

# I Background



## Chapter One

# Metaphors for the moment

### Metaphors: ornamental or fundamental?

#### *Definitions*

Reflection on the value of metaphor has a long history. While Plato was suspicious of anything beyond plain speech,<sup>1</sup> Aristotle appreciated the unique value of metaphor: 'Ordinary words convey only what we know already; it is from metaphor that we can best get hold of something fresh' (*Rhetoric* 1410b). Therefore he considered the making of metaphors a worthwhile pursuit: 'But the greatest thing by far is to be a master of metaphor. That alone cannot be learned; it is the token of genius. For the right use of metaphor means a perception of the similarity in dissimilar things' (*Poetics* 1459a).

What was the basis for debate among the Greeks was an established tradition in the Near East. Figurative language is evident in a wide variety of genres and appears to be as natural in human communication as literal speech. The Bible is a rich repository of figures of speech that contribute to its communicative efficacy (cf. Bullinger 1968).<sup>2</sup>

In order to understand the nature and uses of metaphor, we need to appreciate the nature of figurative language in general. A trope or figure of speech is a term that is used in a non-literal way. Examples include simile, metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, anomaly, irony and paradox. Each of these calls on a higher order of cognition for comprehension. Similar to these elements of speech are images and symbols that are typically non-literary in form. Ryken et al. (1998: xiii) define a verbal image as 'any object or action that we picture in

<sup>1</sup> In more recent times John Locke (1894: bk 3, 10.34) agreed that figurative speech serves 'for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions, and thereby mislead the judgment. . . .' This view represents a bias towards rational, literal and objective scientific thought.

<sup>2</sup> For recent interdisciplinary investigations of specific biblical metaphors, see Brettler (1989), Nielsen (1989), Camp & Fontaine (1993), Stienstra (1993) and G. A. Long (1994). On figurative language in the Bible generally, see Caird (1980), Macky (1990) and Ryken et al. (1998).

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words'. It is usually rich in overtones and generous with connotations, deployed in order to elicit an experiential reflection. A symbol is closely related. It is 'an image that stands for something else in addition to its literal meaning' (ibid. xiv). Metaphors and similes are frequent symbols in the Bible.

Our primary interest is in those figures of speech that are used to make comparisons.<sup>3</sup> Metaphors are implicitly comparative (e.g. God is my rock, light or shepherd), whereas similes are explicit (e.g. the kingdom of heaven is like . . .). Synecdoche is the use of a part to represent the whole ('Zion' stands for the Holy Land) or the whole to represent the part ('Zion' stands for the temple in Jerusalem). Metonymy is the use of a related object to refer to something. The shepherd's staff, for example, is a metonym for royal office or authority.

Resemblance is central to any definition of metaphor (cf. Ricoeur 1974: 53–55), though it exists in a creative tension with dissimilarity: 'To see the like is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different. This tension between sameness and difference characterizes the logical structure of likeness' (Ricoeur 1979: 146). Readers or listeners are teased by this tension into considering the points of similarity.

Caird (1980: 145–149) notes that the points of comparison can be quite diverse. To say that someone's reputation (lit.) 'stinks' (Gen. 34:30) is to import sensation from one setting into another. To say 'their hearts turned to water' (Josh. 7:5) is to compare effect from one domain to another. That is, their courage dissipated. Comparing a type of activity is more common. Thus, it is common in ancient texts to read of people being '(shep)herded' by rulers and military commanders.<sup>4</sup>

Metaphors are not simply equations with transferable attributes. They create a potential exchange between two domains or environments in which the inner logic or relations between various elements are compared. To compare a king to a shepherd is to download a collection of contextual associations regarding shepherds in relation to their sheep. The metaphor may then highlight resemblance in more than one way. For example, there may be a feeling of protection along with a delineation of shepherding functions.

<sup>3</sup> The native OT terminology for comparison is *māšāl* (from the root meaning 'to be comparable to'), translated 'proverb' or 'parable'.

<sup>4</sup> In metaphor theory three components are distinguished: the subject (or 'tenor'), the object (or 'vehicle') and the similarities being highlighted. In the language of semiotics these elements are referred to as the referent, the sign and the signification(s).

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I. A. Richards (1936) was the first to describe the interactive relationship between these two linguistic contexts. A metaphor leads us to reconsider the two distinct domains from the perspective of the shared elements in focus. What happens when these two worlds are placed side by side is a resonating of what M. Black (1962: 40) calls 'systems of associated commonplaces'. These are tantalizing potential extensions, implications or 'entailments' that contribute to a metaphor's multivalence. R. H. Brown (1977: 88) describes an 'electric field of potential elaborations' which helps a metaphor deliver its meaning 'in the interplay of juxtaposed associations'.

While not all metaphors have such extensive surplus meaning, obvious organic associations naturally 'travel' together in familiar configurations. Certainly this is the case with shepherd language in the biblical texts we are about to survey. The metaphor drags a collection of inter-related associations from the source domain into the target domain as *prospects* for comparison. The hearer/reader understands that the selected features of a subject have been recontextualized. Such recontextualizing generates new ways of seeing familiar things.

Appreciating metaphors and their 'associated commonplaces' (as with all figurative language) requires a certain level of cultural competence. Just like jokes, metaphors are often meaningful only to the culturally initiated. Knowing what is (not) implied or inferred is a challenge. For this reason we begin with an effort to understand pastoral realities in the ancient world (ch. 2). The next chapter summarizes the standardized metaphorical associations in extrabiblical literature (ch. 3). Awareness of conventional entailments prepares us to appreciate the likely correspondences biblical authors had in mind. Together these introductory chapters provide a measure of cultural competence in preparation for our investigation of the Bible's shepherd passages.

The importance of social context and culture in the interpretation of metaphor has been emphasized by a number of theorists (e.g. Quinn 1987, 1991). Language has both semantic (linguistic) and pragmatic (social) dimensions. Metaphors work in a given context because of 'socially binding connotations' (Dittmer 1977: 570) that form a tacit consensus about a legitimate range of meanings. The irony (as in all figurative language) is that the bending of the normal rules of literal speech is only successfully accomplished when readers/listeners are aware of the rules and in expectance of general compliance with them. Metaphors create a bridge between two

specific phenomenal worlds, one that can only be crossed by two parties (speaker/listener) who are similarly socialized. In this sense, metaphors are made for the moment.

Ezekiel provides an interesting test case for a reader's cultural competence. In real life, the primary purpose in raising flocks is to gain income. Herding is an economic choice, a livelihood. Any shepherd, ancient or modern, would be surprised if he were criticized for raising animals only for their fibre, milk and meat. Yet this is Ezekiel's critique of the 'shepherds of Israel' in Ezekiel 34. The criticism only makes sense if the leaders of Israel are *undershepherds*. In that case they have no right to the products. The parable goes right to the heart of the matter: the rulers behaved like owners rather than hired servants.

### *The way we think*

To this point we have acknowledged the unique place figures of speech have in language. But metaphor is now recognized as fundamental to thought as well.<sup>5</sup> Our earliest efforts at conceptualization require analogical thinking. The mental categories we construct for the world we sense are built by seeking and seeing order, similarity and pattern. To move from the familiar to the unfamiliar we must categorize on the basis of comparison. Analogical thinking is therefore natural and necessary.

Rosch (1978) has shown that this cognitive process is a search for 'family resemblance'<sup>6</sup> among objects, judging them (unconsciously) in terms of prototypes. Prototypes are exemplars for phenomenological categories, ideal members that possess the primary attributes by which we define a class. While leaving room for ambiguity, our cognition categorizes new objects in terms of learned prototypes.<sup>7</sup> The ensuing discussion about shepherd rulers begins with an investigation of two prototypical shepherd rulers in biblical literature, Moses and David. To use theological language, these figures 'typologically' anticipate the role of Christ as the ultimate shepherd.

<sup>5</sup> The most accessible introduction to this view is Lakoff & Johnson (1980). While their philosophical presuppositions are radically constructivist (assuming that 'reality' is socially and cognitively constructed rather than objectively 'out there'), their insights regarding the way people conceive of the world are useful.

<sup>6</sup> Using a phrase made popular by Wittgenstein.

<sup>7</sup> Stereotyping is a similar, natural mechanism for interpreting what would otherwise be a bewildering variety of individuals.

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Because of this natural, conceptualizing movement from the known to the unknown, a majority of metaphors make use of concrete or physical realities to describe less tangible realities. The physical world is 'mapped' onto our symbolic and spiritual world. We use elements of and effects from physical phenomena to understand and describe transcendent realities. Theology is, therefore, metaphor-dependent and metaphor-rich (McFague 1982; Soskice 1985). We need metaphors if we are to understand God. Anthropomorphism is an indispensable means by which biblical writers convey their thoughts about God (Caird 1980: 172–182). The metaphorical phrase 'God is my shepherd' is thus, in the words of Ortony (1975), 'necessary and not just nice'. Or, to quote Frederick Ferré, anthropomorphisms are 'necessarily not avoidable' (1987: 188). Thus, the vocation of shepherding itself became a vital medium of revelation.

If metaphors are fundamental to human thought, then we might compare their place in our thinking to scientific models (M. Black 1962). These are comprehensive viewpoints, frames of reference through which we view reality. This may seem like a grand claim for metaphor, but a case can be made at least for central 'root' metaphors functioning this way (see below). Social scientists have chosen different terms for such integrating perspectives: paradigms (Kuhn 1970; Gregory 1983); schemas (Fiedler 1982); frames (Goffman 1974; Bolman & Deal 1997); prisms (Grant & Osrick 1996: 147–165); images (Morgan 1986); symbols (Geertz 1971); epistemes (Iggers 1975:6); implicit theories (Brief & Downey 1983); representations (Sternberg & Frensch 1991); cognitive maps (Weick & Bougon 1986); mental models (Senge 1990); cultural models (Caws 1974); cultural systems (Geertz 1966); and world hypotheses (Pepper 1942).<sup>8</sup> Of course, these terms are neither completely synonymous nor do they all possess the same scope. But each term represents a concession that *knowledge is perspectival*.

This awareness has broken down the rigid boundaries often assumed to exist between the left and right brain, between objective, scientific, abstract thought and subjective, imaginative, concrete thought. No doubt there are varied ways of thinking. But the barrier between them is unexpectedly permeable. Polanyi (1964) exposed the whole scientific enterprise as one propelled more by insight

<sup>8</sup> Other terms that have currency include matrices, filters, world-views, constructs, dominant or implicit ontologies, and root metaphors.

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(‘personal knowledge’) than by incremental discovery. Kuhn (1970) summarized the history of science as a movement from one paradigm to another, each one simultaneously resisting and inviting bits of new information.

One value of these insights for our study is the awareness that human thought tends towards an economy of explanatory images. We cultivate mental categories that preserve as much information as possible with as little effort as possible (Rosch 1978). This tendency requires mental frameworks that are suitably matched to the world around us. These frameworks are metaphorical in nature.

Metaphorical thought provides coherence to our thinking about the world, but in so doing it also creates limits. While a picture may be ‘worth a thousand words’, it is only one picture. Might a thousand other pictures be possible? If metaphor provides a ‘filter’ through which we perceive the world (M. Black 1962: 39–40), then other filters are not only possible but desirable. This is not to suggest an unfettered relativist epistemology. Rather this is recognition that there are numerous (not limitless) valid perspectives on reality. The four Gospel accounts present filters or frames through which we appreciate the nature(s) of Jesus: as New Moses, New David or New Israel. These are complementary metaphorical re-presentations. Similarly, biblical writers talk of God as rock, father, king, judge, hen and shepherd. By highlighting certain attributes with associated affects, a particular image inevitably veils others. We simply cannot conceive of all attributes at once. Thus, the serviceability of a metaphor is its liability.

The likelihood of multiple metaphors prompts a look at ‘mixed metaphors’. It appears that biblical writers did not hesitate to combine their images. For example, Matthew’s account of Jesus sending out the disciples to minister represents their mission as being sent ‘like sheep among wolves’ (Matt. 10:16). This disturbing image is partly qualified by the use of two other similes: ‘Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves.’ Although the disciples were to take nothing for their own defence, they were to be shrewd. The imaginative combination of sheep, snakes and doves kept innocence from being cheapened to naïveté and shrewdness from being reduced to self-protection. Our study will climax with the sustained, ironic mixed metaphor in Revelation of the Lion-Lamb. The ease with which canonical writers merged their metaphors may be a clue that they appreciated both the constructive and constrictive nature of figurative thought.

## Metaphors at work

### *Classifications*

Metaphors may be novel, living and active, or they may be dead, frozen clichés. Others are in between these poles, but likely moving towards lifelessness. Something about metaphors tends to cool off or atrophy with use. Once a figure becomes extensively used it is often mistaken for literal speech. Who, when hearing of the foot of a mountain or head of a pin, pictures the rest of the mountain or pin like a body? The meanings of base or top have, over time, entered the dictionary as denotations.

When we encounter shepherd language in the Near East it is frequently fossilized in titles and epithets. Translators will often supply the word ‘rule’ in place of verbs for shepherding and ‘ruler’ for the noun. Perhaps, after time, that is all these terms meant. The ‘electric field of potential elaborations’ has been turned off. The metaphor is apparently dead. However, in a remarkable number of instances and genres, shepherd language is explicitly elaborated. The metaphor is thawed and revived for reuse. A king not only calls himself a shepherd but he represents himself as the source of green pastures and safe fold. God is pictured leading his sheep by still waters and along sure paths.

Because of this remarkably persistent reuse of the shepherd construct in the ancient world, it should not be classified as dead, but ‘retired’ (to use yet another metaphor!). Metaphors can come out of ‘retirement’, brought back into service at any time by any user, as long as there are hearers who understand the contextual elements. We must pay attention to each context to examine the extent to which various elements are (re)animated. We will find that biblical writers – even more than other Ancient Near Eastern sources – re-employed the pastoral metaphor with intentionality. Time after time, text after text, the shepherd is called back to serve as a frame of reference for evaluating leadership. The durability of the metaphor is all the more striking when one takes into account the fact that in the New Testament period the social status of literal shepherds had been seriously diminished.

Another important distinction can be made between descriptive, conventional metaphors and those that are constructive.<sup>9</sup> Conventional metaphors are typically constitutive of a reigning paradigm.

<sup>9</sup> Compare the concepts in this section to Kuhn’s distinction between ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ science.

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There is an ‘optimum overlap’ of elements, with similarities outweighing the differences (Oswick et al. 2002: 297–298). For example, the earth has been viewed as a mechanism since the rise of modern science. This is not a startling image. It reinforces the standard way of viewing it. Shepherd ruler language was much the same in the ancient world. The gods were viewed as having a certain shepherd-like responsibility for humans, and human rulers were accountable for a similar kind of responsibility with respect to their subjects. This kind of metaphor supports widely held perspectives, and grounds them in natural phenomena.

Constructive metaphors, by contrast, have a ring of novelty and/or irony. They are generative of new ways of thinking that may be disruptive to the standard world view. Jesus used constructive images often in his parables, subverting the frames and models of his listeners. To say that the kingdom of heaven was like leaven was to use a substance typically associated with evil and equate it with something good. To say the kingdom of heaven was like a wedding feast was a conventional metaphor. But then to say that the first list of guests had refused and now everyone was invited – ‘good and bad’ (Matt. 22:10) – this was scandalous. For Jesus to say ‘I am the good shepherd’ (John 10:11, 14) was to take a conventional metaphor for God and associate it with himself. This provocative new way of imaging reality came with another disturbing entailment: the religious leaders were the hirelings and thieves!

Another important distinction should be made between ‘root’ metaphors (Pepper 1942) and isolated, simple metaphors. ‘Root’ metaphors are so named because they are often implicit in the use of a ‘tree’ of related figures, lying under the ‘soil’ of explicit speech. The metaphor of mind-as-computer is a widely accepted though typically unstated analogue. It is implied in an expression like, ‘I need more time to *process* that.’ Similarly, biblical references to people led to pleasant places, provided with water and given rest indicate a pastoral metaphor underneath the surface. More obviously, any figurative reference to a person or group as sheep automatically triggers the image of a shepherd and potentially images the whole pastoralist system.

Most theorists define root metaphors not only as those that are implicit in discourse, but also as those that are comprehensive in scope. These metaphors tend to explain the use of related metaphors and provide primary organizing rubrics in a culture. They are *integrating* metaphors that have the greatest carrying capacity for

meaning. In this sense, root metaphors are similar to and indicative of a world view. We will discover that pastoral imagery contributes to canonical thought in this fundamental way.

### *Functions of metaphor*

Metaphors invite both comprehension and apprehension of perspectives (R. H. Brown 1977: 115–125). Comprehension emphasizes the cognitive aspects of meaning-making through metaphor. This has been a major emphasis in metaphor theory since I. A. Richards. Soskice (1985: 31ff.) calls this the ‘incremental’ view of metaphor, whereby meaning is achieved by building a comparison.

Apprehension emphasizes the existential aspects of interpretation. Metaphors, like non-literary icons, ‘invite, incite, and induce’ (M. Black 1979: 29) their readers to *experience* a reality, not just hear about it. Lakoff and Johnson (1980: 71) call this global understanding an ‘experiential *gestalt*’. We are familiar with this effect in the context of Gospel parables. They were only understood fully by ‘those who had ears to hear and eyes to see’. The images which Jesus painted with his words were not simply sources of information; they were invitations to accept or reject a novel perspective. They forced a choice.

With this existential dimension in mind we should be careful to appreciate the affective and artistic elements of metaphors. Though Classical sources disparaged metaphors as passion-stirring devices, such affects should not be excluded from a fuller analysis of metaphor’s utility. It is precisely in the *combining* of cognitive content with affective associations that metaphor gains its power. A simple metaphor, like a small key, can open a whole world and immerse a willing participant in all of its sensory stimulation.

While many metaphors are much more modest in their aims, they all have a capacity to communicate in ways that are unique to figurative language. They are compact, felicitous and engaging. They prompt reflection, feeling, evaluation and action. The meaning of a metaphor, like the meaning of a joke, can be unpacked and, to a certain extent, explained. But the full impact of the image on one’s imagination requires an image. Metaphors are irreducible moments of multi-modal communication.

### *Political symbols, social roles and community narratives*

Political language has always been conducive to metaphors. As Seth Thompson (1996) wryly observes, ‘Politics without metaphors is like a fish without water.’ From a cynical point of view, this is because

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politics is about manipulating popular impressions and assessments. People need to be coerced into viewing their governments as benevolent or at least benign. They need to be persuaded to give of their resources to an invisible entity that is constantly defining itself to its members by powerful rhetoric.

Governments, of course, do have tangible elements like buildings, programmes and regulations. These constitute what Walter Bagehot calls government's 'efficient' part (Dittmer 1977: 559). But Bagehot also refers to its 'theatrical' part: the symbols, traditions, myths and ideals that form a *sense* of country. Subsequent analysis of political symbolism has uncovered its powerful influence over the way people conceive of their own government as well as those of others.<sup>10</sup> This is an important angle of inquiry, because many of the texts we are investigating are 'official' texts that represent a theo-political perspective.

Contemporary study of political symbolism is indebted to symbolic interactionism, a social psychological perspective rooted in dramatic categories. People in the public sphere are interpreted as 'actors' who 'perform' within the boundaries of prescribed 'roles'. This perspective highlights certain elements of political drama. It locates actors in a narrative that tends to take on mythic proportions. Leaders take role sets that match archetypal patterns played out in 'type scenes'. In a sense, then, roles are metaphors by which people interpret a host of associated implications.

In the case of shepherd language, the metaphor explicitly imports a known role from another domain of human experience. The role expectations of a shepherd in real life are precisely the extensions of the metaphor that characterize a ruler. He must 'play his part' just as a shepherd plays his.

A valuable insight of role theory is that people play different roles simultaneously. Each person must configure a 'role set'. Shepherd is a felicitous metaphor for human leadership because both occupations have a comparable variety of diverse tasks that are constantly negotiated. As we will see in the next chapter, shepherds had to combine broad competencies in animal husbandry with capacities for scouting, defence and negotiation. The use of the shepherd metaphor for leaders affirms the coherence and inner logic of these diverse tasks and competencies. 'Performance' is judged by the expectations

<sup>10</sup> See Lasswell (1979–80) and M. Edelman (1971) in general, Kemp (1989) for Egypt, and Larsen (1979) for Mesopotamia.

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associated with that role set. A good shepherd is one who does what is required by each circumstance, in each context.

What is most intriguing about the dramatic perspective is that it highlights the human tendency to construct roles within the context of a community's narratives or myths.<sup>11</sup> There is a 'storied nature' to human conduct (Sarbin 1986). Meaning is derived not only through comprehensive root metaphors but also through the stories those metaphors imply. What we will find in the biblical passages discussed below is more than a root metaphor of God or king as shepherd. We will find a persistent, fully developed narrative of the divine Shepherd who, with his undershepherds, looks after the needs of his vulnerable flock as they wander along the margins of settled society. The metaphor triggers a host of associations that root the role of leaders in the great history of salvation.

<sup>11</sup> The term 'myth' is used here not in contrast to historical fact, but rather for the foundational, integrating narrative of a community.