Poetic Metaphor

Study Notes

Introduction

Understanding how metaphors are used in the Bible is an essential tool for reading biblical poetry because metaphors are a main feature of biblical language. When someone describes one thing to give meaning to something else, they are using metaphorical thinking. Metaphors are everywhere in our everyday speech and in the Bible. Use these study notes to go deeper into the ideas from our video Metaphor in Biblical Poetry.

Contents

Introduction 2
What Is a Metaphor? 3
Seeing the World Through Metaphor 3
Basic Conceptual Metaphors in Biblical Poetry 6
Lexical Adaptation 15
Other Resources 17
Introduction

To start our discussion of metaphors in biblical poetry, let’s look at Psalm 46. Notice the vivid images used throughout.

1. God is our refuge and protection, found to be a great help in times of distress.
2. Therefore we won’t be afraid when the land shifts when the mountains totter into the heart of the seas;
3. its waters roar, they churn, mountains quake at its swelling.

Psalm 46

Metaphorical Images in Psalm 46

Here are some of the metaphors present in this psalm.

- God as a protective refuge (v. 1) // tall fortress (v. 7)
- God as the Jerusalem temple // river
- Chaotic, pounding ocean waves referring to nations at war
- God melting earth referring to God breaking nations and God’s exaltation

This poem is packed with vivid images, but what is going on here? To understand these images, we have to understand the culture in which they were written. Every culture has its own way of developing metaphors and imagery unique to their history and experience. Biblical poetry, just like the texts of any culture, uses a core “encyclopedia of production” (Umberto Eco) from which the poets draw to develop images and metaphors.

But first, let’s define our terms.
What Is a Metaphor?

Definitions and Terms

1. “Metaphor” comes from the Greek word meta-phora (μεταφορα): meta: “with, across” + phora: “to carry.”
   a. The term originally denoted transference or “carrying across” the property of one object to another object.
   c. “The metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms that are seen to be suggesting of another.” — Janet Sockice, Metaphor and Religious Language, 15.

2. Metaphor is one type in a larger category we call figures of speech.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Figures of Speech</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metaphor</td>
<td>Describing one thing as if it were another</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simile</td>
<td>Explicit comparison between two things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metonymy</td>
<td>Referring to something by naming what it's associated with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Synecdoche</td>
<td>Naming a whole thing to refer to part of it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>OR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naming part of a thing to refer to the whole of it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Seeing the World Through Metaphor

The poetry of the Bible is not just a set of techniques for saying impressively what could be said otherwise. Rather, it is a particular way of seeing and imagining the world.


Metaphor and Our Worldview

Metaphor is our fundamental way of thinking and perceiving the world.
We use conceptual categories based on familiar experience to describe unfamiliar and complex realities.


Cognitive literary theorists Lakoff and Turner use the categories of “source” and “target” to discuss the underlying process of metaphors.

We use a metaphor to map certain aspects of the source domain onto the target domain, producing a new understanding of that target domain. In the metaphor “Time is a thief,” part of that mapping superimposes a metaphorical understanding of time as a possession, which carries with it our normal feelings about possessions—that we have a right to keep them and that it is unjust for them to be taken away.


Examples: I *lost* time, I *gained* time, he *took* my time, I *have* time, and he *stole* years from me. These all assume a more basic metaphorical conception of time as a possession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain</th>
<th>Superimposed/Mapping</th>
<th>Target Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic possessions</td>
<td>Transference of qualities</td>
<td>My experience of time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The terminology of “target” and “source” illustrates the dynamic that occurs when we conceive of things metaphorically. We superimpose, or perform a “mapping” of one domain onto another. Such “transference” results in a new understanding of the target domain ... For a metaphor to work, an understanding of both domains is presupposed. Also, there must be correspondence between the metaphor and its target domain that is recognized by both poet and reader; otherwise the metaphor remains idiosyncratic and indecipherable. Lakoff and Turner offer the example “Death is a banana.” This metaphor is devoid of reason, and improper. An effective metaphor stands on a common ground of understanding, and builds on it to elicit new inferences and associations. In short, the metaphors create the very mental structures by which we make sense of every aspect of our lives.


### Basic Conceptual Metaphors Versus Poetic Metaphors

In any discussion of metaphor we must make a distinction between basic conceptual metaphors, which are cognitive in nature, and specific expressions of these basic metaphors in our language. While a particular poem might give an odd linguistic expression to a basic metaphor, the conceptual metaphor underlying it may be extremely common.

It’s important to remember that basic conceptual metaphors are not the unique possession of a poet but rather of the poet’s culture. The creative poet will adapt these basic metaphors in new and unexpected directions, creating new ways of conceiving reality.

**Basic Conceptual Metaphors and Their Schema**

Basic conceptual metaphors structure our knowledge of the world into a framework called a “schema.” Each metaphor has a unique schema with slots for each element in the metaphor’s structure.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Metaphorical Scheme</th>
<th>Slots in the Source Domain</th>
<th>Slots in the Target Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Life is a journey”</td>
<td>Journey</td>
<td>Course of a human life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Companion</td>
<td>Friends and family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>People who helped me along the way</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Obstacles</td>
<td>Difficult life experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>I had many hurdles to get where I am today</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Destination</td>
<td>Goals and accomplishments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>I finally arrived</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>End</td>
<td>Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><em>He passed away / she left us</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Metaphors create an expanding web of associations and comparisons. Characteristic of metaphor is a “fullness” of significance that is not evident in other words, a surplus of meaning that extends beyond a word’s dictionary definitions. A metaphor, in essence, works by violating language. It is a transgressor that builds bridges across chasms of meaning that we have separated in our minds.


Poetry works to disrupt the customary ways in which we use language. Poetry stretches the ordinary uses of words, and places them into unfamiliar relationships with each other, thereby cutting fresh paths across the well-worn grooves of everyday language.

Thomas Long, Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible, 45.

Basic Conceptual Metaphors in Biblical Poetry

The Scriptural Imagination

To understand biblical metaphor, we have to grasp the worldview presented in the Torah, and specifically Genesis 10-11. There are five primary concepts that inform the majority of biblical imagery and metaphor and fundamentally shaped the worldview of the biblical authors. Let’s take a look.

1. The Ideal State is a Mountain Garden Temple

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Metaphorical Scheme</th>
<th>Biblical Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Dry land is a divinely provided refuge from the waters of danger and death.** | Genesis 1:2  
*And the land was wild and waste and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters...*  
Genesis 1:6-10  
*And God said, “Let there be a dome between the waters to separate waters from waters.” So God made the vault and separated the waters under the dome from the waters above it. And it was so. God called the dome “sky.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day.  
And God said, “Let the waters under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear.” And it was so. God called the dry ground “land,” and the gathered waters he called “seas.” And God saw that it was good.* |
| **Eden, the cosmic temple mountain, stands in the midst of the dry land.** | Genesis 2:8-10  
*Now the Lord God had planted a garden in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. A river watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was separated into four headwaters.* |
The Jerusalem temple on Mount Zion is a symbolic Eden.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exodus 15:13, 17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling ... You will bring them in and plant them on the mountain of your inheritance—the place, Lord, you made for your dwelling, the sanctuary, Lord, your hands established.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Joel 2:1-3

Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy hill. Let all who live in the land tremble ... a large and mighty army comes ... Before them the land is like the garden of Eden, behind them, a desert waste ...

Jerusalem is a fortified city so it can be identified (metonymy) with God.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psalm 48:1-3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great is the Lord, and most worthy of praise, in the city of our God, his holy mountain. Beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth, like the far reaches of the north is Mount Zion, the city of the great King. God is in her citadels; he is known to be her tall fortress.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Psalm 48:12-14

Walk around Zion and encircle her; count her towers; consider her ramparts; go through her palaces, so that you may tell of her to the next generation. For such is God, our God forever and ever; he will lead us until death.

The biblical poets take all of these core images and combine them in new ways.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psalm 61</th>
<th>Psalm 71:1-3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hear my cry, O God; give heed to my prayer. From the end of the earth I call to you when my heart is faint; lead me to the rock that is higher than I. For you have been a refuge for me, a tower of strength against the enemy. Let me dwell in your tent forever; let me take refuge in the shelter of your wings. In you, O LORD, I have taken refuge; let me never be ashamed. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of habitation to which I may continually come; you have given commandment to save me, or you are my rock and my fortress.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Poetic Metaphor 8

#### 2. Danger and Death are Chaotic Waters, but Safety and Life are the River of Eden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Metaphorical Scheme</th>
<th>Biblical Expressions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| The wilderness and chaotic waters are the basic images of anti-Eden. | Genesis 1:2  
And the land was **wild and waste** and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the water … |
| | Genesis 2:5-10  
Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the Lord God had not sent rain upon the earth, and there was no man to cultivate the ground. But a **mist** (אדים) used to rise from the earth and water the whole surface of the ground. Then the Lord God formed **man** (אדם) of dust from the **ground** (אדמה), and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.  

Now the Lord **God had planted a garden** in the east, in Eden; and there he put the man he had formed. The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. **A river** (נהר) **watering the garden flowed from Eden; from there it was divided into four headwaters.** |
| | • The river is one river inside Eden, but once it leaves, it’s divided into many rivers that go out to **Egypt** and **Mesopotamia** (Babylon, Assyria).  
| | • The **humans** are also **two yet one** (Gen. 2:24) inside the garden, but once outside the garden, they “divide” (Gen. 10:5, 32: “from these the nations divided”).  
| | • The nations, particularly Egypt and Babylon/Assyria, become identified with the waters outside of Eden, which means they pose a threat. |
| The Exodus story combines the chaotic waters with attacks of enemy nations. | Exodus 15:4-8  
**Pharaoh’s chariots and his army** he has cast into the sea;  
and the choicest of **his officers** are drowned in the **Red Sea** …  
And in the greatness of your excellence  
you overthrow **those who rise up against you**;  
you send forth your burning anger, and it consumes them as chaff.  
At the blast of your nostrils the **waters were piled up**,  
the flowing waters stood up like a heap;  
the deeps were congealed in the heart of the sea. |
| | Psalm 18:2-3, 8-11  
The LORD is my rock and my **fortress** and my deliverer,  
my God, **my rock, in whom I take refuge**;  
my shield and the horn of my salvation, my **stronghold**.  
I call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised,  
and I am saved from my enemies.  
O LORD God of hosts, who is like you, O mighty LORD?  
your faithfulness also surrounds you.  
You rule the swelling of the sea;  
when its waves rise, you still them.  
You yourself crushed **Rahab** like one who is slain;  
you scattered **your enemies** with your mighty arm.  
The heavens are yours, the earth also is yours;  
the world and all it contains,  
you have founded them. |
| Egypt (“Rahab”) becomes an icon for “chaotic sea.” | }
| Drowning in the chaotic waters becomes an image for enemy attack/danger/death. | Psalm 69: 1-4,14-15  
Save me, O God,  
for the waters have threatened my life.  
I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold;  
I have come into deep waters, and a torrent overflows me.  
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched;  
my eyes fail while I wait for my God.  
Those who hate me without a cause  
are more than the hairs of my head;  
Those who would destroy me are powerful,  
being wrongfully my enemies;  
deliver me from the mire and do not let me sink;  
may I be delivered from my foes and from the deep waters.  
May the flood of water not overflow me  
nor the deep sea swallow me up,  
nor the pit shut its mouth on me. |
| --- | --- |
| Individual enemies (Psalm 69) | Isaiah 17:12-15  
Woe to the many nations that rage—  
they rage like the raging sea!  
Woe to the peoples who roar—  
they roar like the roaring of great waters!  
Although the peoples roar like the roar of surging waters,  
when he rebukes them they flee far away,  
driven before the wind like chaff on the hills,  
like tumbleweed before a gale.  
In the evening, sudden terror!  
Before the morning, they are gone!  
This is the portion of those who loot us,  
the lot of those who plunder us. |
| ... or corporate/national enemies | Joel 3:18  
And in that day  
the mountains will drip with sweet wine,  
and the hills will flow with milk,  
and all the brooks of Judah will flow with water;  
and a spring will go out from the house of the LORD  
to water the valley of Shittim.  
Zechariah 14:6-9  
On that day there will be neither sunlight  
nor cold, frosty darkness.  
It will be a unique day, known only to the LORD  
with no distinction between day and night.  
When evening comes, there will be light.  
On that day living water will flow out from Jerusalem,  
half of it east to the Dead Sea  
and half of it west to the Mediterranean Sea,  
in summer and in winter.  
The LORD will be king over the whole earth.  
On that day there will be one LORD,  
and his name the only name.  
Isaiah 2:1-4  
Now it will come about that in the last days  
the mountain of the house of the LORD will be established as the chief of the mountains,  
and will be raised above the hills;  
and all the nations will stream [lit. “river”] to it ...  
And they will hammer their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not lift up sword against nation,  
and never again will they learn war. |
| New creation means the restoration of the cosmic mountain and the reunification of the waters. |
### 3. The Ideal State of Shalom is Humanity at Peace with Animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Basic Metaphorical Scheme</th>
<th>Biblical Narratives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Humanity’s rule over the animals is the ideal/shalom state of being. | **Genesis 1:28-30**  
God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. **Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature** that moves on the ground.”  

**Psalm 8: 4-8**  
What is humanity that you are mindful of them,  
the son of humanity that you care for him?  
You have made them a little lower than Elohim  
and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You made them **rulers over the works of your hands**;  
you put **everything under their feet**:  
all **flocks and herds**,  
and the **animals** of the wild,  
the **birds** in the sky,  
and the **fish** in the sea,  
all that swim the paths of the seas. |
| Danger from wild animals is the fundamental image of exile. | **Deuteronomy 32:20-24**  
For they are a perverse generation,  
children who are unfaithful.  
They made me jealous by what is not God  
and angered me with their worthless idols ...  
For a fire will be kindled by my wrath,  
one that burns down to Sheol below.  
It will devour the land and its harvests  
and set afire the foundations of the mountains ...  
I will send wasting famine against them ...  
**I will send against them the fangs of wild beasts, the venom of vipers** that glide in the dust. |
| Danger in general can be described as an animal attack. | **Psalm 22:11-13, 16**  
Be not far from me, for **trouble** is near;  
for there is none to help.  
Many **bulls** have surrounded me;  
**strong ones of Bashan** have encircled me.  
They open wide their mouth at me,  
as a ravening and a roaring **lion** ...  
For **dogs** have surrounded me;  
a **band of evildoers** has encompassed me ... |
Safety from wild animals is an image of shalom or restoration.

Hosea 2:18-19

In that day I will also make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, the birds of the sky, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword and war from the land, and will make them lie down in safety.

I will betroth you to me forever;
Yes, I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in loving kindness and in compassion ...

Isaiah 11:6-9

And the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the young lion and the fat calf together; and a little child will lead them.

Also the cow and the bear will graze, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child will play by the hole of the cobra, and the toddler will put his hand on the viper's den.

They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah 65:25

“The wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox; and dust will be the serpent’s food. [Gen. 3:14-15]

They will do no evil or harm in all my holy mountain,” says the LORD.

Jesus as a New Adam and Creator God

Mark 1:9-13

In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon him; and a voice came out of the heavens: “You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased.” Immediately the Spirit impelled him to go out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness forty days being tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels were ministering to him.

Mark 4:35-41

On that day, when evening came, he said to them, “Let us go over to the other side.” Leaving the crowd, they took him along with them in the boat, just as he was; and other boats were with him. And there arose a fierce storm of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up.

Jesus himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” And he got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, “Hush, be still.” And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm. And he said to them, “Why are you afraid? How is it that you have no faith?” They became very much afraid and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”
### 4. God’s Will Is the Garden of Eden Ideal

The river of Eden equals God’s provision of the blessed life.

| Psalm 1:1-3 | How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,  
|             | nor stand in the path of sinners,  
|             | nor sit in the seat of scoffers!  
|             | But his delight is in the **law of the LORD**,  
|             | and in **his law** he meditates day and night.  
|             | **He will be like a tree** planted by streams of water,  
|             | which yields its fruit in its season  
|             | and its leaf does not wither;  
|             | and in whatever he does, he prospers.  

Psalm 92:11-15  
*And my eye has looked exultantly upon my foes,  
my ears hear of the evildoers who rise up against me.  
The **righteous** man will flourish like the **palm tree**,  
he will grow like a cedar in Lebanon.  
**Planted in the house of the LORD,**  
*They will flourish in the courts of our God.  
They will still yield fruit in old age;  
they shall be full of sap and very green,  
to declare that the LORD is upright;  
my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

Proverbs 3:1-2, 13, 18  
*My son, do not forget my **Torah,**  
but keep my commands in your heart,  
for they will **prolong your life many years**  
and bring you peace and prosperity ...  
Blessed are those who find **wisdom,**  
those who gain understanding ...  
**She is a tree of life** to those who take hold of her;  
those who hold her fast will be blessed.*

Proverbs 13:14  
*The **Torah** of the wise is a **fountain of life,**  
to turn aside from the snares of death.*

Psalm 36:5-9  
*Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the skies.  
Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,  
your justice like the deep abyss.  
You, LORD, preserve both people and animals.  
How priceless is your unfailing love, O God!  
People take **refuge in the shadow of your wings.**  
They feast on the **abundance of your house;**  
you give them drink from your river of delights [lit. edens].  
For with you is the **fountain of life;**  
in your light we see **light.***
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scripture Reference</th>
<th>Text</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jeremiah 17:5-8</td>
<td><strong>Cursed</strong> is the man who puts their trust in humans and makes flesh his strength, and whose heart turns away from the LORD. For he will be like a bush in the desert and will not see when prosperity comes, but will live in stony wastes in the wilderness, a land of salt without inhabitant. <strong>Blessed</strong> is the man puts their trust in the LORD and whose trust is the LORD. For he will be like a tree planted by the water, that extends its roots by a stream and will not fear when the heat comes; but its leaves will be green, and it will not be anxious in a year of drought. Neither cease to yield fruit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 4:13-14</td>
<td>Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 6:35</td>
<td>Then Jesus declared, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 7:37-39</td>
<td>Now on the last day, the great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and let the one who believes in me drink. As the Scripture said, ‘From his innermost being will flow rivers of living water;’ but this he spoke of the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were to receive; for the Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 19:32-34</td>
<td>So the soldiers came, and broke the legs of the first man and of the other who was crucified with him; but coming to Jesus, when they saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John 20:20-22</td>
<td>And when he had said this, he showed them both his hands and his side. The disciples then rejoiced when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you; as the Father has sent me, I also send you.” And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### 5. The Covenant Is Symbolized in the Marriage Relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain</th>
<th>Superimposed/Mapping</th>
<th>Target Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marriage covenant between two humans</td>
<td>Transference of qualities</td>
<td>Israel's covenant with Yahweh</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Worship of Yahweh is equal to marital faithfulness.</th>
<th>Jeremiah 2:2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Go and proclaim in the ears of Jerusalem, saying, “Thus says the LORD, I remember concerning you the devotion of your youth, the love of your betrothals, your following after me in the wilderness, through a land not sown.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Idolatry is equal to adultery.</th>
<th>Hosea 2:2-5, 8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rebuke your mother, rebuke her, for she is not my wife, and I am not her husband. Let her remove the adulterous look from her face and the unfaithfulness from between her breasts. Otherwise I will strip her naked and make her as bare as on the day she was born; I will make her like a desert, turn her into a parched land, and slay her with thirst. I will not show my love to her children, because they are the children of adultery. Their mother has been unfaithful and has conceived them in disgrace. She said, “I will go after my lovers, who give me my food and my water, my wool and my linen, my olive oil and my drink.” She has not acknowledged that I was the one who gave her the grain, the new wine and oil, who lavished on her the silver and gold—which they used for Baal.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defeat by enemies and exile is equal to separation and divorce.</th>
<th>Hosea 3:1-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The LORD said to me, “Go, show your love to your wife again, though she is loved by another man and is an adulteress. Love her as the LORD loves the Israelites, though they turn to other gods and love the sacred raisin cakes.” So I redeemed (lit. “bought”) her for fifteen shekels of silver and about a homer and a letek of barley. Then I told her, “You are to live with me for many days, not acting like a prostitute or be intimate with any man, and I will behave the same way toward you.” For the Israelites will live many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or household gods. Afterward the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Poetic Metaphor 14
Lexical Adaptation

Metaphors can give us a new understanding of reality, so our words can change in meaning through the creation and use of metaphors.

The history of the term “magnetic field” in science and physics offers a great example of lexical adaptation. The term was coined by Michael Faraday in 1845 to describe a “sphere of space within which a magnet exerts a certain force or influence upon objects in varying degrees.”

This was an innovation in the use of the word “field.” Until this point, the word was only used to refer to a literal space (“a field of wheat”) or metaphorically of a conceptual space (“a field of study”), but Faraday introduced the mapping of two domains onto each other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain</th>
<th>Superimposed/Mapping</th>
<th>Target Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Force, energy, movement</td>
<td>Transference of qualities</td>
<td>A field of space appropriate for certain activity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Field was the perfect word because it designated a space characterized by a specific activity such as growing wheat or the study of a topic (e.g. economics).

But the word also had to undergo **lexical adaptation**, an adjustment in meaning to make the metaphor successful. In literal and metaphorical fields before Faraday, whatever is in one part of the field is equally applicable to all parts of the field (e.g. every part of a wheat field grows wheat). Not so for magnetic fields, where the degree of force and the strength of the magnetic influence increases or decreases depending on proximity to the magnet. This was not true of any “field” previously.
The concept of a magnetic field, force field, or gravitational field was coined as a metaphor, and it was so successful that the word “field” changed its meaning to include this new concept.

We now use the term, “force field” as though it named some easily understood obvious thing in the world. There are trees, rocks, and force fields capable of causing things to happen. But this is simply not the case: When iron filaments come under the influence of a magnet, we now have a well-attested set of mathematical descriptions about how they will act, but this puts us no closer to “observing” a magnetic field than it does to observing God. All that’s possible is a mathematical description, or, the field metaphor that is so useful and successful we don’t even know we’re using a metaphor anymore.


Successful metaphors are those that seem natural so that we begin to comprehend reality in terms of the metaphor.

**Metaphoric Disclosure**

The juxtaposition of two domains at first produces shock and then helps us discover new things about the objects under consideration.

In the process of “mapping” the source onto the target domain, we must ask which features of the “source” are meant to be mapped onto the “target.” Features can be grouped into three categories.

1. **Positive:** Features which have a certain natural fit
2. **Negative:** Features that clearly don’t fit
3. **Neutral:** Features which are immediately obvious, but may open new possibilities into understanding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source Domain</th>
<th>Superimposed/Mapping</th>
<th>Target Domain</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rock</td>
<td>Transference of qualities</td>
<td>God</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive:</td>
<td>Enduring, long lasting</td>
<td>Eternal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hard</td>
<td>Not subject to change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tall</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eternal</td>
<td>Not subject to change</td>
<td>Not physical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>Slowly disintegrates</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Powerful metaphors reveal as much as they conceal, and they illuminate aspects of reality but never completely. Metaphors leave reality mysterious and incomprehensible, causing the reader to think more deeply about the text.
The purpose of metaphor is both to cast up and organize a network of associations. A good metaphor … is a new vision, the birth of a new understanding, a new referential access. A strong metaphor compels new possibilities of vision.


Metaphors do something to the reader, enabling them to perceive differently. In the event of a metaphor, two or more modes of perception are juxtaposed and fused, so that “mapping” occurs. The source domain is mapped onto a target domain, and the reader’s perception of the target is irrevocably altered. Metaphor enables one to see similarities in what previously had been regarded as dissimilar; the images serve as “grids” or “filters” through which reality can be viewed, reconfigured, and comprehended anew.


However, metaphors come with a degree of dissonance and tension between the source and target. The metaphor exploits an irresolvable incongruity between the target and source domain, to generate a “semantic shock.” A good metaphor effectively weds together analogy and anomaly. Living metaphors invariably create conceptual and emotional friction by which new meaning is created and the impossible becomes conceivable. The metaphor, thus, is a master of surprise.


As a figure of speech that cavorts with the visual, the metaphor has its home in the imagination; it is poetic imagining, a saying and seeing of one thing in terms of something else, or several things at once, in order to create something new. Through metaphor, poetry is best suited, as T.S. Eliot wrote, to “make a raid on the inarticulate.” Poetry works with what is known and from there reaches out to convey what is unknown. And so poetry conceals as much as it reveals. It captures our imaginations and stirs the heart, and it’s our intellect that must catch up later, processing the new levels of discernment and discovery. Poetic metaphor offers a chance to expand our world.