

When Theology Sings: Reflections on the theological significance of poetry.

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Introduction

The very presence of texts like the Psalms in the canon of Scripture raises an interesting question: why poetry—and so *much* poetry? Over one third of the Old Testament is poetry, and few books of Scripture are entirely poetry free zones. Much could be said about vital theological claims made by particular poems—the Song of the Sea and divine victory, the Magnificat or Philippians 2 and the significance of the Incarnation—but here I want to reflect on the theological significance of the *phenomenon* of poetry. Theologically speaking: why poetry?

In so doing I will, I suppose, be swimming against the current of much evangelical theology. As a tribe, evangelical Christians tend to be propositionally-fixated (with the occasional seasoning of commands). Unless it's a clear assertion of fact or instruction to do something, we don't know quite what to make of it theologically. And so we tend, by some perverse theological alchemy, to touch poetry against our propositional philosopher's stone and turn the gold of song into a leaden lump. I'd like to encourage us to resist that temptation—for temptation it is, a somewhat brutal and brutish kicking against the goads of Scripture. Here's why. Poetry does things that no other kind of language can do. Here are some of them.

Poetry allows words to capture aspects of human experience that slip through the net of other kinds of speech. While not unknown, essays from one lover to another are understandably rare. But love poems and songs abound, blossoming in the fertile ground of love and desire, entangling us in their tendrils, slowing our steps as we gaze at the thousand flowers of language that litter our path. There's something delicious, almost daring in these overflows of affection, and Song of Songs invites us to taste—no, to drink deep at this welling up of language. There's theology for you.

Even more, poetry can give voice to experiences that might otherwise silence us in delight or despair. When life triumphs over words, when it soars beyond our own voice's reach or beats it down, when our own lips limp, then poets provide crutches—and sometimes wings—that prop us up or let us soar. Psalm 88's cry from the dust and Psalm 150's ringing praise break the silence of agony or ecstasy, framing words that touch our depths and grasp at the greatness of God. There's theology for you.

But more again. The Psalms remind us that poetry can launch earthbound words towards the heavens themselves. Sometimes, to be sure, they burn out and fall like charred sticks to the ground. But sometimes—gloriously—these words reach escape velocity and break the curved bonds of gravity and soar. They go beyond merely helping us know something of the transcendent wonder of God (wonderful as that is) and bring us into contact with the infinite personal God. Poetry gives us the very air we breathe in the presence of God. There's theology for you.

About the author

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