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Grounding Biblical Metaphor in Reality: The philosophical basis of realist metaphorical language

Simon Walker

Introduction

In recent years 'metaphor' has become a fashionable topic of discussion, even in biblical studies, where discussions of the Bible as 'metaphor' are now frequent. Many liberal theologians, who reject the historical claims of Scripture, have seized on the concept of metaphor and have used it as one more reason why the Bible should not be read 'literally' (ie as truth). This article attempts to argue that to see the Bible as metaphorical does not damage the veracity and authority of the Scriptures, but rather deepens and enriches our understanding of it as 'the double-edged sword dividing joint from marrow'.

Is Biblical Metaphor Rhetoric or Truth?

Aristotle's definition of metaphor remains valid as a working definition of what is meant by the concept. He wrote: 'Metaphor is the application of an alien name by transference.'[1] It is clear that all language is full of metaphors, and so we must not be surprised to find them in the Bible. Scriptural poetry and prophecy are full of vivid metaphors – trees clap their hands (Isa 55:12), the stars and the moon bow down (Gen 37), evil men devour God's people (Prov 30:14, Jer 5), Israel is a threshing-sledge (Isa 41:15), hearts melt (2 Sam 17:10), sins are washed white as snow (Isa 1:18) and so on.

But in addition to these essentially poetic metaphors, there are a number of others which have a more obvious theological significance. For example, God is described as the Father of his people, Jesus is the good shepherd, God is the husband of his people, the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper are the body and blood of Christ, Jesus' death on the Cross is a victory, and Jesus is called the Son of God. The metaphors mentioned in the last paragraph are really little more than rhetorical devices, which

1 Aristotle's *Poetics* 1457b 7-8

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add colour without conveying literal truth, but few would want to say the same about the claim that Jesus is the Son of God.

It might appear therefore, that there are two types of metaphor in Scripture – those which are purely rhetorical, and those which contain truth. But what kind of linguistic statement is a metaphor which also contains truth? If we adopt this kind of distinction, we are forced to conclude that the truthful statement is not a metaphor at all. This takes us back to Aristotle, whose law of non-contradiction remains fundamental to the Western metaphysical tradition. Aristotle said: 'It is impossible that one and the same predicative determination should at the same time be attributed and not attributed to the same object and in the same respect.'[2] The essence of this law is that there is a correlation between words and the world, between the *logos* and the *cosmos*, which commits us to accepting linguistic realism.[3] It follows from this that all truth must be literal; anything non-literal is a lie because it denies the law of non-contradiction. Metaphor, being non-literal, falls into this trap. As Colin Gunton puts it: 'Metaphor is not so much a use as a misuse of language, because it offends against the rationalist canons of meaning.'[4] To this way of thinking, metaphor can only be used in discourse as an aesthetic rhetorical device; it is picture language for something which could equally well have been stated literally.[5]

This rationalistic understanding of metaphor as a rhetorical substitute for a literal statement was a hallmark of Enlightenment thought. Thomas Hobbes, for example, mentioned metaphor explicitly as an abuse of language, which was deliberately intended to deceive.[6] This implies an underlying belief in linguistic realism, and it is this which has to be challenged if the critique of men like Hobbes is to be answered effectively. But before we do this, we must ask whether there is any way in which we can distinguish types of metaphor on the basis of inductive reasoning. Is there some way of deciding when a metaphor is 'literal' and when it is not? To put it another way, is there any reason to distinguish the 'hand of God' from the 'hands of the trees'?

The Construction of Biblical Metaphor: Meaning Embedded in Language

There seems to be a difference in Scripture between so-called 'governing' metaphors and others. Sally McFague has coined the term 'root metaphor'

2 *Poetics* 1456b - 1457a 30

3 Sue Patterson 'J M Soskice: Metaphor and a Theology of Grace' *Scottish Journal of Theology* XLVI (1993) p 2

4 Colin E Gunton *The Actuality of the Atonement. A Study of Metaphor, Rationality and the Christian Tradition* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1988) p 29

5 Gunton *Atonement* p 3

6 Gunton *Atonement* p 29

to describe those which provide co-ordinating frameworks within which other, lesser metaphors are given their meaning.[7] McFague cites 'the kingdom of God' as a good example of a root metaphor. It is built up and fed by the narrative of Scripture, in which Israel was a kingdom, presided over by the House of David, and is continued in the parables of Jesus and especially in his self-proclamation as king. In this way, the 'kingdom of God' becomes the most important way of describing God's activity in and through Christ. This makes it quite different from other metaphors, such as the identification of Israel with a threshing-sledge, because they are not used for the same purpose or with the same frequency and consistency. A root metaphor thus has a different function in discourse, which gives it a different significance.

Colin Gunton postulates a process by which terms which were initially metaphorical came to be regarded as literal.[8] This did not happen in the case of the threshing-sledge, but it did in the case of 'kingdom', which came to be understood primarily as God's activity in the world in Christ. In other words, the function and use of the term, not its original meaning, came to determine whether it was 'literal' or 'metaphorical' in the Aristotelian sense.[9]

We may therefore conclude from all this that a metaphor is defined by its linguistic context, and not by any abstract, absolute rules. Wittgenstein came to much the same conclusion in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1945-9), which represent a very different understanding from the one found in his *Tractatus* (1921).[10] In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein saw language as a mirror of reality, in the Aristotelian mould, but in his later work he argued that language is more like the grammar of a game, the rules of which control the range of meaning which a word can have. Different communities have different rules, and so the meaning of words has to be understood within the context in which they are used.

If we accept this idea, then it is clear that our discussion of biblical metaphor must be governed by the narrative of Scripture itself, and not by some abstract theory about the nature of language in general. The meaning of a biblical metaphor cannot be decided apart from its context, but must be understood in the light of Scripture as a whole.[11] The text of Scripture gives each metaphor a unique meaning, which is determined by the text in which it is found. It cannot be replaced by something else without some

7 Sally McFague *Metaphorical Theology. Models of God in Religious Language* (London: SCM 1982) pp 26-7
8 Gunton *Atonement* p 35
9 Gunton *Atonement* p 35
10 Gunton *Atonement* p 37
11 Gunton *Atonement* p 44

loss of meaning. As Nelly Stienstra has written:

> If a translator decides to change an important metaphorical concept, such as 'God is king', very drastically, he changes the meaning of the message, if we agree that a metaphor expresses something which cannot be expressed in another way.[12]

If we accept this argument, then biblical metaphor becomes a unique source for our understanding of God, which we cannot tamper with if we are to remain Bible-based believers. Stienstra's approach can be supported by what Sally McFague wrote in *Metaphorical Theology*,[13] though she appears to have moved away from it in her more recent work.[14] There, McFague suggests that scriptural metaphors must now give way to more personal ones, if we are to convey the meaning of God to our generation. In particular, she suggests adopting words like 'lover' and 'friend'. But she cannot have it both ways. If biblical metaphor can be replaced as easily as this, metaphor does not make a significant semantic innovation. If change of this kind is both possible and desirable, then biblical metaphor is no more than rhetoric, a linguistic device which makes no claim to be true.

Metaphor as Semantic Innovation and Epistemological Discovery

We have discussed why a metaphor is unique and irreplaceable in general linguistic terms, but it must also be remembered that metaphor's uniqueness lies in its very nature. It may be thought that metaphor is a kind of contracted simile, a comparison in which two otherwise unrelated terms are connected by 'like' or 'as', which for some theoretical reason have simply been omitted in this case. But metaphor connects terms in a way which is quite different from that of a simile, as Sandra Schneiders has pointed out. She claims that metaphor is 'tensive' language, by which she means that it operates in tension between two possible readings.[15]

On the one hand, a metaphor offers itself as a literal statement of fact, to be understood as the truth about the way things are. For example, to say that 'God is a father' means that God really did produce children 'from his loins'. On the other hand, metaphor can be read as an absurd statement,

12 Nelly Stienstra *YHWH is the Husband of his People. An Analysis of Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos 1993) p 66

13 McFague *Metaphorical Theology* pp 27-37

14 Sally McFague *Models of God. Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (London: SCM 1987). See also the article by Garret Green in *Speaking the Christian God. The Holy Trinity and the Challenge of Feminism* A F Kimel Jr ed (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1992) p 51

15 Sandra S Schneiders *The Revelatory Text. Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (San Francisco: Harper Collins 1991) p 29

because in one sense it is ludicrous to suggest that God's children are the fruit of his loins. Metaphor thus contains both an 'is' and an 'is not' element, and it exists by refusing to be polarized into either reading.[16] By doing this, metaphor has the ability to make a 'genuine semantic innovation',[17] in other words, to say something that cannot really be said in any other way.

By relating two concepts which were previously unrelated, metaphor (if it is true to itself) is a unique way in which man's knowledge of his world can advance. Colin Gunton gives the example of the Latin word *musculus*, which originally meant 'little mouse' and which is now used in the sense of 'muscle'. Not only was a semantic innovation made by doing this, but attention was drawn to the fact that there is some link between a mouse and a human muscle, which gives the metaphor its meaning and purpose. In this way, the metaphor helped people to understand something more about the nature of the world.[18] Metaphor is thus a way in which it is possible to understand our world better. Each new metaphor brings out something different in the two concepts or objects which it ties together, and in doing so, puts them in a new relationship within the order and structure of reality. To this extent, and in this sense, it can be said that metaphors are genuinely revelatory, because they say things which were previously not realized.

Post-critical Realism as the Epistemological Basis for Metaphysical Realism

The understanding of metaphor as semantic innovation is epistemologically useful to the extent that it reveals a relationship between two created things which would not be perceived in any other way. As Colin Gunton puts it: 'Metaphor is a way, perhaps the way, that the world which exists outside the mind is discovered.'[19] One person who has defended a realist view of metaphorical language is Janet Martin Soskice, who has written that metaphor is 'a kind of language use, not a kind of truth'.[20] The implication which she draws from this is that metaphor does not threaten theological truth, but as Sue Patterson points out, in this assertion, Soskice is exposing a basic confusion in her understanding of truth and epistemology.[21]

Patterson argues that Soskice's claim that metaphor is 'reality depicting' is based on a 'critical realist' epistemology. Critical realism is a term taken

16 McFague *Metaphorical Theology* p 13
17 McFague *Metaphorical Theology* p 29
18 Gunton *Atonement* p 37
19 Gunton *Atonement* p 37
20 J M Soskice *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: OUP 1991) p 107
21 Patterson 'J M Soskice' pp 5-10

from the world of science and describes a process which proceeds dialogically. The investigator proposes a model, which is then applied to the scientific situation under investigation. It is modified by this encounter, in such a way as to suggest a new and better model. In this way, the model provides the heuristic possibility of extending knowledge, allowing the findings to be close to the truth if not identical with it. Critical realism, then, is an epistemology of provisional truth which does not descend into relativism.

Soskice suggests that metaphors are necessary for causal explanation, and therefore for truth, because of 'their ability to refer without laying claim to unrealizable truth'.[22] Metaphor thus resembles a scientific model which can be revised in the light of experience, without losing all claim to represent truth.[23] Experience is important for Soskice, because religious experience is the basis on which we come to a knowledge of God. Christians do not claim to be able to describe God in himself. Rather we look at what he has done and use his works to point beyond them to his being.[24] From this perspective, further experience may deepen our knowledge of God and therefore demand some revision of our metaphors, without denying the revelatory nature of the original experience or the appropriateness of the metaphor then used to describe it.

But there is a double logic in Soskice's position. She makes a distinction between religious and scientific experience and grants epistemological weight to the latter - this is critical realism, based on repeated empirical investigation. But the former she regards more idealistically, because any and all religious experience is taken to be self-authenticating. She therefore implies that human beings already have structures and senses in place through which they can and do filter their experiences. Because of this, Soskice can allow that metaphor may be 'reality depicting' in a critical-realist manner, ie open to further revision in the light of experience. But, as Patterson points out, critical realism of this kind is ultimately based on a false premise, viz that there is a clear distinction between subject and object. In the end it seems that there is little choice to be made between the self-authenticating subjectivity of idealism and the doubtful objectivity of critical realism. The problem of both epistemologies lies in a prior and rigid subject-object distinction.[25]

The problem lies in Soskice's initial statement that metaphor is a kind of language, not a kind of truth. If metaphor is to play a proper role in the theology of revelation it has to be seen as a kind of truth, because

22 Soskice *Metaphor* pp 130-8
23 Patterson 'J M Soskice' pp 10-11
24 Soskice *Metaphor* p 140
25 Patterson 'J M Soskice' p 18

otherwise it could not function. What is needed is a post-critical, realist epistemology which sees the world as 'ontologically metaphorical'. Such an epistemology will resist the approach which sees the object as a passive entity to be investigated by an active subject, conceiving instead, of the subject as an entity which gives itself to be known, not as actively reaching out to know.[26] As Alan Torrance puts it:

> Post-critical realism conceives of the world as giving itself to be known. The way in which things are is seen, therefore, as epistemologically invasive, instituting heuristic leaps in our process of understanding.[27]

If this is the case, a conversation between two people becomes one between two subjects who are each offering themselves to be known by the other. Language is the way in which we dwell in the world, and metaphor is the technique by which we construct it. The world offers itself to us as subject, as metaphor. In return, people dwell in the world and offer their own metaphors back to it as mutual subjects. The encounter transforms them both. This kind of realism is illuminated by Michael Polanyi's insights about what he calls tacit knowledge.[28] Polanyi sees our primary contact with the world at the tacit or sub-conceptual level, rather than at the level of explicit statement. In other words, the world imposes itself on us sub-conceptually (ie, without our reflection), and becomes part of our tacit knowledge. We are above all the receivers of an epistemologically invasive world, and givers of ourselves back to that world, not subjects who pursue knowledge of the world as if it were merely a passive object. Our tacit understandings are therefore of fundamental importance as we come to know the world.

Metaphor can be seen as the shape of our inheritance of tacit knowledge. It is a sub-conceptual arrangement of categories in the form of internalized metaphors, which reflects our understanding of reality. When reality imposes itself on us, our tacit metaphors are changed and the new metaphors create new meanings by juxtaposing familiar associations in an incongruous way. As Sue Patterson puts it, the learning process is mostly sub-conceptual:

> The metaphorical utterance, as a (not necessarily formal) predication, is the visible 'peak' of its synthesized network of associations, the tip of an iceberg whose bulk is under the water.[29]

26 Patterson 'J M Soskice' p 19
27 Alan Torrance *Persons in Communion. Trinitarian Description and Human Participation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark 1996) p 349
28 Michael Polanyi *Personal Knowledge. Towards a Post-critical Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1958)
29 Patterson 'J M Soskice' p 22

Seen in this way, metaphor is revelatory, because it extends the limits of our understanding:

> [It] takes hold of our language, revising and extending our terminology and conceptualities, and compelling us to use semantically incremental metaphors in such a way that they receive a new *a posteriori* property from the given structure of the world.[30]

Moreover, it is a linguistic event of transformation before it is a linguistic entity of information.[31] To be encountered by a metaphor and to dwell in it is an event by which a person's understanding of reality is changed. This change affects the self, the self's relationships with others, and the metaphors in which these relationships are expressed. People who enter into relationships become 'epistemologically invasive', but at the same time they too are transformed by those whom they are 'invading'.

Scripture offers us new and hitherto unseen metaphors of being. The Bible is God's metaphor and thus it becomes his agent, not only of revelation but of transformation as well. To use more familiar theological language, the Bible becomes God's agent of redemption. One way in which to think of the effect of sin is to see it as having distorted the metaphors by which we conceive of the world. This in turn leads to a distortion of relationships, a dis-integration of being in the world. The narrative of Scripture serves to reintegrate our dysfunctional and distorted self-expressions, and our relationships with others as well.

An encounter with the Bible as metaphor not only gives us a deeper understanding of reality, but actually transforms that reality, making it something which it previously was not. As Sue Patterson expresses it, the purpose of this is nothing less than

> that we may be brought by the creative dynamic of the Spirit, epistemologically and semantically, to indwell the triune life as created human beings, and thereby to participate in the created ways in the Son's eternal communion with the Father.[32]

Metaphor as an Ongoing Linguistic Event

The action of metaphor at the tacit level, as this is described by a post-critical realist epistemology, suggests that there will always be nuances, depths and meanings in a metaphor which have not previously been discovered. This is partly because metaphors do not open up until they are

30 Torrance *Persons in Communion* p 349
31 Patterson 'J M Soskice' p 21
32 Patterson 'J M Soskice' p 54

'indwelt'; the more deeply they are internalized, the more they will act to transform the associations and pictures which shape the person.

As we have seen, such an ongoing event is a transformation, which results in our indwelling within the triune life of God (cf John 17:17-23). When we have such a vision in mind, we cannot say that the Bible as metaphor has been, or can be exhausted this side of the second coming of Christ. Metaphor has an eschatological dimension, and will not yield up all its secrets in the here and now. As the Apostle Paul put it: 'Now we see through a glass darkly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know even as also I am known' (1 Cor 13:12).

All discussion of metaphor raises the question of analogy, a concept which has long been familiar in theological discourse. The classical and neo-classical theologies of Augustine, Boethius and Thomas Aquinas, for example, conceive of analogy in metaphysical terms, as a timelessly subsisting relation between God and the created order.[33] History cannot change the nature of analogy, as is implied in the medieval term *analogia entis* ('analogy of being'), which suggests something which is static and unchanging. This concept derives from a Platonic understanding of truth and of absolute being, which is outside time and therefore unchanging.[34] According to this way of thinking, if the world is to stand in an analogical relation to the creator in such a way as to be able to express eternal things, it must itself be unchanging.

In his *Being and Relation*, Carver Yu argues that time, as understood by Israel, always had an openness to the future. In contrast to the cyclical notions of time prevalent among the nations which surrounded them, the Israelites had a linear view of time, in which each present moment is a significant fulfilment of a past promise of God, and each promise of God is a significant hope for future realization.[35] The importance of this is that time gives an openness to 'being' and has genuine possibilities of accepting new beings and new relations. Israel's history was nothing other than the story of how time constituted the elements of her identity. As Yu expresses it: [Israel's] identity did not lie in some permanent elements within herself, but in a constant movement out of her self-confinement into ever fresh involvement with that which was other than herself.[36]

Unlike the Greeks, for whom time, as something which was in ever-

33 Colin Gunton *Becoming and Being. The Doctrine of God in Charles Hartshorne and Karl Barth* (Oxford: OUP 1978) p 177
34 Gunton *Becoming and Being* p 179
35 Carver Yu *Being and Relation. An Eastern Critique of Western Dualism and Individualism* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1987) pp 170-8
36 Yu *Being and Relation* p 181

changing movement, could not be an absolute, the Israelites conceived of time as bringing the absolute relations of reality into being. As Yu points out, this must be contrasted with modern process theology, where the physical universe (or even God himself) is brought into being by the ongoing process of time, which makes time the only absolute agent of creation.[37] The biblical notion, on the other hand, is one of different realms of reality (physical, spiritual, God himself) in open and ongoing relation, so that the future holds new possibilities of interaction and communion between them. As Yu says:

> When time moves forward, it actually means that the different realms of being are 'moving' toward one another in interaction and communion, so as to draw one another out into new horizons of unfolding and fulfilling.[38]

Yu's interpretation of the biblical understanding of time is close to our understanding of metaphor. We have suggested that the structure of the world is to be seen as ontologically metaphorical; it exists in relation to itself in such a way that metaphors between objects, persons and realms illuminate the ontological relations which exist in the structure of reality.

But this structure is not closed in the sense of being timeless and unchanging. It is not that there is a metaphysical *analogia entis* between God and the world. Rather, persons and entities are to be seen in terms of their giving of themselves to be known, as open and ongoing. By their nature, they interact and involve themselves in relation with one another. Each person is ontologically involved in interaction with other persons, in the course of which their metaphors of being are constantly being challenged, opened up and reshaped. Relations in the world, therefore, are in a continual state of revision and of openness to new possibilities.

Thus, while there is a metaphorical structure to the world, it is an open structure, which is constantly being exposed to new ways of being and in the process, developing new meaning. As we have already insisted, it is not that time will bring new metaphors to light which will describe the structure of reality even better; rather, it is that the biblical metaphors will continue to construct and open up new ways of knowing and being, if we allow them to do so. This ongoing construction is nothing less than the reconstruction of creation, the redemption of the world.

The openness of biblical metaphor must also be seen in the light of the uniqueness of the tacit knowledge contained in personal metaphors. This means that the new and revelatory associations which biblical metaphors

37 Yu *Being and Relation* pp 182-3
38 Yu *Being and Relation* p 183

make within each person and community will have a character which is unique and particular to them. Metaphor relates to the particularity of each situation, but it remains revelatory and authoritative, transforming the metaphors of all who indwell it, thereby leading individuals in their particular situations into a higher unity which transcends the particular, and unites us all in the kingdom of God, which is Christ's work of redemption in the world.

SIMON WALKER is Assistant Curate, Christ Church, Abingdon.