



## THE BIBLICAL PURPOSE OF ART

By Felicia M. Lopes

We most likely forget that the Bible itself is a work of art, a work of literature. It is not a string of crude phrases, or a pile of words that somehow give us truth; but it is an engaging story - the Greatest Story ever told! It is a collection of all different forms of literature — historical works, hymns as well as religious and secular poetry. How extremely interesting to note that in five chapters of Exodus (Chapters 20-24), God gave Moses the Ten Commandments and all the ancillary laws to guide the people of Israel for the next several millenniums, yet He spent the next six chapters (Chap. 25-31) describing in greater detail the artistic designs for the Tabernacle. Here, God explained how to make all the art and crafts to be used as tools of the priests and scribes, as well all the details involved in crafting the aura of the Tabernacle. In my opinion, this profoundly indicates that art and the craftsmanship to express it are both extremely important to God!

There are four main purposes that I see from my research for art's existence in the Bible.

- Worship
- Communication
- Restoration
- Edification through Instruction

### **WORSHIP**

Worship, by its very form, is a combination of art forms. Music, Instrumentation, Song, Dance, Drama, etc are the outward expressions of worship, thus they are extremely tied to the arts. The very expression of the Mass, for example, is a drama within the Catholic Church that is done to remember the Last Supper of Jesus Christ. The following two Psalms from the Book of Psalms highlights an art form being used for worship. [Incidentally, the word Psalm means *Song of Praise*.]

Psalm 150 — “Praise the Lord! Praise God in His sanctuary, praise Him in His Mighty heavens, praise Him for His acts of power, praise Him for surpassing greatness, praise Him with the sounding the trumpet, praise Him with the sound of the harp and the lyre, praise Him with the tambourine and dancing, praise him with the strings and flute, praise him with the clash of cymbals, praise him with resounding cymbals, let everything that has breath praise the Lord!”

Psalm 30:11 — “You turn all my wailing into dancing!” This specifically contrasts dancing—an art form, with its opposite, wailing.

There are also times that an art form is used yet not recognized to be so:

Acts 16:25 “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God and the other prisoners were listening to them.”

In Luke 15:25 within the story of The Prodigal Son when he returns they have a dance to celebrate.

## COMMUNICATION

God wants to communicate and meet with his greatest creation—us—so He uses art as a means of evoking pleasure from us when we meet with Him at the sites where His Glory rests, such as in the Temple. It is beautifully designed, as seen in Exodus 25:22,

When He describes to Moses how to build the Ark of the Covenant. God uses a very intricately crafted art piece as a location finder when He says,

“There above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”

## RESTORATION

Another use of art that is mentioned in the Bible, is that of healing or its power to restore to wholeness. King David was known as a warrior, but was also known as an artist. He was referred to constantly as the singer of songs. It is very interesting to note that in that extremely male dominated society that somebody of King David’s stature would be known not only for being a warrior but also an artist.

1 Samuel 16:23 “Whenever the spirit from God came upon Saul, David would take his harp and play then *relief* would come to Saul, he would feel better and the evil spirit would leave him.”

Basically, David would play music and Saul would feel better, thus adding credence to the old claim that “music soothes the savage beast.”

Numbers 21:4-9 tell us the story of the Bronze Snake. The background for this story is that the people had yet again turned away from God and He had to punish them, so, He sent snakes out to the people to bite them. They were all lying on the ground dying when God told Moses to *create a statue of a snake*, raise it up and everybody in the tribe of Israel who would look up at the snake would be healed. He used a piece of art to bring salvation to these people. This bronze snake that’s created by Moses is actually

mentioned four times. It became an icon. Jesus also talked about this icon and again re-enforced the symbolism of it in John 3:15.

“Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up that everyone that believes in Him may have eternal life.”

## EDIFICATION THROUGH INSTRUCTION

Storytelling is the basis of theatre and drama. This also was utilized fully by the prophets to illustrate points to the people. Ezekiel for instance was given his “script”. He basically was to build a model of the city, with model siege works, and then lie down next to it for seven days to show the seven years that the city was going to be under siege. Basically, *he play acted to show a deeper truth.*

The ultimate “Method actor” of all biblical history is an un-named prophet found in 1 Kings 20:35-43. He put on a play that he wanted to make sure was realistic. What had happened up to this point was that Ahab, who is the king at this time, had been given victory by God and had been told by God that he was to destroy his enemies. When Ahab had the final victory, however, he let the opposing king live. So the prophet created for the king a story in order to chastise him. This prophet set up a play in order to drive home a greater word of prophecy to the king.

## THE CALL OF THE CHRISTIAN ARTIST

Just as the pastor or the missionary is called, God calls the artist by name.

“The Lord said to Moses, “See I have chosen Bezaleel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts, to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver, and bronze; To cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship. Moreover I have appointed Aholiab, son of Ahisamach of the tribe of Dan: I have appointed Aholiab to help him. Also I have given skills to all the craftsman to make everything I have commanded for you,...”<sup>1</sup>

Every time a name is mentioned it’s very important. He called Moses, David, and most of the prophets by name. Artists had and still have the same category of responsibilities as the prophets. They are often outside of the established leadership and/or community base. Artists and prophets alike have the responsibility to comment on—often from the outside—to correct and to draw the people towards God.

Skill and Talent are given to us by God. Skill is equivalent to talent. It is the vision. Talent and ability don’t always go together, however, there are numerous talented people who don’t have the ability and an equal amount of people who have the ability but don’t have the talent.

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1 Exodus 31:1-13

For whatever reason, God does not give both in equal amounts. Neither does He give spiritual gifts in equal quantity:

“There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one, the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.” “The body is a unit though it is made up of many parts and though all of its parts are many, they form one body so is it with Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

His intention is that we all work together to foster a spirit of collaboration so that, when the craftsman does a great job if he has the design, and the designer who does a great design but can not build the structure, if they collaborate a great art piece can come together! Theatre is a true collaborative process! It is many, many hands taking what each individual’s talent is and putting it together to create something magnificent! It is the ultimate Biblical model of art!

## THE HOLY SPIRIT

It is my belief that all artists are speaking about God, through God, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. The reason that I believe this is that in Exodus 31:1-13 the first person to even receive the first out pouring of the Holy Spirit was Bezaleel, an artist called of God. The Holy Spirit is intricately important to artists for when the Holy Spirit is cut off and He is no longer guiding the artist, the art becomes very small and very superficial.

I believe that all artists follow this model, whether they know it or not. It is also my belief that Christians in 21st Century America are more likely to tune out the Holy Spirit than are non Christians, because a non-Christian only knows the Holy Spirit in them as this “artistic thing they need to say” and they say it as it’s given to them. Christians, however sometimes tend to edit God. When God comes into us through His Spirit and says, “I want you to go and tell the people this” and we say, “Yes Lord, but I feel that this is going to offend some people, so,... I’ll tell them part of it, then I’ll tell them this.... Oh that language isn’t really acceptable to me, and,...etc”. We go through and we edit what is coming through us, so we’re putting up road blocks for the Holy Spirit coming through us, which is why I feel that some of the best Christian theatre out there has been written by non-Christians.

For example, George Bernard Shaw’s "Major Barbara" is a brilliant example of this. It is about a young woman whose father is an arms manufacturer who basically tries to come in and buy the Salvation Army to impress her. To complicate matters, she doesn’t know that this man is her father. He’s an atheist and doesn’t believe in God - so in that situation is the whole conflict. This is a brilliant play about Christianity and the truth of Christianity even though George Bernard Shaw didn’t know that this was what he was writing about. The final lesson of this play is that it skillfully suggests that the poor are not the only people that need the Gospel of Christ, but the middle class, the people

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2 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

content with their jobs, those okay with the way they are living, they need Christ! This play, written by a non-Christian, explicitly states the need for Christ!.

Another example that I feel points to a non-Christian tapping into the heart of the Spirit, is in the musical Jesus Christ Superstar by Sir Andrew Lloyd Weber and Sir Tim Rice. They basically looked at the life of Christ and came up saying that people could never leave Him without having a violent reaction. They either “violently” loved Him to the point they did not know what to do with their love, as did Mary and the disciples, or hated Him to the point they did not know what to do with their hate, which is where Herod’s song came from.

It is unfortunate that we Christians are constantly attempting to write Easter plays where there is no violent tension, no danger, and where audiences are not forced to make decisions thus making church performances usually quite bland. Most Christians in church plays do not realize that in art there is inherently a risk, there’s inherently danger because of the artists’ search for answers. If we come at art smugly with pious attitudes that say, “We’ve already found the answer. We don’t have to look anymore”, then our theatrical performances will be flat!

For instance, "Les Miserables" was written by secular people. It was produced by a secular person, but the fact of Jean Valjeans’ search for who he is as a higher being, as a higher person, becomes inherently the search for God! If we, as Christians come into an experience of art saying that we’ve found the answer and that we do not need to experience the search ourselves, then we will always have bland and tedious theatre coming out of the church. We will never create provocative drama that hits audiences in the gut!

## WISDOM

Finally, the call of the artist would not be complete if I did not quickly discuss the role wisdom plays in the creation of art. Wisdom is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and is an important part of art.

Proverbs 8:22-31 talks of Wisdom being a craftsman at God’s side throughout creation. That’s really enforced in Proverbs 3:19-20 - “In wisdom the Earth was created”. It is interesting to note that Solomon built the Temple only after he’d been given wisdom by God. *It’s as if to say that now that he has wisdom, so, now can he build the temple.* If artists create without approaching the art with wisdom, it’s incomplete - it might be very good, but it’s incomplete. Even in singing, another art form, we are supposed to be engaging our minds in the art. 1 Cor. 14:14-15 Paul says,

“for if I pray in a tongue my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful, so what shall I do, I will pray with my spirit but I will also pray with my mind, I will sing with my spirit but I will also sing with my mind.”

Just as we are to sing with our minds; we are to engage art with our brains.