



The Inseparability of Beauty and Truth in Biblical Poetry

DIANE JACOBSON

“So tell me,” folks often ask, “what does this mean?” I have been teaching Scripture for over thirty-five years, and this is a perennial question. What folks want is for me to take a story or proverb or psalm and boil it down to its core meaning, its core truth, its core message. Kind of, “don’t bother me with all of this fancy stuff, just give it to me straight.” The question strikes me as very modern, very American. And then I am reminded that this question comes as well from my Lutheran heritage. Luther takes the Ten Commandments, the Creeds, the Lord’s Prayer and asks “what does this mean?” And we get the Small Catechism. Meaning is again boiled down to its core essentials. Strip it down, get to the underlying meaning, and make it direct and useful.

I write this article in reaction to this impulse, in protest really. Art and beauty are not frills added on to core meanings, needing or able to be boiled down to some core truth. Poetry is not adaphora. Rather, in all biblical writing, the art is part of the message. Allow me to concentrate on how biblical poetry in the Old Testament conveys meaning.

First and foremost, there is a primary movement underlying the art of all biblical poetry—in psalms, in wisdom literature, and in prophets. Poetry derives its

There is a modern tendency among Christians to reduce the biblical text to a flat, propositional truth of a generally literal nature. But the power and truth of the biblical text is limited by such an approach. The biblical writers intended in the text to move the heart of the reader by the beauty and force of the words and images.

meaning first and primarily through the rhythm of the parallel line.¹ The meaning of a poetic line is captured in the tension of the two parts. In the movement from one part to the other, from *a* to *b*, meaning is anticipated in the pieces' relationship to one another. We as readers, hearers, singers are caught up in the puzzle and the gift of this tension—consciously or unconsciously puzzling out how the lines fit together. In such a way, we are invited into the creation of the meaning of the passages. Meaning is certainly there for us to discover, but more than this, meaning is found in the tension of the lines, with all their beauty and complication. Here are two examples from Proverbs and a psalm, though possible examples are nigh onto infinite:

Meaning is certainly there for us to discover, but more than this, meaning is found in the tension of the lines, with all their beauty and complication.

Look at Prov 15:13–15 NRSV (with notes on the underlying Hebrew):

A glad heart makes a cheerful countenance [face],
but by sorrow of heart the spirit [*ru'ah*] is broken.
The mind [heart] of one who has understanding seeks knowledge,
but the mouths of fools feed on folly.
All the days of the poor [oppressed, afflicted] are hard,
but a cheerful heart has a continual feast.

We could take each one of these three proverbs and ask “what does this mean” and come up with some not-very-interesting platitudes. But, taken together, we are caught up in the repetitions, the many body parts, the contrasts of joy and sorrow as well as knowledge and folly, affliction and feast. Ours is the heart/mind seeking knowledge as well as healing and wholeness of spirit. Glad hearts/intentions are related to personal inquiry and community well-being. Folly and sorrow are related, and we are drawn deeply into the interactions. Something more than simple good advice is here. We are invited to live into these proverbs, much as we are invited by Jesus into the Sermon on the Mount.

Or look at the beginning of Psalm 8:

O LORD our Lord,
how majestic is your name
in all the earth!—
you whose glory is chanted
above the heavens
out of the mouths

¹ Among the many fine works on parallelism, see Adele Berlin, “Parallelism,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5:155–60, as well as Rolf A. Jacobson and Karl N. Jacobson, *Invitation to the Psalms: A Reader's Guide for Discovery and Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

of infants and children;
you have set up a fortress
against your enemies,
to silence the foe and avenger.
(Ps 8:1–2)²

I love the beginning of this psalm precisely because it is so intricately beautiful and confusing. It begins (as it ends) with praise to the majesty of the name of God in all the earth, setting the stage for the majesty of humanity in the middle of the psalm. The psalm then continues; praise is chanted in the heavens. When I hear of God’s glory chanted in the heavens, I see a historical picture of the heavenly hosts, angels if you will, singing the praises of God—part of their heavenly job description. Think of Isa 6:3 and the hosts calling “holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of God’s glory.” (Part of the beauty of biblical poetry is allowing historical insights and other biblical passages to interact and help to create meaning.) But in Psalm 8, the reference takes on a fascinating shape. These angels, gods, are mere babes, infants, children. Compared to God, they are tiny. And they are totally dependent.

Then another strange and beautiful thing happens in the psalm. We find a double use of the phrase “out of the mouths of infants and children.” On the one hand, the glory of God is chanted out of the mouths of babes and infants. On the other hand, out of these same mouths, God is said to have founded a fortress, a bulwark to silence and make cease the foe and the avenger, God’s cosmic enemies who threaten the order of the world. What a way to win a battle! God defeats chaos through the praise of mere babes!

Singing a song of praise itself builds a mighty fortress (as Luther knew well) and contributes to the creation of an ordered world. This beautiful complexity gives me a whole new calling as a choir member.

Singing a song of praise itself builds a mighty fortress (as Luther knew well) and contributes to the creation of an ordered world. This beautiful complexity gives me a whole new calling as a choir member. The singing rings intricately and beautifully in my ears, calling forth a new import to praise.

A second way that poetry invites insight and engagement in proverbs and psalms is through the rich use of imagery and metaphor, particularly for God.³

² This translation comes from the hymnal *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 342. The translation of the first verse is notoriously difficult. See the comments in Nancy L. DeClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 121. See also Matt 21:16 NASB “Jesus said to them, ‘Yes; have you never read, ‘Out of the mouths of infants and nursing babies you have prepared praise for yourself?’”

³ See William Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), and Gail Ramshaw, *Treasures Old and New: Images in the Lectionary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002).

In many ways, we pray psalms in order that we might know God, not directly through a straightforward explanation and theory, but through engagement with images that take us places we cannot go with plain, straightforward speech.

The variety of images of God in the psalms is breathtaking:

- God is our fortress/refuge (Ps 18:1–2; 57:1; 91:1–4, 9–10, etc.).
- God is the transplanter of trees/vines (Ps 44:1–2; 80:8–11, etc.).
- God is the sun of righteousness (Ps 19; 27:1; 43:3; 104:1a–2b, etc.).
- God is the voice of many waters (Ps 29:3–4, 10; 78:13, 15–16; 77:16–20, etc.).
- God is a bird: eagle/vulture, dove, owl (humans tend to be other animals).
- God takes on many roles: king, warrior, parent, teacher, shepherd.
- God is represented by many personal metaphors: senses, face, hand, mouth, voice, breath.
- God is represented by numerous impersonal metaphors: light, shield, shade, mountain, rock.

I love this. One could go on forever, and maybe that's the point. Once one begins the exploration of the beautiful and sometimes frightening psalmic images of God, one senses and is touched by the way the ordinary and the extraordinary intermingle. There is from the beginning, through the use of image and metaphor, an incarnational quality to God. In fact, I would claim that the intricate beauty of biblical poetry is one of the main ways we are introduced to an incarnate God.

I give you two examples, one from Proverbs 8 and then back to Psalm 8. I have written a fair amount about the figure of Woman Wisdom, about whom there is a good deal to say.⁴ But just look at the implied/direct metaphors in Proverbs 8 and 9 and note how they invite us to see God as incarnate. Wisdom is

- the one who stands at a public place, encountering those at gates and crossroads (8:1–3);
- a teacher (8:4–11, 32–36);
- the personified order of creation (8:23–31);
- God's child, God's daughter (8:30–31); and, finally,
- architect and priest (9:1–6).

The poetic weaving of these metaphors prepares us for Jesus as is evident throughout the New Testament in the writings of Paul, Matthew, Luke, and, particularly, John. The groundwork is in the poetry.

An equally important poetic groundwork is laid in Psalm 8. We have looked at the beginning of the psalm with its lovely double movements of children chanting and building a fortress. Now I want to look at the middle section, also complicated to

⁴ See, for example, Diane Jacobson, "Strengths and Weaknesses of Wisdom/Sophia Talk," in *A Reforming Church . . . Gift and Task: Essays from a Free Conference*, ed. Charles P. Lutz (Minneapolis: Kirk House, 1995), and Diane Jacobson, "What Is Wisdom: Who Is She?" *Word & World* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1987): 241–44.

translate for different reasons than the first verse—the problem being with English rather than Hebrew.

When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
the moon and the stars that you have established;
what are human beings that you are mindful of them,
mortals that you care for them?
Yet you have made them a little lower than God,
and crowned them with glory and honor.
You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet,
all sheep and oxen,
and also the beasts of the field,
the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea,
whatever passes along the paths of the seas.
O Lord, our Sovereign,
how majestic is your name in all the earth!
(Ps 8:3–9 NRSV)

These remarkable verses open up so many things. They change our gaze from heaven to earth. More importantly, they change our attitudes toward ourselves. The poetry enters into our questioning (who are we?) and invites us to consider our place from a divine vantage point. The poetry moves us to believe something beyond the immediate evidence—that the Lord has fashioned creation in such a way that humanity is a little less than God, or a little less than the gods, the angelic hosts who praise God and with their praises help to form the bulwark in the first verses. Everything is reversed from the obvious, the expected.

These remarkable verses open up so many things. They change our gaze from heaven to earth. More importantly, they change our attitudes toward ourselves.

What we do not see in the NRSV translation, which beautifully and inclusively illumines this reversal, is found in the more literal translation of verses 4–5:

What is mortal man, that you remember him?
and the son of man, that you attend to him?
For you have made him little lower than God/the gods,
and you have crowned him with honor.

This translation takes us on a biblical journey not unlike that taken in Proverbs 8. Yes, all human beings, all of us, are made little lower than God or the gods. But this reality is mirrored most closely and most particularly in the person of Christ. Again and again Jesus is called Son of Man. In Psalm 8, we have seen that this phrase means “a human being, a mortal,” referring to all humanity. But in the

New Testament, this phrase becomes a christological title referring to Jesus. If this title derives much of its meaning from Psalm 8, which I believe it does, then by its use we are proclaiming that Jesus is the true human, the best example of a human. Jesus is the one who most fully lives the role of royal viceroy, suffering death in service to the world; the one who praised with the mouth of babes; and the one who, as Son of Man, stills the enemy and the avenger.

This connection is not lost to the writers of the New Testament. We find uses of Psalm 8 in specific reference to Jesus all over the New Testament. Look, for example, at 1 Cor 15:27, Eph 1:22, and Heb 2:5–9. The meaning of the psalm comes to us in the midst of the whole Christian witness. The meaning of the psalm is inseparable from the poetry because we come to see the phrase *son of man* in two separate and inseparable ways. We are all the son of man, God's royal viceroys, crowned with glory and honor. We are all given dominion over the earth and the beasts and the fish and the birds. But the shape of this dominion is startling because the fulfillment of this task is present in the life and death of Jesus. Christ the king, who wears a crown of thorns, is both the model and goal of royal humanity.

In just such ways as these the intricate beauty of biblical poetry introduces us to an incarnate God.

And there is more. Paradox is also seen in the art and beauty of the poetry. Look, for example, at this pair of contrasting proverbs.

Do not answer fools according to their folly,
or you will be a fool yourself.
Answer fools according to their folly,
or they will be wise in their own eyes.
(Prov 26:4–5 NRSV)

Both proverbs are true and good advice. But taken together they are something more. They show us how the truth of poetry works. It is an extension of the notion of parallelism itself. The truth of “*a*, and what’s more, *b*” becomes “*a* and *b* together,” even when it is logically impossible. This concept of contrasting pairs is extended to Scripture’s two creation stories, two law codes, yea, even four Gospels.

One might speak also of this tendency of poetic movement in the two different ways we are invited to pray, each beautiful in their own way. We pray our sorrow and lament, and we pray our praise and thanksgiving.

It may at first seem strange to speak of the beauty of lament. But think of the haunting lines that give rise to so much of what we feel when we give ourselves over to biblical lament.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. (Ps 130:1)

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? (Ps 13:1)

By the rivers of Babylon—
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion. (Ps 137:1)

Faithful lamenting is beautiful in its honest cry to God to be with the lamenter in times of trouble. Lament gives voice to pain. And, of course, laments become emblematic of a theology of the cross.

It is not at all accidental that the Gospel writers tell the story of the passion by invoking the words of Psalm 22 from its beginning (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” [v. 1]) and throughout the psalm (“All who see me mock at me; they make mouths at me, they shake their heads; ‘Commit your cause to the Lord; let him deliver—’” [vv. 7–8]; “they divide my clothes among themselves, and for my clothing they cast lots [v. 18]). When one brings the whole of Psalm 22 to the story of the passion, the end of the psalm brings a special beauty with its move from worship of “all the ends of the earth” and “all the families of the nations” (v. 27) to “all who sleep in the earth” and “all who go down to the dust” (v. 29), and finally to “future generations” (v. 30) and “a people yet unborn” (v. 31). Psalm 22 holds a unique place in the Psalter as the one psalm that cannot be read by any Christian without being drawn to the cross. Psalm 22 shares with other laments the tendency to find the presence of God in the absence of God. But Psalm 22 is also the passion prayed. It is God entering into our lament and owning it. It is God taking on our lament and transforming it.

But Psalm 22 is also the passion prayed. It is God entering into our lament and owning it. It is God taking on our lament and transforming it.

Lament leads to, stands in contrast with, and finds its partner in psalms of comfort, blessing, and praise. These psalms also live in our biblical imaginations—from the comfort of Psalm 23 and knowing the Lord is our shepherd, to waiting patiently for the Lord (Psalm 40), to knowing God is our refuge and strength (Psalm 46), to making a joyful noise to God with all the earth (Psalms 66, 95, 100), to proclaiming the beauty of the Lord’s dwelling place (Psalm 84), to joining the legions of those who proclaim that God’s steadfast love endures forever (Psalm 118), to proclaiming how good and how pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity (Psalm 133), to singing any number of new songs, blessing, thanksgivings, to the joy of singing praise to God in the last five psalms of the Psalter.

Praise the Lord!
How good it is to sing praises to our God;
for he is gracious, and a song of praise is fitting.
(Ps 147:1 NRSV)

Consider the simple and profound beauty of Psalm 121, a psalm that begins so personally, so intimately with each of us individually, lifting up our eyes and searching.

I lift up my eyes to the hills—
from where will my help come?
My help is from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth.
(Ps 121:1–2)

This psalm then moves from moves from “I” to “you,” from query to assurance, from wonder to promise, from doxology to witness. God, who has made and continues to make all the heavens and the earth, is committed to watching over us, guarding us, keeping us from danger and harm.

The Lord will keep you from all evil;
he will keep your life.
The Lord will keep
your going out and your coming in
from this time on and forevermore.
(Ps 121:7–8)

Our praise is related to promise and grace. Our praise surprises us with a God who meets us in our lament and takes us beyond. The poetry of praise transports us. Our questions are met by promise.

Not incidentally, I have been illustrating how our Lutheran/Christian theology rises out of our encounter with biblical poetry. The poetry has given us glimpses of incarnation, paradox, a theology of the cross, intimations of promise and grace. We should not, therefore, be surprised when we discover that Luther derived much of his theological insight from his encounter with the psalms.⁵ The poetry is also the source of much Jewish thinking and theology.

So I return to where I started to repeat my initial claim. Beauty and art are not incidental to meaning. Beauty and art lead to complexity and depth, to conversation and community, to insight and questions, to theology and faith. “What does this mean?” Come, let the beauty and art invite us on a scriptural journey. ⊕

DIANE JACOBSON is professor emerita of Old Testament at Luther Seminary in Saint Paul, Minnesota, where she taught from 1982 to 2010. She also served as director of the Book of Faith Initiative for the ELCA from 2008 to 2016. Jacobson’s recent publications include “Job as a Theologian of the Cross” (Word & World, 2014) as well as “Book of Faith: Retrospective and Prospective” (Currents in Theology and Mission, 2014).

⁵ See the wonderful book by James S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 1969), esp. 166–75 for an overview of the influence of the psalms on Luther.