

THE DECEIT OF METAPHOR & THE REVELATION OF THE DIVINE NAME¹

Introduction

When I began teaching the required course on interpreting biblical poetry at Biblical Theological Seminary, I wanted to address the function and interpretation of “figures of speech”.² Students therefore read brief discussions of metaphor and other figures (Packard (1989); Ryken, Wilhoit, & Longman (1998); and Ryken (1982, 1993)), and we looked at some clearly figurative statements in the various poetic books.

Our discussions were based on traditional discussions and definitions of metaphor derived ultimately from Aristotle’s *Poetics*, such as:

... a figure of speech that implies comparison between two unlike entities ...
In poetry a metaphor may perform varied functions from the mere noting of a likeness to the evocation of a swarm of associations; ... (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1994, 8:61).

Any figure that asserts the equivalence of two or more disparate elements, as in mathematics when one states, for example, that $A = B$ (Packard 1989, 121).

At the same time, I was working toward a taxonomy of figures of speech (i.e., Is metaphor or simile more fundamental?),³ since I thought that this might help students understand the relationship between the various figures. Although some of the relationships are clear (e.g., synecdoche is a type of metonymy), some are not, such as the relationship between metaphor and simile. Although this project turned out to raise at least as many questions as it answered, it nonetheless was helpful in organizing my own understanding.

The materials that I was reading and on which my teaching was based, said that [biblical] metaphors needed to be interpreted by a four-step process typified by Ryken 1982 (the example is mine), viz.,

1. Recognize the presence of a metaphor because a statement cannot be understood as a literal statement (e.g., “God is my rock”).
2. Identify the original referent of the metaphor (e.g., what sort of “rock?”), which often requires the original language.
3. Identify the metaphor’s “base”—what enables the poet to make the comparison, and the reader to accept it (e.g., “rock” corresponds to the “security/safety” that David finds in his god).
4. Transfer the metaphor and apply its base to the present (David found safety from Saul in the rocky fastnesses of the Wilderness of Judah and the same sort of protection in Yahweh; in the same way, Christians find safety and protection in Jesus).

This is essentially the method taught or assumed in most textbooks and works on poetry (biblical or not) {examples needed from both hermeneutics & Perrine (e.g.)}. It “worked” on the literary level, and helped students deal appropriately with metaphors that they encountered in their reading of the biblical text, and so seemed adequate for my purposes in the class.

¹This paper was read at the 2004 meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society Eastern Region.

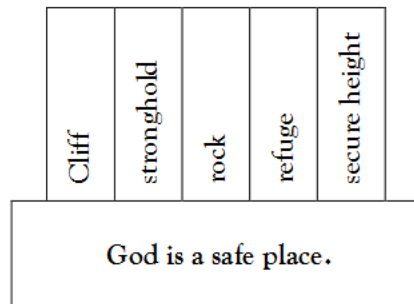
²The term “figures of speech” is in quotations to reflect the traditional view that such figures were merely “ornaments” added more or less *ad hoc* to “straightforward” or “plain” language, as Bullinger says: “... an unusual form is (*figura*) is never used except to *add* force to the truth conveyed, emphasis to the statement of it, and depth to the meaning of it” (1986, vi; emphasis original).

³This question is the subject of massive debate. I.e., is a metaphor a simile with an elided comparative particle, or is a simile a metaphor made explicitly comparative? This discussion dates from Aristotle’s *De Poetica*, who called metaphors “condensed similes” {}. See the discussion in Preminger & Brogan (1993, 761-62).

In analyzing a metaphor *via* this approach, I used the following diagram to illustrate how metaphors function. This particular diagram shows that “safety” (or “protection”) is the aspect of reality common to both Yahweh and a cliff. Identifying this “base” (step 3, above), enables us to understand how to interpret the metaphor and transfer its application to the present by looking around at what might be considered a source of safety in our culture. The horizontal line in the diagram represents the horizontal line in a fraction, since the premise of this approach to metaphor is that a metaphor identifies a ratio or proportion between its members, a correspondence that is common to both, and which allows the speaker to use the metaphor, and the hearer to understand it.

$$\frac{\text{“Yahweh = a cliff”}}{\text{safety/protection}}$$

One of the assignments that I developed for that course asked students to identify the metaphors in Ps 18.1-2. The discussion of their responses to this assignment became our point of entry into the discussion of metaphor. One year, while preparing for that discussion, I realized that these metaphors were not discreet (or mutually exclusive), but topically linked—that is, they could be grouped according to what I decided to call “foundational” metaphors. The metaphors of “rock”, “refuge”, “fortress”, and “stronghold”, for example, could be identified as individual images built on the foundational metaphor that “God is a [safe] place”, and this relationship could be diagrammed as:



Particular images (“realizations”)⁴ are listed vertically and left to right in the order in which they are named in the biblical text. The foundational metaphor extends beyond the images to show that this list of realizations does not exhaust the foundation’s potential. I had been teaching students how to interpret metaphors⁵ by identifying the individual “tenor” and “vehicle” of each example,⁶ but now began using the terms “foundation” and “[literary] realization”, which seemed more productive in terms of the students’ understanding (and my own).

Out of curiosity, I began to map all of the divine metaphors in the Psalter. This worked well for a while (e.g., “shepherd” (Ps 23.1); “light” (Ps 27.1)), but a number of statements, while not metaphors in the traditional (“mathematical”, Packard 1989, 121) sense of “A = B”, contained what I came to call “implicit” metaphors.

In, e.g., “He comes to judge the earth, ...” (Pss 96.13; 98.9), a human activity or rôle—judgeship—is ascribed to Yahweh, even though the poem does not directly assert that “Yahweh is a judge”. In the same way, the phrase “... with the strength of his saving right hand” (Ps 20.6) ascribes (1) strength and (2) victory to (3) a

⁴“Realization” is used in its etymological sense of “that which makes something real”.

⁵The plural is deliberate. Although I was beginning to think in terms of groups of metaphors, I still thought of them primarily in terms of individual “equations” or “statements” (i.e., literary realizations).

⁶The terms “tenor” and “vehicle”, first used by I. A. Richards (1936 *passim*), refer to the underlying “similarity” and literary or “surface” realization of the metaphor, respectively. The clause “God is a place” is the vehicle, and the concept of “safety” common to both parts of the metaphor is the tenor.

right hand which is Yahweh's. The psalm does not say "Yahweh is strong", "Yahweh wins victories", or "Yahweh has a body", but all three are implicit in the statement.

Neither of these examples is a metaphor in the usual or traditional literary sense of the term, which is restricted to statements such as "For *you are a refuge* for me, a strong tower from my enemy" (Ps 61.3).⁷ Psalm 96.13 and 20.6, in contrast, certainly *felt* like metaphors, but I was not sure what to do with them, so I called them "implicit" metaphors. There are hundreds of these in the Psalter, and thousands in the Bible as a whole.

By this time (c. 1998), I was fumbling with three "types" of metaphor, using them in my teaching, yet not knowing whether or not—or even how—to evaluate the validity of the overall paradigm. They were:

1. *foundational metaphors*, conceptual rubrics upon which
2. *literary or linguistic metaphors* (called "particular", "instantial", "individual", "unique" because each was a particular linguistic expression of a foundational metaphor) were built, and
3. *implicit metaphors*, "semi-literary/linguistic" or "universe of discourse" metaphors in which a [common or generic] comment (verb or other predicate) ascribes an activity to God which cannot be understood "literally".

I did not know how to determine whether or not this approach was valid (although I was teaching it!), until I stumbled across a review of six works on metaphor (Freeman 1991), including Lakoff & Turner (1989). A few pages into *More than Cool Reason*, I knew that this was what I had been searching for. Their definition of metaphor erected a theoretical framework around my own thinking, and my "foundational metaphors" corresponded to their "conceptual metaphors", and the other two "types" of metaphor which I had been struggling to explain were accounted for by their explanation of the term "metaphor":⁸

A metaphor, after all, is *not a linguistic expression*. It is a *mapping from one conceptual domain to another*, and as such it has a three-part structure: two endpoints (the source and target schemas) and a bridge between them (the detailed mapping) (Lakoff & Turner 1989, 203; emphasis added).

My foundational metaphor that "God is a place" thus became the conceptual metaphor GOD IS A SAFE PLACE,⁹ adding the word "safe" because each individual metaphor describes a place of safety in time of trouble. The literary metaphors show that the conceptual metaphor describes Yahweh not merely as any kind of place, but specifies a place to which one may flee to escape danger.

Furthermore, my general explanation of how we understand metaphors, or how we know which aspects of the two sides of the metaphor "fit" together (or match each other), also agreed with their explanatory concept of *mapping*.

Let me use an analogy (a metaphor!) to [try to] explain the concept of "mapping". The software that matches fingerprints found at a crime scene with those in a regional or national database does not need—or

⁷These two examples are sometimes called *hypocatastases*, a figure of speech in which a comment (predicate) from one "sphere or realm of existence" modifies a topic (subject) from another. The book of Proverbs is replete with these, as in, e.g., "A king sitting on the throne of judgment winnows all evil with his eyes" (Pr 20.8), in which a verb from the realm of agriculture ("winnow") describes the act of judging, and is ascribed to the action of the eyes, all of which presents a fantastic picture of a king using his eyes to throw the wicked into the air so that they might be blown away by the wind (but cf. Ps 1.4). For a simple presentation of hypocatastasis in the book of Proverbs, cf. *i.a.* Mouser (1983).

⁸Especially Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 ("That time of year thou mai'st in my behold"), and "Because I could not stop for Death" [sometimes called "The Chariot"], by Emily Dickinson.

⁹They use small capital letters for conceptual metaphors, and regular type for individual metaphors. For example, "All flesh is grass" (Is 40.6) is a metaphor based on the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS (or, in my terminology, a literary realization of that foundational metaphor).

even try—to match every mark in the two prints. A perfect (100%) match would be nearly impossible, given the effects of age and injury, and especially such variables as how hard the fingertip was pressed against the object in question, whether or not it was pressed straight down, twisted, or rolled, and how far, and in which direction it was moved, whether or not it was clear or smudged, how much ink was applied at the police station, the material in or on which the print was made, and so forth (these qualifications also apply to official fingerprints, even if they were made by the same officer, since the same variables apply to his or her performance). The software has thus been written so that it functions *positively*, ignoring what does not agree, and looking instead for the number of matches that the state considers a valid identification.¹⁰

Persons have an internal “database” that consists of knowledge gained by experience (whether that experience was personal or vicarious), from which we choose the correspondences appropriate to the metaphor, or against which we constantly measure the metaphor in order to find the “matches”. We choose what fits and ignore what is extraneous, focussing on the agreements that enable the metaphor to function.¹¹ This database functions both socially and personally, so that some metaphors function more widely in a given society than others (e.g., LIFE IS A JOURNEY, so that we say that we have “overcome obstacles”, “been waylaid”, “taken a wrong turn”, &c.). The more widely that a foundational metaphor functions—the more realizations that it produces—the less likely it is that users realize that they are using or hearing a metaphor.¹²

???? These internal databases are both idiosyncratic and cultural. ????

Our ability to “map” metaphors onto the reality that they illuminate means that no reader would accuse David of litholatry (the “worship of stones”), even though he frames a poem by calling Yahweh his “rock” (2 Sam 22.3, 47 || Ps 18.3, 47; cf. 144.1, &c.).¹³ Nor do we suspect that Hosea was tempted to create idols in the shape of a moth or lion because Yahweh described his opposition to Ephraim in terms of those animals (Ho 5.12, 14; 13.7-8), or conclude that Jesus somehow thought that he was a plant because he calls himself “the vine” (John 15.1), or that he was advocating cannibalism by saying that his followers must eat his flesh and drink his blood (John 6.48-58).¹⁴

This eventually led to a cohesive theoretical basis from which to approach biblical metaphor, a basis that had moreover some external encouragement, and which I looked forward to sharing with the students that fall.

Then one day, during a sermon (not on this subject, I regret to admit) I wrote on a scrap of paper, “Are all statements that identify God with a common noun or activity metaphorical?” and right under it added, “Yes, of course!”¹⁵ By “common”, I meant any nominal or verbal predicate used by the biblical authors to describe Yahweh as either (1) *performing an action* that is also predicated of human or other beings (e.g., speaking, hearing, smelling, shepherding, fighting, turning, sitting, saving/delivering, ruling, judging), or (2)

¹⁰This information came to me through the courtesy of a student who had studied forensics in college.

¹¹Lakoff and Turner develop an extremely sophisticated approach to metaphor that invokes such concepts as image metaphors and image-schema metaphors, and invokes the GREAT CHAIN OF BEING, to which our understanding appeals when mapping a metaphor (160-213). The distinction between image and image-schema metaphors (89-100) allows them to distinguish metonymy from metaphor (100-106), and to critique traditional views of metaphor.

¹²Extremely widespread conceptual metaphors, such as LIFE IS A JOURNEY are so productive and function at such a fundamental level that they are often called “dead” metaphors (see any traditional discussion of metaphor). That is, they support or enable many realizations, as illustrated by this conceptual metaphor’s ubiquity in the book of Proverbs. Their frequency does not mean that they are dead, but that they mold our way of thinking about life (in this case), so that we can use them to create new metaphors as human culture changes (e.g., “That job was a real speed bump in her life”, a metaphor which could not have been used before (1) the automobile gave rise to the need for (2) speed bumps).

¹³We should probably invoke relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson 1986), which asks how we “arrive at conclusions not obtained from the observation nor from [our] previous knowledge alone” (Gutt 1991, 9). Its explanation of the power and function of inference in communication is especially helpful in this regard. For a brief overview of relevance theory, see Gutt 1991.

¹⁴This saying was, of course, misunderstood by many in the crowd (John 6.52), just as the celebration of the Lord’s Supper would become the basis of the imperial Roman charge of cannibalism against the early Church.

¹⁵Since writing this article I have learned that Cornelius Van Til made this same assertion many years ago, but have not traced the citation.

characterized by a state or condition that is also used to describe human or other beings (e.g., holiness (Lv 11.44, 45), integrity (Ps 18.31), and various emotional states such as joy (Ps 104.31) or hate (Dt 16.22; Pr 6.16; Zc 8.17)) is a metaphorical statement.

For example, the term *mōšī*¹⁶ (trad., “saviour”) usually refers to Yahweh,¹⁶ but is also used by both a biblical narrator¹⁷ and by participants¹⁸ in the story to identify human agents of deliverance. *Mōšī* is thus a common *nominal* (substantive) predicate. In the same way, the verbal root *mlk* (“be[come]/ reign as king”) describes both human beings (Saul, Ish-bosheth, David, *et al.*)¹⁹ and Yahweh,²⁰ which means that *mlk* is a common *verbal* predicate.

This, however, raises another question. If *’el*, and *’elohim*²¹ were common nouns in BH (i.e., generic terms that could refer to any deity, rather than being restricted to Israel’s god), and if their Ugaritic, Akkadian, and Aramaic cognates²² function generically in their cultures, then statements such as “Yahweh is a god or the god of someone (whether “your”, “our”, “my”, “Israel’s”) must also have been metaphorical.

This conclusion helps us understand why the Bible takes such pains to distinguish Yahweh from other gods, so that the Moses, Joshua, the prophets, and even Israel’s enemies constantly refer to Yahweh as either “my”, “our”, “your”, or “their” god—he was [merely] one god among many. In his confrontations with Pharaoh, for example, Moses constantly reiterates the phrase “Yahweh *our* god”, i.e., “our god and not [one of] yours” (e.g., Ex 3.18; 5.3; 8.6, 22, 23). At first, Pharaoh responds by saying, “Who is Yahweh that I should listen to his voice [obey him] by sending Israel away? *I do not know Yahweh, ...*” (Ex 5.2; emphasis added), but then acknowledges that Yahweh is Israel’s god, referring to “Yahweh *your* god” a number of times (e.g., Ex 8.24; 10.8, 16, 17). Pharaoh at one point even refers simply to “Yahweh” (when asking Moses and Aaron to pray for relief from the frogs (Ex 8.4)).

This also explains why Yahweh often refers to himself as “*your* [Israel’s] god” (cf., also in the context of the Exodus, e.g., Ex 6.7), and why Moses calls Yahweh “*your* [Israel’s] god” after the waters were healed at Mara (Ex 15.26). In fact, the phrases “your god”, “our god”, and “Israel’s god” (for example) often stand in direct contrast—implicit or explicit—to “their god(s)”, “your god(s)”, and “[anyone else’s] god(s)”.²³ These and similar ways of making the same distinction are ubiquitous in Scripture.²⁴

Yahweh himself, Moses, and others also used the phrase “your god” in order to remind Israel that their fundamental religious [covenantal] allegiance was to Yahweh and to no other god (cf. Ex 20.2-3; Dt 5.6-7), and when Moses renewed the covenant in the plains of Moab (e.g., Dt 6.4)), or as the basis for Israel’s obedience to the covenantal stipulations (e.g., Lv 18.2, 4, 30; 19.2, 3, 4).

This series of questions and answers also seemed to explain the Bible’s apparently casual acceptance or assumption of the existence of other gods (cf. Ex 15.11; Ps 82.1; 86.8),²⁵ and its relatively rare assertion that Yahweh *alone* is God²⁶ (“G” is deliberately capitalized).²⁷

¹⁶E.g., 1 Sa 14.39; 2 Sa 22.3, 42 (|| Ps 18.42); Ps 7.11; 17.7; Is 43.3, 11; 45.15, 21; 49.26; 60.16.

¹⁷Jg 3.9, 15; 2 Kg 13.5; Is 19.20.

¹⁸When the elders of Jabeš asked for time to summon a “saviour” (1 Sa 11.3).

¹⁹1 Sam 11.15 (Saul); 2 Sam 2.8-10 (Ish-bosheth); 3.1-5 (David). *mlk* describes the rule of all of the kings of both Israel and Judah, and even the usurpation of Athaliah (2 Kgs 11.3).

²⁰Ps 93.1; 96.10; 97.1; 99.1; 146.10.

²¹Both Hebrew words are traditionally glossed by “[a] god”, “gods”, or, in reference to Yahweh, “God”.

²²The respective terms are *’el* (Ug.), *ilu* (Akk.), and *’lah* (Aram.).

²³The initial covenantal statement asserts that Israel’s god, Yahweh, had brought them out of Egypt (Ex 20.2), so that they should not serve any other god or gods (Ex 20.5).

²⁴The phrase “Yahweh your god” occurs c. 400 times in BH, about 240 of which occur in Deuteronomy (c. 60%). It is relatively rare in the prophetic writings (occurring ten times in Isaiah and thirteen times in Jeremiah). Its high rate of occurrence in Deuteronomy fits the context of Israel’s first covenant renewal ceremony, which fixes the relationship between Yahweh and the Israelites as Moses passes from the scene).

²⁵A few passages, of course, assert that false gods were not real gods—that they apparently had no existence beyond the idols themselves—mocking them and their makers for worshipping them (cf. Ps 135.15-17; Is 40.19-20; 41.7; Jr 10.3-5).

We might argue about the theological propriety of suggesting that YAHWEH IS A GOD is a conceptual metaphor—does this mean that Yahweh is not “really” or “actually” a god? My discussion, however, is primarily epistemological rather than ontological. Perhaps the biblical refrain that distinguishes Yahweh from other “gods” is necessary only because human beings have “invented” [false] gods that are therefore called “god(s)” only metaphorically and condescendingly (or mockingly). In that case, the Moabite phrase “Chemoš my god” (in the Meša’ Inscription) would have been considered an [unwitting] metaphor—an epistemological statement of faith—rather than a description of an ontological reality.²⁸ [Further on YAHWEH IS A GOD under “The Nature of Metaphor”, below.]

Finally, the conclusion that generic or common divine predicates are metaphorical implies that foundational [“conceptual”] divine metaphors are more accurately stated in the form YAHWEH IS ..., since this does not subsume Yahweh’s personal identity in these statements to the generic noun “god”.²⁹

Divine Metaphors

To reiterate what was stated above, any *common* or *generic* descriptor (noun, adjective, verb)—i.e., any word that can be used in a literal sense of a created being, whether human or non-human—is fundamentally metaphorical when applied to Yahweh. This is because Yahweh is entirely separate from his creation, and even those aspects of his person which he has chosen to share with his created beings (his so-called “communicable” attributes) are (1) untainted by any of the effects of the fall; and therefore (2) *absolutely incomprehensible* to those who live, move, and have their being in this “futile” world, all of whom are themselves subject to futility (Ro 8.20), and whose every aspect and activity is tainted by sin—including their thoughts about how their activities and thoughts are tainted by sin.

²⁶The biblical assertion of monotheism is made directly (Dt 32.39; Ps 83.19; Is 44.6; 45.5, 6, 18). It is further supported by a comparison of Is 42.8 with Is 43.11, by the rhetorical question in Is 44.24, and even by Jr 32.27. In 2 Sa 7.22, David’s assertion that “There is no one like you and no god apart from you”, however, is qualified by the rest of the sentence, in which he says, “... in all that we have heard with our ears”, i.e., as far as we know, which makes David’s claim only conditionally henotheistic. Naaman’s confession (“Now I know that there is no god in all the earth but in Israel”; 2 Kg 5.15) may be such an assertion, if the gloss “earth” for *’eret* is appropriate in this context. Even Isaiah 45.21b probably asserts Yahweh’s uniqueness as the only righteous god (“... and there is no god apart from me—a righteous and saving god—there is none; only me”).

²⁷This discussion raises the question of Israel’s progressive understanding of Yahweh, from apparent henotheism (cf., e.g., Ex 20.3, 23.24, 32, 33) to absolute monotheism (see the previous note). In other words, since the biblical authors do not hesitate to use the same generic noun(s) to refer to both Yahweh (“their” god) and other gods, it seems that they recognized the existence of those gods *in some sense*. Only in the eighth century (apparently) do biblical authors begin to claim that other “gods” were not divine beings (cf. 2 Kgs 19.18; paralleled by Is 37.19; cf. 2 Ch 32.19), and to imply that they had no ontological reality.

Burning captured idols (“their gods”) shows that *’elohim* could refer to the images themselves, not only to some underlying reality (1 Chr 14.12). In Is 37.20, however Hezekiah uses an incongruous motivation: “... that all the kingdoms of the earth [land?] may know that you alone are Yahweh”, or, perhaps “... that you Yahweh are [the] only [one]”. If it was intended to assert absolute monotheism, his statement is rather weak; much more explicit would have been something like “... that you Yahweh are the only god”.

²⁸Space prevent us from discussing the biblical references to “Chemoš the god of Moab” (1 Kg 11.33) and “Chemoš the detested thing [N.B.: not “detestable god”] of Moab” (1 Kg 11.7; 2 Kg 23.13).

²⁹To the biblical authors the identification of Yahweh as a [their] god transmogrified into the realization that *sensus strictu* Yahweh is the only [real] god, so that *’lohim* eventually functioned as a specific (i.e., not generic) term, and “God”, “god”, and “Yahweh” could all be used interchangeably (along with many other divine names, such as *’El ’Elyon* and *’El Shaddai*). This appears in such statements as Elijah’s challenge on Mount Carmel: “... if Yahweh is *the* god, go after him, ...” (1 Kg 18.21) and “... *the* god who answers with fire is *the* god” (1 Kg 18.24; the article is present in Hebrew, the emphasis is added). In the first part of his prayer for fire, however, he says to Yahweh, “Let it be known today that you are *a* god in Israel” (1 Kg 18.36), but continues “... that this people may know that you are Yahweh *the* god ...” (1 Kg 18.37). When the heavenly fire consumes the sacrifice, wood, altar, and water, the people cry out, “Yahweh is *the* god! Yahweh is *the* god!” (1 Kg 18.39 [I interpret the pronouns as copulas]).

Other aspects of this ontological distance include familiar theological concepts such as aseity (non-contingent existence), and those infinite perfections (e.g., his omniscience, omnipresence, omnipotence, holiness), which make his essence, and his existential experience, entirely outside our imagination.³⁰ Since everything that we experience and know is both “bent” by the fall and limited, we cannot understand that or how something can be without horizons, whether those horizons be temporal, spatial, or existential (e.g., creation *ex nihilo*, or aseity).

The Bible is therefore replete with divine metaphors by which the authors seek to close this gap, or at least to provide “mappings” that enable us to comprehend, however faintly, *something* of Yahweh’s person and activity. They do this by attributing to Yahweh common activities (“laughing”) or states (“holy”), or by identifying him with common experiences (“a strong tower”) which we can attempt to “map” onto the divine nature.

Where do these metaphors come from?

Some divine metaphors are self-assigned (i.e., used by Yahweh to describe himself), such as “your shield” (Gn 15.1), “the one who heals you” (Ex 15.26; cf. Ho 6.1), “king” (1 Sam 8.7), “deliverer/saviour” (Is 43.3; 49.26), “lion” (Ho 5.14; 13.7-8), “moth” (Ho 5.12), “good shepherd” (John 10.11, 14), and “vine” (John 15.1, 5).

Most, however, appear to be used initially by human biblical authors as they attempt to describe their experience of the divine. David begins the poem that became Psalm 18, for example, with an almost overwhelming cascade of metaphors, some “new” and some long familiar: “my strength, ... my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock in which I take refuge, my shield (cf. Gn 15.1), and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Ps 18.2-3 [ET 1-3]). Many others are used by biblical authors without [recorded] divine precedent, such as “stronghold” or “fortress” (Ps 9.9; 18.2; 31.2; 46.7, 11; 59.9, 16, 17; 71.3), “horn of salvation” (Ps 18.2), “light” (Ps 27.1; 84.12), and “strength” (Ps 28.7, 8; 31.4; 37.39; 46.1).

Chosen at random, as an overly-obvious example, the phrase “the strength of his saving right hand” (Ps 20.7b [ET 6]) applies three predicates in concert to Yahweh, namely, strength, victory (salvation), and a body (right hand):

Now I know that Yahweh saves his-anointed,
He-answers-him from the-heavens-of his-holiness with-the-strengths-of the-salvation-of his-right-hand.
(Ps 20.7 [ET 6])

Now I know that Yahweh saves his anointed,
He answers him from his holy heaven with the strength of his saving right hand.³¹

What does it mean to assert that Yahweh is *strong*? Nearly every human being has some degree of physical strength (even the laziest “desk jockey” can lift and carry a briefcase). Through exercise some have

³⁰The exclusively masculine pronouns in the discussion of the divine person is a deliberate choice, in order to avoid the confusion engendered by alternating forms or using such clumsy expressions as “s/he”, “him or her”, &c. The identification of gender with Yahweh can only be formal; it cannot be ontological. I.e., although the choice of the “masculine” form for nominal and verbal forms in BH is not arbitrary, it primarily reflects the linguistic need for grammatical concord, so that divine references fit within the morphosyntactic system of the language(s) in which they occur; they do not describe actual nature. Otherwise, BH would have separate affixes to indicate that the referent was divine rather than created (e.g., special “divine” affixes for adjectives, apposed nouns, participles, verbal subjects and objects, &c.). I believe that this is implied in the article “God” in the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*: “All gender-related [divine] language in the Bible is metaphorical, so there are no sexual connotations involved in references to parents or spouse” (Ryken, Wilhoit, Longman 1998, 333; although the statement requires the editorial insertion (above) in order to make the point). Cf. also Padgett 2003, and Hutchens 2003a and 2003b.

³¹I have glossed the root (ysʿ) with forms of “save” in order to (1) maintain some concordance in the verse and (2) use the term “saving” rather than “delivering” in line b.

developed their muscles far beyond their natural state, so that they are able to lift great amounts of weight.³² Professional athletes routinely bench-press hundreds of pounds, but not even the most over-developed human being would even contemplate trying to dead-lift or press a diesel locomotive weighing ?? tons. And to contemplate a human being trying to move something as large as a naval vessel without mechanical aids beggars the imagination, although these, the largest moving artifacts, are indiscernible from even a relatively low orbit in space. Human strength is extremely limited in scope—the difference between the energy used by a new-born infant and that required by Alekseyev’s feat is miniscule when compared to the amount of solar energy released every second (which is itself a miniscule—nearly unnoticeable—portion of the energy of a galaxy, which is itself infinitesimal within the entire universe).

Yet Yahweh created and maintains or governs the entire creation. To bench-press the sun, or the solar system, or the galaxy, or all created things requires no measurable effort on his part, since omnipotence implies an infinite supply of strength and power beyond whatever is needed or expended for any purpose. It is not as though Yahweh *can* move and control unfathomable weight, but that he *does*, and that doing so *requires no exertion on his part*, or at least not exertion in any sense that we can comprehend. There is as much more power available to him immediately “after” or even during creation as there was before he began the act of creating; infinity is not affected.

And that is the point. We understand the psalmist’s image of a saving strong right hand because each of us either has a right hand or has seen someone else’s right hand, because we know that right hands tend to be stronger than left (with apologies to the left-handed), because most people have strength sufficient for at least one or two tasks, and because many people have experienced at least some sort of personal or vicarious victory or accomplishment. The metaphor gives us permission—better, the metaphor encourages *and enables* us—to apply or extend³³ our experience in these spheres of life to Yahweh.

This is the effectual function of metaphor: *it enables us to use our experience(s) to begin to comprehend something that is outside our experience*. Metaphors offer us conceptual “windows” (below) by which we gain insight into—and the ability to conceptualize and discuss—what is otherwise absolutely ineffable or incomprehensible.

Much as a parent answers a very young child’s question with “That’s a birdie!” (rather than “... a downy woodpecker” or “... an exemplary specimen of *Dendrocopos pubescens*”) or “A diamond is a sparkly stone” (rather than “crystallized pure carbon that sparkles when cut with facets, polished, and cleaned”), we link that which we seek to understand to that which we already know, usually *via* conceptual hyponyms.³⁴ We can only attempt to relate to or understand another person based on our own experience.³⁵

Because of his infinite distance or “otherness” we can only attempt to relate to or understand Yahweh in terms of human nature and experience. Divine metaphors are therefore necessary to any divine attempt to make himself available to our understanding, as well as to any human attempt to pursue that knowledge and insight—i.e., to enter and grow in that relationship. *Divine* metaphors offer a link between our experience and that which we *cannot* experience.

Therefore when Yahweh says “I am your god” he is using a metaphor. This metaphor could function in [at least] two ways. If we were entirely ignorant of the rest of the biblical testimony, we might read this as a henotheistic claim that he is a god as are the gods of Egypt, Canaan, or Mesopotamia, but that he—and no

³²The gold medal in weightlifting (heavyweight division) at the 1988 Olympics was won by A. Kurlovich of the U.S.S.R., who lifted 462.5 kilograms, well over 1000 pounds (*Encyclopedia Britannica* 1994 8:936).

³³Of course, as this example illustrates, we can extend our understanding only to a point, but this is beyond the limits of this paper.

³⁴This understanding may even find affinity with Plato’s view of pedagogy, although not with his reasons (i.e., the pre-existence of the soul in the world of the Ideal). That is, the idea that we can learn only that which we already know (a poor paraphrase of ??), which implies that “learning” is really a kind of “remembering”, might be better stated as “We can learn only that which we can relate to what we already know”.

³⁵This experience can be actual, vicarious, or—more often—some combination of both.

other—is *Israel's* god.³⁶ This was certainly the viewpoint of, for example, Sennacherib's field commander—the Rab Shakeh—who delivered his master's challenge to Hezekiah's representatives on the walls of Jerusalem:

Thus says [Sennacherib]: "... [D]o not let Hezekiah make you trust in Yahweh by saying, 'Yahweh will be sure to deliver us, nor will this city be given into the hand of the king of Assyria.' " . . .

"But do not listen to Hezekiah when he misleads you, saying, 'Yahweh will deliver us.' Has any of the gods of the nations really deliver his land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim, Hena and Ivvah—for they delivered Samaria from my hand! [irony] Who is there among all the gods of the lands who delivered their land from my hand, that Yahweh should deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (2 Kgs 18.29a, 30, 32b-35).

Henotheism would, however, certainly be a non-biblical understanding of statements of divine identity, and this viewpoint is explicitly condemned in, e.g., the verses cited from Isaiah 45 (above).

A second, somewhat better, reading interprets these words as a monotheistic claim, but this may founder on the generic meaning of *'el/’elohim*. Although the term *ha’lohim*, "the God", occurs almost 350 times in the Old Testament, this is only about fifteen percent of the total occurrences of **lohim*. Even if we subtract the 800 occurrences of "G/god" with a pronominal suffix ("your god", &c.), this still amounts to only one-third of its biblical occurrences. If **lohim* functioned as a term of absolute or unique identity (i.e., if it only referred to Yahweh), then the article would be unnecessary, since there could be no other referent. On the other hand, if the articular form (*ha’lohim*) were the only way to express this identification, then it would be used for every reference to Yahweh as *the* [true and only] "god".³⁷

In fact, the real reason that the divine statement that "I am your god" is a metaphor is that Yahweh stands so far outside human experience, and therefore outside human comprehension, that it is a statement of epistemological identity *only*, completely without explanatory power or function.³⁸ In order for it to have ontologically explanatory power, we would need to have some experience of at least one god,³⁹ which would then function as our database for potential mapping the characteristics of the "god(s)" that we had experienced onto the person of Yahweh.

Abraham's descendendants, of course, had experience with gods of various sorts (beginning explicitly with Jacob's household (Gn 35.2)),⁴⁰ and certainly when they were in Egypt they would have been inundated with expressions of Egyptian polytheism.⁴¹ They would have known that a "god" was either a statue or some sort of reality behind the image,⁴² and that the gods competed with one another constantly for pre-eminence,

³⁶This also makes him, by extension, the Church's God.

³⁷This discussion sidesteps the historical development of biblical understanding, alluded to above. We may say, however, that the repeated use of "God" in, e.g., the "Elohistic Psalter" suggests that the original metaphor quickly came to be interpreted as a literal and absolute statement (at least by the orthodox).

³⁸See "The Nature of Metaphor" (below).

³⁹Of course, even to say that he stands outside our experience is a metaphor that misleads us (see "The Deceit of Metaphor", below), implying as it may that his and our existences are hermetically sealed. I confess (i.e., profess my faith in), but do not here address, the explicatory or revelatory rôle (both purpose and effect) of the Incarnation (cf., e.g., John 1.14, 18; 6.46; 14.9).

⁴⁰This is, at least, the first narratorial association of "gods" with the patriarchs, although, as Joshua says, Abraham had worshipped other gods before crossing the Euphrates (Js 24.2).

⁴¹Egyptian polytheism might better be called "political henotheism", since each city claimed that its titular deity was supreme.

⁴²For the view that the golden bull of Mt. Sinai was a pedestal for an [invisible] image, so that Aaron was not guilty of idolatry *per se*, but instead guilty of encouraging a misunderstanding of Yahweh's true nature by encouraging the people to think of him in terms of the gods that they would have known, see the commentaries.

and they would have viewed their rôle *vis à vis* those gods as either (1) bribing or tricking a god into helping them; or (2) placating the god's wrath lest they be destroyed.⁴³

How helpful would this information, this theological database, have been in attempting to understand this deity who called himself Yahweh, and demanded their allegiance based on the claim that he was "the god of their fathers"—the god whom their ancestors had worshipped? I submit that any such experience, as well as the use of any other metaphor, would have been profoundly misleading, and distorted rather than strengthened their understanding of Yahweh.

The Nature of Metaphor

The Power of Metaphor

Metaphor is the primary tool by which we experience, interpret, understand, and explain the world around us, especially those aspects of our existence which we cannot directly experience as events (or persons). An example will make this more clear.

A standard biblical and literary metaphor is LIFE IS A DAY.⁴⁴ We are born in the "morning of our lives", reach our full strength at noon, and, with the coming of darkness and night, grow old and die. This metaphor functions alongside others (e.g., PEOPLE ARE PLANTS) in biblical descriptions of our lives as grass that flourishes in the morning but withered and gone by evening, as the biblical poet says:

You-bring-them-to-an-end [in] sleep
They-are in-the-morning like-grass it-is-sharp.
In-the-morning it-blossoms and-it-is-sharp
By-the-evening it-withers and-it-dries-up (Ps 90.4-5).

In the same way LIFE IS A YEAR functions powerfully in our culture (although it is not a biblical metaphor) because we can identify the passing of a year by its cycle of seasons,⁴⁵ which again—like the parts of the day—can represent the "seasons" of human life.

A yet more basic metaphor underlies both LIFE IS A DAY and LIFE IS A YEAR, namely, that LIFE IS A CLEARLY DEFINED PERIOD OF TIME (which is much too prolix to be helpful; conceptual metaphors tend to be brief). I.e., months and seasons are rarely or never used as metaphors for the length of our lives, because they are too ill-defined. When, exactly, do we experience the beginning or end of spring? If our calendars did not mark the vernal equinox, the official start of "Spring", few of us would notice anything beyond "The days are getting longer" or "It really is getting warmer". Seasons are too amorphous to be useful metaphors.

The conceptual metaphors LIFE IS A DAY/YEAR exist in the first place, and function widely in our culture because we need such a metaphor because we cannot experience life as an entity. We know that we are alive, and that we once were not and someday shall be no longer (within this temporal order), but we cannot grasp the reality—the existent—that is our life. We can yearn for or groan over the past or daydream about the future (avoiding the present, with apologies to Pascal), but we cannot grasp the scope of our lives, only remember little pieces of our experience. Mapping the concept of a human life onto our experience of a day enables us to grasp—and gives us words with which to discuss—our stage of life by means of a familiar experience.

And this is the power of all metaphor. Every metaphor offers a glimmer of understanding about what we find otherwise ineffable, and affords us a language—a lexicon, including the semantic domains—by which to discuss something that we cannot really comprehend. In the same way the language of the various divine

⁴³ On ANE religion in general, see ??; on Egyptian religion in particular, see ??.

⁴⁴ For an extended discussion of this metaphor in [English] literature, see Lakoff & Turner (1989, 1-56).

⁴⁵ This is probably more true in the temperate climes than, say, on or near the equator, but this is a mere suspicion. Even there, depending on the location, there are "seasons" of [slightly] more or less rain, or of typhoons or calm.

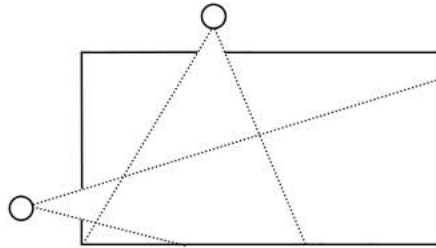
metaphors gives us a variety of pictures from which we can work toward a more holistic apprehension of the person, nature, and activity of Yahweh.

The Deceit of Metaphor

Although metaphors give us such powerful tools for understanding, they also misinform and mislead us. Every metaphor both reveals and conceals (Barth on Ex 33.18-23), because a metaphor focuses on one aspect of a thing, to the neglect of other aspects or truths.

In order to understand the deceit of metaphor, let us imagine a room which we cannot enter, although we can look in through any of several windows. Further, let each window be a lens that only allows us to focus upon one area of the room, so that we see that area clearly, but we cannot focus on or even see other parts of the room (i.e., we can only see through a window from a particular position, nor can we poke our heads through the opening).

When we look through a window we see *only* what the geometry of light makes visible. Everything else in the room is hidden from our sight by the walls of the room (or by the focus of the metaphor). If we could get into the room, of course, we could eventually examine everything in it, but the point of a metaphor is that we invoke it in order to grasp something that we cannot enter. This diagram illustrates what we see through these windows:



As this diagram shows, neither window enables us to see the whole room, although one may reveal more than another. We can see a fairly large portion of the room by coordinating the view through both windows, and the two views overlap, but not even the sum total of both views reveal the entire room. Furthermore, *neither window lets us see that another window exists*. It should also be obvious that more windows would enable us to see more of the room. Like the windows in our imaginary room, all metaphors reveal some things (i.e., we see things that we could not if we did not look through the window), but conceal others (i.e., we see only part of the room).

And this is the deceit of metaphor.

When we forget either (1) that we are looking through a window [metaphor]; (2) that the window is a picture, not the room itself; (3) that the view [our understanding] through the window is only partial, and therefore incomplete; or (4) that what is in the room *but not visible* through a given window may be just as—or even more—important than what is seen through that window, then we are in grave danger of abusing the metaphor.

And the danger is that the greater the explanatory power of a given metaphor, the more easily we come to identify that metaphor with what it purports to explain. The more of the room that any given window reveals, the greater our tendency to identify the window itself (or what we see through it—the analogy begins to break down) as the entire room. We warn against “pressing a metaphor” too far, but forget that even unpressed(!) metaphors can mislead.

For example, the metaphor that YAHWEH IS A REFUGE (e.g., Ps 14.6; 46.2; 61.4; 62.8, 9; 94.22), popularized as “A Mighty Fortress is our God” by Martin Luther, would have been a powerful image in the

Bronze and Iron Ages.⁴⁶ An easily accessible refuge would have been an important consideration in the price of Iron Age real estate. Thus the statement that “God is our refuge” (Ps 46.2) would have been extremely meaningful to ancient Israelites, as it was to Martin Luther, living in [barely] post-medieval northern Europe, where a fortress or castle crowned nearly every hill.

Although the fundamental metaphor YAHWEH IS A SAFE PLACE shows up a number of times in Scripture, and although we can see how helpful and encouraging it would have been through ages of repeated warfare, it nevertheless has at least one serious flaw. Yahweh is [also] a person, neither a place nor an inanimate entity, whether a natural geological formation (a “rock [cliff]”) or a manmade structure (“fortress”). Nor is he confined to a single location, but omnipresent (and thus available to anyone in any place who needs a refuge at any time). To the extent that readers of the Bible find YAHWEH IS A SAFE PLACE illuminating and therefore emphasize it as a means of understanding Yahweh, or as the “key” or “center” of their theology, other aspects of the divine being could fall into shadow or even be eliminated from (or never allowed to enter) his or her thought.

To use another example, some teach that the Christian’s primary responsibility is to grasp his or her status as an adopted child of God, that, i.e., understanding our “sonship” (the term is theirs) is the first step toward Christian maturity. This is a powerful metaphor, and speaks strongly to many in our culture. Adoption is not, however, the only biblical model of the work of God in Christ, nor is it necessarily the primary picture of either that work or the relationship that it establishes. Terms such as “redemption”, “reconciliation”, “propitiation”, “new creation”, “justification”, “sanctification”, “transfer”, “renewal”, “salvation”, &c. also portray that work, each with its own nuances—each window providing its own view of the room. And all of these metaphors—and more—are fully valid biblical portrayals of the divine work. To focus on one to the exclusion or slighting of others is to impoverish our understanding, and to that degree rob the work of God of some of its significance.

Another divine metaphor is YAHWEH IS THE PERSON IN CHARGE, whether a king, judge, leader, ruler, or shepherd. What did this mean in ancient Israel? Did Yahweh depend upon an army for his power, upon taxes to support his lifestyle, upon governors to rule his land, upon prophets for divine counsel and priests for instruction in the covenant? Was his rule somehow dependent upon the will of [at least some of] the governed (cf. 2 Kg 23.30; 2 Ch 33.25; 36.1). Did his rule follow the “custom [*mišpat*] of the king” (1 Sam 8.9-18)? As a judge, did he depend on the trustworthiness of witnesses or the adequacy of the evidence? To ask these questions is to answer them. And yet no one denies that the metaphor of divine kingship is an accurate picture. As George Mendenhall says,

Yahweh was the one who exclusively exercised the classic functions of the king, as described in the prologue to the Code of Hammurabi. . . . The administration of law internally, the waging of war, and the economic well-being of the divine population are here . . .” (Mendenhall 1973, 29).

Indeed, the kingship metaphor functions so powerfully in both Scripture and our understanding, that we might be forgiven for concluding that divine kingship is somehow the literal statement from which all other statements are metaphorically derived! The expository power of any individual metaphor is directly proportional to its potential for deception.

Yahweh is not, however, only a king. He is a rescuer who delivers the lowliest of people from their distress (e.g., Ps 113.7-9), and a watchman who guards his people unweariedly (Ps 121.3-4). He is a refuge, a stronghold, a fortress, a horn, and a deliverer (Ps 18.3-4). But his being is not limited to any one of these, however important a particular metaphor may be in the life of an individual or culture. To return to the

⁴⁶This is suggested by the strong tendency to locate settlements where they could be defended, and where there was a dependable supply of water that could supply the defenders in a siege. This is, incidentally, the reason for *tehs*—the humped hills that conceal layers of settlement beneath their soil. A place that made a good settlement site in one century was just as good in the next.

metaphor of the room, every window affords an accurate view of the room, but it can only be a partial view, so that we must look through *as many windows as possible* in order fully to understand the room.

Absolutizing a divine metaphor—reading it as somehow literal—and making it central to our theological understanding, and thereby relegating other biblical metaphors to secondary (or even tertiary) rôles, means that we have chosen to ignore the other windows and to insist that our understanding of the room—the view through the window of our seeing—is the only correct view.

We must therefore be careful neither to neglect nor to privilege any individual divine metaphor, but rather seek to extend our understanding of Yahweh across the breadth of the biblical portrayals of his being and work.⁴⁷ To reiterate, to the extent that we emphasize any single divine metaphor, or organize our understanding of Yahweh around it, thus making it “key” or “central” in our theology, other aspects of the divine being will fall into shadow or even be eliminated from our theological consideration, and thus *fail* to make their biblically mandated contribution to that theology.

Exodus 3.14

This brings us to the question of the divine name, and specifically to the famously debated statement in Exodus 3.14. Rather than discuss the etymology of the Tetragrammaton or the syntax of this verse, let us see whether or not (and how) an understanding of the pitfalls of metaphor can help us interpret the communicative intent of the statement in this verse. But first a brief word about narrative.

The Nature of Narrative

Narratives entail multiple communicative layers. One level is that of the actions and words of the *characters* in the story, whether they function as participants or props.⁴⁸ They attempt to communicate with each other, by both speaking and listening; i.e., by initiating and response. They assume that the other characters in the story are likewise attempting to communicate, and that their speeches are both (in their own view at least) both coherent and cohesive.

The second level is that of the *author*, who supplies the cohesive links for the *reader* (the third level) by such morphosyntactical means as the person, gender, number, conjugation, and stem of verbs, by his choice of how he will identify each character (and at which point in the story each character is identified in which way(s)), by his lexical choices (e.g., “They said”, “He answered”, “He called”, “He lifted up his voice and called and said”). The author also controls the information given the reader, by choosing both what to include and what to leave unstated. The third level is that of the *reader*, who—depending on the authorially supplied cohesion—reads [interprets] with the assumption that the story coheres with “the way things were”.

It would be more accurate, however, to say that these are multiple *interpretive* layers, rather than layers of *information*, since every authorial choice adds information that shapes the reader’s perception and understanding of the story.

In reading the Bible, for example, speech events are rarely characterized beyond the level of the bald assertion that a character “said” or “spoke” (e.g., _____, _____). That is, the biblical authors rarely included the adverbial information that is so necessary to modern fiction: “... he said, narrowing his eyes suspiciously” or “... he screamed in a shrill falsetto (quite unlike his usual baritone)”. But we cannot read the words “He said, ‘I am the god of your father’”, without supplying some sort of inflection, since this is part of all human vocal communication. Readers “hear” the voices of biblical (and fictional) characters, and tend to assume that their

⁴⁷It could be fascinating to read a collection of essays exploring “Biblical Models of Salvation”. On another note, in the field of biblical counseling, many, if not most [self-identified] “biblical” counselors (in the mold of, e.g., Jay Adams) assume that counselees’ basic problem is that they don’t understand that God is (1) Father and (2) Lord (and not necessarily in that order). This paper suggests that we should ask if these are the only—or even the most important—biblical metaphors for this particular divine-human relationship (my answer to this question should be obvious by this point).

⁴⁸For an early discussion of this distinction, see Joseph Grimes, “Kinds of Information in Discourse” *Kivung* 1971.

hearing is correct.⁴⁹ And we expect certain characters to have certain characteristics. When Bill Cosby does his famous “Noah” routine he makes the voice of God far deeper and more resonant than his usual speaking voice, and raises the pitch of Noah’s voice slightly above his own (thus heightening the contrast, and making the story even more humorous).

In biblical narratives, in fact, we rarely encounter *any* information apart from the characters’ identity, the content of their speech, and an occasional prop or two, such as the drawn sword in the hand of the man who met Joshua (Js 5.13), the implicit prop of a tent which Abram left in order to look at the stars (Gn 15.5: “He took him *outside* and said, ...”), or the staff in Moses’ hand (Ex 4.2-4). This is one aspect of the reticence of the biblical narrators, for whom *who* said *what* and *what happened* were the point of the narrative. Thus we ought to be surprised, for example, to be told that David was “ruddy” (1 Sa 16.12) or that Joseph was “extremely handsome” (Gn 39.6), or that Eli was “heavy” [an highly uncharacteristic euphemism] (1 Sa 4.18). We are not so much surprised at the *content* of the information—since it is precisely the type of “color” which we expect in works written in our own culture—but at its *presence* in the biblical narrative.

This reticence means that most readers of biblical stories supply such qualities as, e.g., tone of voice, diction, rate of delivery, volume, timbre. This is not wrong—indeed, it cannot be avoided. Even reading in a flat monotone supplies an inflection, and therefore an interpretation. But we need to be aware that we are supplying something that the text does not specify, something about which the author was not concerned even to give us hints.

Exodus 3

Yahweh and Moses are the only participants in the story of their first encounter;⁵⁰ the only props in the story are sheep (3.1), the bush (3.2-4), and Moses’ staff (4.2-5, 17) and hand (4.6-7). The two characters communicate by actions and words. First, Yahweh initiates the conversation and Moses responds (3.2-12), then Moses takes the lead and Yahweh responds to his concerns and objections (3.13-4.17).

In interpreting Ex 3.14, therefore, the author wants us to assume (1) that Yahweh and Moses were trying to communicate with each other; (2) that they succeeded (i.e., this is not the record of a failed communicative attempt, no matter how oblique, or even opaque some of their conversation seems to us); and (3) that the quotations are not mere concatenated statements, or questions and non-answers, but that the speakers both believed that their statements [cor]responded to one or more of the preceding statements.

We are further meant to assume that (4) the author faithfully represents their conversation; and that (5) the author’s lexical and morphosyntactic choices accurately interpret their conversation.⁵¹

In addition to these rather obvious assumptions, we must remember not only that the entire communicative event described in Ex 3-4 results from Yahweh’s determination to communicate to Moses (and the Israelites in bondage in Egypt), but also that both speakers are bound by Moses’ socio-cultural environment, including the constraints of communication, language, and understanding. In other words, Yahweh can communicate with Moses only *from within* Moses’ set of conceptual metaphors by which he interprets and understands his world.

⁴⁹This creates an expectation that contributes to viewer dissatisfaction with movies based on a book that they have read.

⁵⁰Biblical narrative normally restricts participation to two characters at a time. Three-way conversations (or more) are unknown. Even when a group is present, either the group functions as a whole (a collective “participant”), or one member of the group functions as their spokesman. In, e.g., the first encounter between Joseph and his brothers (Gn 42.7-23), they are presented as an undifferentiated group until one of them (Reuben) addresses the others in the group (v. 22). In their second encounter, Benjamin is singled out at several points (e.g., Gn 43.16, 29, 34), but only because Benjamin’s presence is the catalyst for the succeeding events. In the climactic encounter, Judah steps forward and speaks *as an individual* (thus signifying both his rôle as leader, and his complete change of heart), and so is identified by name as the speaker (Gn 44.16-34 [one of the longest speeches in Genesis!]).

⁵¹This, of course, assumes an honest communicative desire and intent and expression on the part of each link in the chain, from original participant to author to reader (who also wants and expects to be communicated *with* or *to*).

Furthermore, as Robert Longacre points out, there are no unmotivated choices in communication. Having decided *to* communicate, and having decided *what* to communicate, Yahweh's language is bound by (1) his own communicative intent; (2) Moses' universe of discourse; and (3) Moses' responses to Yahweh's utterances.

We cannot, therefore, interpret or understand Ex 3.14 merely by asking, "What do the words mean?" or "What verbal root or stem are these forms?" or "Where else does this sort of construction appear?" or "What are possible permutations of this statement?", although none of these questions are illegitimate, and all, must, indeed, be answered in order to gain a satisfactory understanding of 'ehye 'šer 'ehye. We must instead begin by asking "What was Yahweh trying to communicate, given Moses' linguistic, social, theological, historical, and other constraints?" Furthermore, the statement recorded in this verse is part of Yahweh's answer to a question (3.13), and must be interpreted as an answer to that question, so that we must ask "What was Moses asking?" and "How does this statement answer his question?"

If we (to be redundant) assume that both speakers are honestly trying to communicate, then Moses' question is not rhetorical, but a request for information that he thinks he may need: "They will say to me, 'What is his name?' What shall I say to them?" (3.13). In the story thus far, that is, *within the context of their conversation*, only the narrator has used the divine name. Yahweh has called himself "the god of your father [singular]", explained by the apposed phrase "the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (3.6). Moses has only used the term "the god" (an articular generic noun), by which the narrator shows us Moses' point of view—he is encountering *a* divine being (3.6, 11, 13). [Table B lists all divine references in Ex 3.]

Moses has accepted the name "the god of your fathers [sic]", used by Yahweh, since he uses it himself in 3.13b, but suspects that this term will not satisfy the Israelite leaders (even with the apposition of 3.6b). They will instead want a specific *name*, which is the goal of Moses' request.⁵²

This is the question which Yahweh begins to answer *via* the enigmatic statement of 3.14.

At this point the deceit inherent within every metaphor—its potential to be mis-interpreted, mis-applied, or mis-understood—explains Yahweh's enigmatic statement to Moses (Ex 3.14).

If every statement about Yahweh's identity is a metaphor (and therefore prone to misinterpretation, then *how could* Yahweh—himself immeasurably removed from human contemplation or understanding—make himself known to a culturally, conceptually, and linguistically bound Moses?

Any statement using a generic predicate—that is, any metaphor—that he might have used, whether "shield" (Gn 15.1), "healer" (Ex 15.26), "shepherd" (Ps 23.1; 28.9; Is 40.11), "king" (Ps 47.9; 93.1; 96.10; 97.1; 99.1; 146.10), "judge" (Pss 2.10; 7.9, 12; 9.5, 9, 20), "host" (Is 55.1-2), "rock" (Ps 18.2, 31, 46; 28.1; 31.2,3; 42.9; 62.2, 6, 7; 71.3), "fortress" (Ps 18.2; 71.3), "sun" (Ps 84.12), &c. would have had overtones that, in the Israelites' Egyptian context, could have been misleading (at best).

Even the statement, "Tell them that I am their god ...", baldly inserted into their highly polytheistic and idolatrous Egyptian context, could have been gravely misconstrued, and encouraged the sort of misunderstanding that led to the crafting of the gold calf at Sinai (Ex 32).

What could Yahweh have said? We cannot know *all* the choices open to him, but we can know some of the possibilities. What, for example, would the statement "I am Yahweh, your shepherd" imply? Since the metaphor of shepherd was an ANE royal metaphor (rather than a primarily pastoral one), and since "The Egyptian creator is commonly described as a "Good Shepherd" (Halla & Younger 1997, 37), such a statement—immediately comprehensible and comforting to modern Christians (or even to Israelites under the monarchy)—would have been profoundly misleading.

A claim to be a "god" or "king" would also have been prone to misinterpretation, since any experience that Moses and the Israelites had of a king, judge, or ruler would have been in terms of their oppression under Pharaoh, who was himself called *neter nefer*, "the perfect god" or *neter aa*, "the great god", and who had been conceived by intercourse between a god and his human mother (Montet 1964, 32-34)). And surely Moses, raised in the court of Egypt for thirty or thirty-five years, would have known exactly what a "god" was. Every

⁵²This may imply that there was more than one god in the inherited Israelite pantheon—i.e., perhaps they would really be asking, "Which of our father's gods ...?"

major city had at least one temple dedicated to the titular deity of that city, and there was constant competition between the various temples for prestige and power. An answer such as “I am a god”—or even “I am the real god”—could have misled Moses and his people.

The apparent enigma of Yahweh’s answer thus lies at least partially in what he is *not* saying or doing. His answer to Moses’ question is not the Pentateuchal equivalent of “I am and there is no other god” (cf. Is 45.21), nor, in light of our assumption of conversational and authorial integrity (above), should we assume that his statement is a “near refusal to dignify Moses’ question with an answer” (*pace* most commentators, e.g., Enns 2000, 103).

Nor is it a refusal to answer Moses’ question, since Yahweh answers it in the next sentence with a three-fold statement of identity: “Yahweh, the god of your fathers, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... This is my name for ever, and this is how I am to be remembered through all generations” (3.15), which he immediately reiterates by saying, “Go and gather the elders of Israel and say to them, ‘Yahweh, the god of your fathers, the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has appeared to me ...’” (3.16).

These statements suggest that Yahweh’s first statement is *not* a direct response to Moses’ question—the direct response is in the following verses—but functions instead as a qualifying preface to that answer, in essence a warning that there is none to whom and nothing to which he can in any sense be compared. Or, for the purposes of this paper, *no metaphor* will illuminate the Israelites’ understanding without also misleading them. As Nahum Sarna says,

... the Divine Personality can be known only to the extent that God chooses to reveal His Self, and it can be truly characterized only in terms of itself, and *not by analogy with something else* (1986, 52; emphasis added).

Sarna echoes Calvin, who said that Yahweh does not “predicate of himself anything *common, or shared by others*” (n.d., I:73; emphasis added), or, as Keil says, this statement “... *precluded any comparison* between the God of the Israelites and the deities of the Egyptians and other nations, ...” (Keil & Delitzsch 1949, I:442; emphasis added).

The statement *’ehye ’asher ’ehye* in other words does *not* contain the divine name, either baldly or in some sort of cipher,⁵³ but reflects instead Yahweh’s desire to protect the Israelites’ understanding of their God by avoiding any comparison that might mislead their imaginations, or that they might extend or apply in illegitimate ways, *before* revealing his name (3.15). And the timing of this revelation—at the very beginning of their existential relationship with Yahweh—meant that it was especially important that they not receive potentially misleading information.⁵⁴

In discussing the nature and determination of meaning, Kenneth Pike notes that the first definition that we encounter tends to function as the “real” or “basic” or “core” meaning against which we weigh all others.⁵⁵

“When a morpheme has several meanings, one of these may appear to be clearly CENTRAL, or basic, with the others marginal to it or derived from it. . . . How, then, do we determine the central meaning of a morpheme? There are several essential components to an answer of this question. The first component in the answer is that, other things being equal, the central meaning will be one which was learned early in life. *Meanings early learned* are

⁵³ *Pacem* every commentary (apart from the three noted above) that I have been able to find, all of which assume that 3.14 *answers* the question in 3.13, and so focus on interpreting this clause as though it *were* that answer. These works will eventually be listed in the bibliography.

⁵⁴ Cf. the note above on the function of “Yahweh your god” in Deuteronomy (the first covenantal renewal ceremony).

⁵⁵ A frustration common to teachers of first-year students of a language is the tendency of students to identify the “real” or “basic” or “central” meaning of a word with the first gloss listed in the textbook, so that the “real” significance of, e.g., is “father”, and all other functions (“grandfather”, “ancestor”, &c.) are derivative (addressed by Pike 1967).

likely to have a certain *primacy* about them which is lacking in later meanings.” (Pike 1967, 600; emphasis original; italics added).

In light of this fact of human behaviour, “getting it right” from the beginning meant—in Moses’ report to the Israelite elders and leaders—not getting it wrong. The apparently enigmatic or even evasive divine answer is thus instead an instance of divine grace, Yahweh’s attempt to protect their hearts from *misunderstanding* who he was. He said, “I am what I am”, from which Moses was to infer, “... and there is nothing in heaven or on earth to which I can be compared”.

And finally, to return to the room with windows (above), we live, move, and have our being within a tiny room. By means of the Scripture that room has been provided with a number of windows through which we can look out into the Infinite. Neither any window nor all of the windows together can give us more than an extremely incomplete glimpse of Yahweh’s person. How much more do we need to beware absolutizing any particular insight or metaphor, however biblically or theologically apt.

Some Conclusions⁵⁶

1. Metaphor is both necessary and inevitable in our attempt to understand anything. We learn and we understand nothing without appealing to a metaphor, by which we map the known onto the new or unknown. This invokes the theory of Lakoff, Johnson, Turner, *et al.*, as well as the relevance theory of Sperber and Wilson.
2. The ontological and existential distance(s) between Yahweh and the created order, as well as the vast gulf between the divine perfections and the creation which groans in bondage (and which includes humanity), mandates the use of metaphor in revelation.⁵⁷
3. Any particular metaphor (literary realization) can be over-extended (over-applied), or even absolutized, in a word, abused, because it can only be a partial representation of the thing that it is invoked to explain. This applies equally to common and divine metaphors.
4. Ex 3.14 records the divine refusal to mislead his people at the beginning of their relationship by invoking a metaphor to explain himself. It is not a refusal to answer Moses’ question (Ex 3.13), but a prelude to his answer. It should therefore be glossed as “I am what I am”, meaning “There is nothing with which I can be compared”. This is probably not the only purpose of this statement, but it accomplishes at least this much at its moment in redemptive history.
5. This paper does not even begin to hint at the great benefit of tracing foundational metaphors in the Bible. The primary benefit of applying the Lakoff-Johnson-Turner (*et al.*) model of metaphor to biblical studies is that it dethrones the individual literary (or explicit) metaphor in favour of their underlying foundational or conceptual metaphors, which in turn makes it possible to trace those conceptual metaphors in far greater depth and to see their breadth—their truly foundational function within the biblical view of existence.

⁵⁶The next step in this study would be to apply the same methodology of conversational analysis to the record of the incident in which Yahweh identified himself to Moses by name for the first time in the narrative (4.22), a name which Moses clearly shared with Aaron, with other Israelite leaders, and with Pharaoh himself (e.g., 5.1-3). One of our grave mistakes in reading conversations or narratives in Scripture is that we assume that what is recorded is all that was said or done, when in fact, we know that this was rarely the case. We must not make the same mistake here.

⁵⁷Perhaps this discussion of metaphor should cause us to question the helpfulness of the concept of anthropomorphism and anthropopathism in Scripture—the usual view being that they are mere accommodations to human limitations. We might be better served by considering them to be *true* statements—as all metaphors are true—which invite us to map our experience onto the divine reality (always mindful, of course, of the ontological and existential distances entailed in that comparison).

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⁵⁸Although I am culpable for the contents of this article, I am very thankful to my student assistant, Mr. Chris Drager, whose extensive help and encouragement have made this paper possible. His work on the interpretation of Ex 3.14 enables me to offer this interpretation as paralleled only by the comments of Sarna, Calvin, and Keil.

Appendix: Non-metaphorical Divine Predication

Are divine predicates *necessarily* metaphorical? Since—as we have defined them above—all “common” or “generic” nominal and verbal predicates are metaphors, does this mean that biblical language is necessarily or absolutely constrained to metaphorical divine description or ascription?

Any noun, adjective, or verb which (1) *only* describes Yahweh and (2) *never* describes human nature or activity or created things might be a non-metaphorical predicate, given the limits on our knowledge of extra-biblical Hebrew (see below on the lexicon of BH).

One such predicate is the verb (*br'*), usually glossed “create”. This gloss of *br'* merely transliterates the Vulgate’s *creatio* rather than attempting to interpret or explain the Hebrew term. That gloss in turn may reflect passages like Is 43.7, in which *br'* parallels verbs that are also used to describe human activity:

Everthing that is called by my name;
And [as] for my glory I *created* it, I *molded* it—surely I
made it (Is 43.7).

Since the object or result of the activities described by *yatsar* (“mold/shape/form”)⁵⁹ and ‘*a a*’ (“do/make/act”) is usually identified when the subject of the verb is human, we can suppose that *bara'*—by virtue of its parallelism with these two verbs in this verse—describes a divine activity that is somehow analogous to those human activities.

If, however, *br'* never paralleled any generic verbs (i.e., verbs that describe “human” activity), we would have no basis for understanding it. A word with a functional referent that is entirely outside our experience simply *cannot be understood*.⁶⁰ “Mapping”—the process of identifying the applicable corresponding (overlapping, aligned, &c.) aspects of the comparison—is impossible without some known point of reference (just as the first statement made when a map is often, “Oh, now I see *where we are!*” or “So *that’s* where that is!”).

When, in contrast to its active function, *bara'* is passive (*nifal*, 10x), its subjects are the universal or stellar creation, human and non-human beings, and previously unknown deeds (Table A). Of course, since human beings cannot bring stars, human beings (apart from the normal procreative processes), animals into existence, nor can we perform deeds that are unknown,⁶¹ these statements do not help us understand the

⁵⁹The verbal root *ytsr* is used of divine activity (e.g., Gn 2.7, 8, 19; 2 Kg 19.25; Pss 33.14; 74.17; 94.9; 95.5; 104.26); used of human activity, it is generally glossed “potter” (e.g., 2 Sa 17.28; Ps 2.9; Jr 18.2-4) or some other artificer (e.g., wood-carver), which is especially instructive in reading the account of Yahweh’s “molding” of the first man from dirt (Gn 2.7). This relationship is made explicit in Is 64.7:

Therefore, Yahweh, you are our father;
We are the clay, and you our potter;
And we are all the work of your hand.

In Is 44.2 both verbs describe Yahweh: “Thus says Yahweh, your *maker* and your *potter* ...” [The verbal forms are substantive participles functioning as predicate nominatives.]

⁶⁰This is not true merely of words or concepts. A friend who is an engineer tells of a man who visited a heavy machinery plant (which my friend describes as filled with machines bigger and louder than anything you can imagine). When the visitor was asked to help one of the workers find a hammer, he said, “I’m so disoriented right now, I wouldn’t know a hammer if I saw it.” My same friend said that when his nephew visited his chemical engineering plant, the boy’s drawing of the plant consisted of the exit sign—the only piece of the plant that made any sense to him.

⁶¹As we are reminded by Qohelet, there is “nothing [truly] new under the sun” (Qo 1.9).

activity described by *br'*, but they do reinforce our suspicion that it describes something that is beyond our ability, understanding, and even imagination.⁶²

Because the traditional gloss for the activity described by *br'* is “create”, and because we use the English word “create”, derived from Latin, to describe the activity of those whom we call “creative” (e.g., poets and composers), we may assume that we can identify some aspects of the activity described by *br'*, but this assumption reflects a misapprehension of the relationship between a lexeme in the original language and its [English] gloss,⁶³ and also fails to realize that since the term *bara'* never describes either a human activity, or an event within human experience, we *cannot* know precisely what it means. Only its parallel generic predicates—and the scope of its result (sun, moon, stars, life, ... all things)—afford us even a glimmer of its nature.

Are there other verbs of which YHWH is the exclusive subject? Perhaps. There are certainly verbal roots that occur a mere handful of times in BH with a divine subject and without any human subject,⁶⁴ but we must be cautious about identifying any of them as a uniquely divine activity (or state), since our knowledge of Ancient Israelite Hebrew is extremely limited, since Biblical Hebrew is a mere sample of its linguistic resources. The tiny vocabulary of BH (about 8000 “words”) is an insufficient fund of data from which to draw sweeping conclusions about how the Israelites may or may not have expressed themselves, since the available linguistic resources of AIH must have been far greater than those that we find in BH.⁶⁵

So, although we cannot make the assertion with absolute confidence, the presence of two non-metaphoric divine predicates allows to admit at least the possibility that more may have existed, whether or not we can identify them.

⁶²Did some instinctive realization of the “otherness” of the act of *bara'* give rise to the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*, “creation out of nothing”, which is an event outside the experience of, and therefore incomprehensible by, human thought.

⁶³See Putnam 2004 for a discussion of this relationship (ch. 2).

⁶⁴E.g., the verb *(tkn)*, “to test, measure”, occurs either with a divine subject (1 Sam 2.3; Jb 28.25; Ps 75.4; Pr 16.2; 21.2; 24.12), or in rhetorical questions (“Who can measure ...?”) that expect a negative answer (Is 40.12, 13; Ek 18.25, 29; 33.17, 20). [In the last reference (Ek 33.20) *tkn* is paralleled by *(shpt)* “judge”.]

⁶⁵The working lexicon of the average college graduate in the United States is estimated at 10-12,000 words with an additional “passive” lexicon of 7-10,000 items. The lexicon of the complete works of William Shakespeare is variously estimated at 28-33,000 words (several thousand of which were coined by him). Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible is a relatively small book, especially when compared to the works of many prolific authors, e.g., Shakespeare, Tolkien, Churchill, Solzhenitsyn, or David Weber.

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TABLE ONE: THINGS CREATED
Subjects of the *nifal* of /br'
(all references)

The Greater Creation	heaven & earth	Gn 2.4
	the heavens and what is in them	Ps 148.5
Human Beings	male & female	Gn 5.2
	a people [yet to be] ¹ created	ps 102.19b
	the Ammonites	Ek 21.35 [ET 30]
	the king of Tyre	Ek 28.13, 15
Non-human Beings	animals	Ps 104.30
New or Explicitly Unique Deeds	new things, hidden things that [Israel has]	Is 48.7
	not known	
	wonders which have not [yet] been created in all the land or in any of the nations	Ex 34.10

TABLE TWO: DIVINE REFERENCES IN EX 3.1-13

BHS	Gloss	Syntax	Voice/POV	Exod.
	<i>Yahweh's messenger/angel</i>	<i>subject</i> pred.: appeared	narrator	3.2
	<i>Yahweh</i>	<i>subject</i> pred.: saw	narrator	3.4a
	<i>Elohim (God)</i>	<i>subject</i> pred.: called	narrator	3.4b
	<i>I am your father's god</i>	pred. nom. subj.: I pred.: said	Yahweh	3.6a
	<i>Abraham's god, Isaac's god, and Jacob's god</i>	<i>apposition to</i> "your father's god" (pred. nom.)	Yahweh	3.6b
	[the] God	<i>object</i> pred.: feared to look at	narrator/Moses	3.6c
	<i>Yahweh</i>	<i>subject</i> pred.: said	narrator	3.7a
	[the] God	<i>object</i> subj.: Moses pred.: said	narrator/Moses	3.11a
non-lexical [verbal PGN]	<i>he</i>	<i>subject</i> pred.: said	narrator	3.12a
	[the] God	<i>object</i> subj.: you pred.: serve	Yahweh	3.12b
	[the] God	<i>object</i> subj.: Moses pred.: said	narrator/Moses	3.13a
	<i>your fathers' god</i>	<i>subject</i> pred.: sent	Moses	3.13b

	his [name]	possession	people	3.13c
	God	subject	narrator	3.14a
	<i>I am that I am</i>	pred.: said statement	Yahweh	3.14b
non-lexical [verbal PGN]	he	subject	narrator	3.14c
	<i>I am</i>	pred.: said subject	Yahweh	3.14d
	God	pred.: sent subject	narrator	3.15a
	Yahweh	pred.: said subject	Yahweh	3.15b
	<i>your fathers' god</i>	pred.: sent apposition (sbj.)	Yahweh	3.15c
	<i>Abraham's god, Isaac's god, and Jacob's god</i>	apposition to "your fathers' god" (sbj.)	Yahweh	3.15d
	<i>This is my name ...</i>		Yahweh	3.15e
	<i>... and this is my memorial</i>		Yahweh	3.15f
	Yahweh	subject	Yahweh	3.16a
	<i>your fathers' god</i>	pred.: sent apposition (sbj.)	Yahweh	3.16b
	<i>the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob</i>	apposition to "your fathers' god" (sbj.)	Yahweh	3.16c
	Yahweh	subject	Yahweh	3.18a
	<i>the Hebrews' god</i>	pred.: sent apposition (sbj.)	Yahweh	3.18b
	Yahweh	subject	Yahweh	3.18c
	<i>our god</i>	pred.: sent apposition (sbj.)	Yahweh	3.18d
	<i>and I</i>	subject	Yahweh	3.19
		pred.: knew		
[verbal PGN]	<i>I [will send]</i>	subject	Yahweh	3.20a
[verbal PGN]	<i>I [will attack]</i>	subject	Yahweh	3.20b
	<i>my [wonders]</i>	object	Yahweh	3.20c
		pred.: I will do		
[verbal PGN]	<i>I [will do]</i>	subject	Yahweh	3.20d
[verbal PGN]	<i>I [will give]</i>	subject	Yahweh	3.21