

## CHAPTER 2

### THE STUDY OF METAPHOR

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “metaphor” as “the figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable.”<sup>1</sup> This statement may appear straightforward enough to stand as the undisputed definition of this key word “metaphor,” but in reality it overlooks the existence of the intense discussion which has surrounded this topic in the last forty years. As recently as 1981, philosopher Mark Johnson could justly write,

We are in the midst of metaphormania. Only three decades ago the situation was just the opposite: poets created metaphors, everybody used them, and philosophers . . . ignored them. Today we seem possessed by metaphor.<sup>2</sup>

The standard definition given above quite accurately reflects the understanding that has prevailed from as early as Aristotle up to the first half of the twentieth century when it was challenged at its very foundation. At present, while the “mania” has subsided it has also diversified to the point that serious creative reflection concerning the nature and function of metaphor has

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<sup>1</sup> “Metaphor,” in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, vol. 9 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989) 676.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Johnson, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) ix.

ranged beyond the realms of philosophy and theoretical literary criticism, having entered the fields of linguistics, psychology, and education to name a few.<sup>3</sup> What is at issue is not merely the function of metaphorical language and concepts within these established disciplines, but the radical nature of what may be called a “metaphorical perspective” on reality as a whole. Once metaphor was recognized as more than a dispensable rhetorical device, thinkers began to spot its ubiquitous presence and influence not only in literature, but in everyday language as well. The language of discourse in the natural sciences is commonly characterized and even epitomized as “literal” yet it is not only fraught with metaphorical expressions, but uses metaphorical concepts to explain unobservable entities.<sup>4</sup> With metaphor existing at the root of both reason and imagination, it could be true that investigating its nature may be “one of the more fruitful ways of approaching fundamental logical, epistemological, and ontological issues central to any philosophical

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew Ortony, ed. *Metaphor and Thought*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). This work first appeared in 1979 and contains a helpful collection of significant essays which focus on the growing place of metaphor in these disciplines. Another valuable collection of essays which complements *Metaphor and Thought* deals with the psychology of figurative language and particularly the matter of cognition (Richard P. Honeck and Robert R. Hoffman, eds., *Cognition and Figurative Language* [Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980]). A third volume edited by Sheldon Sacks is the product of a symposium sponsored by the University of Chicago Extension in February, 1978 titled, “Metaphor: The Conceptual Leap.” See *On Metaphor* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the language of fluid dynamics helpfully explains various properties of electricity and its behavior, with the result that people commonly speak of an electrical “current” without any sense of sort crossing between the categories of water and electricity.

understanding of human experience.”<sup>5</sup> Lakoff and Turner shared this optimism and wrote,

Because metaphor is a primary tool for understanding our world and ourselves, entering into an engagement with powerful poetic metaphors is grappling in an important way with what it means to have a human life.<sup>6</sup>

My interest in metaphor originates from the study of biblical literature which uses a blend of realistic narrative and imagistic poetry as it addresses the deepest concerns of humanity. By its very nature, religious discourse raises unique and profound issues concerning meaning, understanding, and the power of language. Before venturing into those topics, it is appropriate to summarize and evaluate the view of metaphor that has dominated the philosophical and theological landscape for over two millennia. A clear understanding of this theoretical basis for understanding metaphor provides needed background for the discussion of more recent developments. This historical survey is the subject of the first section of this chapter.

The next section moves from a chronological treatment of thinking about metaphor to consider three matters which have become central to current analyses of metaphor. The chapter closes with a section offering a summary statement of definitions and presuppositions related to the discussion so far.

#### A. History of Research concerning Metaphor

Until this century, theoretical reflection on the nature and function of

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<sup>5</sup> Johnson, *Philosophical Perspectives*, ix.

<sup>6</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Turner, *More than Cool Reason: A Field Guide to Poetic Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) xii.

metaphor has generally followed a single line of thought based on the conviction that metaphor is essentially a *rhetorical* device. As a literary embellishment, metaphor adds polish and appeal to statements which assume their “pure” form in strictly “literal” language. Modern theorists, however, tend to relegate this ornamental function of metaphor to the periphery, insisting that at the heart, metaphor is a powerful *cognitive* device and expresses ideas that cannot be restated in plain language without a loss of meaning.

### 1. Metaphor as a Rhetorical Device

The practice of using metaphors predated any sustained theoretical consideration of what metaphors were or how they should be used. Writers of literature have often gone about their work either unaware of or unconcerned with the philosophical foundations of metaphor, freely using language to communicate thoughts both mundane and sublime. But among those who have directly analyzed metaphor there has been a clear trend to classify it as a figure of speech used to embellish thoughts and arguments which find their purest expression in literal discourse.

#### a) Greek Philosophy

While almost certainly not the first ever to reflect on the subject of metaphor, Aristotle’s treatment of the topic is not only the oldest extant but clearly the most influential. His seminal definition of metaphor appears in *Poetics* and receives further treatment in *Rhetoric*. Its situation at the crossroads of these two disciplines reveals its dual function which transcends the common distinction between prose and poetry. In his mind, metaphor

serves the interests of philosophy which requires the art of persuasion in order for its arguments to carry weight in the political world and it also has a role in the mimetic arts of tragic poetry which express human actions.<sup>7</sup> On its own, philosophy deals with proofs and has no need of rhetoric, but metaphor becomes useful to the philosopher in that it lends clarity, style, and elegance to one's speech. In theory, philosophers could speak with one another using speech that is devoid of metaphor. But outside of that circle, philosophers may use metaphors in the presentation of their arguments as they seek to convince their audience. In the service of either discipline however, rhetoric or poetics, the basic structure of metaphor remains the same.

Metaphor is the application [or transfer] of a word that belongs to another thing: either from genus to species, species to genus, species to species, or by analogy.<sup>8</sup>

The definition of metaphor given at the beginning of this chapter reflects three influential theories which have descended directly from Aristotle. First, metaphor operates at the level of the individual *word*. Second, this word is *transferred* to something else which assumes that the word has a proper use in literal discourse, but a *deviant* use in metaphor. Third, the two nominal elements of the metaphor are bound together by *similarity*.

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977) 3.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle *Poetics* 1457b7–9. μεταφορα; δε νεστιν ονοματο" αι; λοτριου επιφορα; η; απο; του' γενου" επι; ειδο" η; απο; του' ειδου" επι; το; γενο" η; απο; του' ειδου" επι; ειδο" η; κατα; το; αναλογον.

Aristotle's identification of the word as the basic semantic unit launched metaphor on a trajectory which eventually relegated it to a trope or figure of speech which is nothing more than a matter of style. In the words of Soskice, "Aristotle tends to speak of metaphor as a phenomenon of the individual word rather than of any wider locus of meaning such as the sentence, and this, as we shall see, is an important theoretical limitation."<sup>9</sup> According to Ricoeur who is an astute observer of metaphor, the long history of rhetoric culminates with the work of Fontanier<sup>10</sup> who classified a taxonomy of tropes, with metaphor being listed among the single-word tropes. Ricoeur has traced the eventual decline of rhetoric as a discipline and concluded that its enduring contribution has been to illustrate the need to look beyond the word to the sentence as the basic unit of discourse.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, Aristotle's notions of transfer and deviance are fundamental to the division between literal and figurative discourse. In retrospect, Mark Johnson assessed the importance of this distinction by referring to this split as a "fatal separation."<sup>12</sup> When Aristotle spoke of

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<sup>9</sup> Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 5.

<sup>10</sup> Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, with an introduction by Gérard Genette (Paris: Flammarion, 1968; originally published in 1830).

<sup>11</sup> Ricoeur, "Study 2: The Decline of Rhetoric: Tropology," in *Rule of Metaphor*.

<sup>12</sup> Mark Johnson, "Introduction: Metaphor in the Philosophical Tradition," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) 6.

metaphor as involving the “transfer” (epifora) of the “name” or “word” (ὀνόματόν), he invoked an etymological explanation of the word “metaphor” which left the essence of the matter quite open.<sup>13</sup> Exactly what is transferred remains unclear. Nobody actually moves words, and the situation does not significantly improve even when one speaks of a transfer of “meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Whatever he had in mind, Aristotle saw a distinction between speech that is literal or ordinary and that which is “exotic” or otherwise different.

Impressive and above the ordinary is the diction that uses exotic language (by “exotic” I mean loan words, metaphors, lengthenings, and all divergence from the standard).<sup>15</sup>

I. A. Richards commented that the assumption of metaphor being “something special and exceptional in the use of language, a deviation from its normal mode of working, instead of the omnipresent principle of all its free action” has inhibited our ability to appreciate its operation and importance.<sup>16</sup> Once metaphor was classified as a deviant use of language, there was a corresponding tendency to subordinate its semantic value to that of “literal” discourse.

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<sup>13</sup> The noun “metaphor” (metafora) is related to the verb metaferain which is a compound of the preposition meta( across) and the transitive verb ferain (to carry).

<sup>14</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle *Poetics* 1458a20–23. semnh; de; kai; e;xallattousa to; idiwtikon h;toi" xenikoi" kecrhmenh; xenikon de; legw glwttan kai; metaforan kai; epektasin kai; pah to; para; to; kurion.

<sup>16</sup> I. A. Richards, “Metaphor,” in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936, renewed 1964; Galaxy 1965) 89.

Aristotle also focused on the notion of similarity as a driving force in the operation of metaphor.

Metaphors should be drawn from objects which are proper to the object, but not too obvious; just as, for instance, in philosophy it needs sagacity to grasp the similarity in things that are apart.<sup>17</sup>

Aristotle made a valid point, but the feature of similarity led later thinkers to claim that by nature, a metaphor could not carry any new information. It was merely a poetic substitute for what could be stated non-metaphorically, with greater clarity and less ambiguity.

The logical end of Aristotle's understanding of metaphor is to regard it as a sometimes useful but always dispensable literary ornament. Johnson aptly summarized the view: "A metaphor is an elliptical simile useful for stylistic, rhetorical, and didactic purposes, but which can be translated into a literal paraphrase without any loss of cognitive content."<sup>18</sup>

Before leaving Aristotle, it should be noted that even though he is responsible for spawning what became the so-called "ornamental" theory of metaphor, he did recognize a cognitive element.

It is important to use aptly each of the features mentioned, including double nouns and loan words; but much the greatest asset is a capacity for metaphor [literally, to be metaphorical]. This alone cannot be acquired from another, and is a sign of natural gifts: because to use metaphor well is to discern similarities.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1412a5. Dei' de; metaferrein, kaqaper eifhtai proteron, ajo; oikeywn kai; mh; fanerwh, oipn kai; ejn filofia/to; ofmoion kai; ejn polu; diecousi qewreih eujstorou.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, "Introduction," 4.

<sup>19</sup> Aristotle *Poetics* 1459a3-8. e'ftin de; mega men to; eka'stw/twh

Easy learning is naturally pleasant to all, and words mean something, so that all words which make us learn something are most pleasant. Now we do not know the meaning of strange words, and proper terms we know already. It is metaphor, therefore, that above all produces this effect.<sup>20</sup>

He did not elaborate on the significance of this important aspect of metaphor which did not receive serious attention until this century.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the reason for Aristotle's concern with the mere identification of metaphor at the expense of considering its fundamental operation is that his comments were directed more toward the poet and reader of literature than the philosopher.<sup>22</sup>

#### b) Latin Rhetoric

Like Aristotle, both Cicero and Quintilian dealt with metaphor in terms of style rather than meaningful discourse in its own right. But whereas Aristotle valued metaphor over simile, both writers reversed the relationship

eirhmenwn prepontw" crh'sqai, kai; dipl oi" ojomasi kai; gl wttai", pol u; de; megiston to; metaforikon eihai. monon gar touto ou'te par ja llou e'sti labeih eufuiã" te shmeion e'sti: to; gar eulmetaferein to; to; omoion qewreih e'stin.

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle *Rhetoric* 1410b2. to; gar manqanein rãdiw" hdu; fusei pa'sin e'sti; ta; de; ojomata shmainei ti, w'ste o'sa twh ojomatwn poiei' hmih maqhsin, hãdista. ailmen ouh gl wttai agnwte", ta; de; kuria i'smen. h l de; metafora; poiei' touto mal ista.

<sup>21</sup> For example, C. S. Lewis developed an understanding of metaphor which distinguishes between "Master's metaphors" which we invent for teaching and "Pupil's metaphors" which we learn from ("Bluspels and Flalansferes," in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, 133–58 [London: Oxford University Press, 1939]).

<sup>22</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 9. In making this point about Aristotle's audience, Soskice attempted to shield Aristotle from the charge of being the author of the "substitution" or ornamental view of metaphor.

and viewed metaphor as merely a shorter form of simile. Cicero wrote, “A metaphor is a short form of simile, contracted into one word; this word is put in a position not belonging to it as if it were its own place, and if it is recognizable it gives pleasure, but if it contains no similarity it is rejected.”<sup>23</sup> The thought was echoed by Quintilian who wrote, “On the whole, metaphor is a shorter form of simile.”<sup>24</sup> The difference between metaphor and simile is real but not substantial; both are forms of comparison only. Neither play a cognitive role and so primary concern centers on their use and abuse as figures of speech. Terence Hawkes regarded Quintilian’s *Institutio Oratoria* as “possibly the culmination of this sort of approach to language and to metaphor” and offered this summary statement: “Metaphor’s ultimate value . . . and one which obviously justifies its use of words and phrases in ways that are not ‘proper’, is that it is decorative. It is ‘the supreme ornament of style.’”<sup>25</sup>

### c) Medieval Theology

Medieval thinkers who dealt with metaphor offered two lines of thought.

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<sup>23</sup> Cicero *De Oratore* 3.39.157. Similitudinis est ad verbum unum contracts brevitatis, quod verbum in alieno loco tanquam in suo positum si agnoscitur, delectat, si simile nihil habet, repudiatur.

Cicero referred to a whole chain of metaphorical words which are used to describe something as “a valuable stylistic ornament” (*De Oratore* 3.41.167; magnum ornamentum orationis). But he also cautioned those who would make use of this ornament, warning them to avoid obscurity.

<sup>24</sup> Quintilian *Institutio Oratoria* 8.6.8. In totum autem metaphora brevior est similitudo.

<sup>25</sup> Terence Hawkes, *Metaphor, The Critical Idiom* 25 (London and New York: Methuen, 1972) 12, 13 (italics original).

On the one hand, metaphor and other modes of figuration have value only as matters of style and have nothing to do with cognitive content. In other words, they are dispensable.

In Bede's treatise of figures [*Concerning Figures and Tropes*] we see the emergence of a pattern that will contribute to the decline of metaphor for many centuries to come: rhetoric is distinguished from logic and then reduced to a manual of style. Thus metaphor, treated traditionally under rhetoric, becomes a stylistic device divorced from serious philosophical argument.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, the fact that Scripture uses many figures of speech must be reckoned with. The mere existence of this feature in the Bible prevented the total devaluation of metaphor. Some sought to demonstrate the superiority of scriptural metaphors *vis-à-vis* secular ones, but St. Thomas Aquinas took the task a step further.<sup>27</sup> While he seemed to prefer literal discourse for its clarity,<sup>28</sup> he maintained that there are times when it is necessary to resort to metaphorical descriptions, such as when discussing the nature of God. Since God is other-worldly, we as creatures must use earth-bound terms in speaking about God, but to do so univocally would be to wrongly imply a fundamental equality between God and creatures. Hence, there must be a use of language which operates on a different level, an analogical

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<sup>26</sup> Johnson, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>27</sup> For a fuller treatment of Aquinas and the concept of analogy, see Nelly Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People: Analysis of a Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1993) 43–54 and Herwi Rikhof, *The Concept of Church: A Methodological Inquiry into the Use of Metaphors in Ecclesiology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1981) 167–71.

<sup>28</sup> "Those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts are taught more openly." (*Summa Theologica* 1.1.9)

use. While this use of words may convey a truth about God, it can lead to improper implications as well; it is important to accept only those similarities that are appropriate.

Thus, all names applied metaphorically to God, are applied to creatures primarily rather than to God, because when said of God they mean only similitudes to such creatures.<sup>29</sup>

While St. Thomas made a positive contribution to understanding how language may be used in theology proper, he shared the common belief about metaphor with his medieval counterparts. In the summary of Johnson, “Metaphor is a *deviant* use of a *word* to point up *similarities*.”<sup>30</sup>

#### d) Enlightenment and Modern Philosophy

Until sixteenth-century empiricism, discussions about metaphor and figurative language in general usually took place in the field of rhetoric which as a discipline was largely concerned with style. Rhetoricians often bear the blame for fostering the ornamental or substitution view of metaphor, but Soskice looked elsewhere for the genesis of a fully consistent view of metaphor as entirely noncognitive.

Metaphor, as chief amongst the tropes, was indeed a principal subject for the rhetoricians, but to suggest that the rhetoricians saw metaphor as a useful but expendable technique is to misrepresent them. We suggest that the crude substitution view of metaphor is not so much that of the rhetoricians as of their empiricist critics.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Summa Theologica* 1.13.6.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, “Introduction,” 11 (italics original).

<sup>31</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 10–11.

Thomas Hobbes was the first empiricist to launch a frontal attack on the use of metaphor in any discussion about truth. Distinguishing between proper and improper uses of speech, he condemned the use of words “metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for; and thereby [to] deceive others.”<sup>32</sup> He was sure that literal language was the only appropriate medium for philosophical discourse and that metaphor was an unnecessary and potentially insidious departure from it. Every metaphorical statement both can and should be rephrased in an inherently superior, literal statement that requires no cosmetic enhancement in order for it to be taken seriously by people whose thinking isn’t swayed by emotions.

John Locke is responsible for the classic empiricist censure against not only metaphor, but all figurative language. In a chapter titled, “Of the Abuse of Words,” he wrote,

But yet, if we would speak of things as they are, we must allow, that all the art of rhetoric, besides order and clearness, all the artificial and figurative application of words eloquence has invented, are for nothing else but to insinuate wrong *ideas*, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment; and so indeed are perfect cheats: and therefore, however laudable or allowable oratory may render them in harangues and popular addresses, they are certainly, in all discourses that pretend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided; and where truth and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault, either of the language or the person that makes use of them.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Hobbes’s Leviathan: Reprinted from the Edition of 1651* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1909) 25; part I, chapter 4.

<sup>33</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, abridged and edited, with an Introduction and Notes by Kenneth P. Winkler (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996) 214–15; book III, chapter X, section 34 (italics original).

Even though Locke himself was not able to completely divest his own discourse of figurative expressions, he successfully set a standard which led subsequent writers to favor literal writing. Hegel, for example, flatly stated, “Even in its highest degree it [metaphor] can appear only as a simple ornament for a work of art.”<sup>34</sup>

This trend was checked to some degree by Immanuel Kant, Jacques Rousseau, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Both Kant and Rousseau considered the role of metaphor and the transfer of meaning in the creative growth of language, but neither developed an understanding of metaphor that squarely faced the concept of knowledge. In contrast, Nietzsche saw metaphor as an integral process of thought itself and therefore inseparable from truth itself. He wrote,

What therefore is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms: in short a sum of human relations which became poetically and rhetorically intensified, metamorphosed, adorned, and after long usage seem to a nation fixed, canonic and binding.<sup>35</sup>

Johnson offered this clear summary of Nietzsche’s view:

We experience reality metaphorically. What we know, we know metaphorically. And the ‘fixed truths’ of our culture are nothing but metaphorical understandings that have become conventionalized to the point where their metaphoricity is forgotten.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, trans. Wm. M. Bryant (New York: Appleton, 1879) 41, quoted in Johnson, “Introduction,” 13.

<sup>35</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Falsity in Their Ultramoral Sense (1873),” in *Early Greek Philosophy & Other Essays*, trans. Maximilian A. Mügge, vol. 2, *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy (New York: Russell & Russell, 1964) 180.

<sup>36</sup> Johnson, “Introduction,” 15–16. Along the same line of thought but without yet mentioning the place of metaphor or separating “literal” from

In spite of this virtual equation of metaphor and truth, the general drive of researchers to perceive and describe the world “scientifically” favored literal language for its accuracy and relative lack of ambiguity. The preference for literal language in scientific and historical writing is self-evident; in philosophical circles it reached a zenith in positivism which sought to emulate the cognitive certainty of science. In the process, positivism boldly relegated figurative language to an emotive (non-cognitive) sphere, leaving literal language to carry the weight of expressing truth statements which alone were subject to the all-important principle of verification. The aversion to metaphor became widespread.

To say that all sense of metaphor was destroyed would be false, but it is true that metaphor lost much of its credibility. In many areas of human thought, and among these some of the most important areas (including theology), metaphor was suspect, and students were given a new commandment—“thou shalt not commit metaphor.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus, on the level of theoretical considerations of metaphor, the treatment of metaphor had reached somewhat of a terminus. Locked into realm of rhetoric, metaphor was treated as a single word figure of speech. It was regarded as a mere stylistic ornament in which a term is used “improperly” to

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“figurative” discourse, Gadamer described the relationship between thought and language as one of “enigmatic intimacy” (Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method: Elements of Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. Garrett Broden and John Cumming, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. [New York: Seabury, 1975; reprint, New York: Crossroad, 1982] 389 [page citation is to the reprint edition]). More specifically, he affirmed the “fundamental metaphorical nature” of verbal consciousness and added, “It is important to see that to regard the metaphorical use of a word as not its real sense is the prejudice of a theory of logic that is alien to language” (*Truth and Method*, 429).

<sup>37</sup> Roland M. Frye, “Metaphors, Equations, and the Faith,” *TToday* 37/1 (1980) 64.

state what could otherwise be said using literal speech. The decline of rhetoric as a discipline left metaphor outside of serious philosophical and theological discussions. But theoretically and practically, metaphor simply refused to go away. Logical positivism's commitment to the verification principle of language failed to account for the whole of meaningful discourse and the eventual realization of this fact marked a turning point. According to Mark Johnson,

The first stage of the dawning awareness that metaphors are not cognitively dispensable consisted in the breakdown of the verificationist project of identifying as cognitively meaningful only those sentences entailing some set of literal observation statements.<sup>38</sup>

On the level of practice, metaphor has always been more persistent and the widespread recognition of its power never totally disappeared. Stienstra correctly noted that in spite of the trend away from the use metaphor in philosophy, there has always been a need to rely on its ability to express truth.

It cannot be overemphasized, however, that in practice man has always used metaphor to give expression to abstract concepts. This is true of authors of the books of the Old Testament, it is also true of scholars throughout the ages, up to the eighteenth century. The recently (re)discovered truth that metaphor is not just a decorative device, but that metaphors express truths that cannot be expressed otherwise, has always been tacitly and even unconsciously assumed by speakers and writers who wanted to convey an abstract or metaphysical concept.<sup>39</sup>

## 2. Metaphor as a Cognitive Device

With the demise of positivism around the middle of this century, the

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<sup>38</sup> Mark Johnson, "A Philosophical Perspective on the Problems of Metaphor," in *Cognition and Figurative Language*, ed. Richard P. Honeck and Robert R. Hoffman, 47-67 (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980) 49.

<sup>39</sup> Stienstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People*, 19.

subject of metaphor came in for re-evaluation, not primarily as a figure of speech, but for its unique ability to express real meaning. Roger Lundin wrote,

During these decades [ca. 1950–80], while literary artists and theorists have been celebrating, as they have done for almost two hundred years, the absolute necessary yet absolutely illusionary qualities to metaphor, philosophical theorists have been laboring to claim for metaphor its proper epistemic rights.<sup>40</sup>

Two individuals stand at the beginning of this recovery. I. A. Richards was a literary critic who reopened philosophical consideration of metaphor, but two factors weighed against the quick acceptance of his views. He lacked the respect afforded to full-fledged members of the philosophical community and his seminal essay on metaphor appeared well before the decline of positivism and its antipathy regarding figurative language.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, it was the philosopher Max Black who not only supported Richards' contentions, but clearly delineated a fresh way to appraise the operation of metaphor as a cognitive expression.

#### a) The Interanimation View of I. A. Richards

In a 1936 essay, I. A. Richards approached the subject of metaphor from

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<sup>40</sup> Roger Lundin, "Metaphor in the Modern Critical Arena," *Christianity and Literature* 33/1 (1983) 19. For an application of recent metaphorical awareness to a single root attested in Ugaritic, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Arabic, see John Wansbrough, "Antonomasia: The Case for Semitic '*TM*,'" in *Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East*, ed. M. Mindlin, M. J. Geller, and J. E. Wansbrough, 103–16 (London: University of London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1987).

<sup>41</sup> Johnson, "Introduction," 19. In 1958 another literary critic, Walker Percy noted but did not elaborate on the fact that the cognitive dimension of metaphor is usually overlooked ("Metaphor as Mistake," *Sewanee Review* 66 [1958] 93).

the position of rhetoric, but with a decidedly semantic interest.<sup>42</sup> He was concerned with more than the identification and literary analysis of metaphor; he probed the way metaphor produces meaning. This line of investigation represented a change in direction in as much as Richards himself had earlier gone on record in support of a purely emotive theory of metaphor. Earlier he had affirmed that figurative language did not communicate reference, but is used “to express or incite feelings and attitudes.”<sup>43</sup> His fresh approach to the subject made at least three important points.

First, he claimed that metaphor is an omnipresent principle of language and not a dispensable ornament of persuasion.<sup>44</sup> Simple observation that philosophical invectives against metaphor are themselves fraught with figurative language is enough to establish the fact, but the claim can also be recommended theoretically.

His second point therefore presented a conceptual basis for understanding metaphor.

In the simplest formulation, when we use a metaphor we have two thoughts of different things active together and supported by a single word, or phrase, whose meaning is a resultant of their interaction.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 76.

<sup>43</sup> C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1946) 149; quoted in Johnson, “Introduction,” 17.

<sup>44</sup> Richards, “Metaphor,” 92–93.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 93. Following Soskice (*Metaphor and Religious Language*, 43–51), I label Richards’ view of metaphor with the word “interanimation” rather than “interaction” because the latter is generally reserved for Max Black’s theory which is slightly different. Earlier in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, Richards

Along with this basic statement, Richards offered two technical terms for each half of the double unit called metaphor: tenor and vehicle. The tenor is “the underlying idea or principal subject”<sup>46</sup> and the vehicle is the figurative part which provides a description of the tenor. Together, the tenor and vehicle have a meaning; there is no transfer of meaning at the word level from a “proper” sphere to an “improper” one. To use a simple example later given by Black, in the case of the simple metaphor, “Man is a wolf,” the tenor (“man”) is described in terms of the vehicle (“wolf”). But Richards gave no such illustration. Instead he used the following lines from Kames.

A stubborn and unconquerable flame  
Creeps in his veins and drinks the streams of life.<sup>47</sup>

In this case, a fever is the subject of the metaphor and therefore the tenor which is described as a flame.<sup>48</sup> Beyond the identification of the parts of the main metaphor, what is of interest here is that the tenor is unexpressed.

Thus, Richards’ third contribution is that metaphor is a matter of thought more than one of single terms. In contrast to the older, nominal theory of metaphor, Richards made the following statement:

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included a lecture on semantics (not metaphor) titled “The Interanimation of Words” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936, renewed 1964, reprint, Galaxy, 1965).

<sup>46</sup> Richards, “Metaphor,” 97.

<sup>47</sup> From Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, quoted in Richards, “Metaphor,” 102.

<sup>48</sup> The “flame” is further described in metaphorical terms as an animate being that consumes the essence of life which is itself described as a liquid. Clearly, the lines present a multi-storied metaphor, but that fact is beyond the present point.

. . . fundamentally it is a borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts*, a transaction between contexts. *Thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom.<sup>49</sup>

Richards affirmed the metaphoric (and thus linguistic) nature of thought as did Nietzsche and others, but he also lifted the analysis of metaphor beyond the level of a trope to one of semantics. In the words of Ricoeur,

Metaphor holds together within one simple meaning two different missing parts of different contexts of this meaning. Thus, we are not dealing any longer with a simple transfer of words, but with a commerce between thoughts, that is, a transaction between contexts.<sup>50</sup>

Although Richards wrote that the thought in each half of the metaphor is “supported by a single word, or phrase,” it does not necessarily follow that he would have ruled out the function of larger units of discourse such as clauses or sentences.

In making these three points, Richards succeeded in reopening philosophically oriented discussion about metaphor, but it would take nearly twenty years before Black propelled the issue to the foreground of consideration.

#### b) The Interaction View of Max Black

In 1955, Max Black published an important essay which presented three views of how metaphors operate.<sup>51</sup> The first two provide a fair, albeit

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<sup>49</sup> Richards, “Metaphor,” 94 (italics original).

<sup>50</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 80.

<sup>51</sup> Max Black, “Metaphor,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, n.s. 55 (1954–55) 273–94; reprinted as ch. 3 in *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962) 25–47.

somewhat traditional and uninteresting account of metaphor as a stylistic device. The third view, however, proved to be a catalyst to philosophers who became interested in metaphor's ability to convey cognitive content which cannot be reduced to the level of literal restatement.

#### (1) The Substitution View

According to this view, a metaphor (or even a more complex metaphorical expression) is used in the place of a literal statement which would have an equivalent meaning. For example, the metaphor, "Richard is a lion" means "Richard is brave." The essence of the metaphor is the similarity or analogy between the words "lion" and "brave." This is the time-honored and dominant view of metaphor which is also the theoretical base of the definition of metaphor provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The purpose of metaphor is two-fold. First, at the emotive level it adds style to writing and speech. Second, at the practical level a metaphor may fill a gap in the literal vocabulary.<sup>52</sup> For example, the word "orange" which originally denoted a type of fruit was used metaphorically of the color of that fruit, thus serving to fill a linguistic need. Now, the word has shed its metaphorical nature and can literally denote the fruit and the color.<sup>53</sup> The aim of interpretation of metaphor

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<sup>52</sup> This function is properly called catachresis which *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines in terms very similar to those used to define metaphor. "Improper use of words; application of a term to a thing which it does not properly denote; abuse or perversion of a trope or metaphor" ("Catachresis," in *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., prepared by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, vol. 2 [Oxford: Clarendon, 1989] 965).

<sup>53</sup> Black, "Metaphor," in *Models and Metaphors*, 33.

according to this view is the recovery of the meaning of the statement expressed by a synonymous literal rendition. Black explained, "Once the reader has detected the ground of the intended analogy or simile (with the help of the frame, or clues drawn from the wider context) he can retrace the author's path and so reach the original literal meaning."<sup>54</sup> Interpretation is accomplished by restatement and incurs no cognitive cost. The loss is purely aesthetic.

## (2) The Comparison View

This next view of metaphor is not much different than the first and Black admits it as a special case of the substitution view. It holds that "a metaphor consists in the *presentation* of the underlying analogy or similarity" and thus says something about each part of the metaphor.<sup>55</sup> The literal equivalent of the metaphor, "Richard is a lion" would be "Richard is *like* a lion (in being brave)."

When metaphors are interpreted according to the substitution and comparison theories, the result is a literal paraphrase. In the case of trivial metaphors, this may be wholly adequate. For example, to say that one's job is a "dead-end street" probably means little more than that it holds no possibility of promotion or advancement. But to use these theories to explain more substantial metaphors leads to "a vagueness that borders on vacuity,"

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

according to Black.<sup>56</sup> For instance, the meaning of the metaphor, “My beloved is a locked garden”<sup>57</sup> can hardly be unpacked by a simple literal equivalent. Such a paraphrase may be initially helpful, especially when the reader is unfamiliar with the terms and historical or literary context of the metaphor. But the effectiveness of the metaphor has something to do with its invitation to explore the relationship of its two elements without imposing a limit on their degrees of similarity and difference. Black observed, “We need the metaphors in just the cases when there can be no question as yet of the precision of scientific statement.”<sup>58</sup>

Because the substitution and comparison views focus attention on the terms of the metaphor, they are (and remain) valid at the lexical level of interpretation. But they cannot account for the production of meaning at the semantic level of interpreting a whole metaphorical statement.<sup>59</sup> For this we require a more sophisticated theory.

### (3) The Interaction View

The limitations of the first two views led Black to propose a fresh way to perceive metaphor. Rather than see it as a fancy or convenient way of saying what could also be said literally, it is possible to view metaphor as a distinctive

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>57</sup> Derived from Song of Songs 4:12.

<sup>58</sup> Black, “Metaphor,” in *Models and Metaphors*, 37.

<sup>59</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 65.

mental accomplishment. Starting with Richards' view, Black went on to describe metaphor as a filter by which certain characteristics of the figurative part of the expression (Richards' "vehicle") are selected for projection onto the main subject (the "tenor"). In the case of the metaphor, "Man is a wolf," the subsidiary subject ("wolf") calls to mind a "system of associated commonplaces" which are generally accepted characteristics of wolves (whether they are actually true or not). From this system, certain features are applied to the principal subject ("man") depending on the context of the statement. "The wolf-metaphor suppresses some details, emphasizes others—in short, *organizes* our view of man."<sup>60</sup> The view is labeled interactive because neither subject remains unchanged. Black observed, "If to call a man a wolf is to put him in a special light, we must not forget that the metaphor makes the wolf seem more human than he otherwise would."<sup>61</sup> G. B. Caird affirmed this "two-way traffic in ideas" with special reference to biblical metaphors for God, showing their ability to shape not only our understanding of God's nature, but the effect of that understanding on those who accept these metaphors.

The metaphors derived from human relationships have a special interest and importance, because they lend themselves to a two-way traffic in ideas. When the Bible calls God judge, king, father or husband it is, in the first instance, using the human known to throw light on the divine unknown, and particularly on God's attitude to his worshippers. But no sooner has the metaphor travelled from earth to heaven than it begins the return journey to earth, bearing with it an ideal standard by which the conduct of

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<sup>60</sup> Black, "Metaphor," in *Models and Metaphors*, 41 (italics original).

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

human judges, kings, fathers and husbands is to be assessed.<sup>62</sup>

In contrast to relatively simple metaphors, the chief value of many metaphors is the insight they provide—something which has no literal equivalent. Commenting on the weakness of a metaphor's supposed literal equivalent, Black stated,

One of the points I most wish to stress is that the loss in such cases is a loss in cognitive content; the relevant weakness of the literal paraphrase is not that it may be tiresomely prolix or boringly explicit—or deficient in qualities of style; it fails to be a translation because it fails to give the insight that the metaphor did.<sup>63</sup>

Although interpretation of these metaphors cannot be accomplished by offering a paraphrase in literal language, the ground of the metaphor can still be explained. The result will fall short of a cognitive substitute for the metaphor and will necessarily be non-exhaustive of its meaning, but it will enhance the reader's grasp of the device much the way a musical analysis of a classical work may raise the listener's level of appreciation of it.

Black summarized the essence of the interaction view by making seven claims.

(1) A metaphorical statement has two distinct subjects—a “principal” subject and a “subsidiary” one.

(2) These subjects are often best regarded as “systems of things” rather than “things.”

(3) The metaphor works by applying to the principal subject a system of “associated implications” characteristic of the subsidiary subject.

(4) These implications usually consist of “commonplaces” about the subsidiary subject, but may, in suitable cases, consist of deviant implications established *ad hoc* by the writer.

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<sup>62</sup> G. B. Caird, *The Language and Imagery of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1980) 19.

<sup>63</sup> Black, “Metaphor,” in *Models and Metaphors*, 46.

(5) The metaphor selects, emphasizes, suppresses, and organizes features of the principal subject by implying statements about it that normally apply to the subsidiary subject.

(6) This involves shifts in meaning of words belonging to the same family or system as the metaphorical expression; and some of these shifts, though not all, may be metaphorical transfers. (The subordinate metaphors are, however, to be read less “emphatically.”)

(7) There is, in general, no simple “ground” for the necessary shifts of meaning—no blanket reason why some metaphors work and others fail.<sup>64</sup>

Since issuing this view of metaphor, Black has slightly modified it. He no longer found it helpful to identify the primary subject with a whole “system of things” and hence reserved that designation for the secondary subject only, preferring to view the primary subject as being more simple.<sup>65</sup> He abandoned the use of the phrase “associated commonplaces” in favor of the more general “associated implications.”<sup>66</sup> Particularly helpful was his clarification of the way the two subjects of the metaphor interact.

In the context of a particular metaphorical statement, the two subjects “interact” in the following ways: (a) the presence of the primary subject incites the hearer to select some of the secondary subject’s properties; and (b) invites him to construct a parallel implication-complex that can fit the primary subject; and (c) reciprocally induces parallel changes in the secondary subject.<sup>67</sup>

Black’s essay, especially his explanation of the interaction view of metaphor, captivated the attention of philosophers of language who recognized the importance of his pioneering insights. Much of the discussion has accepted

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 44–45.

<sup>65</sup> Max Black, “More about Metaphor,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Andrew Ortony (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 27.

<sup>66</sup> Black, “More about Metaphor,” 28.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

and built on the fact that metaphorical expressions cannot be reduced to literal language, as if such an accomplishment would be a genuine improvement. Indeed, the neat division of language into figurative and literal categories is now viewed as unworkably simplistic. A more descriptive use of these labels is to place them on the ends of a single continuum. But in light of the initial agreement about metaphor, it has been much more difficult to reach any consensus regarding *how* metaphors function, not to mention the matter of practical application of such a theory. It is therefore necessary to move on from discussing the establishment of a cognitive theory of metaphor to consider its subsequent growth and refinement.

#### B. Toward an Understanding of Metaphor

It is one thing to recognize that metaphor is much more than a way to embellish a thought and to assert that it has cognitive power to foster insight. It is another thing to qualify that assertion in terms that everybody can accept. At present, a definitive or comprehensive theory of metaphor does not exist and the subject as a whole has points of intersection with many other disciplines. Numerous modern insights about cognitive metaphor are valid, yet of little practical value for the interpretation of biblical metaphors. Like works of art, metaphors attract attention and reward those who respond by yielding both pleasure and insight. Just *how* that happens is difficult to describe. In the words of I. A. Richards,

Our skill with metaphor, with thought, is one thing—prodigious and inexplicable; our reflective awareness of that skill is quite another thing—

very incomplete, distorted, fallacious, over-simplifying.<sup>68</sup>

Because of the sprawling nature of the discussion, the aim of this section cannot be to offer a comprehensive sweep of the field or to engage in a polemical evaluation of all positions. Rather, its more modest goal is to consider some of the theoretical bases of identifying, understanding, and interpreting metaphor as a cognitive device. It will set forth a working definition of metaphor and then seek to identify some of the ways in which metaphor produces its uniquely meaningful effects. Finally, it will discuss the range of options for viewing the ability of metaphor to communicate truth in the context of transcendent matters, ultimately deciding in favor of a position known as “critical realism.”

### 1. The Definition and Identification of Metaphor

Accepting the claim that metaphor is essentially cognitive rather than rhetorical leads to the conclusion that metaphor is more a matter of thought than mere expression. Gadamer argued that the genius of verbal consciousness consists in being able to express similarities between things without reference to a particular scheme of classification; hence, thought itself is fundamentally metaphorical.<sup>69</sup> From this broad perspective, metaphor is ubiquitous and the task of identifying it would appear pointless. But at the level of linguistic expression, it is still possible to speak of specific instances of metaphor as over

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<sup>68</sup> I. A. Richards, “The Command of Metaphor,” in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936, renewed 1964; Galaxy, 1965) 116.

<sup>69</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 429.

against speech that is recognizably plain.

Spotting the presence of metaphor is often quite intuitive but producing an infallible test for metaphor is practically impossible. The statement, “Men are pigs,”<sup>70</sup> automatically brings a metaphorical understanding to mind but the matter is not as simple with the statement, “You hit the nail on the head.” Depending on factors outside the sentence, one could construe the words literally or metaphorically. For this reason, the claim that metaphors are marked by the presence of semantic deviance from literal speech simply doesn’t always hold true. In other words, metaphors are not always literally false. But even in the case of statements that can *only* make sense as metaphors, there is often no thought of deviance from what the statement might mean on a literal level.

Somebody seriously making a metaphorical statement—say, “The Lord is my Shepherd”—might reasonably claim that he meant just what he said, having chosen the words most apt to express his thought, attitudes, and feelings, and was by no means guilty of uttering a crass absurdity.<sup>71</sup>

The production of a definition for metaphor has proven difficult partly because metaphor operates within multiple levels of context. The fundamental plan of Ricoeur’s masterful volume, *The Rule of Metaphor*, is to explain these levels. Considered at the word-level, metaphor is no more than a figure of speech, but at the level of the statement, metaphor has “sense” and at the level of a whole discourse it has “reference.” There is a progression from rhetoric to

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<sup>70</sup> Credited to comedian Tim Allen.

<sup>71</sup> Black, “More about Metaphor,” 22.

semantics to hermeneutics. Speaking of the argument of the book as a whole, Ricoeur wrote,

It does not seek to replace rhetoric with semantics and the latter with hermeneutics, and thus have one refute the other, but rather seeks to justify each approach within the limits of the corresponding discipline and to demonstrate the systematic [*sic*] continuity of the viewpoints by following the progression from word to sentence and from sentence to discourse.<sup>72</sup>

Ultimately, then, the context for a biblical metaphor is the whole Bible as a discourse. But beyond that observation, there is yet another consideration. If metaphor resists definition, it does so partly because there is a speech-act distinction between what a sentence means and what a speaker means.

At present, then, no sure criteria for identifying metaphor have been found. It does seem clear that our apprehension of an utterance as metaphorical relies upon our awareness of the total speech situation in which it occurs. We seem to interpret an utterance metaphorically when to do so makes sense of more aspects of the total context than if the sentence is read literally.<sup>73</sup>

Words are like tools in that they both can be used to perform a variety of functions.<sup>74</sup> Words have potential uses therefore, which become actualized when a speaker employs a word in a specific setting. On its own, every sentence is potentially ambiguous and may be understood literally or metaphorically. But in the case of speech or the utterance of a community, outside factors help to screen out unintended meanings, as Cohen and Margalit have recognized.

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<sup>72</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 7.

<sup>73</sup> Johnson, "Philosophical Perspective," 51.

<sup>74</sup> The analogy of a word being like a hammer is pointed out by Peter W. Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors to Biblical Thought: A Method for Interpreting the Bible*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity 19 (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen, 1990) 18.

In speech it is knowledge of background facts or of the socio-physical context of utterance, along with certain presumptions of appropriateness, that helps a hearer to recognise [*sic*] whether the speaker intends a literal or a metaphorical meaning for a particular utterance of a word, phrase or sentence.<sup>75</sup>

Rather than try to deal with what a word, phrase, or sentence “means,” it is better to seek for what a speaker means. In relation to words used metaphorically, John Searle is direct: “Metaphorical meaning is always speaker’s utterance meaning.”<sup>76</sup> With this in mind, I favor the definition set forth by Soskice.

As a working definition of metaphor, we shall say that *metaphor is that figure of speech whereby we speak about one thing in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.*<sup>77</sup>

By linking the meaning of metaphor to the intention of the speaker, this definition leads the interpreter to look beyond some supposed “metaphorical meaning” of the words themselves.

We argue that the reference which the metaphor makes is not, as some suggest, a split reference determined by the individual terms used in a metaphor (like ‘man’ and ‘wolf’); it is rather the reference effected by the speaker’s employment of the whole utterance in its context.<sup>78</sup>

This definition is close to that provided by Peter Macky, who offers an

<sup>75</sup> L. Jonathan Cohen and Avishai Margalit, “The Role of Inductive Reasoning in the Interpretation of Metaphor,” in *Semantics of Natural Language*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. D. Davidson and G. Harman, 722–40 (Boston: Reidel, 1972) 736.

<sup>76</sup> John R. Searle, “Metaphor,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson, 248–85 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) 250. See also John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>77</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 15 (italics original).

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

important refinement by introducing the role of analogy. He defined metaphor as “that figurative way of speaking (and meaning) in which a subject is depicted in terms of a symbol, which is related to it by analogy”<sup>79</sup> which is itself defined as “a relationship between two realities in which there are significant similarities and noticeable differences.”<sup>80</sup> One can therefore speak of positive analogies which point out similarities and negative analogies which have to do with differences. In Ricoeur’s words, the most intimate and ultimate abode of metaphor “is neither the name, nor the sentence, nor even discourse, but the copula of the verb *to be*. The metaphorical ‘is’ at once signifies both ‘is not’ and ‘is like.’”<sup>81</sup>

Macky notes, however, that one may even note the presence of neutral analogies. In this case, the details of the symbol do not clearly fit into the categories of positive and negative analogies and “so provide the realm of mystery we can explore in order to see more deeply.”<sup>82</sup> While the positive and negative analogies are usually more specified, the neutral analogy is undetermined and encourages the reader to consider other potential

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<sup>79</sup> Macky, *The Centrality of Metaphors*, 56.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 7.

<sup>82</sup> Macky, *Centrality of Metaphors*, 288. Following this comment, Macky considers an example from the words of Jesus, “My yoke is easy and my burden is light” (Matt 11:30). He explains the positive and negative analogies of the metaphor, the obvious points of similarity and difference. Then he explores the neutral analogy, looking for non-explicit implications of the “burden” metaphor. In this way, he treats the metaphor not only as a means of communication, but also as an invitation to personal discovery.

connections between the terms of the metaphor.<sup>83</sup> In this way, metaphors use multiple analogies to both inform and prompt independent thought. In the words of Barbour,

. . . a metaphor proposes analogies between the familiar context of a word and a new context into which it is introduced. There is a tension between affirmation and denial; in other words, both positive and negative analogy are present. For metaphors, as for models, it is the *neutral analogy* which invites exploration, and which prevents reduction to a set of equivalent literal statements. Metaphors . . . [are] irreducible because they are open-ended.<sup>84</sup>

## 2. The Operation of Metaphor

The process of producing a definition of metaphor has accomplished more than making a simple identification of metaphor as a cognitive device; it has also provided some insight on how metaphors of this kind actually work. But the process has also demonstrated the elusive nature of metaphor, making the task of interpretation difficult to describe. At one level, metaphor has much to do with similarities, and the comparison view elaborated above is an attempt to deal with this fact. But on another level, metaphor is more complex and open-ended; metaphor cannot only draw on existing similarities; through linguistic creativity it can conceive new ones. As Walker Percy stated, “Metaphor

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<sup>83</sup> Ian G. Barbour points out a similar situation in the case of Jesus’ parables which do not present “an optional illustration of a set of explicitly stated principles.” Rather, in that the parable lacks a statement concerning how it should be precisely applied, it presents “a comparison to be explored [and] insights to be discovered” (*Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion* [New York: Harper and Row, 1974] 17).

<sup>84</sup> Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 42 (italics original).

is the true maker of language.”<sup>85</sup> The interanimation and interaction views recognize this power to assert novel similarities and have won general acceptance, though agreement has not been reached on how the views should be refined. Extending an epistemic distinction set forth by Kant, Mark Johnson has attempted to explain these two sides of metaphor under the rubric of its “canonical” and “noncanonical” aspects.

#### a) Metaphor and Interpretation

Looking at metaphor as a comparison of two things, one can think of a reasonable ground for the analogies. Thus, “For every metaphor there is a rule-governed, systematic procedure for spelling out the relevant respects in which *A* is similar to *B* (in the metaphor ‘*A* is *B*’).”<sup>86</sup> Drawing out the points of similarity and difference can lead to a literal paraphrase of the metaphor which captures most of its meaning, though admittedly there will be a loss of poetic impact. In the case of metaphors taken from the ancient world, an explanation of the tenor and vehicle may prove very helpful to readers not immediately familiar with covenants, monarchies, village life, and so on.<sup>87</sup> But on another level, metaphor operates differently.

This is the level at which one experiences the insight that two entire systems of implications (attached to *A* and *B*) “belong together” in some fundamental way. The cognitive activity at this level cannot be reduced to

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<sup>85</sup> Percy, “Metaphor as Mistake,” 96.

<sup>86</sup> Johnson, “Philosophical Perspective,” 55.

<sup>87</sup> In metaphors of the “God is *X*” type, the tenor is transcendent and less understood, leaving most of the explanation to fall on the vehicle (“*X*”).

that of the comparative level, for it consists of the alteration of certain experiential structures (e.g., categorizations, concepts), such that one discovers a formal unity between previously unassociated things.<sup>88</sup>

Whereas a comparative analysis is rule-governed and canonical, the meaning of the metaphor at this interactive level cannot be extracted mechanically; it is noncanonical. The truth claim of metaphor at this level is based on a restructuring of the organizing principles of knowledge.<sup>89</sup> Metaphors which provide insight into an unknown, transcendent, or mysterious subject thus can have an extremely powerful effect on those who accept them. Johnson remarked,

The metaphor makes (that is, creates) sense by a novel projective act resulting in new significance. It is this latter semantic achievement that has led many to see metaphor as the central device for extending language and, through it, the bounds of sense.<sup>90</sup>

When metaphor moves beyond the objective similarity of the two objects, the act of understanding the metaphor moves beyond a rule-governed procedure and enters a mode of “productive imagination” in which the interpreter explores the relationship of the two parts of the metaphor. This level of analysis is highly aesthetic and corresponds to the metaphor’s power to stimulate exploration. Drawing on Kant’s notion of a productive mode of imagination, Johnson stated,

A metaphor asserts a formal unity between two particulars (individuals, classes, universals), yet the ground of this unity goes beyond any objective similarities between the two subject-things. Since the metaphor asserts

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<sup>88</sup> Johnson, “Philosophical Perspective,” 55.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

more than that the two things are merely alike, our discovery *that* and *how* the two subject-things belong together cannot be determined from these objective likenesses alone. Rather, an act of reflection is required that results in a new way of organizing our experience.<sup>91</sup>

When considering the meaning of metaphor, then, it is not shallow-minded to point out similarities and differences between the two subjects of the metaphor, unless one then concludes that this is *all* the metaphor means. The result of such analysis may be some form of literal paraphrase which may indeed help and encourage the reader to explore the significance of the metaphor for one's own experience. The central metaphors of the Bible may be considered in this light. The depictions of God as father and king, for example, not only point out similarities, they foster a certain relationship with God and, in turn, with others.<sup>92</sup>

#### b) Imagination, Intimacy, and Invitation

This relational function of metaphor is typically not felt or highly valued by readers who seek to be purely objective. One may observe existing similarities from a distance, but in this case the imagination is only active in trying to reproduce the thinking of the speaker. This type of "re-creative" imagining, however, is prerequisite to a second-order "creative" imagining in which the reader turns inward to figure out how the truth of the metaphor

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<sup>91</sup> Johnson, "Philosophical Perspective," 60 (italics original) with reference to Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) B151, 164.

<sup>92</sup> Macky, *Centrality of Metaphors*, 260.

reorders his or her own life.<sup>93</sup> Marcus Hester described this imaginative activity as “seeing as” and wrote, “Metaphorical seeing as is a seeing as between the metaphorical subject and the metaphorical predicate, either one or both of which must be image-exciting.”<sup>94</sup> Imagination can thus operate in two domains. It can reproductively focus on the thinking of another as well as productively focus on one’s self.

This particular understanding of the imagination is committed to the linguisticity of human consciousness. Ricoeur in particular took issue with those who limited imagination to pictorial depiction and argued that in reference to metaphor, it is primarily verbal in that it “effects a restructuration of semantic fields.”<sup>95</sup> Even before publication of his *Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur recognized an essential link between metaphor and imagination.

We are prepared to inquire into the power of imagination, no longer as the faculty of deriving “images” from sensory experiences, but as the capacity to let new worlds build our self-understanding. This power would not be conveyed by emerging images but by emerging meanings in our language. Imagination, then, should be treated as a dimension of language. In that way, a new link would appear between imagination and metaphor.<sup>96</sup>

Relying somewhat on Polanyi’s notion of participant knowing, Macky

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>94</sup> Marcus B. Hester, “Metaphor and Aspect Seeing,” *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 25 (1966) 207; quoted in Johnson, “Philosophical Perspective,” 53.

<sup>95</sup> See Paul Ricoeur, “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling,” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks, 141–57 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1979) 146.

<sup>96</sup> Paul Ricoeur, “Metaphor and the Main Problem of Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History* 6 (1974) 110.

notes that the potent metaphors of the Bible have more to do with participation than observation.

Participating in an author's metaphorical thinking is an imaginative process, one that cannot be fully represented verbally. However, verbal guidance for that journey can be offered . . . In the end, however, it all depends on the reader. Those who have eyes to see, will begin to see.<sup>97</sup>

Another function of metaphor is what Ted Cohen referred to as the "cultivation of intimacy." Philosophers of language have fought hard to establish the cognitive import of metaphor as over against a purely emotive theory, yet Cohen boldly considered this valuable, yet non-cognitive role.

I want to suggest a point in metaphor which is independent of the question of cognitivity and which has nothing to do with its aesthetical character. I think of this point as the achievement of intimacy. There is a unique way in which the maker and appreciator of metaphor are drawn closer to one another. Three aspects are involved: (1) the speaker issues a kind of concealed invitation; (2) the hearer expends a special effort to accept the invitation; and (3) this transaction constitutes the acknowledgment of a community.<sup>98</sup>

In this sense, metaphors may be construed as invitations to view a subject in a certain way. Unlike plain assertions which are judged as either true or false, metaphors (like models and analogies) have heuristic value.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Macky, *Centrality of Metaphors*, 297. See Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

<sup>98</sup> Ted Cohen, "Metaphor and the Cultivation of Intimacy," in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks, 1–10 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 6. The community that results from the comprehension of the metaphor may be as large as the group of those who have grasped it or as small as the individual speaker and recipient and indeed, even a single individual, for "surely the self-dialogue of the soul is often figurative" (8).

<sup>99</sup> Ina Loewenberg, "Identifying Metaphors," in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson, 154–81 (Minneapolis: University of

According to Don Swanson, “A metaphor is a peremptory [i.e., urgent] invitation to discovery.”<sup>100</sup> In this regard, metaphor has something in common with literature which presents a verbally constructed universe to the reader. Erich Auerbach made the point that in contrast to the stories of Homer which offer the reader temporary relief from reality, the literature of the OT seeks to displace our reality. Its invitation to discovery is pointedly serious.

The world of the Scripture stories is not satisfied with claiming to be a historically true reality—it insists that it is the only real world, is destined for autocracy. . . . The Scripture stories do not, like Homer’s, court our favor, they do not flatter us that they may please us and enchant us—they seek to subject us, and if we refuse to be subjected we are rebels.<sup>101</sup>

Accepting this invitation means adopting the perspective or world view of the speaker.<sup>102</sup> Metaphorically, it is to enter the speaker’s “world.” In the words of Goethe,

Wer den Dichter will verstehen  
Muss in Dichters Lande gehen.<sup>103</sup>

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Minnesota Press, 1981) 175.

<sup>100</sup> Don R. Swanson, “Toward a Psychology of Metaphor,” in *On Metaphor*, ed. Sheldon Sacks, 161–64 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978) 163.

<sup>101</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953) 14–15.

<sup>102</sup> M. H. Abrams suggests that an author’s choice of imagery reveals his world view, (*The Mirror and the Lamp* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953], 260). Paul Maloney argued that metaphor is both the poetic way of knowing reality and the artistic technique of representing this knowledge. It adopts a certain stance towards reality which the knower then is to accept on its own terms, (“Metaphor: The Poetic Mode of Knowledge and Its Implications for Education” [Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 1980]).

<sup>103</sup> “Anyone who wants to understand a poet must go to the poet’s

### 3. The Cognitive Status of Metaphor

The so-called “literal-truth paradigm” that has dominated most of the history of philosophical reflection holds that “literal assertions are somehow better or more obvious bearers of truth than metaphors are.”<sup>104</sup> The consequence of this doctrine is the ornamental theory of metaphor as a purely rhetorical device used for emotive functions. This distinction simply no longer holds. Timothy Binkley, for example, admitted that metaphorical statements are comprehended somewhat differently and with more complexity than literal ones, but this difference in meaning “has nothing to do with truth or falsehood.”<sup>105</sup> While the philosophical re-evaluation of metaphor has raised the awareness of its cognitive value, it has yet to reach consensus as to what that value actually is. This absence of consensus becomes more understandable when the difficulties surrounding discussion of epistemology and ontology are taken into account. Macky has surveyed the field and grouped the views into five positions placed along a continuum.

(1) **Absolute Literalism:** anything that we can think and know we can express in literal speech. Metaphorical speech is essentially a rhetorical form useful for stylistic purposes.

(2) **Sophisticated Literalism:** all the presentative (often labeled

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country,” quoted in Caird, *Language and Imagery of the Bible*, 145. Caird went on to make a salient application. “We do not live in the world of the Old or New Testament, we are unacquainted with what to the contemporaries of Isaiah or Paul were familiar, everyday objects or experiences, and it is therefore easy for us to miss the affinities which imposed themselves on the inward eye of the biblical writers” (145).

<sup>104</sup> Johnson, “Introduction,” 37.

<sup>105</sup> Timothy Binkley, “On the Truth and Probity of Metaphor,” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Metaphor*, ed. Mark Johnson, 136–53 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1981) 143.

“cognitive”) aspect of metaphorical speech acts can be re-expressed literally, though it may take a long time before it is done successfully. Any metaphorical utterance that cannot ever be re-expressed literally at all is devoid of presentative content.

(3) **Critical Metaphoricalism:** we can say some things literally about any subject. But, when we are concerned with unobservable realities (e.g., inner human experiences and the supernatural world), their mysterious depths can only be understood, and described, metaphorically.

(4) **Modified Radicalism:** all speech about unobservable realities is and must be metaphorical. We can re-express most metaphorical utterances in other terms; but when unobservable realities are the subject, then the re-expressions will also be metaphorical (often hidden metaphors).

(5) **Radicalism:** almost all the realities we experience, except for emergent categories such as up-down, heavy-light, etc., can only be thought of and spoken of metaphorically. Whenever we use any of the standard linguistic expressions that are parts of a hidden metaphor (“winning an argument”), we are forced to think metaphorically (of “argument as war”).<sup>106</sup>

Macky’s analysis of these positions is fair-minded and cogent. Both varieties of literalism stand close to each other and have few modern proponents. Radicalism makes a valid point about the widespread presence of hidden metaphors in language and thought, but overextends its claim by maintaining that one’s concept of something is always a reflection of some metaphorical theory of it.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, radicalism leads to a notion of truth that is unacceptable for philosophical realists. After a stimulating discussion of conceptual metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson flatly state, “We do not believe that

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<sup>106</sup> Macky, *Centrality of Metaphors*, 163–64. For survey of positions on the nature of metaphor in general, see Lakoff and Turner, *More than Cool Reason*, 110–39. Their survey is more detailed than Macky’s and favors what Macky calls “radicalism.”

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 160. Michael Reddy is also a member of the “radical” camp and has contended that linguistic expressions are laden with hidden metaphors which thus constrain thinking. See “The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict in Our Language about Language,” in *Metaphor and Thought*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Andrew Ortony, 164–201 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) and Macky’s critique (156–59).

there is such a thing as *objective* (absolute and unconditional) *truth*.”<sup>108</sup> The remaining two middle positions are not that different from each other. Macky argues for critical metaphoricalism and stands in agreement with Soskice who uses the phrase “critical realism” instead. She proposed,

A form of critical realism is advocated for theology, not because it is the only cogent position, but because so much of the Christian tradition has been undeniably realist in sensibility, and because it is important to defend a version of theological realism, given the anti-realist drift of so much modern philosophical theology.<sup>109</sup>

As a general presupposition for the remainder of this dissertation which is concerned with a key biblical metaphor for God, I accept the position of “critical realism” which recognizes the value of literal paraphrase, yet holds that metaphors are the best means of describing the supernatural and that they actually do have the power to refer to what is real. Black would have agreed.

I have been presenting in this essay a conception of metaphors which postulates interactions between two systems, grounded in analogies of structure (partly created, partly discovered). The imputed isomorphisms can, as we have seen, be rendered explicit and are then proper subjects for the determination of appropriateness, faithfulness, partiality, superficiality, and the like. Metaphors that survive such critical examination can properly be held to convey, in indispensable fashion, insight into the systems to which they refer. In this way, they can, and sometimes do, generate insight about ‘how things are’ in reality.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 159 (italics original).

<sup>109</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 137. This is also the position of Ian Barbour who uses the same description “critical realism” which upholds a cognitive function for metaphor-laden religious language (Barbour, *Myths, Models, and Paradigms*, 110 as well as Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* [Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966] 162–74).

<sup>110</sup> Black, “More about Metaphor,” 39.

Another proponent of this approach is Earl MacCormac who studied the varieties of meaning in a metaphor and concluded,

Metaphors create new meanings of various types; without them, neither knowledge nor language can grow. Without cognitively based linguistic devices to juxtapose the old in unfamiliar ways, new ways of thinking and new expressions for those thoughts cannot emerge.<sup>111</sup>

When the discussion of metaphorical truth narrows to how finite language can describe a transcendent God, the issues become decidedly theological. Part of this issue involves the propriety of anthropomorphic accounts of God, but this will be taken up in chapter 3. It is important to note at this point, that anthropomorphic language is a subset of metaphor which is, in turn, an indispensable mode of theological discourse. Tremper Longman wrote, “Anthropomorphisms are poetic symbols or, more particularly, metaphors for divine attributes which would otherwise be indescribable.”<sup>112</sup> Likewise, Soskice concluded, “In our stammering after a transcendent God we must speak, for the most part, metaphorically or not at all.”<sup>113</sup> Just as believers are called upon to exercise existential trust toward God, those who would comprehend theological metaphors must possess a sense of cognitive optimism. Although C. S. Lewis elsewhere affirmed the truth of metaphorically

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<sup>111</sup> Earl R. MacCormac, *A Cognitive Theory of Metaphor* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1985) 206.

<sup>112</sup> Tremper Longman III, “Anthropomorphism,” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright, 30–31 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1988) 31.

<sup>113</sup> Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 140.

stated Christian doctrines,<sup>114</sup> he nevertheless remarked,

I have not tried to prove that the religious sayings are true, only that they are significant: if you meet them with a certain good will, a certain readiness to find meaning. For if they should happen to contain information about real things, you will not get it on any other terms.<sup>115</sup>

### C. Summary and Commitments

The previous discussion has traced the history of how theorists have understood metaphor, first as merely a rhetorical figure of speech but later as a fully cognitive mode of communication in which metaphorical linguistic expressions reveal a deeper metaphorical perspective. Since the subject of metaphor is of interest to scholars working in a variety of fields, this chapter has drawn on the insights of a large community of thinkers and has collected observations that are especially relevant to the interpretation of metaphor in biblical literature. One's particular view of what metaphor is and how it operates is largely a function of one's philosophical and theological commitments. This chapter has briefly surveyed the field of options for understanding metaphor and embraced a stance known as "critical realism." It has considered the salient features of this position and thus taken steps toward providing a foundation for dealing with a key OT metaphor in which God is presented in terms of a host.

In summary, I set forth the following definitions and presuppositions:

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<sup>114</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1947) 95-96.

<sup>115</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Language of Religion," in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper, 129-41 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 141.

- (1) A metaphor is that figurative way of speaking in which one thing is spoken of in terms which are seen to be suggestive of another.
- (2) An analogy is the ground of the relationship between two realities in a metaphor. Positive and negative analogies point out similarities and differences. Neutral analogies are more ambiguous and open-ended, functioning as invitations to exploration.
- (3) Although metaphor has rhetorical value, it is not primarily a rhetorical device whose meaning equals that of a literal paraphrase. It is a cognitive device capable of communicating insight and truth.
- (4) In the most inclusive sense, metaphor is more than a linguistic expression but is a function of the verbal nature of human consciousness. Hence, metaphor cannot be separated from thought. It is therefore possible to speak of a general metaphorical perspective which gives rise to individual linguistic instances of metaphorical expression.
- (5) Especially when taken together within the context of a single work of literature, metaphor can represent a perspective on reality, also known as a world view.
- (6) It is possible to speak literally about any subject, but metaphorical language is especially suited for dealing with unobservable, transcendent realities.
- (7) The terms and ground of a metaphor can be explained, assisting the reader to better comprehend the metaphor and to make sense of related metaphors. But this explanation can never exhaust the

meaning of the metaphor. Interpretation of a metaphor thus has a rule-governed, canonical aspect as well as a non-rule-governed, noncanonical aspect which is especially suited to providing insight to unknown subjects.

- (8) A given instance of metaphor may be profitably analyzed at the word-level as a figure of speech, as well as at the levels of statement and discourse. The levels of word, statement, and discourse correspond to the disciplines of rhetoric, semantics, and hermeneutics.
- (9) The meaning of the metaphor ultimately belongs within the total speech context in which it occurs and is linked to intention of the speaker as ascertained by consideration of the total speech context.
- (10) The act of comprehending a metaphor may produce a non-cognitive sense of community between the speaker and readers who accept the metaphor's invitation to discover a new perspective.