

BEAUTY IN THE BIBLE

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Herbert Rand in his "Biblical Concept of Beauty" (*Jewish Bible Quarterly* XXX:4:October-December 2002) touches upon the Bible's viewpoint on beauty and personality, averring that "beauty is not required [for a woman] to qualify" for personal worth or wisdom (p. 214). Indeed, when the Bible notes that some of its heroes and heroines happen to be good-looking, it is usually careful not to describe their physical appearance. Rebekah, in the words of the Bible, *was very fair to look upon*. Yet rather than describing her physically, it is her intrinsic hospitality and genuine generosity offered to a thirsty alien servant and his master's camels that the Bible notes and underscores (Gen. 24:16-20).

Abigail, the Bible tells us, was of *good intellect and of a beautiful countenance*. Significantly, Abigail's cleverness is mentioned first before her looks, even as the ensuing narrative in I Samuel 25 focuses only on Abigail's acumen and hospitality. David and his followers, evading King Saul's troops, believed that they were entitled to some kind of gift from Abigail's husband Nabal, apparently in the form of food and drink, as payment for the "protection" David and his band rendered to him and his shepherds. When David takes umbrage at Nabal's brazen refusal, Abigail is able to placate his ire at her husband's offensive words.

Vashti, King Ahasuerus' beautiful Queen, risks her royal status if not her very life when she refuses her husband's abusive demand that she entertain his drunken male guests *wearing [only?] the royal crown* (Est. 1:11-12). She was deposed for her courageous refusal to comply with his male-chauvinist and degrading bidding. Her defiance may have worked a change in the King, seen in his attitude toward Esther, Vashti's successor. When she violates the royal law by appearing before the King without waiting to be summoned, there seems to have been a reform in his reactions. The credit for this should go in great part to the beautiful Vashti.

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Beauty, the Bible tells us, should not be man's sole criterion in choosing a wife. We deduce this from Deuteronomy 21:11-14, that prohibits an Israelite warrior from lying with – that is, marrying – a captive *beautiful woman*. Before he may do so, he must allow the woman to mourn for her parents, now lost to her because of her captivity, by shaving her head, paring her nails and growing pale as she remains ensconced for a full month within his house. During this period, when the beautiful female captive is bound to lose much of her good looks, the Israelite is presumably expected to pay closer attention to her personality. It is this procedure that serves as the Bible's check on a hasty decision to marry a captive woman solely because of her physical attractions. Only when seeing her in a state of lesser beauty would her captor make up his mind whether or not he wanted her as his wife. If he did not, the Torah enjoins him to *let her go free*.

The Bible also demonstrates how mere physical attraction to beauty can constitute great evil or inflict much pain. When Mrs. Potiphar lusts for Joseph who was *well built and handsome*, the (rare!) *shalsholet* cantillation note over the word "*va-ye-ma-en* [but he refused]" suggests by prolonging the traditional chant of this word an intense struggle in Joseph's heart whether or not to commit adultery with his master's wife. Yet, despite the great temptation, Joseph demurs lest he breach the trust of his master, and most importantly lest he *do this great wickedness, and sin against God*. Joseph's physical handsomeness was a temporary gift, but his courageous resolution not to abuse it and incur sin because of it was his gift to God; that made him internally and eternally beautiful.

In radical contrast to Joseph, King David and Bathsheba, both of whom are described as beautiful, engage in a forbidden adulterous relationship that has disastrous consequences. Similarly, the Bible notes that there was no man in Israel as handsome as Absalom, David's son: *His entire stature was praiseworthy for he was flawless* (II Sam. 14:25). Yet it is Absalom who goes on to commit the abomination of lying with his father's concubines on the same palace roof from where David first spotted the *very beautiful* Bathsheba. Absalom's ensuing full-scale mutiny against his father's monarchy thus fulfills Nathan's prophecy to the sinful David: *I will raise trouble against you from within your own house*' (II Sam. 12:11).

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The Bible suggests that *Charm is deceitful and beauty is vain* (Prov. 31:30) and that *Beauty is but fading flowers* (Isa. 28:1). Nevertheless, physical beauty either of nature or nature's creatures is given specific liturgical or benedictional attention through such blessings as: "Praised be the One who created beautiful creatures in His world" or ". . . whose universe holds such things." Beauty is not an object of admiration for its own sake, but an opportunity to praise or serve God who created it. Without this insight, beauty is of little meaning or worth. Indeed, the Bible and Jewish liturgy understand that character and integrity constitute one's real beauty, and that physical beauty is only skin-deep. In order to enjoy the beauty of the pearl, it is necessary to look inside of the shell that holds it. To taste the grain of the wheat, its chaff must be separated. When all is said and done, the real beauty that counts, as Herbert Rand argues, radiates from the inside; that is, one's resolve to live by God's ethical code.

עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF

CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

2003

October	II Chronicles	1 - 29
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November	II Chronicles	30 - 36
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STARTING THE 2ND WEEK OF NOVEMBER, WE BEGIN A NEW CYCLE OF THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

November	Genesis	1 - 22
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December	Genesis	23 - 50
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January	Exodus	1 - 27
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February	Exodus	28 - 40
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	Leviticus	1 - 15
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