

## The Pleasing and the Awesome: On the Beauty of Humans in the Old Testament

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### ABSTRACT

*Profiting from the OT research programme held at the University of South Africa during August 2010, this paper further investigates different aspects of the concept of beauty in the Old Testament (OT). The use of the concept of human beauty and the beauty of human achievement is investigated in a broad variety of text types. Representative texts are examined where the concept occurs as a literary motif. It is found that human beauty, both erotic and non-erotic, as well as the metaphorical use of the concept are intertwined with descriptions of awe not only in the terminology, but also in the actual use to which it is put in texts from practically all genres. It is concluded that a coherent aesthetic is found in OT texts from different periods, which remains stable despite diverging historical and theological contexts. The contours emerging from the texts seem to square with the Kantian concept of the beautiful and Goethe's view of the awesome.*

### A INTRODUCTION

In August 2010 I delivered a paper on a facet of my exploration of the concept of beauty in the OT.<sup>1</sup> The lively discussion prompted the idea that not only a basic survey,<sup>2</sup> but several papers are called for in which the topic is examined from various angles each in its own right. In what follows, I submit one of these.<sup>3</sup>

The concept of beauty occurs often in the OT and a whole word group is used to express it.<sup>4</sup> Two aspects of human beauty will concern us here: beauty as that which pleases and as that which causes awe.

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<sup>1</sup> Given at Unisa; cf. James Alfred Loader, "The Beautiful Infant and Israel's Salvation." *HTS Theological Studies* 67/1 (2011): n.p. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v67i1.913.

<sup>2</sup> James Alfred Loader, "Schön / Schönheit," in *Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* (ed. Michaela Bauks and Klaus Koenen; Stuttgart: DBG 2011), n.p. Cited 12.07.2011. Online: <http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/nc/wibilex/das-bibellexikon/details/quelle/WIBI/referenz/27269/cache/db9b8c4e474e872ce767a5c1d7b4b178/>

<sup>3</sup> Also delivered at Unisa (July 2011).

<sup>4</sup> These include nouns (יָפִי "beauty"; הוֹד "splendour"; חֵן "favour," "loveliness"; נֹעַם "radiance," "attractiveness"; שִׁפְרָה and שִׁפְרָה "beauty," "loveliness"; הַדָּר "majesty," "glory," "splendour"; אֲדָרָה "splendour," "glory"; כְּבוֹד "glory," "importance"; תְּפִאָּרָה

## B HUMAN BEAUTY

Apart from the linguistic activity of identifying a semantic field that comprises the set of words used to speak about beauty in the Hebrew Bible, the pragmatics of the contextual use of the concept enables us to distinguish two areas that "flow into each other,"<sup>5</sup> notably those of the pleasing and the awesome. I shall try to show that this flowing into each other is so thorough that, despite being distinguishable, they cannot be disentangled and that there is good reason for this.

### 1 The Pleasing

Human beauty can be observed and spoken of both as erotic<sup>6</sup> and non-erotic. In either case the beauty is usually a physical, corporeal quality that attracts the onlooker. Although both sexes can attract attention by an appearance pleasing to others, it is mostly female beauty that is experienced in this way.

#### 1a Female Beauty

While female beauty is mentioned in both prose and poetic texts,<sup>7</sup> the beauty ideal is best to be observed in the *wash* songs of Canticles. An exemplary text is the poem in Cant 4:

- <sup>1</sup> How beautiful you are, my beloved, how beautiful!  
Your **eyes** are doves behind your veil.  
Your **hair** is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead.
- <sup>2</sup> Your **teeth** are like a flock of shorn ewes come up from washing,  
all of which bear twins, and not one among them is bereaved.
- <sup>3</sup> Your **lips** are like a crimson thread, and your mouth is lovely.  
Your **cheeks** are like pomegranate halves behind your veil.
- <sup>4</sup> Your **neck** is like the tower of David, built in courses;  
on it hang a thousand bucklers, all of them shields of warriors.
- <sup>5</sup> Your two **breasts** are like two fawns,  
twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies.
- <sup>6</sup> Until the day breathes and the shadows flee,

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"beauty," "splendour"), adjectives (יָפֵה "beautiful," טוֹב "good," "pleasing/beautiful"; נָעִים "pretty," "pleasing"; אֲדִיר "splendid," "powerful"), and verbs (שָׂפַר *qal* and נָעַם *qal* "be beautiful, attractive"); cf. James Alfred Loader, "Schönheit zwischen Segen und Errettung im Alten Testament," *ZAW* 124 (2012): forthcoming.

<sup>5</sup> The expression is borrowed from Tim Ingold, "1991 Debate Language is the Essence of Culture" (*sic*), in *Key Debates in Anthropology* (ed. Tim Ingold; London: Routledge, 1996), 127.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Matthias Augustin, *Der schöne Mensch im Alten Testament und im hellenistischen Judentum* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1983), 26 (who devotes a whole chapter to this aspect).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gen 6:2; 12:14; 24:16; 26:7; 29:17; Judg 15:2; 2 Sam 11:2; 13:1; 1 Kgs 1:3-4; Ps 45:12; Prov 11:22; Cant 1:15; 6:4; 7:7, etc.

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I will hasten to the mountain of myrrh and the hill of frankincense.

<sup>7</sup>You are totally beautiful, my beloved; there is no flaw in you.

Although the poem continues to the end of the chapter, there is a clear caesura after v. 7 at the end of the *Setumah*. Here the specific description of what is beautiful about the individual features is reinforced by a general claim that the girl is absolutely beautiful in every respect. If ever there was an ideal of flawless beauty, it is expressed here. A comprehensive judgement is formulated both positively and negatively and reinforced by the power of metaphorical detail. Her every feature is beautiful (positive, כלֵךְ יפה in v. 7a) and there is not the slightest flaw about her (negative מום אין in v. 7b). This is enhanced by the comparisons and metaphors in the description itself. All speak of perfect completeness (positive) and deny a single blemish of as much as one tooth (negative, v. 2b). In a context without orthodontically backed-up guarantees for the absence dental caries and other forms of decay, any idea of a shining white, totally complete and perfectly arranged set of teeth is clearly a more desirable than attainable image, in other words: an ideal. The description in this text is confined to the female body from the breasts upwards, but the *wasf* in ch. 7:2-10 works its way from the feet via the hips and does not shrink from verbally portraying the most intimate detail imaginable.<sup>8</sup> The categorical clarity of completeness in female beauty is the clearest indication that Oeming's denial of the existence of a beauty ideal in Israel<sup>9</sup> cannot be upheld.

One may judge that it goes without saying that pictures such as this are a source of joy to the observing young man. Even so, the poem does not only suggest it obliquely, but also makes an explicit literary motif of the influence of the beautiful girl on the lover. It is stated explicitly in the second *Setumah* that what actually is beautiful (יפה *qal*) about the girl, is the erotic *effect* (רויך pl.) she has on the young man (v. 10). Equally clearly the lover spells out that it is the *effect* of her eyes that has stolen his heart (v. 9, cf. 6:5). We have many examples in the OT that the attraction of female beauty described here can be so overwhelming that it is able to manipulate powerful heroes (Judg 14:2-3, 7), generals (Jdt 10:1-7; 11:16; 12:10-13:8) and monarchs (Esth 2:2-3, 7, 9) and that even the sons of God can be enraptured by it (Gen 6:2). All of which means that beauty is constituted by the impression made on the observer. What impresses as such is therefore beautiful by virtue of this fact.

Precisely which features have this effect, is amply described by the *wasf* songs and complies with what is found in the other texts on female appeal cited above: big eyes (cf. Gen 29:17 as an instance of the opposite of attractiveness), flowing hair, dark red lips, rounded hips, an elegant poise, a tanned complexion, adornment with veil and ornaments, and a sweet fragrance.

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<sup>8</sup> These details are often obscured in translation; cf. James Alfred Loader, "Exegetical Erotica to Canticles 7:2-6," *JSem* 10/1&2 (2001): 98-111.

<sup>9</sup> Manfred Oeming, "Schönheit: II. Biblisch-theologisch," *RGG* 7: 961.

## 1b Male Beauty

But also male beauty is mentioned and described several times in prose and poetry.<sup>10</sup> In this case as well the *wāsf* songs of Canticles provide the most sustained descriptions. In chapter 5:10-16 the girl describes her lover:

<sup>10</sup> My beloved is dazzling and **ruddy**, notable among ten thousand.

<sup>11</sup> His **head** is fine gold, his **locks** are curled, black as a raven.

<sup>12</sup> His **eyes** are like doves by springs of water,  
washed in milk, sitting by a filled (pool).

<sup>13</sup> His **cheeks** are like beds of balm, terraces of spice.  
His **lips** are lotus, dripping liquid myrrh.

<sup>14</sup> His **hands** are disks of gold, set with jasper.

His **body** is an ivory work, covered with sapphires.

<sup>15</sup> His **legs** are columns of alabaster, set upon bases of gold.

His **appearance** is like the Lebanon, choice as the cedars.

<sup>16</sup> His kiss is sweet, and he is altogether desirable.

This is my beloved and this is my friend, you daughters of Jerusalem.

Here too the poem itself affirms the ideal in the appearance of a young man. Framed by general statements on his complexion (v. 10) and his general appearance (מראהו, 15b) the male body is described from the head downwards. As in the case of the girl, the total impact of his looks is called desirable. The desirability (מהמרים, v. 16ab) refers to the *effect* roused in the girl and is all the more emphatic by virtue of being expressed in a *pluralis intensitatis*. The totality (כלי, v. 16aβ) referred to in the last verse relates to this attraction felt by the girl, for it is she who experiences the desire radiated by the young man. This is amplified by the motif of the sweetness she finds on his palate (חכו). Again it is clear from the impressions flowing from the metaphoric description that male beauty is constituted by that which makes a pleasing impression on the on-looker. As in chapter 4, it is also made an explicit literary motif in this poem (v. 16), thereby not only confirming the existence of an ideal of beauty, but also that its essence is the pleasing impression.

With the help of these and other descriptions, both in the Book of Canticles and elsewhere, we can also construct a picture of the features of male beauty: big eyes, long, dark hair, a ruddy complexion, impressive torso and hands, strong legs and athletic mobility (Cant 2:8-9). The picture coincides with ancient Near Eastern statuettes and is rightly called "typified" by Kaiser,<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Gen 39:6; 1 Sam 17:42; Ps 45,3; Cant 1:16; 1 Sam 16:12; 2 Sam 1:23 (the beauty of military strength); 2 Sam 1:26 (the beauty of a man for another man); 1 Kgs 1:6; Dan 1:4,15; Prov 5:9 (masculine beauty / strength).

<sup>11</sup> Otto Kaiser, "Von der Schönheit des Menschen als Gabe Gottes," in *Verbindungslinien: Festschrift für Werner H. Schmidt* (ed. Axel Graupner, Holger Delkurt and Alexander B. Ernst; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 160; cf. Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst*

since both plastic and literary sources attest the same stereotype. This, again, corresponds to descriptions of male beauty found in the OT. Saul is described as the best-looking man in Israel with particular reference to his imposing stature, (1 Sam 9:2). In another text his impressive tallness is extolled when his form is described as the absolute pinnacle of what could be found in Israel (1 Sam 10:23-24). David and Jonathan are called beautiful (נעימים), their athleticism being typified as eagle-like speed and lion-like strength (2 Sam 1:23). David's ruddy taint and beautiful eyes are underlined as features of his good looks (1 Sam 16:12, 17:42), whereas he, as a young shepherd (1 Sam 16:18), is described as "a man of good build" (איש חזר) combined with other attractive traits, such as well-spokenness, military prowess and musicality. The highly stereotyped presentation of what makes a young man attractive can justifiably be called a summary of the ideal Israelite *kalokagathia* for young men.<sup>12</sup> Once again we have to affirm the existence of a beauty ideal in Israel for the male no less than the female human.<sup>13</sup>

At least three arguments for this affirmation of human beauty have now emerged:

- The same style is used to describe bodily beauty for both male and female.
- The descriptions always portray rounded-off perfection for both sexes.
- The *wāsf* songs tally with incidental descriptions in narrative texts.

But there is another dimension, to which we may refer as negative beauty.<sup>14</sup>

### 1c Absence of Beauty

Negative beauty in the sense of its absence occurs in several texts. The most prominent of these instances is to be found in the description of the Servant of the Lord in Isa 53:2-3, where it says:

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*im Alten Testament* (Freiburg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987), 222-236.

<sup>12</sup> So Ludwig Köhler, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1966), 129; cf. also Gerhard von Rad, *Die Theologie der geschichtlichen Überlieferungen Israels* (vol. 1 of *Theologie des Alten Testaments*; München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1957), 429 n. 32; Otto Kaiser, *Der Mensch unter dem Schicksal* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1985), 116-117.

<sup>13</sup> The beauty of an infant also occurs in the OT. In Exod 2:1-10 the beauty of Moses is a central motif, which has enjoyed a huge impact in the reception history of the passage. Since this does not fall within the scope of this essay, it is not discussed further at this point; cf. Loader, "The Beautiful Infant and Israel's Salvation," *HTS Theologische Studien/Theological Studies* 67(1), Art. #913, 9 pages. DOI: 10.4102/hts.v67i1.913

<sup>14</sup> This is not the same as the dark side of beauty, on which I plan another article.

<sup>2</sup>For he grew up before him like a young plant,  
and like a root out of dry ground;  
he had no build or splendour that we should look at him,  
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

<sup>3</sup>He was despised and rejected by others;  
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;  
and as one from whom others hide their faces he was despised,  
and we held him of no account.

Again the outward appearance of a human is focused upon, but here in terms of what is *not* there. Two of the relevant terms for male beauty are denied the Servant: he has no תאר and no הדר, no build like Saul or David are said to have had, and no splendour to look at (ראה), that is, no splendid appearance. Instead, it is said that his "looks" (מראה) do not evoke pleasure (חמד *nip'al.*), the opposite of what we have seen the lovers of Canticles to find in their respective looks (Cant 5:16, cf. 4:10). But precisely by describing the suffering male as lacking these external features, the ideal is confirmed, for he is not the object of "desire" (חמד), that is, he does not please by his looks. If he had pleasant features to look at, he would not have been despised by those who observe him. Their observation is negative, meaning his appearance does not please them. So, again the beautiful is shown to be what pleases categorically.

Another example of this is the questioning use of נעם in Ezekiel's prophecy against Egypt (Ezek 32:19):

Whom do you surpass in beauty? Go down!  
Be laid with the uncircumcised!

The verb נעם (*qal*) is used in a rhetorical question to say that Egypt is *not* more beautiful than any other nation. The wrath of God is to be unleashed on her and the loss of beauty as punishment again bears out the positive opposite.

In the famous chapter on Oholah and Oholibah (Ezek 23) there is a passage showing – albeit as a critical symbol of the young woman Jerusalem – that even the pictures of macho men can so impress a young woman that she is sexually attracted to them:

<sup>12</sup> She lusted for the neighbouring Assyrians, captains and rulers, dressed most gorgeously, horsemen riding on horses, all of them desirable young men <sup>14</sup> But she increased her harlotry. She looked at men portrayed on the wall, images of Chaldeans portrayed in vermilion, <sup>15</sup> girded with belts around their waists, flowing turbans on their heads, all of them looking like captains, in the manner of the Babylonians of Chaldea, the land of their birth. <sup>16</sup> As soon as her eyes saw them, she lusted for them and sent messengers to them in Chaldea. <sup>17</sup> Then the Babylonians came to her, into the bed of love and they defiled her with their immorality. So she was defiled by them, and alienated herself from them.

Because of this she most horribly loses her attractiveness (Ezek 23:26-34):

<sup>26</sup>And they will strip off your clothes and take away your beautiful jewelry. ... <sup>29</sup>They will do hateful things to you, take away all your earnings, and leave you naked and bare. The nakedness of your harlotry will be uncovered, both your vice and your harlotry. ... <sup>33</sup>You will be filled with drunkenness and sorrow, the cup of horror and devastation, the cup of your sister Samaria. <sup>34</sup>You will drink and empty it, you will break its sherds and tear your breasts, for I have spoken, says the Lord God.<sup>15</sup>

These cases show that the idea of the lack or loss of beauty under different circumstances confirms the positive picture of physical beauty of men and women that we have found so far. It also confirms that a definite ideal of what beauty looks like, was present in Israel.

### 1d The Beauty Motif in Metaphors<sup>16</sup>

A further complex of occurrences of the beauty motif is its use in metaphors. As far as I can see, the metaphorical expression of beauty occurs in two functions, namely for the physical, sensual beauty as we have found it so far, and as a figure for another kind of beauty found in moral characteristics.

In the case of the use of images for physical beauty, we again find several instances in the Book of Canticles:<sup>17</sup>

1 <sup>9</sup> I compare you, my love, to a **mare** among Pharaoh's chariots.

...  
<sup>13</sup>My beloved is to me a bag of **myrrh** that lies between my breasts.

<sup>14</sup>My beloved is to me a cluster of henna **blossoms** in the vineyards of Engedi.

<sup>15</sup>O, you are beautiful, my love, o, you are beautiful; your eyes are **doves**.

2 <sup>1</sup> I am a **rose** of Sharon, a **lily** of the valleys.

<sup>15</sup> For the motif of physical humiliation of the female body as an instance of punishment of cities by their enemies, cf. further Ezek 16:13-17 // 37-40; Lam 1:6; bodies in general: Isa 17:3-4. The use of this motif in prophecies of doom is important, since it demonstrates the association of two motifs that are both the opposite of such punishment, namely blessing and redemption. This is however a topic in its own right (cf. Loader, "Schönheit zwischen Segen und Errettung im Alten Testament," forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> For metaphors generally in the Book of Canticles, cf. Othmar Keel, *Deine Blicke sind wie Tauben: Zur Mataphorik des Hohen Liedes* (SBS 114/115; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> The excerpts are from Cant 1:9, 13-15; 2:1-3, 8-9, 14; 7:4, 8-10.

<sup>2</sup> As a lily among thistles, so is my beloved among the girls.

<sup>3</sup> As an **apple tree** among the trees of the wood, so is my beloved among men.

With great delight I sat in his shadow, and his **fruit** was sweet to my taste.

...

<sup>8</sup> The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping over the mountains, bounding over the hills.

<sup>9</sup> My beloved is like a **gazelle** or a young **stag**.

Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice.

...

<sup>14</sup> O my **dove**, in the clefts of the rock, in the covert of the cliff, let me see your face, let me hear your voice; for your voice is sweet, and your face is lovely.

7 <sup>4</sup> Your two breasts are like **two fawns**, twins of a gazelle.

<sup>8</sup> Your stature is like a **palm tree**, and your breasts are like **fruit clusters**.

<sup>9</sup> I say, I will climb the palm tree and lay hold of its **fruit-stalks**.

Let your breasts be like **grape bunches**, and the scent of your breath like **apples**,

<sup>10</sup> your palate like good **wine** that gently runs and glides over sleepers' lips.

In these lines the male as well as the female lovers are presented in terms of plants and animals.

Not only beautiful girls, but also their young men ideally exude a pleasant fragrance like that of myrrh and henna blossoms. The girl is a rose and a lily, which puts her apart from all other girls who look like thistles in comparison. The young man is an apple-tree, whose protective shadow and luscious fruit puts him apart from all other men who are only bushes. In both cases the imagery itself as well as the explicit comparisons with other exemplars of the relevant sex point to consummate perfection and therefore – as we have found in the *wāsf* songs discussed above – to an ideal of female and male beauty. Again, the girl is both a palm tree and a grape vine, the *tertium comparationis* explicitly referring to her breasts as date-clusters and grape-bunches. While she sees her lover as an apple tree, he also finds her to resemble an apple, this time the scent of the fruit on her breath. Importantly, the emphasis is once more on the impression made upon the partner by the experience of all five senses: looking (and desiring to look, Cant 2:9c and 14bα), hearing (Cant 2:14bc, which contains a chiasmus of seeing and hearing), touching (Cant 7:9a), smelling (Cant 7:9c) and tasting (Cant 2:3; 7:10).

As far as the animal imagery is concerned, the girl is a stately mare. Here the *tertium comparationis* is the diametrical opposite of the use of this metaphor in the German and Afrikaans languages, which is made clear by the



context referring to the dazzling beauty of decorated horses in an Egyptian royal entourage. She herself as well as her eyes are doves.<sup>18</sup> Both the male and the female are described as gazelles, respectively a young stag for the male and twin fawns for the female breasts.

All of the images are sensual and here too the impressionistic element with focus on what the observing partner experiences is unmistakable. So, even if flowers, trees, birds and other animals are beautiful, they serve to describe the beauty of male and female humans. Of course their metaphorical use presupposes the beauty of nature,<sup>19</sup> but as such they serve to express the main traits of what we have found above.

The figurative use of such images of beauty can however also be applied in the literal sense of the Greek meta-phor, "carried over" into another domain (German "übertragen," Afrikaans "oordragtelik"). Here the images are also taken from the sensual world, but are then used to describe other facets of life, so that moral features are also included in the sphere of the beautiful.

Let us consider a number of examples from sapiential literature.

A well-known topos is the beauty of parental instruction or wisdom itself for young males:

My son, listen to your father's instruction and do not reject your mother's teaching  
for they are a graceful garland for your head and ornaments for your neck.

Prize her, and she will exalt you; she will honour you if you embrace her.  
She will crown your head with a fair garland and give you a beautiful wreath.

Her collar is a golden ornament, and her cords a purple thread.  
You will wear her like a glorious robe, and put her on like a splendid crown.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> The symbolism of the dove for general health and wellbeing (cf. Keel, *Deine Blicke sind wie Tauben*, 57-58 and Otto Kaiser, "Von der Schönheit des Menschen," 200, 160-161) only applies to the girl herself and not specifically to her eyes, which suggests that the dove imagery for the eyes must refer to something specific about them – either their form, perhaps in terms of the clearly outlined eyes known from Egyptian art, or their dynamic function as in Cant 4:9. Cf. further Peter Riede, *Im Spiegel der Tiere: Studien zum Verhältnis von Mensch und Tier im alten Israel* (OBO 187; Göttingen/Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), 44.

<sup>19</sup> I plan to attend to this aspect in another article.

<sup>20</sup> The excerpts are from: Prov 1:8-9; 4:8-9; Sir 6:30-31.

Whoever achieves wisdom – either through heeding parental advice or by other means – is made beautiful by her. The images or beautifying ornaments refer to physical objects, but are now signifiers transferring the beauty they represent to the signified, notably the moral lifestyle of a young man. Even if Westermann and Oeming are right that the virtues of obedience and wisdom are not static entities, this advice suggests the universal cliché that “true beauty comes from within.” No wonder this is explicitly stated in the penultimate saying of the Book of Proverbs (Prov 31:30; cf. Prov 2:10, Sir 40:26). This spiritualisation of beauty is particularly featured in the Christian reception of the motif.<sup>21</sup>

### 1e Humans as God’s Work of Art

A last instance of human beauty will lead us to the other side of the coin, namely that of beauty as the awesome. In Ps 139:13-15 the human being is not only called “beautiful,” but is seen as a divine work of art:

<sup>13</sup> For you formed my inward parts, knit me together in my mother’s womb.

<sup>14</sup> I praise you, for I am made awesomely and wonderfully.  
Wonderful are your works; deep within I know that well.

<sup>15</sup> My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret,  
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

God is seen as the artist and the human being as the beautiful object. Praising the work of God’s hands highlights its awesomeness and therefore of the human being. Therefore formation of this wonderful work of art is not only described, but explicitly called “awesome” (נִרְאֹת *nip’al* participle, v. 14a) and “wonderful,” that is, what calls forth wonder and astonishment (פִּלְיָה *nip’al*, v. 14a). As we shall see presently, it is this aspect that makes the concept of the image of God possible together with its momentous theological impact.

## 2 The Awesome

As we have just seen, that which is pleasing thus intersects with that which is awesome. This is logical and on several counts should not be surprising.

### 2a Power – Glory – Beauty

Who has power, has glory (German “Herrlichkeit” and Afrikaans “heerlikheid,” literally “lordship,” that which befits a powerful lord). Therefore a well-established aspect of human beauty in the OT is the glory or splendour of those to whom respect is due. These characteristics blur into one another. So the

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Clemens Alexandrinus (*Paedagogus* II, 8; III, 111) Basil of Caesarea (*De spiritu sancto* IX, 23) and Augustin (*De vera religione* XL,74-75); cf. Patrick J. Sherry, “Schönheit II: Christlich-trinitarisch,” *TRE* 30, 240-247.

powerful are not only feared, they are also regarded as beautiful. In the first place, this goes for kings:

Saul's comeliness and impressive stature are mentioned (1 Sam 9:2, טוֹב); David's handsome appearance, complexion and eyes are repeatedly mentioned (1 Sam 16:12, יָפֵה; טוֹב רֵאִי; 1 Sam 17:42, יָפֵה מִרְאָה); the unnamed king's incomparable beauty is sung (Ps 45:3, verb יָפֵה).

Also in this regard the negative application of the concept can corroborate its positive use. In the Book of Ezekiel the king of Tyre is called "complete in beauty" (יָפֵה),<sup>22</sup> which is combined with his wisdom. This reminds one of the beautiful glamour of Solomon, which was also combined with wisdom (1 Kgs 10). All of this is destroyed because of the hybris brought about by his beauty.<sup>23</sup>

But also the offspring of kings can be expected to be handsome or beautiful. The cultural universal of the dream prince accordingly occurs in several texts from the Deuteronomistic History. David's sons Abshalom and Adonijah are called handsome (2 Sam 14:25f; 1 Kgs 1:6). In neither case the beauty is substantiated by or associated with their royal provenance and the texts rather suggest that their physical appeal was genetic, for not only are the handsome features of Abshalom praised excessively, but it is also stated that he had a beautiful sister Tamar and a beautiful daughter by the same name (2 Sam 13:1 and 14:27). Nevertheless, even this beauty is closely associated with impressiveness of social standing, which becomes very marked in the fact that David is also accorded these accolades at the end of his life:<sup>24</sup>

The one exalted high, the messiah of the God of Jacob  
The beautiful one of the songs of Israel

The handsome young shepherd (1 Sam 16:12) is now near the end of his life and has lost those physical features. Somewhat further a pathetic picture is drawn of his old age and deteriorated physical condition (1 Kgs 1:1-4). Nevertheless, the king's praise as a beautiful man (יָפֵה) is still sung. Even if this refers to what Israel *thought* of him, the motif is associated with the old and dying king. Therefore his beauty must be independent of his physical features, thus showing the nexus between beauty and majesty or royal stature. Beauty is that which impresses.

This is confirmed in narrative and in prophetic texts and – as far as I can see – also once in the Psalms, where the same motif concerns VIP's other than kings. The status of such powerful people is seen as social beauty and ex-

<sup>22</sup> Ezek 28:12.

<sup>23</sup> Ezek 28:17; cf. the use of אֲדִיר in Ps 136:18 to describe the splendour of kings even in defeat. The motif of the danger of beauty (Gen 12:11; 26:7; 2 Sam 11:2) falls outside the scope of this paper, but I will return to it in another article.

<sup>24</sup> 2 Sam 23:1.

pressed by אָדיר.<sup>25</sup> In all of these cases it is the power or social appeal of some people that impresses other people, and that is experienced as beauty.

## 2b The Beauty of the Image of God

The beauty of majesty and splendour is democratised to become a characteristic of all humans. The *locus classicus* for this is Ps 8, in which the image of God as this appears in the First Creation Narrative of Gen 1 is developed:

- 2 O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name on all the earth!  
 You whose majesty is sung higher than the heavens  
 3 out of the mouths of newborns and infants;  
 you have founded a bulwark because of your foes,  
 to silence the enemy and the avenger.  
 4 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,  
 the moon and the stars that you have established –  
 5 what are humans that you think of them,  
 mortals that you visit them?  
 6 Yet you have made them only a little lower than God  
 and crowned them with glory and honour.  
 7 You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;  
 all things you have put under their feet,  
 8 all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field,  
 9 the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,  
 whatever passes along the paths of the seas.  
 10 O Yahweh, our Lord, how majestic is your name on all the earth!

In this symmetrically composed psalm the first half is about the smallness or *humilitas* of humans and the second about the greatness or *dignitas* of humans, both framed in the poem by the majesty of God's glory.<sup>26</sup> Humble humans are given the attributes used for God. To this end the terminology for glorious beauty is used in the framing verse of God and in the second strophe of humans (אָדיר, הוֹד, כְּבוֹד, הַדָּר). That entails a momentous claim: the royal beauty of all humans is derived from the majestic beauty of God "on all the earth" (vv. 2, 10) and is only a little less than that of God himself (v. 6). The psalm's use of the beauty concept is fully in accordance with what we have found above concerning beauty and the impressive splendour of rulers, since the psalm presents human beings as vassal rulers of God himself. For these rea-

<sup>25</sup> Judg 5:13; Neh 3:5; 10:30; 2 Chr 23:20; Jer 14:3; Nah 2:6; Nah 3:18; Ps 16:3.

<sup>26</sup> James Alfred Loader, "Psalm 8," *HTS* 34/1-2 (1978): 35-40; also: Loader, "Image and Order: Old Testament Perspectives on the Ecological Crisis," in *Are we killing God's earth?* (ed. Willem S. Vorster; Pretoria: Unisa, 1987), 6-28. The terminology of *humilitas* and *dignitas* was coined by Berend Gemser, "Humilitas of Dignitas: De Signatuur van het Oudtestamentisch Mensbeeld," *NedTT* 14 (1960): 161-174.

sons Oeming<sup>27</sup> is correct in stating that God "distributes" (he uses the German verb "austeilen") his beauty.

However, there is also another reason for both accepting and limiting Oeming's view. Psalm 8's generalisation of royal beauty poetically articulates the classic expression of humans as the image of God (Gen 1:26-28). In this text humans are called the image / likeness (צֶלֶם / דְּמוּת)<sup>28</sup> of God *so that* they can rule over everything else in creation. It must mean that the image is a sensual one in the literal sense of the term – whatever it may consist of, whether metaphorical or not and whether used in a functional way or not. Since the צֶלֶם-image has a God-like look (דְּמוּת), male and female humans are as beautiful as God. Therefore we can concur with Oeming that God distributes his beauty. However, according to the *imago Dei* tradition, God gives this specific beauty to humans alone and not – as one may think on the grounds of Ecclesiastes 3:11-12 – to all his creatures likewise. When Qohelet says that God "has made everything beautiful in its time," it may mean that the beauty of all ultimately comes from God, but not that the beauty of his image is equally shared by all. Thereby the beauty of what Pierre Teilhard de Chardin would call "le phénomène humain" becomes a fundamental anthropological category.

## C CONCLUSION

Studying the ways in which humans are said to be beautiful, we have found a clear and consistent aesthetic in the OT. This consists of several elements.

**The aesthetic norm is deeply bound to the religious norm**, for human beauty as a work of divine artistry, as the very likeness of God himself, clearly expresses a deep association of the two.

But this is not only a matter of secondary association. An essential integration of the two is shown by the inner constellation of the beauty concept as it is used in the texts. Time and again we could observe that **the essence of beauty is that which impresses**. It enchants by virtue of its inner force. There-

<sup>27</sup> Oeming, "Schönheit: II. Biblisch-theologisch," 961.

<sup>28</sup> On the relationship of the two terms, see James Barr, "The Image of God in the Book of Genesis: A Study of Terminology," *BJRL* 51 (1968): 11-26; also his paper delivered at the OTSSA in 1967, James Barr, "The Image of God in Genesis: Some Linguistic and Historical Considerations," in *OTWSA: Proceedings of the 10th Meeting* (1971), 5-13. The recent reaction by Paul Niskanen, "The Poetics of Adam: The Creation of אָדָם in the Image of אֱלֹהִים," *JBL* 129 (2009): 417-436. Niskanen's emphasis on the image as inclusive of *male and female* (cf. the conclusion, p. 436), critical of Barr as it is, is fully compatible with the equality of male and female beauty we have found above. Cf. also Stephen L. Herring, "A 'Transubstantiated' Humanity: The Relationship between the Divine Image and the Presence of God in Genesis 1:26f.," *VT* 58 (2008): 480-494. On the latter's submission, the image also *represents* the deity, which would further strengthen my argument.

fore males and females are captivated by its power exactly as subjects are captivated by the hold of powerful rulers over them. And therefore it can also be dangerous as the mighty are dangerous.<sup>29</sup>

This is confirmed by the **negative counterfoil**. The loss of beauty as a manifestation of powerlessness and the loss of power once held, corroborate the positive expression of the motif.

Perhaps I may end by quoting what I wrote in *Old Testament Essays* seven years ago, which could show how the examination of human beauty in the OT lends additional support to the Kantian concept of the Beautiful as influenced by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten in the eighteenth century and how the same construction was forged by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in his view of the Awesome as the root of religion.<sup>30</sup>

Whereas for Plato the Beautiful is to be distinguished clearly from art and is to be recognised particularly in the perfect shape of the human body, for Aristotle it is to be found in the combination of order, symmetry and finitude. For Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-1762), the founder of philosophical aesthetics as an independent discipline,<sup>31</sup> something is aesthetical when it concerns perception of the Beautiful in the sense of a *gnoseologia inferior* – that is, *vis-à-vis* conceptual knowledge – with the perceiving subject playing the crucial role.<sup>32</sup> Both aspects (perception and the perceiving subject) were later taken up and used by Immanuel Kant as an aesthetics of the general theory of perception in his *Critique of pure Reason* (1781) and in his *Critique of Judgement* (1790). According to Kant the Beautiful is “that which generally pleases without any concept,” and is connected to his view of the Sublime (“das Erhabene”). The Sublime is that “which is absolutely great” (“was schlechthin groß ist”), such as awe-inspiring natural phenomena. In the Awesome humans can experience the Sublime.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Cant 2:7; 8:6-7; Eccl 8:4; Job 34:18; cf. also James Alfred Loader, “The Dark side of Beauty” (to be published).

<sup>30</sup> James Alfred Loader, “Theologies as symphonies: On (Biblical) Theology and aesthetics,” *OTE* 17/2 (2004): 252-266; the quote is from p. 254.

<sup>31</sup> First in a master’s dissertation, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, published at Halle in 1735, but especially in *Aesthetica I*, which appeared at Frankfurt/Oder 1750, the second volume of which came out there in 1758.

<sup>32</sup> “Aesthetica (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitiva.” (“Aesthetics [as theory of the free arts, as lesser doctrine of knowledge, as art of handsome thought and as art of analogous rational thought] ist the science of knowledge through the senses.”) Cf. Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Aesthetica* (vol. 1; Frankfurt/Oder: J.C. Kleyb, 1750), (§)1.

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It seems to me exactly what Goethe aims at in his famous word on human shuddering:<sup>33</sup>

Das Schaudern ist der Menschheit bestes Teil  
Wie auch die Welt ihm das Gefühl verteuere  
Ergriffen fühlt er tief das Ungeheure

[Shuddering is the best part of being human  
However the world begrudges him the feeling  
Moved within he deeply feels the Tremendous].

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<sup>33</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust* vol. 2/1, 6272-6274.

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