the Tabernacle, revealing his additional adeptness as Architect and Interior Designer. “The sensuous aspects of color and texture are involved in the sanctuary furnishings,” writes Davidson. “One cannot ignore the richness of color: gold, silver, bronze, tapestry threads of blue, purple, scarlet and gold woven together. Even the sense

of smell is involved—incense is to be blended with spices” (26). Similarly detailed instructions were later given for the construction of the two Jerusalem Temples. For Davidson, such descriptions prove that “human artworks have their place within the will of God” (28).

However, the exploration of God as Artist is brief. The majority of the book is devoted to analyzing the Bible’s literary qualities. It is Davidson’s assertion that the stylistic aspects of the biblical text serve as both literary and theological devices. She views the Bible’s narratives, poetry, and prophetic utterances as tools for alluring and captivating the senses and convincing the mind. Thus, literary techniques were not meant to display the talents of the authors, but to “amplify and establish theological statements” (134). Davidson points out, for instance, that Old Testament poetry, “whether by psalmist, prophet, historian, or wise man, is inseparably linked to its content, lending it intensity, depth, clarification and authenticity” (140).

This brings us to the book’s main point. Because human beings are profoundly attracted to and moved by art, divine revelation is expressed in the Bible through aesthetic means. Beauty functions as a primary way of attracting and opening the heart to truth and goodness. Davidson concludes: “God employs the biblical aesthetic to aid us in comprehending Him and grasping divine truth, a reality which we would otherwise not be able to fathom” (190). From a biblical perspective, then, God is the Master of Arts, who speaks to us through artistic forms, endows us with artistic ability, and expects our artistic responses to his presence. Still, Davidson is careful to point out that art is not salvific. Just as the biblical prophets railed against elegant worship that lacked correspondence in the believer’s inner experience, present-day worshipers should be mindful that artful praise does not conceal or make up for moral transgressions. Sacred art may bring one closer to sacred truths, but in order for such truths to have weight, they must be incorporated into one’s life.

The value of the book lies in its insistence that both the mind and emotions are essential for a comprehensive understanding of the divine. As Davidson writes, “body and mind are inseparable in discerning and comprehending and experiencing the beauty of

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divine truth” (189). To be sure, *Toward a Theology of Beauty* is not the final word on the subject of beauty in the biblical perspective. As mentioned, Davidson’s primary interest is the Bible’s literary forms, and portraits of God as Musician, Sculptor, Architect, and so forth await further elaboration. Nevertheless, she presents a compelling argument for the inclusion of biblical aesthetics in theology. The book is an important contribution to a field that is, by and large, unappreciative of the extent to which beauty can enrich one’s understanding of the divine.

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