Words and Meaning
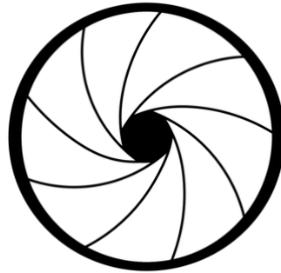*Interpreting Figurative Language in the Hebrew Scriptures*

by

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The Challenge of Meaning

What is "meaning"? How do we know how to interpret a text literally or concretely? Are there signs that a text is meant figuratively or abstractedly? Generally, these are unconscious skills in our native tongue, but even that has limitations. In this section, let's consider three progressively more difficult arenas of meaning.

It's All Semantics

It is common to dismiss a nuanced argument by saying, "It's just semantics." Usually, the person uttering this dismissive clause does not understand how significant the field of semantics is. **Semantics is the study of meaning. More specifically, it is the study of how signs and symbols are given meaning in a language.** For linguistics, all words are "arbitrary signs," which means they have no inherent value. The value is assigned to the sign by a collective, unconscious agreement of the language speakers.

Consider the word *tree*. There is nothing inherently tree-like in the combination of letters that we use to produce the word *tree*. The English word derives from the Anglo-Saxon *trēo(w)* which itself derives from the same Proto Indo-European root as the Sanskrit *dru* and the Greek *drŷs*. The Sanskrit form is itself over 3,000 years old, and yet it is no more tree-like than the Hebrew *ʿeṣ* or the Japanese *ki* or the Basque *zuhaitz*. The Maori *rākau* or the Hawaiian *kumulāʿau* equally are not more tree-like than the Hausa *itace*, the Zulu *umuthi*, or the Chichewa *mtengo*.[1] Go around the world, and you will find many different arbitrary signs that language groups have assigned to the thing we call a tree.

Semantics does not end with simple lexical form. The lexical form *tree* can take on different meanings depending on its location in a sentence and its relationship to other words and forms. The actual way in which we form our semantic understanding of the *tree* is complex. There are three primary theories about how we form meaning, and while these are a bit technical, it is important for our understanding of what figurative language is.

Structural Semantics
- *Language is to be viewed as a structured system, such that each element of that system derives its meaning from its position in relation to other elements.* In the natural language (the form of the language that is spoken, rather than defined by dictionaries and systematic grammars), words do not have meaning in isolation.
- *This system is autonomous – that is, language is to be approached without reference to its relation to human cognition.* A structuralist is careful to distinguish the arbitrary signs from the cultures, worldviews or thought patterns of its speakers. Put another way,

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[1] Sanskrit is the language of the Vedas, ancient Hindu scriptures. Basque is a language isolate spoken on the borders of Spain and France. Maori and Hawaiian are languages of Polynesia in the Pacific ocean, with Maori spoken in New Zealand. Hausa, Zulu, and Chichewa are African languages. Hausa is a Chadic language spoken in west central Africa while Zulu is a Bantu language spoken in the eastern regions of what is today South Africa while Chichewa (or Chewa) is spoken just a little north along the eastern coast of Africa.

speakers of a language do not think a certain way because of the words they use, nor do the words they use form their worldview except in its articulation.

- *The system is inherently to be studied synchronically, since what is pertinent is how the rules and relations of the system function at a given moment in time.* Etymologies, and to some extent reconstructed language families, have value but not for understanding the structure of the language at the present.[2]

From a structuralist perspective, the word *tree* only has meaning because of its relationship to other words in the language. Thus, a *tree* means something tall because it is not *grass*. It means something living with leaves and branches, in contrast to a *log* or *beam*. A *tree* is not an *animal* because it does not move around on its own. A structuralist avoids the temptation to say that speakers of our language think of tree-ness in a certain way because of the way they use the word *tree*.

While structuralism is attractive because it is orderly and well-defined, it has issues. The largest issue is the idea of an autonomous system. Language is *not* independent of cognition. Language is the product of the human mind, and so there is a two-way relationship between language and thought. Our perspective on *trees* does alter our understanding of the word we use to describe a tree, and also the kinds of trees we are around influences the images which we conjure up using the sign *tree*. My idea of a tree is quite different from that held by an Arapaho person living in the high plains in the 18th century or someone of the Mbuti people living in the northern Congo rain forests today. The differences have to do largely with my cognitive processing of inputs in the world.

Componential Analysis

Another approach to meaning is the idea that all signs can be broken down into basic units of meaning.[3] This is not nearly as structured as structural analysis (pun intended) because it relies on a fairly straightforward paradigm. Let's consider *tree* again. A tree is a plant. It is free-standing. It is woody. Thus, in componential analysis, we might say "tree" = PLANT+FREE-STANDING+WOODY. A vine, on the other hand is a woody plant, but it is not free-standing. Therefore *tree* and *vine* are both woody plants, but we distinguish between the two lexemes (words) because a vine is not free-standing.

	"tree"	"vine"	"grass"
PLANT	+	+	+
WOODY	+	+	-
FREE-STANDING	+	-	+

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[2] Marilyn Burton, *The Semantics of Glory: A Cognitive, Corpus-Based Approach to Hebrew Word Meaning* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 3.

[3] Ibid., 7.

The problem with componential analysis is the same as its strength. It is simple. While it works well for words which might occur in overlapping domains, but it does not handle nuance well and figurative language blows the entire thing to pieces. Where does bamboo fit, for example? What does someone do with a phrase like Luke 13:19 where mustard, which is essentially a grass, is treated like a tree? Componential analysis flattens out semantic meaning and while it is a useful tool for deducing the basic meaning of words, it is not quite as helpful in understanding complex meaning.

Cognitive Semantics

Here, the discussion can quickly slip into complexity. I will do my best to avoid doing that. At its core, cognitive semantics holds that meaning is rooted in what Peter Gärdenfors described as "a mapping from the linguistic expressions to cognitive structures."[4] Put another way, language and thought are deeply intertwined. This list is adapted from Gärdenfors's more technical descriptions.

- *Meanings are mapped onto concepts in the mind.* Determinations of "truth" or validity in a literal framework are secondary to the expression of a "mental entity."
- *When hearing/reading, we perceive and determine meaning.* The language is internal to the speaker and becomes immediately internal to the hearer.
- *In our minds, meaning is spatial and object-oriented rather than lexical.* Our brains do not "speak a language" but rather language is an expression of something conceptual.
- *The cognitive model are transformed by metaphoric and metonymic operations.* In other words, we do not have a "container" of ideas in our heads but rather a network of relationships. These links carry meaning from one cognitive space to another. We express these relationships in language, and the receiver then constructs his/her own relationships.
- *Syntax (form of language) depends upon semantics (meaning).* This is the reverse of structuralism, which holds that syntax determines meaning. For Gärdenfors, meaning comes first and the form of sentences and syntax are guided by meaning. Syntax becomes a medium for transmission.[5]
- *Concepts show "prototype effect."* In other words, there are no absolute concepts. The speakers of the same language share very similar image schemes in our minds, and so we understand language with *enough* of an approximate similarity that communication of the "prototype" is possible but exact replication is not necessary.[6]

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[4] Peter Gärdenfors, "Some Tenets of Cognitive Semantics," in *Cognitive Semantics: Meaning and Cognition*, ed., Jens S. Allwood and Peter Gärdenfors (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1999), 20.

[5] Although proposed before the existence of AI translation (like Google Translate), this may be one of the reasons it is not possible to have an AI translate nuance and subtlety. AI lacks the interior imagery and spatial relationships

[6] Gärdenfors, "Some Tenets of Cognitive Semantics," 21–25.

At the risk of oversimplifying, cognitive semantics allows that language is an imperfect medium for non-linguistic mental images. Rather than saying that meaning is determined by rigid structure or that it can be derived by simplistic, binary combinations, cognitive semantics sees language as *primarily* metaphoric or analogous. This is why language is *social* in nature. Within the community of those who, as a society, have an implicit or explicit agreement to utilize the same language, the agreement is upon the general prototype of what a term or phrase means. One can consult "experts" within the community when something is unclear. Expressions are agreed upon, and changes are societal.

Gärdenfors makes an interesting argument about the use of the qualifier "technically." This is used in English to make a distinction between an informal, societal understanding and a grammatical, formal understanding.[7] For example, English speakers almost never employ the objective form *whom* in speech. A grammarian might correct this by saying, "You said, 'Who did you throw the ball to?' but since it is the object of the sentence, *technically*, it should be 'To whom did you throw the ball?" This distinction makes sense in terms of written grammars, but that is not how the language works within the agreement of conceptual transmission.

Which is the *correct* understanding? Here is where cognitive semantics gives insight into why we have trouble with idioms. The *correct* understanding is any understanding in which both the speaker and the hearer have approximately the same understanding. The cognitive map of the hearer approximates the cognitive map of the speaker sufficiently well that the same general relationships are reconstructed by the reader in his mind.

Trying to Cope with Figurative Language
This brief survey is only the tip of the iceberg of the discussion of metaphor and figurative language.[8] There is no end to trying to understand how we communicate in figurative language. The point here, however, is getting us to the point that we see meaning as something more than dictionary definitions. **We cannot interpret the biblical text via dictionary.** The most common error is to do a "word study," using a lexicon to look up every occurrence of a particular Greek or Hebrew word and then try to interpret specific interpretations based on this study. While there is value in understanding the ways a word has been translated, this is not the same as understanding meaning. D. A. Carson devotes a significant portion of his seminal *Exegetical Fallacies* to addressing this common mistake. "Linguistically, meaning is not an intrinsic possession of a word; rather, 'it is a set of relations for which a verbal symbol is a sign'."[9]

On the other hand, **we cannot interpret the biblical text solely through appeal to "background information."** The truth is that lack a real understanding of the cognitive

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[7] Gärdenfors, "Some Tenets of Cognitive Semantics," 29.

[8] A good survey exists in Mason D. Lancaster, "Metaphor Research and the Hebrew Bible," *Currents in Biblical Research* 19 (2021): 207–307.

[9] D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 32. Citation from Eugene A. Nida, *Exploring Semantic Structures* (Munich: Fink, 1975), 14.

matrix that produced many of the figurative language forms. Carson indicts his own early works in illustrating how easy it is to *think* you understand the context of biblical language. He describes his own failure to understand a particular metaphor in Greek (*eis to oros*, "into the hills") which required him to develop a completely unnecessary method for synchronizing Matthew and Luke's descriptions of the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Matt 5:1; Luke 6:17).[10]

The admission that figurative language can be a daunting hurdle is one that many commentators fail to make. Modern thinkers, both in academia and in the church, prefer certainty in their interpretations. *It is important that we emphasize that interpretation is an art, and not a science*. Language is complex and much of language is figurative and analogous rather than concrete. In the next section, we will briefly deal with the concept of separation in language to illustrate this point.

<div align="center">Idiomatic Separation</div>

Idiomatic separation is the linguistic reality that we do not always understand the basis for figurative language. When dealing with concrete language, it is a relatively straightforward exercise to explain the meaning of a word. Take, for example, the word *tall*. It is the vertical analogy of *long*. We can easily offer a comparison between a short person and a tall person. It is the quality of being high off the vertical plane.

Does *tall* always mean this? If you enjoy getting coffee from Starbucks, however, you know that ordering a "tall cappuccino" means you are ordering the *smallest* of three sizes. Starbucks originally had two sizes—short (8 oz.) and tall (12 oz.)—but then added grande (16 oz.) and venti (20 oz.) and took the short off the menu. In the movie *Role Models,* Paul Rudd's character goes on a tirade about the size names, pointing out that *venti* means twenty in Italian, and then concludes, "Congratulations! You're stupid in three languages." Rudd's tirade in the movie is a perfect example of Gärdenfors's distinction between societal and technical language. Starbucks customers have an implicit agreement that *tall* means the smallest of three sizes on the menu, so although Rudd is technically correct, he fails to understand the validity of the figurative language. This kind of idiomatic separation occurs at all levels of language. Below are some examples of the separation at work.

Within the Same Language

While Americans and Brits both speak English, their idiomatic vocabularies are quite different. Americans would struggle to understand "Bob's your uncle," meaning something akin to "and then you're finished." Equally, we would not understand when our Londoner friends say they need to "spend a penny" (go to the restroom) without proper context. There is no analogy between the phrase and its idiomatic meaning. At least in that circumstance, the idiom employs language we can understand. At times, idiom employs neologism or dialectal variation, as in the use of the British term "bodge," which has no general lexical value for an

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[10] Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 42.

American. We would have to ask for an explanation to learn that "bodge" means poor craftmanship or shoddy work.

Translation Between Related Languages

Those are issues with our native tongue. Consider how much more complicated it becomes when crossing a language barrier. Say, for example, that you have a German exchange student living with you. This young person needs some laundry done. "Will it be difficult to wash these clothes?" she asks. You reply, "piece of cake!" The student looks confused. "What does this mean?" You realize the confusion and clarify in German, *das Kinderspiel.* The frustration clears. She understands that "piece of cake" is an idiom equivalent to *das Kinderspiel* ("child's play") indicating a simple task. The German speaking student does not understand the development of the idiom, but she can grasp the meaning.

Culturally Distinct Languages

At least German and English are somewhat related languages. When idioms are crossing larger linguistic gaps, the challenges become truly daunting. There is a Japanese idiom, *minugahana* that literally means "not seeing is a flower." Perhaps you attempted to make a business deal with a Japanese executive, but it failed. Sitting on the park bench outside of the office building, you exclaim, *watashiwa shippai shimashita* (I have failed!). An old man sitting nearby turns to you and says, *minugahana*. You think, "what do flowers have to do with this?" The idiom means something along the lines of "sometimes things don't work out the way you think they should." There is *no direct correspondence* between the Japanese idiom and what it means in English. We can only approximate meaning. (By the way, my favorite Japanese idiom is *sarumokikaraochiru*, which has a sense of "everyone makes mistakes" but literally translates as "even monkeys fall from trees".)

The Introduction of Diachronic Difference

Understanding and translating idioms and figurative language is difficult enough with languages still being spoken.[11] The Biblical texts requires that we cross yet another barrier, namely time. Linguists refer to the change in language over time as *diachrony.* All languages undergo diachronic shifts in lexigraphy (definition), phonology (pronunciation), and syntax (composition).

Figurative language is inherently flexible, and that means this kind of speech will inevitably be altered as the language develops. Many of the idioms we employ in English today come from the writings of William Shakespeare. Among his many coinages are "laughing stock," (*Merry Wives of Windsor,* Act 3 scene 1), "you wear your heart on your sleeve" (*Othello*, Act 1 scene 1), "a pound of flesh" (*Merchant of Venice*, Act 1 scene 3), "break the ice" (*Taming of the Shrew*, Act 1 scene 2), and "eating me out of house and home" (*Henry IV*, Act 2 scene 7). These are still in usage, so we understand them well. Here are a few that we would struggle to understand:

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[11] Christina Shäffner, "Metaphor and Translation: Some Implications of a Cognitive Approach," *Journal of Pragmatics* 36 (2004): 1253–69.

- "But what **linsey-woolsey** hast thou to speak to us again?" (*All's Well that Ends Well,* Act 4 scene 1)
- "Look, **the unfolding star** calls up the shepherd." (*Measure for Measure*, Act 4 scene 2)
- "Say, **wall-eyed slave**, whither wouldst thou convey this growing image of thy fiend-like face?" (*Titus Andronicus*, Act 5 scene 1)

Less than five hundred years removed from Shakespeare, we are at a loss as to the meaning of these idioms.[12] Imagine now how quickly idiomatic language could have changed in the Iron Age without printing to slow the movement of language. When David writes, "Many young bulls encompass me. Strong bulls surround me"[13] (Ps 22:12), we know that he is describing his beleaguered state but why are bulls associated with Bashan? This area is in the Golan Heights, but why were the bulls considered so intimidating? We can get the general idea from context, but David's *specific* meaning is lost on us.

Diachronic differences exist not only between the ancient text and the modern reader but also between the ancient text and other ancient readers. Figurative language employed in a psalm from around 1000 BCE might have a significantly different meaning to a prophet writing around 400 BCE. The ways in which biblical authors read preceding biblical works is called *intertextuality*. We cannot assume that biblical authors read the texts as we read them or even as the authors intended them for their original audiences. An example of this is a familiar one from Isaiah 7, "Behold a virgin shall conceive." Isaiah's original audience read this as referring to a birth of a child to a young woman, probably Isaiah's daughter-in-law. The gospel writers read this as referring to Jesus's miraculous birth to Mary. Medieval commentators added even more meaning to this with the development of the "immaculate conception," which saw Mary as also virgin-born. These steps involved the reading of a literal text, so it is not hard to imagine how flexible readings can be when dealing with a figurative one.

How Does Figurative Language Work?

There is actually a tremendous amount of literature that has been written about the nature of metaphor. Exploring all the varied theories about figurative language is a discipline in itself. Here, a concise and hopefully useful summary will suffice.

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[12] "Linsey-woolsey" is a mixed fabric made by weaving together linen and wool, but Shakespeare uses it as an idiom for a mixed message. "Unfolding star" is the idea of a star becoming visible, the sign that guided the magi to the infant Jesus. (Shakespeare mistakenly says it guided the shepherds.) To be "wall-eyed" is to have a blank, angry expression, a term that today refers solely to a type of fish.

[13] *səbabûnî perîm rabîm ʾabîrê bašan kīt-rûnî*

Lakoff and Johnson define a metaphor as "a cross mapping domain mapped in the conceptual system."[14] Essentially, **figurative language is how we express truth or ideas from one conceptual matrix into another.** The two chief forms are metaphor and simile, which are distinguished from each other by the use of explicit relationship. "A fish in water, Bobby moved gracefully from one end of the pool to the other," is a simile. The analogy is not explicit and must be determined by the reader. The reader assumes Bobby is a human being, and so understand the language to be figurative. "Bobby is *like* a fish in water," is a metaphor. The use of the relational *like* provides an explicit comparison. While the reader must still recognize that relational signal, it is clearer in the composition.

When using figurative language, there is a certain "slipperiness" to the comparisons.[15] The reader must understand both the target (T) and source (S) concepts. In the examples offered in the previous paragraph, it is assumed that the reader knows how fish behave in the water (S) and that the correlation to Bobby's movements is meant to be expressive of human adeptness, not fish-like abilities (T). The reader must mediate these two meanings, which requires a general sense of both and the capacity to understand the intent of the figurative language.[16] The reader maps the figurative meaning onto a concrete concept by relying on background information (BI) which is often taken for granted or assumed by the author.[17] There is no sure way to guarantee that a reader will process figurative language from S to T with the same BI as the author. Of course, in speech, the hearer can ask for clarification or determine meaning from visible clues. In written form, however, the reader must work with his own framework.

Figurative language is not a specialization. In other words, it is not the domain of poetry. Every language has some level of figurativeness inherent to it because language is, by its very nature, expression from one cognate domain to another. Because of its cross-mapping domain, figurative language often exists outside of the norms of definition and syntax. Consider the statement, "Our relationship is at a crossroads." While this is grammatically correct, if we step back for a moment, we realize it does not make literal sense. The relationship is intangible. It is a statement of connection between or among people. A crossroads is a literal place where streets or roads meet.[18] We innately read the text as

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[14] George Lakoff, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," in *Metaphor and Thought*, ed. Andrew Ortony, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 203.

[15] John Barnden, "Metaphor and Simile: Categorizing and Comparing Categorization and Comparison," in *Metaphor and Communication*, Metaphor and Language, Cognition, and Communication 5, ed. Elisabetta Gola and Francesca Ervas (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2016), 25.

[16] Ibid., 35.

[17] Xia Xiang and Binghan Zheng, "Revisiting the Function of Background Information in Sight Translating Metaphor: An Analysis of Translation Product and Process," *Metaphor and Intercultural Communication*, ed. Andreas Musolff, Fiona MacArthur, and Giulio Pagani (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 53–89.

[18] This example is drawn from Lakoff, "The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor," 206.

figurative because we have a shared BI that sees relationships as journeys. The language is wholly reasonable, but does not function within lexical or syntactic norms.

Another way to view mapping is to think of it as imageable. This means that the figurative language allows us to visualize something in a conceptual domain that exists outside of that domain using shared image language. One must have the BI to understand how the concept is imaged in order to grasp fully the meaning of the image. Here is one of the fundamental problems with figurative language from a text as old and as distant as the biblical text. Images that could be said to be fully integrated into the BI of biblical author and audience are quite foreign to our own. This produces all kinds of interpretational challenges.

Let's consider a case of figurative language that may be lost to us in Genesis 21. There, Abraham and Sarah rejoice over the birth of their son, who they name Isaac (Heb. *yīṣḥaq*) which means "laughter." Sarah even declares, "everyone who hears will laugh over me (Heb. *yīṣḥaq*). Only two lines later, Abraham's older son Ishmael laughs (Heb. *məṣaḥeq*) at the boy which upsets Sarah enough to demand Ishmael and his mother be expelled from the camp. The wordplay over the basic form *ṣḥq* is easy to see in the Hebrew text, but why did Ishamel's laughter provoke such a response?

The form *ṣḥq* appears almost exclusively in Genesis. It seems to always denote a condescending laughter, possibly even abusive behavior (Gen 39:14; Exod 32:6) except for one place where it denotes what might be considered flirtation or something more intimate between husband and wife (Gen 26:8).[19] Later, in the book of Ezekiel, it is clearly meant to parallel the idea of ridicule or derision (Heb. *hlk,* Ezek 23:32). It seems that the more common form of the verb for laughter is *śḥq,* distinguished only by the shift of the sibilant from the dental-alveolar *ṣ* to the lateral *ś*.[20] There is only one place where the two appear together (Judg 16:25–27), and again there appears to be some kind of wordplay at work. Even more confusing is the use of *śḥq* in 2 Sam 2:14, "Let the young men arise and compete [*śḥq*] before us." The clear indication of the context is that these young men were supposed to engage in mock combat, something that the devious Joab took advantage of to ambush his opponents.

There is some kind of idiomatic meaning to *ṣḥq* that is lost on the modern reader. Perhaps it means simply some kind of condescending laughter, or there could be some kind of sexual overtone. Is the use of *ṣḥq* meant to be taken literally, as simply "laughing" or is there a metonymic function here? Could Ishmael have been doing something far more degrading to Isaac? Such practices were hardly unknown in the Canaanite society. If the text is meant to be figurative language, the image that the biblical author appeals to in the language is no longer in our BI. We do not read "laughter" in this way. It makes good sense for translators

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[19] The Akkadian cognate *ṣī/ēḫtu* sometimes denotes this. See HALOT, "צָחֹק"; CAD 16:186. It also can have the sense of making someone smile, usually out of love as well as the laughter of engaging in lovemaking.

[20] Hebrew has four sibilant or s-sounds: ס (*s*, samekh), pronounced as in "see"; שׂ (*ś*, sin), with the same phonetic value as *s*; שׁ (*š*, shin), pronounced like the *sh* in "she"; צ (*ṣ* or *tz*, ṣade), pronounced somewhat like the *ts* in "cats;" and ז (*z*, zayin), pronounced as the *z* in "zoo."

to render *ṣḥq* as "laughing" in Genesis 21, but there may be much more going on than we can perceive. We are unable to mediate the conceptual worlds.

One of the challenges of reading figurative language is what the Hebrew scholar Robert Alter refers to as "shimmer." This is the practice of switching back and forth between figurative and literal.[21] This "shimmering" can be seen throughout the Song of Songs 1:2–3.

> Literal: Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!
> Figurative: For your love is better than wine;
> Literal: Your anointing oils are fragrant
> Figurative: Your name is oil poured out;
>   Therefore the virgins love you.

Although prevalent in poetry, "shimmering" is not limited to that genre. In Ezekiel, this kind of switching appears often. Calling Ezekiel to respond to the stubborn Israelites, YHWH says:

> "And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them. And you, son of man, be not afraid of then, nor be afraid of their words, though briers and thorns are with you and you sit on scorpions." (Ezek 2:5–6)

While the reference to the people refusing to hear Ezekiel can be taken literally, are we to believe that he will actually be made to sit on scorpions? Is this a metaphor? It appears that the scorpion is a metaphor for discomfort and even punishment by the whip (1 Kgs 12:11). It seems unlikely that this is meant to be taken literally. The reference to sitting (Heb. *yšb*) on scorpions must be a metaphor, but we lack the BI to understand the full intention of the form. Most commentators are content to say that it indicates "torture and bloodshed" without exploring the metaphor any further.[22]

Types of Figurative Language

Metaphor/Simile

It has been argued that the distinction between metaphor and simile is semantic. They function in virtually the same way, and the only real distinction is the relational particles ("like" or "as") in the simile. Metaphor is very common, but here are two examples.

- "YHWH is my rock and my fortress." (Ps 18:2)

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[21] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 199.

[22] See, for example, Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1: A Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, Chapters 1–24,* Hermeneia, trans. Ronald E. Clements (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 134.

- "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord God." (Ezek 34:15)

Is God truly a rock? No. We know him to be a transcendent being. Still, in times of trouble, he offers the security of a fortress built into the rock. It is a shelter from violence and weather, a place even the lowliest can seek out and find.

Ezekiel 34 is an extended metaphor built off the language of Psalm 23, with YHWH as the shepherd of Israel, the wayward and often disobedient sheep. Jesus later utilized this metaphor in his own teaching (John 10). The analogy communicates divine judgment and compassion in terminology which the ancient Israelites would have understood well.

Personification

This may be the most easily recognized form of figurative language. It gives human attributes to inanimate objects. While it is most common in poetic sections of the text, it can appear in general discourse. You can observe that a personification is a specialized form of metaphor or simile. A source and a target are still evident.

- "The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs." (Ps 114:4)
- "All the trees of the field shall clap their hands." (Isa 55:12)
- "Their arrows are like a skilled warrior who does no return empty-handed." (Jer 50:9)

Personification is fairly self-explanatory. Inanimate objects are described in these kinds of terms in a method similar to hyperbole (see below). We can recognize that the personification is meant as a magnification of whatever the core idea is in the text. Thus, in Psalm 114, the point is all of creation rejoicing with the Hebrews for being chosen as God's people. All of God's creations responds in joy. Likewise, Isaiah 55 sees all of creation in the temple procession, celebrating the gathering of God's people to himself in Zion.

Metonymy/Synecdoche

These two figurative forms are closely related. **A metonymy is the substitution of a word or phrase for another which has a similar or overlapping semantic domain.** The word comes from the Greek for "changed name." It is a sort of indirect description, coloring the description.

- "Now it was in the heart of David my father to build a house for the name of YHWH, the God of Israel." (1 Kgs 8:17)

The "name of YHWH" is a metonymy for the presence of YHWH. His name is deeply associated with his presence. Genesis refers to worship as "calling on the name of YHWH" (Gen 13:4, 16:13, 21:33, 26:25). Identification with YHWH is taking his name (Exod 20:7; Lev 24:16; Deut 32:3; 1 Sam 17:45). Solomon is not building the house solely for the name YHWH but because glorifying the name of YHWH stands in for being in YHWH's presence.

A couple of familiar metonyms are "The house of David" standing in for the kingdom of Israel and Judah (1 Kgs 12:19; Isa 7:13; Neh 12:37; Zech 12:7, 13:1), and Zion standing in for Jerusalem (Ps 2:6, 20:2, 69:35; Isa 10:24, 12:6, 51:3; Lam 2:6, 4:11; Zeph 3:16). This kind of usage was common in the ancient world, with a ruling house or geographical location representing a much larger entity. These were not meant to be replacements, or to narrow the focus because the ruling house was very much identified with the nation. This usage is similar to the way we refer to "the White House" when we mean the entire executive branch of the US government.

A synecdoche is the use of a part to stand in for a whole. For example, referring to "a thousand head" when you mean a herd of one thousand cattle or a swashbuckling pirate declaring, "Taste my steel!" but meaning he will attack with his sword.

- "If you will save Israel by my hand, as you have said." (Judg 6:36)
- "My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all the day." (Ps 71:8)
- "My heart [Heb. *kīlyâh*, literally "kidneys"] faints within me." (Job 19:28)

While singing is an act that involves the mouth uttering sounds, the psalmist has in mind the idea that his entire being is involved in the act of praise. Likewise, it was not Gideon's literal hand that saved the people in Judges 6:36 but his tactics and armies. Job's reference to his kidneys fainting stands in for a general weakness and feeling of inadequacy before his circumstances.

Hyperbole

A hyperbole (and its related form the understatement) is a metaphor which magnifies the scale of the analogy for effect. It is also one of the most challenging forms to identify because the biblical text treats the supernatural as normal. The question always has to be whether the narrative is presenting a concept as normal or showing clear literary purpose.

- "Our pursuers were swifter than eagles in the heavens." (Lam 4:19)
- "The sluggard is wiser in his own eyes than seven men who can answer sensibly." (Prov 26:16)

In the first example, we should not conclude that the Babylonian armies could move faster than birds of prey in flight. The hyperbole is meant to demonstrate the speed of the Babylonian conquest, and the relative ease with which they attacked Jerusalem. In the second, the author exaggerates the scale of misconception. The sluggard (Heb. *ʿāṣel*) has no perspective on his own ineptitude and is content to take his own counsel, even in the face of wisdom. The actual proportion is not 1:7, but the point is well-made by the hyperbole.

We must be cautious not to exclude the possibility of hyperbole in extraordinary episodes. Let's take a look at the account of the Noahic flood. "The waters prevailed so mightily on the earth that all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered." (Gen 7:19) From a modern perspective, this description seems to be a hyperbole. The volume of water required to cover the entire earth would then be equal to the surface area of the earth

(1.97 x 10^8 sq mi) times the average elevation above sea level (0.5mi). There simply is not enough water trapped in the ice sheets and atmosphere of the earth to cover the *entire planet* completely. On the surface, considering the language as hyperbole would resolve this issue. While we can affirm the literal interpretation of a universal flood, allowances must be made for interpretations which see the text as hyperbole, no matter how distasteful they might be to us personally.[23] Hyperbole *is* a legitimate figurative form in the biblical text, and so answering someone who refers to a text like this as hyperbole requires more than a simple dismissal.

<div align="center">Allusion</div>

Again, closely related to the metaphor is the allusion. Here, however, the source of the comparison is a literary work or familiar text. **The allusion relies upon imagery that has entered the cognitive matrix from another creative work.[24]**

- "But now, O YHWH, you are our father; we are the clay, and you are our potter. We are all the work of your hand." (Isa 64:8)
- "I am about to destroy the strength of the kingdoms of the nations, and overthrow the chariots and their riders." (Hagg 2:22)
- "I will plant them on their land, and they shall never again be uprooted out of the land that I have given them." (Amos 9:15)

In the first example, Isaiah is alluding to the creative work of Genesis 2:5–7. The motif of the potter appears throughout Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isa 29:16, 30:14, 41:25; Jer 18:26, 19:1). Isaiah simply changes "dust" (Heb. ʿpr) to "clay" (Heb. ḥmr). It may also allude to Job 33:6, "I was pinched off from a piece of clay." The allusion is still quite strong, despite the change of medium. The second example from Haggai seems to link up with the drowning of the armies of pharaoh at the Red Sea (Exod 14:1–31). Haggai describes an eschatological restoration of Jerusalem and the house of David, but he does so with language borrowed from the Exodus. He also mixes this with language borrowed from the Achaemenid Persian court when he describes Zerubbabel as "my signet ring" (Heb. ḥôtam). While seals were common in the ancient world, giving the signet ring to a representative is a very Assyrian/Persian behavior (Esther 3:10).

When discussing allusions in the biblical text, the focus is on references to other biblical accounts. It is *extremely* possible that the biblical text contains allusions to extrabiblical texts which were known to the original audience but are now lost to us. Certainly there are allusions to customs that are unknown to us. One of the most common is the phrase "he was gathered to his people" which appears in Genesis in reference to the death of the patriarchs

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[23] Author's Note: I personally struggle with the idea of reducing the scale of the Noahic flood to hyperbole. It opens the door for dismissing anything extraordinary in the text, using hyperbole as a way to ignore or marginalize the supernatural work of God. If God can create from nothing and raise from the dead, what is to prevent him from performing other acts that countermand the laws of physics and reality?

[24] Another case of allusion already discussed is Ezekiel 34's use of the shepherd language from Psalm 23.

(Gen 25:8, 35:29, 49:33) as well as to Aaron and Moses (Num 20:26; Deut 32:50). The allusion may relate to a practice of communal burial, since the patriarchs were all buried at the Cave of Machpelah, which Abraham purchased near Shechem (Gen 23:1–16) but why is it used concerning Aaron and Moses? Something else may be at work, but the lack of BI leaves us reconstructing and hoping that we have enough clues in the text to understand intent.

Questions for Understanding Figurative Language

1. Does a Normal, Concrete Reading Fit the Context?

If you can answer this question in the clear affirmative, there is really no reason to explore a figurative, abstract reading. For example, when we read that "Abraham went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him into the Negeb," (Gen 13:1) there is no reason to question the literal meaning of these words. Egypt is in the south and it is actually topographically lower than the Judean highlands where he settled, so Abraham literally "went up from Egypt." The phrase "all that he had" is also not problematic. Abraham was a nomadic chieftain, and it is clear from the context that he had to leave Egypt with everything he had with him. His nephew Lot journeyed with him since Abraham left Haran (Gen 12:4), so there is no metaphor there. Finally, he literally went to the Negev, a term still in use for the southern region of Judea.

In contrast, when YHWH promises Abraham that he will "make your offspring as the dust of the earth," (Gen 12:16) the use of "as" indicates a simile. This cannot be taken literally, since human beings do not exist in the trillions upon trillions of particles that make up the dust of the earth. The simile is a hyperbole meant to indicate that Abraham's descendants would become great nations, which indeed they did. Even here, however, we must ask what the frame of reference is for "the earth" (*haʾareṣ*). This does not necessarily just mean the ground or the planet. It can refer exclusively to a specific land, such as the land which YHWH promised to Abraham. This is made explicit in the following verse: "Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land (*haʾareṣ*), for I will give it to you." Did YHWH mean the entirety of the earth? Surely not.

2. Is there an Incongruity in the Phrasing?

Shakespeare, the king of the English metaphor, once wrote, "All the world is a stage." (*As You Like It*, Act 2 scene 7) Is the world a stage? There is a certain incongruity, a sense in which the statement does not "feel right." This is not a binary question, but one of degrees or what David Aaron refers to as "gradience" and "continuum of the domain."[25] Figurative language slips outside of the real of congruence, drawing analogy between ideas of two

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[25] David H. Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery,* Brill Reference Library of Judaism 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 28–30.

different spheres or cognitive domains. Put another way, does the statement you are reading lead you to think of one thing in terms of another?

In Psalm 23:1, our perspective about YHWH is immediately shifted into terms of shepherding. "YHWH is my shepherd" places the reader into the position of being a sheep, tended by the supreme, divine being. There is an incongruity which makes it clear we are dealing in metaphor rather than in concrete literalism. YHWH's leadership of his people has some shared attributes with that of a shepherd tending his flocks, but he is not defined as a shepherd, and we are not reduced to being sheep.

This is quite different from the assertion that "YHWH is king" (Ps 10:16). This is meant plainly and literally. There is no context in which we necessarily should treat this as a metaphor.[26] While one might say there is analogy between an earthly king and YHWH's sovereignty, the intention is not analogy but rather that one of YHWH's defining attributes is his sovereignty. His kingship can be expressed in metaphorical terms, such as "For YHWH is a great God, and great king above all gods." (Ps 95:3) Figurative language of elevation utilizes the beliefs in other gods to place YHWH above them, although elsewhere it is made plain that YHWH does not share his sovereignty with any other being. The shepherd and sheep motif reappears here as well (Ps 95:7), showing perhaps that the reference to YHWH as shepherd is meant to point toward his literal kingship, perhaps an allusion to David's kingship (Ezek 37:24).

When incongruity is present, you may be dealing with figurative language or idiom. While we often lack the background information to properly form a cognitive model of the reference, we can nonetheless appreciate that some figurative language exists. We should be cautious, however, in categorizing any language as "purely" figurative or literal. Such a binary interpretation leads to over-qualifying the text. By this I mean that we too easily reduce text to genre and categories when literary intent is often meant to be non-binary, to function on multiple levels. Identifying literary method (such as figurative language) does not equate to atomizing the semantic value (meaning) to one thing or the other.

The reason I bring this up is because there is a tendency toward "demythologizing" texts by resorting to metaphor and figurative language as an "explanation" of the supernatural. As mentioned earlier, this has been a common practice with the Noahic flood in Genesis 7. Even if one allows that there is hyperbole in Genesis 7, does that necessarily "demythologize" the flood? If "all the high mountains under the whole heaven were covered" is indeed hyperbole, and it only expresses that the flood was so immersive that all visible land was submerged, does that necessarily negate the meaning and intent of the text? The answer is no. Even if one allows for hyperbole, it still expresses *reality*. Figurative language is *not* "non-true." The use of figurative language is not automatically "non-reality." Metaphors and other figurative language as so common in biblical languages that if one were to assume metaphoric language equals non-true language, it would eliminate the vast majority of truth in the biblical text.

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[26] Aaron, *Biblical Ambiguities*, 40.

Far from denying the veracity of the truth in the biblical text, the incongruity which indicates figurative language should cause us to focus more intensely on the target being identified by the language.

3. Do We Understand the Frame of Reference?

Being willing to admit that we do not understand figurative language in the biblical text is an important and humbling skill. We sometimes labor under the delusion that in order for the Bible to be inspired, we must be able to parse and quantify every aspect of its meaning. There is a great deal of the Bible that is difficult to understand and sometimes impossible to even translate. After all, what is a *seraph* (Heb. *śeraf*) or a *cherub* (Heb. *kərûb*) and why do they only appear in the plural in the Hebrew text? We have little or no explanation or description in the biblical text. The authors assumed the readers would know.

In some cases, we can see a clear frame of reference.In Number 21:4–9, the people of Israel grumble against God, so he sends "fiery serpents" (Heb. *nəḥašîm śərafîm*) to poison them. As a solution, Moses creates a "bronze serpent," which in Hebrew is *nəḥaš nəḥōšet* because the word for bronze comes from the word for serpent. The metaphor inherent in the name becomes apparent, since when bronze is heated, it is malleable like a snake and can be shaped into anything. While that metaphor is simple, the word *śeraf*, which is rendered as "fiery," is the same word as the indescribable angelic being in Isaiah 6:2. If the word is related to the idea of fire, why are there *cherubim* given flaming swords (Gen 3:24) instead of *seraphim*?

When the frame of reference is absent, we can offer ideas and concepts as to the meaning of the figurative language, but we should be careful not to focus exclusively on any one idea. Instead, we can explore the diverse possibilities and set them before our readers.

Concluding Thoughts

While I am fully cognizant that most of us are unwilling to delve too deeply into the nature of figurative language, it is vital that we understand its presence in the biblical text and the inherent challenges that it presents in interpretation. The language of the Bible is vibrant and varied. Part of the anemia that infects modern Christianity is a loss of perspective on the grand project that is interpretation. It is easy to fall into fallacious thinking because we want to deal with the Bible without considering the authors and audience, the beauty and mystery of the language. We also do not want to admit that we may not have all the answers.

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