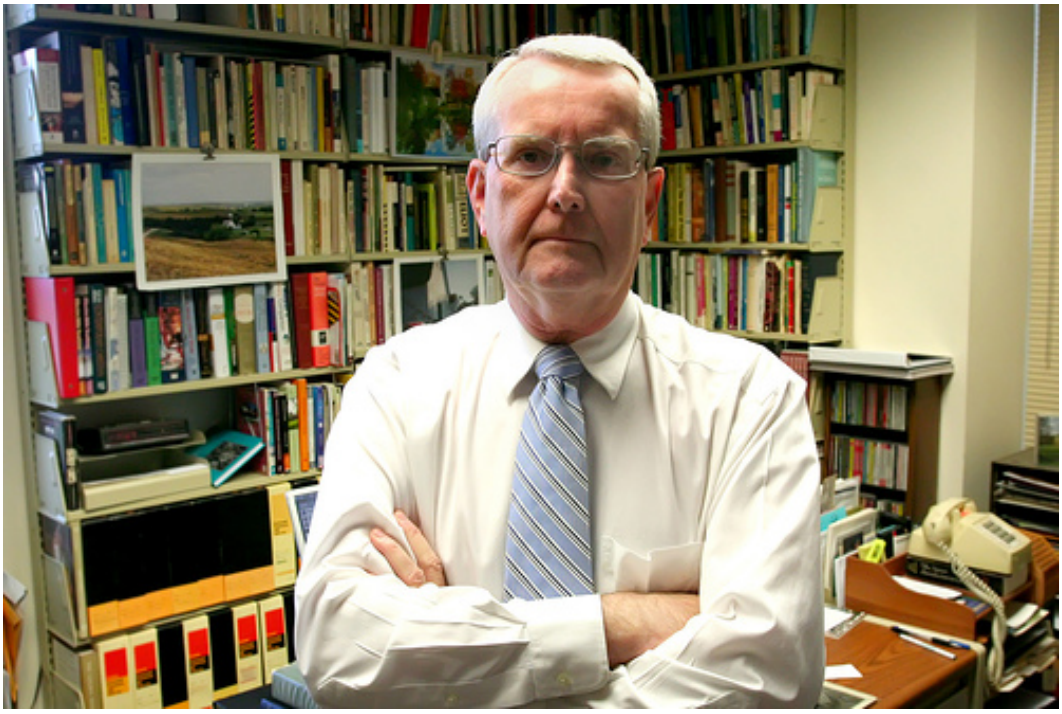

Metaphors in the Psalms*

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It has been said that Shakespeare's language is so consistently and thoroughly metaphoric that he seems to have done his very thinking in metaphor. A similar claim can be made for the poets who wrote the Old Testament Psalms. This idiom is more metaphoric than readers usually realize, partly because our familiarity with the Psalms conceals from our consciousness that we are reading a metaphoric statement.

The very first verse of the Psalter introduces us, almost imperceptibly, to the metaphoric mode of the Psalms:[1]

> Blessed is the man
> who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
> nor stands in the way of sinners,
> nor sits in the seat of scoffers.

Having announced his theme (the blessed person), the poet utters three metaphoric descriptions. Wicked people do not literally walk down a path called "the counsel of the wicked." Nor do they have legislatures that issue

handbooks of evil behavior entitled “the counsel of the wicked.” They do not congregate in places designed “the way of sinners.” And people who are in a cynical mood do not take turns sitting in a chair known as “the seat of scoffers.”

To approach the Psalms without a clear understanding of the nature and function of metaphor ought to be unthinkable. Yet a perusal of published commentary shows how typically the Psalms are treated as if they were straightforward expository writing. Recent discussions of metaphor have taught us to look upon metaphor as a lens through which we look at truth or reality, but in too many readings of the Psalms the lens has been removed from sight.

Metaphor is “… a lens through which we look at truth or reality”

To understand metaphor in the Psalms requires that we look at it from four perspectives: as a rhetorical figure (metaphor in itself), metaphor and the reader (the obligations that metaphor imposes on a reader), metaphor and the poet (why poets speak metaphorically), and metaphor and reality (the ontological question of whether metaphor expresses truth). In the discussion that follows I propose to look at metaphor in the Psalms from all these viewpoints, posing in conclusion the question of whether metaphor has a special function in expressing religious experience.

I

Whatever else we might wish to include in a definition of metaphor, it is first of all a rhetorical device, or figure of speech. As such, its essential feature is comparison. Metaphor always establishes an identity and similarity between two things. A brief comment in Aristotle’s *Poetics* continues to provide the basic text: “to make good metaphors implies an eye for resemblances.”[2] In metaphor, “A” is in some sense like “B.”2

“…its essential feature is comparison”

This being the case, it is curious that criticism is still searching for universally accepted terms by which to designate the two halves of a metaphor. I. A. Richards’ terms “vehicle” and “tenor” continue to be wisely used, but the term “tenor” means almost nothing to most people. The best terms would seem to be vehicle (the literal level) and referent (the subject referred to).

Metaphor asserts a correspondence between two phenomena. Consider as an example this metaphoric description of how God uses the forces of nature to accomplish his purposes (104:3-4):

> who hast laid the beams of thy chambers
> on the waters,
> who makest the clouds thy chariot,
> who ridest on the wings of the wind,
> who makest the winds thy messengers,
> fire and flame thy ministers.

Each of these metaphors asserts a similarity. Just as a builder constructs a waterfront house on pillars over the water, God as creator made the sea coast solid and immovable next to the water. The clouds move across the sky as a chariot moves over a road. The wind blows freely through the air as a bird in flight does. Wind and lightning possess the swiftness of a royal messenger.

If metaphor is this type of connection between two phenomena, several corollaries follow. One is that metaphor secures an effect on one level and then asks the reader to transfer that meaning to another level (in this it is like the New Testament parable). The very definition of metaphor suggests such a transfer, since it is based on the Greek words, ‘meta,’ meaning “over,” and “pherein,” meaning “to carry.” When the Psalmist speaks of someone “who dwells in the shelter of the Most High” (91:1), the first task of the reader is to meditate on the human experience of living in a home. These domestic associations of security, provision, and belonging

then become transferred from a human, family context to the realm of faith in God.

Since metaphor asserts a correspondence between two things, it is obvious, secondly, that metaphor works by indirection. This is what Robert Frost had in mind when he defined poetry as "saying one thing and meaning another."[3] The Psalmist *says* that "the Lord God is a sun and shield" (84:11), but he *means* that God is the source of blessing and a protector. The poet *says* that he lies "in the midst of lion: / that greedily devour the sons of men" (57:4), but he *means* that his enemies' slander inflicts pain and destroys him in a number of nonphysical ways. Metaphor, in short, is a prime example of what Picasso said about art: it is "a lie that makes us realize truth."[4]

The importance of this indirection of metaphor in the Psalms is that it at once disqualifies the usual tendency to talk about the theology of the Psalms as though the text were expository prose, or even a theological outline. Far too much commentary on the Psalms obscures the process of transfer that even allows us to talk about the theological content of the poet's utterance. Metaphor is a bifocal vision, a split-level statement, and to treat it as a single reference or direct statement is to distort the text and short-circuit the richness of meanings that metaphor usually expresses.

The fact that metaphor is literally false should not obscure that metaphor is itself a form of logic rather than illogic. The connection between vehicle and referent in a good metaphor is a necessary or real connection; it can be validated on the basis of observation and rational analysis. When the poet asks God to "set a guard over my mouth, O Lord, / keep watch over the door of my lips" (141:3), we have to explore by what logic care in one's speech can be compared to a soldier or prison guard watching the door of a house or prison. If the threat of death on the battlefield can be described as the rope of a strangler and the water of a flood (18:4) we are justified in looking for a logical explanation for the poet's assertion.

But if metaphor is a form of logic, it also goes beyond logic, if by “logic” we mean abstract or mental logic. For one thing, a metaphor ordinarily offers an *experience* of the topic being presented. As a result, the total meaning that is transferred from vehicle to referent is partly non-verbal. When the Psalmist writes that his soul thirsts for God (63:1), he is surrounding his spiritual longing with physical and emotional associations that we experience but cannot adequately put into words. When the experience of God’s providence is pictured metaphorically in terms of living in a house (23:6), the meanings conveyed are affective as well as intellectually, experiential and intuitive as well as verbal and logical. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, the insight that a metaphor gives us “is both a thinking and a seeing.”[5]

The fact that metaphor is first of all a comparison makes it akin to simile. The perennial debate about whether metaphor and simile are twins or opposites is not an issue in the Psalms. Metaphors in the Psalms are simply elliptical or compressed similes. In fact, most similes can be turned into metaphors by the simple omission of like” or “as” from the statement: “He is like a tree / planted by streams of water” (1:3); “they are like a lion eager to tear” (17:12); “I am like a lonely bird on the housetop” (102:7); “as for man, his days are like grass” (103:15). Metaphor adopts a bolder strategy than simile does, inasmuch as it asserts identity rather than similarity, but in the Psalms the two figures communicate the same content. The only real difference between them is semantic: a simile tells a literal truth, while a metaphor is literally a lie.

Comparison is the essential feature of metaphor, but two other aspects of it should also be noted. One is that metaphor tends to be vivid and concrete. Ricoeur correctly speaks of the “pictorial dimension” of metaphor.[6] The metaphors in the Psalms constantly keep the reader in the realm of grass and water and spears and lions and shields and trees.

Yet another inherent feature of metaphor is its ability to achieve compression and concentration. It is a shorthand way of bringing a whole

set of connotations or associations to bear on a given subject merely by naming another area of human experience. Simply by calling God a fortress and refuge (18:2), the poet calls into awareness a whole military world of threat and terror and struggle. To say that believers in God are “the sheep of his pasture” (100:3) is all that is required to awaken the pastoral world of sheep and grass and provision and protection. Metaphor is in this sense very similar to allusion; in both cases, the mere naming of another phenomenon unleashes a whole world of associations and brings them to bear on the topic of the poem.

What is metaphor? Rhetorically it is a comparison, usually concrete and always vivid on its literal level, and a means of achieving remarkable economy of expression.

II

What obligations does metaphor impose on the reader of the Psalms? They have already been suggested by my remarks on what metaphor is. The reader’s first responsibility is to *identify* the literal reference, or the vehicle of the metaphor. Without such identification a reader will never fully understand or experience a metaphoric statement. Furthermore, it is important that the reader’s identification be specific rather than vague, detailed rather than cursory.

“The reader’s first responsibility is to *identify* the literal reference, or the vehicle of the metaphor.”

The necessity of correctly identifying the literal meaning of a metaphor becomes apparent if we look, not at the metaphors that are familiar to us, but at ones outside our own experience. What, for example, does Psalm 1:1 mean when the poet speaks of sitting “in the seat of scoffers?” In the Old Testament milieu, to “sit in the seat” (or its equivalent “sit in the gate”) has a political meaning. It means to be part of the policy-making assembly of a city.

Or what does the poet mean in Psalm 121:5 when he calls God "your shade / on your right hand?" The reference to the shade of a tree that protects a traveler from sunstroke is obvious, but why is it pictured specifically as being on the right hand? The poet has telescoped two metaphors into a single statement. The second reference is to a warrior who accompanied his lord into battle and customarily stood on his right hand, holding his master's protective weapons in readiness.

Psalm 16:5-6 poses a similar case in point:

> The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup;
> thou holdest my lot.
> The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;
> Yea, I have a goodly heritage.

The impact of this extended metaphor describing God's blessing depends on the reader's getting the literal picture. That picture has to do with real estate, and it alludes to the allotment of land when the Israelites settled in Canaan. The individual allotments were made by lot (cf. Numbers 26:56 and 36:2). The "lines" are the measuring lines of a surveyor. The metaphor, then, compares God's favor to receiving a fertile, well situated piece of land, both for one's own use and as an inheritance to pass on to his posterity.

A survey of the standard commentaries on the Psalms reveals an alarming tendency to abdicate the task of first of all identifying the literal level of meaning in a metaphor. As exhibit A I cite the instance of Psalm 132:17, which states, "I will make a horn to sprout for David, / I have prepared a lamp for my anointed." Here is what some standard sources do with the horn metaphor:

> ...the power and the stability of the kingship--this is the meaning of the two images in v. 17--the king's victory over his enemies and the expansion and the flourishing of his rule, are a gift from God which the earthly ruler receives from the hand of the heavenly King.[7]

> The ...terms *horn* [and] *lamp*...scarcely need comment, with their evident implications of strength [and] clarity.[8]

> The Hebrew mode of speech that he 'will make a horn to sprout for David' means that God will make the house of David a powerful, victorious set of rules, for 'horn' often signifies might and power or a mighty and powerful ruler (cf., Daniel 7:7f, 24; 8:5).[9]
>
> *Horn* here symbolizes strong one, that is, king.[10]

The remarkable thing is that the commentators do not perform the first necessary step in understanding a metaphor, namely, identifying the literal meaning.

The horn metaphor appears also in Psalm 148:14 (indeed, it occurs seven times in the Psalms): "He has raised up a horn for his people." The commentators once again eschew their first obligation to identify exactly what the horn is:

> [God's] nearness and presence convey to the people of God both assurance of salvation and new vitality (this is the meaning of the image of the 'exalting of the horn'...).[11]
>
> Figurative for granting victory or bestowing prosperity. [12]
>
> ...among His people His glory is redemptive love, in raising up a *horn* for them, *i.e.* a strong deliverer.[13]
>
> Horn here symbolizes strong one, that is, king.[14]

This for us somewhat unique statement about the exalting of the horn connotes strength. On this use of the term see Deuteronomy 33:17, 1 Samuel 2:1, Psalm 132:17.[15] These comments add up to a troubling picture. The writers' whole energy is poured into telling us what the metaphor of the horn *means* or *symbolizes*, without ever identifying what kind of horn the poet is talking about. To understand and experience a metaphor requires first of all that we have the literal picture in our minds.

What kind of horn are the Psalms talking about? The possibilities are multiple: the horns of an animal like a ram or ox used in fighting; a horn used to carry liquid and used in anointing (cf. I Samuel 16:13); the horn-shaped protrusions of the altar in the tabernacle and temple. A case can be made for all of these, though the most likely identification is that of the

horns of an animal, as Psalm 92:10 suggests (“But thou hast exalted my horn like that of the wild ox”).

As the example of the horn shows, the literal level of a metaphor might itself be ambiguous or multiple, and the reader should have the courage to identify it as such. An example is Psalm 23:5:

> Thou preparest a table before me
> in the presence of my enemies;
> thou anointest my head with oil,
> my cup overflows.

There are several plausible interpretations of what the speaker is referring to, and they are not mutually exclusive. One accurate reading is that the verse describes what a shepherd does for his sheep. He finds strips of grass where the sheep can safely eat, protected from wild animals or poisonous plants. Back at the sheepfold, the shepherd anoints the sheep’s scratches with olive oil and let’s a fevered sheep drink from a large two-handled cup.[16] Secondly, the verse describes what any host in the Near East does for an honored guest, refreshing his or her dry skin with oil and serving a lavish meal. Or, thirdly, the verse describes the desert law of revenge, under which a fugitive from blood vengeance was safe from his pursuers for a period of two days and one night if he touched someone’s tent before being caught. During the period of immunity, the avengers ‘the “enemies” of the text) could do nothing but look on while the host extended hospitality to the fugitive.[17] In short, the literal meaning of a metaphor can occasionally possess all of the multiplicity of meaning that a symbol sometimes has.

It is, of course, possible to be overly zealous in finding metaphors in the Psalms, but I am inclined to think that metaphor is more prevalent in the Psalms than we think it is. consider the following bit of realistic detail in a Psalm of worship (84:3):

> Even the sparrow finds a home,
> and the swallow a nest for herself,
> where she may lay her young,
> at thy altars, O Lord of hosts.

The poet belabors the domestic aspect of the picture (“finds a home,” “a nest,” “where she may lay her young”) until a piece of realistic detail becomes transformed into a metaphor. The temple itself becomes a home in our imagination, and the human worshiper assumes the qualities of a family member.

Being bolder in our identification of metaphors can even clear up some obscurities. In Psalm 29, after the poet has described the progress of the thunder storm, he suddenly inserts, “And in his temple all cry, ‘Glory!’” (29:9). The usual gloss is that we are suddenly transported from the storm to either the heavenly temple where the angels ascribe glory to God or to the temple in Jerusalem where the Israelite worshiper ascribes glory to God. I would suggest a metaphoric reading: the earthly scene of the storm is itself a temple--a place where God’s presence is encountered as directly as when a pilgrim worshiped on Mt. Zion.

A similar opportunity to resolve a crux by metaphoric interpretation occurs in Psalm 139:18. After a unit (vss. 13-18) describing God’s active control over the speaker when he was a developing fetus, the poet concludes with what seems to be a *non sequitur*: “When I awake, I am still with thee.” The commentators assume that the speaker was so overwhelmed by his thoughts of God that he either literally or figuratively fell asleep, or that the utterance has eschatological overtones and is a prophetic glimpse of resurrection. But the context suggests a metaphoric interpretation: awakening is a metaphor for birth, and the poet asserts that God’s intimate providence over him when he was a fetus continues after he has been born.

To summarize, the first task of the reader of metaphor is to identify the literal meaning of the comparison. Before leaving the topic, we should note a paradox of metaphor. Although metaphor is based on correspondence or congruence, we first *identify* something as a metaphor by seeing it as a semantic clash, as something that *doesn’t* fit. We first recognize how ludicrous it is to think that God literally or physically makes

“a horn to sprout for David.” Having had our expectations jarred, we first let the incongruity--the statement as it stands--sink in.

The second task of the reader is to *interpret* the metaphor. To undertake such an interpretation is to accept the poet’s implied invitation to discovery. In keeping with the nature of metaphor, interpretation consists of discovering the nature of the similarity between the two halves of the comparison. More often than not, the connections are multiple. The reader must explore the logic of the metaphor, the aptness of the comparison.

“The second task of the reader is to *interpret* the metaphor.”

What, for example, is the logic of comparing “tongues” (meaning speech) to “sharp arrows” (57:4)? The correspondence between slander and arrows is multiple: both are inflicted from a position of secrecy; both therefore render the victim defenseless; both destroy or injure a person; both cause pain. There is even a physical similarity between the flinch caused by an arrow and that caused by an overheard verbal attack on oneself.

Or, to take another specimen case, what are the human applications of the poet’s picture in Psalm 23:2: “he makes me lie down in green pastures. / He leads me beside still waters”? Literally it is a picture of how the shepherd leads his sheep to an oasis at midday to rest after a morning of grazing. What are the transfers that we should make to the human level? In a poem about God’s providence, exactly what provision is here described? The answers are as many as the types of restoration that believers experience: physical and emotional restoration, forgiveness of sins, salvation, restored social relationships.

We should be aware that the meanings transferred from vehicle to referent are only partly intellectual or ideational. Some of the meanings are affective or intuitive, and some are extra-verbal. We all have certain feelings about green pastures and still waters that can never be verbalized. When the poet prays, “let them be blotted out of the book of

the living; / let them not be enrolled among the righteous” (69:28), he awakens within us fears that can never be adequately expressed in words--fears, let us say, of not having a bank deposit credited or of having our name omitted from the official list of passengers on an international flight.

Metaphor imposes immense demands on a reader. It first requires that we detect a semantic “error” or literal falsehood and then that we take corrective action. The corrective action is double: first we must take the time to let the literal situation sink in, and then we must make a transfer of meaning(s) to the topic or experience that the poem is about. Commentary on the Psalms by biblical scholars tends to obscure these acts of identification and interpretation. There is an unwarranted willingness and even a readiness to reduce metaphor to a single abstract meaning. As I read such commentary I get the impression that the text under discussion is a theological treatise rather than a poem. We hear far too little about pastures and shields and horns, and about the multiplicity of meanings implied in the text. Taking the responsibilities of metaphor seriously would revolutionize commentary on the Psalms. It might profitably, in my view, include some photographs to enhance a reader’s grasp of the literal level of the metaphors.

III

Why Poets use Metaphors

We need also to consider metaphor from the poet’s perspective. What are the advantages of metaphor that lead the poet to speak in metaphor so consistently? Why, in fact, does metaphor seem to have been the staple of poetry from the very beginning?

One advantage of metaphor is vividness and concreteness. Metaphor is one way to overcome the impotence of the abstract. The Psalms

frequently pair an abstract or direct statement with a metaphor, and in every instance the superior vividness of the metaphor is obvious:

> For there is no truth in their mouth;
> ...their throat is an open sepulchre. (5:9)
> Let ruin come upon them unawares!
> And let the net which they hid ensnare them. (35:8)
> They scoff and speak with malice;
> ...and their tongue struts through the earth. (73:8-9)

Metaphor achieves wholeness of expression. It appeals to more than the rational intellect. It elicits a reader’s *experience* of a given topic, not simply a grasp of an idea.

Metaphor is also a way of achieving freshness of expression, thereby overcoming the cliché effect of language. Metaphor has arresting strangeness. The problem of stereotyped language has been well expressed by the English poet Coleridge: “Truth...the most awful and mysterious...are too often considered as *so* true, that they lose all the life and efficiency of truth.”[18] A poet’s solution to this problem is, in the words of T. S. Eliot, to “dislocate language into meaning,”[19] and metaphor is a chief means of doing so. Through sheer familiarity, religious language is especially prone to become a set of clichés, and this is particularly true of a collection of poems like the Psalms, which in their early history were a Temple songbook and which have always been on the lips of people who regard the Bible as a sacred book. Perhaps this accounts partly for the command within the Psalms themselves to sing to the Lord a *new* song (96:1; 149:1).

The arresting strangeness of metaphor not only captures a reader’s initial attention; it also makes a statement memorable. Compare, for example, the metaphoric statement, “If I take the wings of the morning / and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea” (139:9), with the literal statement, “If I go from east to west.” The comment that “the Bible tells me how to live” slides out of the mind as quickly as it enters, but its

metaphoric counterpart, “Thy word is a lamp to my feet” (119:105), is aphoristic and unforgettable.

Metaphor has another built-in tendency that accords well with the Psalmists’ intention: it forces a reader to ponder or meditate on a statement. Metaphor resists immediate assimilation. It contains within it a retarding element, stemming the current of ideas, and is in this regard very similar to Hebrew parallelism. Both require the reader to pause on a thought before moving on.

Poets also use metaphor for the sake of precision. The common assumption that scientific or expository discourse is precise while metaphor is vague is most inaccurate. Metaphor is as precise as a mathematical equation. It uses one area of human experience to shed light on another area. The Psalmists hate the approximate. They are not content with the formula “when men rose up against us” (124:2) but make the terror precise with a metaphor: “then the flood would have swept us away, / the torrent would have gone over us” (124:4). The oppression that the strong in a society inflict on the weak becomes definite and precise when the poet compares it to the trapping of animals: “he seizes the poor when he draws him into his net” (10:9).

A final advantage that metaphor offers the poet is that it is a way of discovering as well as expressing reality or truth. In the actual process of composition, the poet tends to come upon metaphors by intuition rather than conscious reflection. But once a connection has been made between the two halves of a metaphor, the relationship tends to generate further meanings. Perhaps this partly explains the tendency of poets to string together clusters of metaphors when writing on a given topic. Having made one metaphoric connection, the poet discovers further dimensions of the truth at hand. Observe, for example, how metaphor begets metaphor in Psalm 91:

> He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High
> who abides in the shadow of the Almighty,

will say to the Lord, “My refuge and my fortress;
my God, in whom I trust.”
For he will deliver you from the snare of the fowler
and from the deadly pestilence;
he will cover you with his pinions,
and under his wings you will find refuge...

We can almost observe the poet’s mind at work here. The physical image of dwelling in a shelter is similar to the protection of shade and fortress, which are further examples of physical protection. The battlefield world evoked by the images of refuge and fortress easily links up with the trapping of birds, and the mention of birds and fowler leads naturally into the picture of a mother bird protecting her young.

In view of the advantages that metaphor affords a poet, we should accept without quibble the usual claims of poets that they could not have stated their content in any other way. This is not to say that the Psalmists could not have talked about God or guilt or worship in non-poetic form. But it is to say that without the resources of metaphor and similar poetic forms, their utterances would lack the vividness, the experiential richness, the arresting quality that makes a statement worthy of attention and memorable, and the precision that metaphor confers upon them.

Having said this much about the advantages of metaphor, I should also pause to acknowledge the liabilities of metaphor. The poet runs the risk that the reader will fail to identify the literal level of a metaphor. If a reader does not know that the horn that is raised is an animal’s horn, the impact of the metaphor evaporates. Most of the metaphors in the Psalms are so elemental or universal as to be easily recognized, but further limitations exist. A reader’s experience of the literal level of the metaphor may simply be impoverished, a danger that increases proportionately to the oldness of the poem. Our experiences of the agrarian world of sheep and crops, or the military world of spears and shields, or the hunter’s world of traps and nets, are so limited as to

Liabilities

prevent our experiencing many metaphors in the Psalms in any way approximating the experience of the poet and his original audience.

And even if a reader identifies the literal level of a metaphor, the poet is at the mercy of the reader’s interpretation. It is much more difficult for a writer to control the meanings of a metaphor than of plain statements. It is worth noting in this regard that it is much more typical of the Psalmists than it is of most poets to include direct, expository statements along with metaphoric statements in the same poem. Frequently the parallelism of Hebrew poetry leads a poet to pair direct and metaphoric statements of the same idea:

> The Lord is your keeper;
> the Lord is your shade
> on your right hand. (121:5)
> But for me it is good to be near God;
> I have made the Lord God my refuge. (73:28)
> For thou, O God, hast tested us;
> ...Thou didst bring us into the net. (66:10-11)

IV

Metaphors and Truth

There remains the question of the relationship between metaphor and truth or reality. This is perhaps the most crucial issue of all, for if metaphor does not express truth, anything else we might say about metaphor is likely to be rather frivolous.

Metaphor in the Psalms has an ontological status. The connection between vehicle and referent in a good metaphor is not illusory but real. Metaphor is rooted in reality. It is the product of the imagination, but it is not a figment of the imagination.

The metaphor that declares God to be “father of the fatherless” (68:5) is a good illustration of my claims. The bond between human fathers and the character of God is real. There are qualities (e.g., love, concern, provision, nurture, discipline) inherent in being a good father that are also

true of God's character and acts. The poet is not simply decorating an idea that could as well be stated without the father metaphor. Nor is his attribution of the name "father" to God arbitrary. His assertion is rooted in reality, and he accordingly uses one area of experience to illuminate something else.

The same thing is true of David's metaphoric description of God's rescue of him (40:2):

> He drew me up from the desolate pit,
> out of the miry bog,
> and set my feet upon a rock
> making my steps secure.

The poet here ties into a correspondence that exists in reality. There really is a similarity between physical rescue from a bog and the poet's deliverance from a personal crisis. Metaphoric truth is in the final analysis empirical, in the sense that the correspondence can be demonstrated. Metaphor is not literally true, but it asserts truth.

Once we see the ontological status of metaphor, it is obvious that the poet discovers rather than invents or creates metaphors. A poet could not fabricate the connection between vehicle and referent if he tried; the relationship either exists or does not exist in reality. Given a topic, the poet embarks on a quest to find the right expressive metaphors. From all that we can learn from poets about the actual process of composition, the discovery of metaphors is a very intuitive process.

…the poet discovers rather than invents or creates metaphors.

Although a poet does not create the connection between the two halves of a metaphor, this should not obscure the creative element involved in coming up with metaphors. Metaphor does create a new reality. The poet is active in bringing two phenomena together and the resulting fusion is something that did not exist before. When the Psalmist tells us that "my heart became hot within me" (39:3), or that God gives "drink from the river of his delights" (36:8), or that when God created the world "he put the deeps in storehouses" (33:7), he has

created a new way of seeing certain realities. The poet does not create the correspondences, but he does create the framework that allows us to see them. If metaphor is a lens through which we see truth or reality, we must credit the poet with having made the lens, realizing at the same time that he made it out of existing materials.

V

Metaphors and Biblical Poetry

Does religious experience have a special stake in Metaphors? Is there anything to say about metaphor in the Psalms that could not be said in connection with Shakespeare’s sonnets or Wordsworth’s nature poems?

It would be easy to make exaggerated claims. *All* poetry uses metaphor. Even something as utterly physical as nature poetry uses it. Religious poetry has no corner on the technique. Furthermore, metaphor is no more prominent in the Psalms than either simile or direct, concrete imagery. We can, however, theorize about why religious experience in the Psalms would find its natural expression in metaphor a large part of the time.

We begin with the fact that the Psalms being lyrics, express the emotional side of religious experience. They tend to be at the white heat of intensity, at the two poles of exultation and depression. Heightened feeling tends to find its natural expression in heightened speech, which is simply another name for poetry. Metaphor, in turn, is an important ingredient in poetry. One index to the link between intense feeling and metaphor is the fact that the biggest grouping of metaphors in the Psalms is poems in which the poet describes a threat or crisis. When David recalls the soldiers sent by Saul to besiege his house, he speaks metaphorically (59:6-7):

> Each evening they come back,
> howling like dogs
> and prowling about the city.
> There they are, bellowing with their mouths,
> and snarling with their lips.

The exile’s depression over his inability to worship in Jerusalem is experienced as waves that drown a victim: “all thy waves and thy billows / have gone over me” (42:7).

A second reason why metaphor appeals to a religious poet is that it is a prime weapon in combatting a built-in tendency of religious subject matter, namely, its tendency toward moral and spiritual abstraction. Thus in Psalm 73 religious doubt becomes pictured concretely as stumbling on a path (vs. 2), pride as a necklace that the wicked wear (vs. 6), violence as a garment (vs. 6), and innocence as the washing of one’s hands (vs. 13). Emotions, like moral qualities, also run the risk of evaporating in abstraction. The writer of religious lyrics therefore welcomes the ability of metaphor to link an emotion with something concrete. Thus for the poets of the Psalms joy becomes light (97:11), ecstasy becomes a heart that “overflows” (45:1), gladness becomes an anointing oil (45:7), and anger becomes a burning fire within the heart (39:3).

Another connection between metaphor and religious experience has to do with transcendence. Metaphor is inherently mysterious. It defies literal and physical reality by creating something that does not literally exist in the world. Metaphor is akin to transcendence, or is one type of transcendence. The Psalms suggest that this may make it congenial to religious experience. If God transcends physical reality, so do metaphors that picture a person’s mouth as a door (141:3), or the sound of a storm as a voice (93:3) or a person’s ear as something that was planted (94:9).

Another thing that may account for the prominence of metaphor in the Psalms is the way in which biblical religion pervades all of life. Religion in the Bible does not substitute another world for this one; spiritual reality is incarnate in this world. One important byproduct of using metaphors when talking about spiritual realities like providence or guilt or forgiveness or deliverance is that the literal level of the metaphors keeps rooting religious experience in everyday life. There is a “secular” side to the metaphors of the Psalms. By themselves they have no religious associations, and the

almost total absence of metaphors taken from the religious rituals of the temple is striking. Most of the metaphors come from nature, and the next biggest group comes from warfare and political intrigue. The metaphors of the Psalms let us know that religion is earthly as well as heavenly. They insure that religious experience is understood to occur in the world of sheep and home and light and spears.

There is, finally, an aspect of biblical religion that makes metaphor not simply possible but inevitable. Biblical religion postulates a transcendent or spiritual level of reality. It presupposes the existence of two worlds, one visible and the other invisible. Whatever we know about the supernatural realm is human, earthly knowledge.

Earlier centuries of Christian theology called this "accommodation." John Dryden had this theory in mind when he said that "we have notions of things above us, by describing them like other beings more within our knowledge."[20] Milton made extensive use of this principle when he wrote *Paradise Lost*, and in the course of the poem the angel Raphael describes the principle thus:

> What surmounts the reach
> Of human sense, I shall delineate so,
> By lik'ning spiritual to corporal forms,
> As may express them best.
> (Paradise Lost, V, 571-574).

Our century no longer speaks of the doctrine of accommodation, but as recent a poet as Robert Frost speaks of the same principle: "Greatest of all attempts to say one thing in terms of another is the…attempt to say matter in terms of spirit, or spirit in terms of matter, to make the final unity."[21] We are touching here upon an important feature of religious language. Evelyn Underhill has said that transcendental experience must "convey one thing in terms of another thing…if it is ever to reach our minds, which, after all, are tuned-in to the wave-lengths of the visible world."[22]

It is obvious that the accommodation of supernatural reality to human and earthly terms is a form of metaphor. That this often happens in the Psalms is evident when we observe that the most frequent subject of metaphor, next to the poet’s fears and depression, is God. Again and again the Psalmists describe the transcendent deity in earthly metaphors:

> “Blessed be the Lord,…
> My rock and my fortress,
> my stronghold and my deliverer,
> my shield and he in whom I take refuge. (144:1-2)
>
> Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
> thou who leadest Joseph like a flock. (80:1)
>
> Thou art my Father,
> my God, and the Rock of my salvation. (89:26)
>
> He will cover you with his pinions,
> and under his wings you will find refuge. (91:3)

Metaphor in the Psalms is a primary way of portraying a transcendent God in human and earthly terms.

The poets who wrote the Psalms would not agree with the modern tendency (the product of a secular age) to attach quasi-religious status to poetry and metaphor in themselves. But the relationship between metaphor and religion is important in virtually everything that they wrote. One of them even described the process of writing poetry in the form of a memorable metaphor: “my tongue is the pen of a ready writer” (45:10, King James Version). Throughout the Psalms, poets found metaphor to be the indispensable mode for expressing what was most real to them. To skeptics who doubt that metaphor can express truth, my answer is simple: read the Psalms. The person who believes in the truthfulness of the Bible should be the last person in the world to doubt that metaphor expresses truth for the Bible is saturated with metaphor from beginning to end.

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[1] All quotations from the Psalms have been taken from the Revised Standard Version, unless otherwise noted.

[2] *Poetics*, XXII, in *Criticism: The Major Statements*, ed. Charles Kaplan (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1975), p. 46.

[3] “Education by Poetry,” in *The Norton Reader*, ed. Arthur M. Eastman (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), p. 412.

[4] *The Arts*, May, 1923.

[5] “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979, p. 145.

[6] Ricoeur, p. 147.

[7] Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 782.

[8] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), p. 451.

[9] H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Columbus: Wartburg Press, 1959), p. 916.

[10] New International Version of the Bible (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), note on Psalm 132:17.

[11] Weiser, p. 838.

[12] Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms*, III (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 355.

[13] Kidner, p. 488.

[14] New International Version, note on Psalm 148:14.

[15] Leupold, p. 1000.

[16] For more on this interpretation, see William A. Knight, *The Song of our Syrian Guest* (Boston: The Tudor Press, 1907), p. 184; and James K. Wallace, “The Basque Sheepherder and the Shepherd Psalm,” *Reader’s Digest*, 77 (July, 1960), 20-22.

[17] The details of this interpretation appear in John Paterson, *The Praises of Israel* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), pp. 113-14.

[18] Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, Chapter IV, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Major Authors Edition, ed. M. H. Abrams *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), p. 1587.

[19] Quoted by Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947), p. 204.

[20] “The Author’s Apology for Heroic Poetry and Poetic Licence,” in *Of Dramatic Poesy and Other Critical Essays*, ed. George Watson (London: J. M. Dent, 1962), I, 204.

[21] Frost, p. 415.

[22] “The Philosophy of Contemplation,” in *Mixed Pasture* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1933), p. 16.