Psalm 68
Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Let God arise in all His might,
and put the troops of hell to flight,
as smoke, that sought to cloud the skies,
before the rising tempest flies.

He comes arrayed in burning flames;
justice and vengeance are His names;
behold, His fainting foes expire
like melting wax before the fire!

He rides and thunders thro' the sky;
His name, Jehovah, sounds on high;
sing to His name, ye sons of grace;
ye saints rejoice before His face.

The widow and the fatherless
fly to His aid in sharp distress!
In Him the poor and helpless find
a judge that's just, a Father kind.

He breaks the captive's heavy chain,
and pris'ners see the light again;
but rebels that dispute His will,
shall dwell in chains and darkness still.

Kingdoms and thrones to God belong;
crown Him, ye nations, in your song;
His wondrous names and pow'rs rehearse;
His honors shall enrich your verse.

Proclaim Him King, pronounce Him blest;
He's your defense, your joy, your rest:
when terrors rise, and nations faint,
God is the strength of every saint.

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www.centralseminary.edu | info@centralseminary.edu
900 Forestview Lane N, Plymouth, MN 55441 | 800.827.1043

ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

The Importance of Imagination: A Biblical Example

Kevin T. Bauder

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The Bible is full of imaginative literature (by *imaginative* I do not mean "made up," but rather "literature that makes its appeal to the imagination"). Much of Scripture is cast in the form of stories. Several biblical books are devoted exclusively to poetry, and others employ poetic forms extensively in their composition. Parts of the Bible are apocalyptic, and whatever else apocalypses may do, they appeal to the imagination (specifically, the speculative fantasy).

If we want to discuss the use of the imagination in Scripture, we find ourselves nearly stymied by an embarrassment of riches. Where shall we turn? For the present discussion, I propose to select a work that is widely known and can be easily recalled. We shall discuss the Twenty-Third Psalm.

David begins this psalm with the line, "The Lord is my shepherd." This line is worth pondering for what it assumes. Clearly, David has been contemplating shepherds—no surprise, since he spent his youth performing the work of a shepherd. When David thinks of a shepherd, however, he is not merely thinking of a man doing a job. For David, shepherds point to something beyond themselves. They are symbols, and what they symbolize is something like the notion of provision and care.

This point is so important that it bears restating. David has already been "looking through" shepherds before he begins to associate them with God. His vision of a shepherd is what controls the analogy of Psalm 23. For David, God is not so much like an actual shepherd whom one might meet in the field (sweaty, grimy, and bored, for example) as He is like what a shepherd represents to David.

What if David had thought of shepherds differently? Suppose he had viewed shepherds from a different perspective, perhaps as those who profit from the flock. Given this understanding of a shepherd, it simply would not have worked to suggest that "the Lord is my shepherd." The image would have said all the wrong things.

In other words, David is making a double move within the primary imagination. First, a shepherd is a symbol of provision and care. Second, temporal provision and care is a symbol of God's provision and care for His people. This double symbolism is essential to the success of the psalm.

The poem gives evidence that David has pondered exactly what "provision and care" must mean when applied to God's relationship with His own. The balance of the poem teases out these ideas. All of this is primary imagination.

The poem itself is a virtual textbook in secondary imagination. David has a way of shedding new light on familiar notions. He does not simply say, "the Lord provides and cares for me." Rather, he chooses word pictures that evoke images of pastoral delight: the Lord causes him to lie in green pastures and leads him beside still waters. He is comforted by the shepherd's rod and staff. Even the calamities and uncertainties of life (the valley of the shadow of death) pose no threat, "for Thou art with me." All of these images are packed into the inclusio that opens the psalm.

David supplements this inclusio with a depiction of the Lord as host. Some have taken this depiction as a shift in metaphor from shepherd to host. Since a shepherd is a kind of host to his flock, however, the two pictures are not entirely distinct. Also, the image of the shepherd-king is well known within ancient Near Eastern literature. David may be drawing upon this stock image.

At any rate, the images are colorful. David speaks of a banquet in front of enemies, a head anointed with oil, a cup overflowing. Then, in his closing summary, David employs a vivid picture: personified goodness and mercy follow him "all the days" of his life. David's poetry displays a grain and texture that draws the reader into the poetic world and alters his awareness of ultimate realities.

David's technique relies on a framework of word pictures and evocative language. He erects these pictures upon a foundation of parallelism that conducts the reader from one image to the next and underscores exactly the points that he wishes to emphasize. These are the marks of a master of the imagination, an expert poet who knew how to use the tools provided to him by the secondary imagination. The popularity of this psalm through times and cultures is proof of David's success in evoking within his readers the same vision of God that he himself enjoyed.

I have here given the most cursory analysis of the Shepherd Psalm. Much more could be said. Furthermore, every one of the psalms could be subjected to similar examination. So could the other poetical books, not to mention the prophets (especially Isaiah!) whose work relies so heavily upon poetry. The same kind of scrutiny can also be performed on the other imaginative literature of Scripture: the parables, the narratives, the apocalypses. By its very nature, Scripture invites us to take the imagination seriously.

Christians of all people must be interested in the operations of the imagination. It is an important key to understanding Scripture. Indeed, it is the key to understanding God Himself.

For this reason, the exercises of our imagination must be subjected to the most rigorous scrutiny. Nowhere is this examination more important than in our worship of God. We have no non-imaginative ways of meeting God. Therefore, we have no non-imaginative modes of worshipping Him. Engaging the imagination correctly is at the heart of our calling.

This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
