

# The Dark Side of Beauty in the Old Testament

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## ABSTRACT

*Speaking of the dark side of beauty implies a bright side as well and therefore points to an ambivalence in the concept of beauty. Whereas this can perhaps be most clearly seen in the nineteenth-century romanticist idea of the beauty of repugnance, ancient Israel never regarded "the ugly" as beautiful. But she could and did consider as straight-forwardly beautiful that which conventional Western images would regard as failing beauty (e.g. the decay of old age). While this serves as a reminder of the historical and cross-cultural relativity of the topic, Israelites did find a dark side in what they themselves found beautiful. The focus of this article is on this ambivalence experienced by Israel itself. What it could delight in, could also be fearsome and what it could celebrate, could simultaneously have a dangerous dark side. This is investigated from several angles: as the moral danger of erotic beauty, the religious danger of cultic beauty, the gloomy and even terrorising mental effect of beauty, and the transience of beauty. Although the usual claim that ancient Israel had no abstract concept of beauty is not challenged, it is concluded that beauty was not regarded as a mere "concrete" thing either. Rather, beauty is the image(s) of an ominous force behind it. The images can manifest the threatening character of that lurking energy just as strongly or even more than its gratifying effects.*

## A INTRODUCTION

When we speak of the dark *side* of beauty, we imply that it has a bright side as well. This of course means that beauty is ambivalent, having two contradictory sides. The phenomenon has been explored from a romanticist perspective by Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in his anthology with the clear but deeply ambivalent title, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*).<sup>1</sup> In the opening poetic address to the reader he breaks up the most conventional iambic metre by the less conventional amphibrach to make a starkly unconventional statement for nineteenth-century Europe:

Aux objets répugnantes / nous trouvons des appas.  
In repugnant objects we find the attractive.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, "Au Lecteur (Préface)," in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (ed. Jacques Crépet; Paris: Louis Conard, [1857] 1922), 6; cf. Jeffrey B. Russell, *Mephistopheles: The Devil in the Modern World* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 205-206.

Finding the repulsive attractive *because* it is disgusting is not only deeply ambivalent, but also laden with the tensions of inner contradiction. However, ambivalent beauty does not necessarily have to mean that the ugly is found beautiful because of its revulsion. It can mean several other things. Negatively, beauty may remain beauty but may at the same time be fraught with all kinds of **danger** so that one could paraphrase this as a lurking nemesis in the most beautiful things. Moreover, what popular present-day Western perceptions may see as decaying or at best loss of beauty, may on the contrary be experienced positively as a mark of beauty – for instance, to the one who lovingly shares its history a body worn down by **old age** can reveal the beauty of a lifetime of togetherness.<sup>2</sup>

Ancient Israelite literature shows no evidence of being attracted to revulsion in Baudelaire's sense, but both the latter forms of beauty's "other side" often occur in the Old Testament. A prime example is the ancient image of old age, which is time and again presented as a sign of blessing.<sup>3</sup> Its physical manifestation must therefore be beautiful.<sup>4</sup> This can be seen quite clearly in the description of the old and failing David who, despite not even being able to "become warm" anymore, was still the beautiful one *par excellence* (2 Sam 23:1). He is:

the man exalted high,  
the anointed one of the God of Jacob,  
the beautiful one in the songs of Israel.

Another instance is the Israelite perception of fat bodies as a sign of blessing and good physical condition. This is *a fortiori* even more so in the case of extreme obesity. If fat is beautiful because of prosperity, then extreme fat must be extremely beautiful because of extreme prosperity, as can be seen in the picture painted of such people by Ps 73:4-5, 7:

Surely, they feel no pain; their bellies are healthy and fat.  
They have no human toil; they are not plagued like others...  
Their eyes bulge with fatness...

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. John D. Peters, "Beauty's Veils: The Ambivalent Iconoclasm of Kierkegaard and Benjamin," in *The Image in Dispute: Art and Cinema in the Age of Photography* (ed. Sally Shafto and Dudley Andrew; Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the expression, "and he died old and full [satisfied] of days" (Job 42:17, Gen 35:29, 1 Chron 23:1, cf. Gen 15:15, 1 Chron 29:28). Cf. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (vol. I-II; London: OUP, [1926] 1959), 327-328, and Martin Leuenberger, "Segen/Segnen (AT)," *Das wissenschaftliche Bibellexikon im Internet* (2008 Edition), n.p. [cited 13 April 2011], (ed. Michaela Bauk and Klaus Koenen). Online: <http://www.bibelwissenschaft.de/nc/wibilex/das-bibellexikon/details/quelle/WIBI/zeichen/s/referenz/27583/cache/cd3d9c7a59538d940d82766fa3a4866d/>.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Claus Westermann, "Das Schöne im Alten Testament," in *Erträge der Forschung am Alten Testament: Gesammelte Studien* (vol. 3; ed. Claus Westermann; München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1984), 119-137.

Beauty remains beauty and is appreciated as such within culture-specific aesthetic codes. So it is not only in the eye of the beholder, it is also on the macula of the culture in question. However, what is common in the Old Testament, is the motif of danger as an aspect of the dark side of beauty, which is at least as prominent as Homer's use of ominous beauty, such as that of the beautiful Calypso, resisted and nevertheless accepted by Odysseus (*Odyssey* Book V) or the fatefully attractive Sirens whose beautiful singing among the flowers is mortally dangerous to passers-by (*Odyssey* Book XII). In the Old Testament the motif of the *femme fatale* is accompanied by similar features. For our purpose these are of central significance, but need to be preceded by some general remarks on dark beauty.

## B THE ASPECTS OF DARK BEAUTY

In the Old Testament different texts are found that contain different sides of beauty respectively, but when they are compared poise these sides against each other. For example, there are hymns on the beauty of nature and other hymns on the danger of nature. But there are also texts that demonstrate the danger of beauty within themselves, even reflecting on the inner constitution of beauty and the germ of undoing inherent in beauty itself. After a basic consideration of dark beauty in the latter sense, we shall investigate five aspects that can be summarised by the keywords "erotic," "cultic," "resignation," "terror" and "transience."

### 1 The dark side of beauty in general

If beauty is not only that which pleases, but also that which evokes awe<sup>5</sup> – which it is because both are manifestations of the overwhelming impressiveness with which the beautiful takes hold of the beholder – then the potential danger of the beautiful is always there in principle. Since the primeval narratives in the Book of Genesis are about such fundamental forces, it is hardly surprising to find that the fundamental text for our topic in the Old Testament as well as its reception is to be found in the early chapters of this book, notably in the Paradise Narrative, more specifically its second part in Genesis 3. For our purpose the seminal statement of the story is v. 6:

And the woman saw that the tree was *good* to eat from and that is was a *pleasure to the eyes*, and that the tree was *desirable* to acquire wisdom. So she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave to her husband with her, and he ate.

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<sup>5</sup> The beautiful is expressly identified with the awesome in Ps 139:14; cf. James Alfred Loader, "The Pleasing and the Awesome," *Old Testament Essays* 24/3 (2011): 661 (section 1e).

According to v. 6a, Eve saw that the fruit of the forbidden tree was good (טוֹב) to eat, a pleasure (חָנִית) to behold and desirable (נָחָנָה). Each of these words expresses the aesthetic aspect of the fruit and together they underline it. Now it is undeniable that the first humans wanted to become like God, which is clearly prepared by the Serpent's enticing remark to this effect (v. 5) and the woman's ensuing observation on wisdom that could be expected as a result (v. 6b). But this is founded upon the threefold formulation of aesthetic desire. So the real reason for their disobedience and rebellion against God was their inclination towards the beautiful. Their yearning for the beauty (root טֹב) of the fruit was stronger than their fear of God's prohibition. Therefore they could not resist the temptation of their desire and became guilty. Consequently, sin itself and all ensuing misery result from the effect of the enrapturing lure of the beautiful fruit. For this reason Augustine of Hippo is not really off target in his interpretation of the first sin as desire or concupiscence (*concupiscentia*) as well as *hybris* (*superbia*). To him the latter is the sin of the mind and the former is the sin of the senses that rules the mind.<sup>6</sup> In earthly beauty Augustine sees a trap that can alienate humans from God.<sup>7</sup> In the biblical text this desire for beauty is not of a sexual nature, but a whole series of instances spread over several Old Testament genres do confirm that beauty can be a pitfall for humans both in erotic and in other senses. This seems consistent with Augustine's basic observation.

## 2 The Threat of Erotic Beauty

Even though the temptation by beauty leading to catastrophe is not of a sexual nature in the Paradise Narrative, the dangers of erotic beauty are well attested in the rest of the Old Testament.

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<sup>6</sup> Adolph von Harnack, *Die Entwicklung des kirchlichen Dogmas II/III* (vol. 3 of *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*; 4th ed.; Darmstadt, WBG, [1909] 1980), 210. No wonder therefore, that concupiscence plays such a major part in the Confessions of Augustine (cf. *Confessiones* 10, 35, PL 32:802-803). In my opinion this remains true irrespective of whether Leo Scheffzcyk, *Urstand, Fall und Erbsünde: Von der Schrift bis Augustinus* (Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte vol. II/3a; Freiburg: Herder 1982), 219, 221, is right in his dissenting view that original sin and concupiscence are to be kept apart in Augustine's theology. This may be true as far as an inner and an outer conceptual component of original sin may be distinguished, but it does not impact on the fact that Augustine realised that, according to the biblical text, human rebellion sprang from human desire (I would add: for the beautiful).

<sup>7</sup> Patrick J. Sherry, "Schönheit II: Christlich-trinitarisch," *TRE* 30: 241; cf. *Confessiones* 3,6. PL 32:686-688.

## 2a Narrative Texts

In the narrative texts, we find several stories not only carrying the motif, but even hinging on it. Especially in the abandonment stories<sup>8</sup> of the Book of Genesis, but also the David narratives and in several of the Old Testament's "Jeanne d'Arc" stories,<sup>9</sup> this feature is central. Especially for men, but also for the beautiful women themselves their beauty can be dangerous. At first sight surprisingly, but actually quite representative of the Old Testament's critical perspective of Israel's own past, the first man to be exposed to the danger of a beautiful woman, is the patriarch of all Israel. On his way to Egypt the cowardly Abram tells his wife to say that she is his sister, because her beauty is such that the Egyptians will kill him to get hold of her (Gen 12:11-13):

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, I am aware that you are a woman of beautiful appearance;<sup>12</sup> when the Egyptians see you, they will say, She is his wife, and they will kill me, but let you live.<sup>13</sup> Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.

The same happens in Gerar (Gen 20:2) and is emulated by his son Isaac (Gen 26:7).<sup>10</sup> So both husbands already knew beforehand how dangerous it could be for themselves to have a beautiful wife. So dangerous in fact, that they were quite willing to abandon the honour of their wives and their wives personally in order to save themselves. Sarai's / Sarah's captors in turn get to experience the danger of this woman, but now as a consequence of divine intervention to protect the honour of the beautiful woman at the peril of those who desire her (Gen 12:17, 20:3). Nevertheless, in all three cases the women themselves are threatened by their own beauty.

The story of David and Bathsheba is also about a king who simply helps himself to the captivating beauty of another man's wife (2 Sam 11). Rising in the evening as befits the lion of Judah, David stalks an "exceedingly pretty" woman from the palace roof and watches her take a bath. Like the heathen kings of Genesis, he orders his courtiers to find out about her and bring her to

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Irmtraud Fischer, *Die Erzeltern Israels: Feministisch-theologische Studien zu Genesis 12-36* (BZAW 222; Berlin/New York: De Gruyter, 1994), 190-192.

<sup>9</sup> Despite the doubts of George Bernard Shaw, *Saint Joan: A Chronicle Play in Six Scenes and an Epilogue* (London: Penguin Books, [1924]2001), 11, it is clear that Jeanne also fulfilled this feature of the ideal female saviour: first, the remarks of her companions that "she was beautiful and well-formed," cf. Stephen W. Richey, *Joan of Arc: The Warrior Saint* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 112, and second, the scores of imaginary portraits showing that through the centuries she was regarded as such.

<sup>10</sup> Sarai is called מִרְאָה יִתְהַ and Rebecca טֻובָת מִרְאָה.

him. As often in the Succession Narrative, the superb story teller allows us to wonder whether it really was so simple as David prowling on rooftops to see naked women bathing, or whether perhaps Bathsheba knew exactly what could be expected from peep-showing her beauty in full view of royal voyeurs peering from palace roofs. In any event, in their case it again took two to tango and both had to bear the punishment for their adultery, since the child conceived from the apparently safely timed one night stand died (2 Sam 12:18-19).

There can also be a positive twist in stories of women who have to battle with their beauty. The beautiful Susanna is molested because of her beauty, but then saved as a reward for her virtue (Additions to the Book of Daniel 1). Often this kind of heroine however saves her people by her beauty or rather, by the disastrous effect of her beauty on the enemies of her people. The archetypical examples of this are Esther and Judith. Both are beautiful, reach a position of power because of their beauty and use that position to bring ruin on an enemy of their people. In the case of the wealthy widow Judith her beauty is beyond doubt (Jdt 8:[6]7, 10:1-7, 11:16), and her moral use of its power is emphasised, but nevertheless costs the powerful general Holofernes his life (Jdt 12:10-13:8). In Esther's case, her beauty is highlighted by a number of literary features (such as being chosen from a huge female population as beautiful enough for the king (Esth 2:7-8), being preferentially treated with cosmetics and prepared by the eunuchs (Esth 2:9) for charming the king, and for depending on this power by repeatedly tempting fate in using it to this end (Esth 5:1-4 and 8, 7:2-3). When its terrible effect sets in, it is not her lover/husband, but Haman the enemy of the Jews who is punished for ostensibly trying to take absurd sexual advantage of the beautiful queen (Esth 7:8). Afterwards she coolly has its deadly effect extended to thousands of other anti-Jews (Esth 9:12-16.).

Another example is the story of Jael from the Book of Judges (Jdg 4) as told by Pseudo-Philo. Whereas the Hebrew text does not explicitly mention her beauty, Pseudo-Philo (Ps.-Philo 31:3) does, calling her "very beautiful." When the enemy general, Sisera (or, in this text, Sisara), boasts of taking beautiful Israelite women as war spoils to become his concubines, the most beautiful puts on her jewellery and uses her fatal attraction to lure him to her rose-decked bed. Having intoxicated him, she then rather roughly works him off the bed and finishes him off straight away.<sup>11</sup>

There is also a story about the danger posed by male beauty for the man blessed with it, namely the famous story of Joseph and the wife of Potiphar (Gen 39). Joseph is called beautiful in similar terms as his grandmother Rebecca and his great-grandmother Sarah (יְפָה מְرָאָה, Gen 39:6). When the wife of his master "looked up at him" and desired him sexually (Gen 39:7), Joseph de-

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Matthias Augustin, *Der schöne Mensch im Alten Testament und im hellenistischen Judentum* (BEAT 3; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1983), 211-212.

clined giving in as a "great sin" and did so several times. But then disaster struck as could be expected from a woman scorned in lust. She turned the tables and staged a rape scene, which saw Joseph punished with imprisonment. Although this too ended to the benefit of Israel by providing the avenue to the royal court needed to later save his people from starvation, the motif of the self-threatening danger of male beauty remains the same<sup>12</sup> so that one could still call Potiphar's wife a *femme fatale* of sorts, even if the man in the story does not fall for her.

## 2b Sapiential Literature

The motif of beauty in the story of Joseph, showing strong influence of wisdom literature, tallies quite well with the number of occurrences found in the Book of Proverbs. Even if the Book of Proverbs ends with the thought that beauty is no more than a puff of emptiness (הַבָּל), such trivial female beauty is nevertheless dangerous enough to warrant warning young men against it repeatedly. In this genre only the danger of female beauty features and only young men are perceived to be in danger of falling into the trap.

When the proverbial *femme fatale* is called נָכְרִיה֙ אִישָׁה֙ זָרָה֙ or נָכְרִיה֙ אִישָׁה֙ זָרָה֙, she is "the other" woman, that is, a married woman belonging to another man. Without going into the debate about her identity<sup>13</sup> or the textual criticism of v. 18, it is clear that she poses a sexual threat to the young man being addressed. According to Prov 2:16-19 wisdom in a youngster's heart will have the effect

to save you from the strange woman,  
from the alien woman speaking smooth words,  
who forsakes the mate of her youth  
    who forgets the covenant of her God;  
for her house<sup>14</sup> sinks to death,  
    and her paths to the shades;  
who goes to her does not come back,  
    or reach the paths of life.

The "smooth words" are clearly erotically suggestive and this woman is therefore the type who uses feminine charm for the purposes of seducing youngsters. The danger is quite literally fatal, since this use of beauty leads straight down to death.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Otto Kaiser, "Von der Schönheit des Menschen als Gabe Gottes," in *Verbindungslien: Festschrift für Werner H. Schmidt zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Axel Graupner, Holger Delkurt and Alexander B. Ernst; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2000), 156.

<sup>13</sup> For a survey, cf. Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 18A; New York: Doubleday, 2000), 134-141.

<sup>14</sup> Often נָחִיבָה "her paths" is read instead of בֵּיתָה, "her house," which makes good sense *parallelismi causa*, but is not supported by textual evidence.

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The same motif is developed at length in Prov 5:1-23 and 7:1-27.<sup>15</sup> Again we encounter the strange woman, again we hear of her seductive talk and again the young man is warned that falling for this kind of eroticism is a road to death. In the first case a positive encouragement to marital fidelity is added (Prov 5:15-19): nothing against enjoying the beauty of the young man's own *femme* and even becoming intoxicated by it, but everything against the other, fatal one. In the second case the warning against her beguiling talk, suggestive clothing and lips also includes a description of her decorated bed (Prov 7:16f.) somewhat like the Pseudo-Philonic Jael referred to above (who used rose flavour instead of myrrh).

Quite another kind of beauty is also classified in the dark category, namely that of the dumb brunette. A beautiful but stupid woman is made veritably ludicrous in Prov 11:22:

A golden ring in a pig's snout –  
a beautiful woman without discretion.

Whether the woman is the decorated pig (Waltke<sup>16</sup>) or whether she is the ring (Fox<sup>17</sup>) need not be decided here. What is clear is that the beauty of a woman without sense is not merely worthless, but actually absurdly wasted. This severely relativises the beauty of such a woman as unclean and downright filthy. The un-emended Hebrew text of Prov 11:16, may state that honour for a woman with (only) beauty is as misplaced as wealth for violence, but it may also be a cynically negative comment on the use of beauty by a pretty woman to attain honour. In this case the parallelism as it stands would suggest that beauty used for this purpose is as dangerous and wicked as violence used for acquiring wealth.

## 2c Prophetic texts

Although the danger inherent in human beauty – both female and male – does not occur as often in the prophetic books of the Old Testament as they do in the narrative and sapiential literature, it is also among the prophets. As can be ex-

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<sup>15</sup> A shorter variation on the same theme is to be found in Prov 6:23-25, where the description of a beautiful seductress's coquetry focuses on her tongue and eyelids as well as the result of poverty for the young man. Cf. also Prov 29:3 (where the theme of prostitution implicitly contains the motif that interests us) and, somewhat more indirectly, Prov 9:13-18 where Lady Folly entices the simpleton in terms reminiscent of the *femme fatale* – which she in fact is, although in the metaphorical sense. She may be pictured somewhat like the golden ring in the pig's snout (Prov 11:22, see below), although her beauty is not an expressly developed motif.

<sup>16</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 503-504.

<sup>17</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Proverbs 10-31: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AYB [= AB] 18B; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 540.

pected, the concept is not used for its own sake, but always in the service of the overarching message of the particular prophetic passage.<sup>18</sup> But that in itself is valuable, since in this way the motif is not used contentiously as far as its aesthetic make-up is concerned.

In Isa 3:16-24 feminine beauty is depicted lucidly. The body pose, coquetry, clothes and jewellery of the daughters of Zion are described in unrivalled detail so that this passage is both a treasure trove for cultural historians and a terror for young people studying Hebrew for the ministry. But there are other reasons for noticing the idea of danger in this beauty. In the passage female beauty and its extravagant expression is a metaphor for the arrogance of Israel. Since the metaphor can only work if the motif is credible within the sphere whence it comes, that kind of beauty of which the pretty woman is overbearingly conscious must be meant. The downfall to which it leads is also described in aesthetic terms. The beautiful woman will be made ugly (Isa 3:24):

Instead of spice there will be bad odour;  
and instead of a girdle, a rope;  
and instead of hair make-up, baldness;  
and instead of a rich robe, a bound sack;  
instead of beauty, shame.

We may compare Isa 5:1-7, where the relationship between God and his people is depicted by the motif of the beautiful garden as metaphor for the beloved (רַבָּה and רַבָּה) though sinful people. Here too the motif of beauty is reversed to become its own opposite. This instance is interesting because the beauty, carried as it is by the metaphor of the garden known from biblical erotic poetry (e.g. Cant 4:12-16, 5:1), envisages human beauty as such and not just female beauty.

Even without the motif of coquetry the same idea of beauty mixed with sin and therefore leading to catastrophe is also found in the Book of Jeremiah. In this case beauty is closely associated with the criticised attitude to be punished, to result in the loss of beauty (Jer 11:15-17). Here it is not the beauty itself which is dangerous to the beautiful or to the lover of the beautiful. Nevertheless, the metaphor of a tree is used for the beloved in the same way as in ancient love poetry (cf. Cant 2:3, 7:9), the lover is called רַבָּה and the the normal beauty terminology is used.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> In this context the metaphor of marriage for the relationship between God and Israel as found in the Book of Jeremiah (cf. Jer 3:20) and especially in the Book of Hosea (cf. Hos 1:2, 2:4, 3:1) where the motif of fidelity and not that of beauty as is at stake, is not included.

<sup>19</sup> Jer 11:15-17; the terms פָּה and חָאָר belong to the normal aesthetic terminology; cf. Loader, "The Pleasing and the Awesome," 652, footnote 4.

Related use is made of the beauty motif by the prophet Ezekiel. Here the woman who combines her beauty with pride is brought to a fall precisely for this reason. In Ezek 27:3ff. Tyre is chastised in the second person feminine singular for boasting about her own beauty (בָּאֵן) and for regarding it as "perfect" (כָּלֵיל). Therefore she will lose this very beauty as her punishment (Ezek 27:27ff.).

Male beauty captivating the lust of women – somewhat like Joseph in the company of Potiphar's wife – is used by Ezekiel in quite another context as well (Ezek 23:14f). In negative terms he shows the effect of that which struck people as beautiful all the more forcefully by using it to fuel his criticism. The passage is about the effect of mural art:<sup>20</sup>

She looked at men portrayed on the wall,  
images of Chaldeans engraved in red colour,  
belts girded around their waists, flowing turbans on their heads, all  
with the appearance of officers,  
the picture of Babylonians  
whose land of birth is Chaldea.

It is therefore clear that, albeit mostly in metaphorical or metonymical functions, the prophets did not only know the concept of beauty, but they also used it as an established motif in prophetic judgement texts. For this reason we have to disagree with Claus Westermann who denies that the concept is even found in prophetic criticism.<sup>21</sup>

### 3 The danger of cultic objects

At least one narrative, the story of the attempted transfer of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (1Sam 6:19; 2 Sam 6), shows that quite another kind of beauty can also bear the germ of danger within itself. Artefacts for cultic use are regarded as objects of aesthetic beauty.<sup>22</sup> All the striking objects of metal, gems and wood destined for use in the Tabernacle were created at the command and by the inspiration of God himself<sup>23</sup>. Therefore such objects have to be approached carefully, subject to specific rules for their handling (Num 4:15).

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Loader, "The Pleasing and the Awesome," 656-658.

<sup>21</sup> Westermann, "Das Schöne im Alten Testament," 120.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. James Alfred Loader, "Making Things from the Heart: On Works of Beauty in the Old Testament," *Old Testament Essays* 25/1 (2012), 104-105.

<sup>23</sup> Exodus 31:1-6: "And Yahweh spoke to Moses: See, I have called by name Bezalel son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah and I have filled him with the spirit of God, with wisdom, understanding and knowledge in all kinds of craft, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and copper, cutting stones for setting and carving wood, for working in all kinds of craft. And see, I have appointed with him Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have given wisdom in the hearts of all the skilful, to make all that I have commanded you." Cf. also Exod 35-36.

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When this does not happen, even with the best of intentions, the danger of the beauty lashes out (2 Sam 6:6f.):

When they came to the threshing floor of Nachon, Uzzah reached out his hand to the ark of God and held on to it, for the oxen let it drop. The anger of Yahweh was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God.

This instance shows how close the aspects of the pleasing and the awesome in the concept of beauty really are. The holy object is beautiful and, by virtue of its inner substance as a religious artefact, is also awe-inspiring. Therefore its dangerous quality is necessarily always near at hand.

#### 4     **Beauty that leads to resignation**

Three interrelated elements in the Book of Qohelet are not only dominant in that book, but also indicate forcefully how intensely the phenomenon of awesomeness was perceived in the beautiful. These are Qohelet's view of nature, youth and joy.

The opening reflection (Eccl 1:2-11), framing the book on the one side, is filled with awe at the wonders of nature. However, the impenetrability of these marvels – such as the observation that all the rivers continuously flow to the sea without the sea ever filling up – does not imbue him with enjoyment, but with an “unspeakably” pessimistic resignation (v 8):

All things are so wearisome,  
more than one can say;  
the eye cannot see enough,  
nor does the ear have its fill of hearing.

Therefore this reflection, as all the others in the book, stands under the motto of senselessness (הבל, “puff of air” and רשות רוח, “striving after wind”<sup>24</sup>) and no gain for any human being in life (vv. 2-3).

At the other end of the book he likewise frames his work with similar thoughts (Eccl 11:7 - 12:8). Here the sun is again featured, this time specifically under the aspect of its beauty (Eccl 11:7). This is developed into his advice that youth, its pleasures and beauty should be enjoyed, but under the aspect of the decay of old age and death that are unstoppable in their approach. Therefore the book ends as it began, with the declaration that all is a senseless chase after the nothingness of wind. As far as I can see, this is the only place in the Old Testament where old age is not seen as beautiful or a blessing, but as the counter-pole of the beauty of youth. To me that is not surprising, since in Qohelet's

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. for example Eccl 1:2, 2:21, 3:19, 12:8 as well as 1:14, 2:17, 4:16, 7:13.

view this perspective of degeneration goes for *everything* in life: **הכל הבל** means that *all*, not just some things, are empty (and, as he often adds, mere chasing wind). Therefore the beauty of youth as well as the beauty of enjoyment is only a matter of *carpe diem* – a chance to grab its enjoyment as long as it holds. And the one thing that is certain, is that it will not endure. For reasons like these I have for almost forty years now found myself profoundly unimpressed by endeavours to use the concept of beauty/joy to wring a "positive" message from the thrust of the Book of Qohelet.<sup>25</sup> Beauty and beautiful things like youth, clothes, women and feasts *are* beautiful, but they carry within them the seeds of decay and death. Qohelet can say that God "has made everything beautiful (**יפה**) in its time" (Eccl 3:11) but then follows it up by filling another frame calling for the enjoyment of beauty (vv. 12-13 and 22) with the darkest thoughts about the death of humans holding no more than the death of animals (vv. 16-21). Therefore beauty according to Qohelet is ambivalent in the absolute sense, that is, it has a polar structure – two poles of valence, one of which is positive, the other negative. The negative side necessarily has the upper hand, for in its innermost self beauty is infested with its own opposite. Therefore the observation of the beauty of life under the *memento mori* is perhaps the clearest and most devastating expression of what we have found so often in both wisdom texts and other genres: in beauty itself lurks a dark, deeply disturbing dimension.

Also Job resigns in the face of the beauty of creation. In one of the most awesomely beautiful poems in the Bible (Job 38-39, 40\*) the beauty of nature is presented under the aspect of God's awe-inspiring creative work – to such an extent that the reader is under pressure to resign to God as Job did. But this resignation, although sharing Qohelet's experience of the beautiful world as inexplicable, is a resignation that resolves itself into a dew and does not petrify so as to need a *carpe diem* like Qohelet.

## 5 The Terror of Nature's Beauty

Several onomastic texts in the Book of Job list the wonderful aspects of nature as terrible signs of danger and catastrophe. The first of these is Job 9:5-10, which is a hymn-like description by Job of nature's wonders. It consists of two equally long strophes with a symmetrical structure in hymnic style, one on God's destructive power (vv. 5-7) and the other on his creative work (vv. 8-10). Although the poem oozes marvel at the wonders (**נפלאות**, v. 10) of creation, God is not praised for it. The style of the hymn is used to express estrangement from the awesome God who is active in nature and is just the kind of God Job in his suffering does not feel the need of. The ironical anti-hymn clearly shows such

<sup>25</sup> E.g., among others, Roger N. Whybray, *Ecclesiastes* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), *passim*, and Eben H. Scheffler, "Qohelet's Positive Advice," *OTE* 6 (1993): 248-271.

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fear of the incalculable (רָקָה עַנָּא) dark side of this wonderful creation that we may call it a dark hymn.<sup>26</sup>

In a similar quasi-hymn (Job 26:5-14) dark effects of terror and fear are created through prefacing the second strophe on God's inconceivable work on inorganic nature by a first half on his power in the underworld. The effect of the awesome beauty in creation itself is scaring enough, but in connection with its corollary in the counter-world Job can only feel terror (לִפְנֵי *po'lal*, v. 5).

Two further onomastic texts occur in the speeches of Elihu, where they are directly linked to each other, namely in Job 36:27-37:13 and in 37:14-24. The same phenomenon is used by Elihu, only he is not lamenting the loss of a personally immanent God as Job was doing. On the contrary, he confesses to this kind of terribly beautiful God experienced in a terribly awesome nature. Again the hymnic form is used together with a list-like enumeration of the enthralling wonders of God's creation. The whole perspective of dark beauty is formulated poignantly by the speaker in relation to God (vv. 21-22.):

Now, no one can even look on the light when it is bright in the skies,  
when the wind has passed and cleared them.  
Out of the north gold shines forth;  
around God is terrible splendour.

Further than this no one can go in finding the beauty of God estranging. Invisibility is as much the result of beautiful light as of darkness – that is the ultimate darkness of beauty.

## 6 The Transience of beauty

The final negative aspect of beauty is its transience. We have already encountered this aspect above in the thoughts of Qohelet on beauty, youth and old age. The beauty of youth and young life remains beautiful, but its putrid inner core is clearly stated in the reminder of the final poem (Eccl 11:7-12:8). Joy and enjoyment in the beautiful years, yes. But already at that stage one should think about its temporary character (Eccl 11:8). The sun, consummate symbol of beauty, and the radiance of light, the moon and stars – all of this will darken (עַשְׂנָה *qal*), so that we literally hear of the dark side of beauty.

Not identical, but closely related to the transience of beauty is its relative character. The conventional forms of beauty may be beautiful to the conventional observer, but other things are more beautiful than what is popularly deemed to be so. This theme is found several times elsewhere in wisdom literature. The beautiful things that may seduce a young man to theft and related

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. James Alfred Loader, "Seeing God with Natural Eyes," in *Old Testament Science and Reality: A Mosaic for Deist* (ed. Willie Wessels and Eben Scheffler; Pretoria: Verba Vitae, 1992), 293-294.

crimes are not as beautiful as the spiritual jewellery of wisdom that seeks to keep him from such ways (Prov 1:13 and 15, 2:10; cf. Sir 40:27[28]). The truism "real beauty comes from the inside" is formulated in the last words of the Book of Proverbs. In the great acrostic poem on the ideal woman it is unequivocally said both of נָא and of יְפֵי (Prov 31:30-31):

Attractiveness is deceitful, and beauty is vain –  
a woman who fears Yahweh, she is to be praised.  
Give her of the fruit of her hands,  
and let her works praise her in the gates.

Real grounds for praise and reward are to be found in the God-fearing character of a woman rather than her outward appearance, and worthwhile praise does not come from admirers, but from her own deeds.

In Isa 40:6-8 the transience of human beauty can be recognised in the comparison of human beauty with nature's beauty. Since the beauty of the fields and the flowers is short-lived, the metaphorical transfer of this to all humans ("all flesh is grass") says that human beauty is but a fleeting thing. Psalm 39:12 applies the same logic, but here in the context of God's punishment: human beings themselves are a puff of wind and their desirables disappear as though eaten by moths!

## C CONCLUSION

Although there is mention of the danger motif in the erotic poetry of the Book of Canticles,<sup>27</sup> I have not included it above because in these cases not so much beauty as love itself is meant. But surveying what we have found, it would be justifiable to say that erotic love as the fascination with (for Canticles) the opposite sex is about *finding* someone overpoweringly beautiful. Whether the object of love is pretty by commonly held cultural standards or not, when loved he or she *becomes* beautiful. This transcends all boundaries and is stronger than death. Not only the *femme fatal*, but also the effects of jealousy (Num 5:14), obsessive disorder (2 Sam 13:1-4), attraction turning upon itself (2 Sam 13:15) and stalking (Deut 22:25-27, cf. Jdg 21:20-21), show why the Book of Proverbs can think of people who fall into the power of this phenomenon as walking to their downfall like cattle to the slaughter (Prov 7:22). The same goes for the effect of beautiful objects on people to commit crimes such as Achan's theft of desirable things (Josh 7:21, cf. Prov 1:13).

The character of beauty's dark side was thought through right to its ultimate core by Qohelet, but we have found its logic unfolded in all the texts we have considered above. Our study has revealed a likeness in kind between all of the manifestations of beauty. Beauty is not an abstraction, but neither is it just a

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Cant 2:7, 8:4 on premature love and Cant 8:6-7 on its deadly power.

concrete thing. It is a permeating force that can find visible manifestation in different ways. In the texts we investigated we found:

- Israel observed and experienced that beauty impresses.
- Therefore she recognised and formulated its strength.
- The Old Testament therefore shows how beauty can overpower.
- Thus beauty has a dangerous component well known to Israel.
- This is its dark side.

But the contours of beauty reveal a deep affinity with the religious dimension, which is also fundamentally nothing other than being overwhelmingly impressed by God. The manifestations of beauty in humans, nature, objects and God are all deeply related. John D. Peters<sup>28</sup> could say,

... the Hebrew tradition constantly sees beauty as an image, something mediated and re-presented. The person<sup>29</sup> looked upon risks becoming an idol, a false god, an object that escapes the ethical protection of a relation of mutual obligation.

Our study has shown that this is true.<sup>30</sup> Here we see the darkest corner of beauty's shadows. For this reason Israel could tolerate no images in its cult. For the same reason the temptation to succumb to the beauty of the idol was as strong as death<sup>31</sup> and had to be opposed by prophets like Hosea who even had

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<sup>28</sup> Peters, "Beauty's Veils," 11.

<sup>29</sup> I would add: "or the thing."

<sup>30</sup> The reference to "the" Hebrew tradition remains valid even in the light of Andreas Wagner, "Alttestamentlicher Monotheismus und seiner Bindung an das Wort," in *Gott im Wort – Gott im Bild: Bilderlosigkeit als Bedingung des Monotheismus?* (ed. Andreas Wagner, Volker Hörner and Günter Geisthardt; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 2005), 1-8, when he warns that the diversity of the Old Testament precludes making un-nuanced statements about the monotheism of "the" Old Testament. With this proviso it is nevertheless appropriate, as he also points out (especially p. 5), to recognise a broad thrust within the Old Testament when its general unity is taken into account from the angle of its literary growth and "inner unity."

<sup>31</sup> From this perspective it is both understandable and attractive that Jan Assmann, *Die Mosaische Unterscheidung: Oder der Preis des Monotheismus* (München/Wien: Akzente, 2003), 98-99, interprets the prohibition of images to be a ban on *all* images as so many threats of this entrapment. But Wagner retorts that the ban on images is related to images of the divine (Wagner, "Alttestamentlicher Monotheismus," 11, documented with a wealth of literature on monotheism as well as on the prohibition of images). Whether or not the prohibition intends all likenesses or only cultic images, on both counts it does express a deep and fundamental awareness of the dark side of images, which I have developed above independently from the debates on monotheism and images. As far as I can see, the dimension of the danger in beauty has not yet played a role in the issue.

to combat the devastating lure of erotic beauty in his own family life. The prohibition of images in the cult is Israel's acknowledgement of the sweeping danger of beauty. There is but one alternative, mentioned in two psalms. While naming three priorities of faith, the first pious poet declares them all to be a single triune entity for which he wishes— the centre being nothing less than looking upon God's beauty:<sup>32</sup>

to live in the house of Yahweh all the days of my life,  
to behold the beauty of Yahweh  
and to contemplate.

The other psalmist escalates the wish into speaking the unspeakable, namely to not only behold but also share in God's beauty and to do so in communion with all who worship:<sup>33</sup>

Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us!

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<sup>32</sup> Psalm 27:4 (singular), where the noun בָּרוּךְ is used.

<sup>33</sup> Psalm 90:17 (plural), where the noun בָּרוּכוּ is likewise used.

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