

The Role of Religious Metaphors in Cognition Based on the Bible

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Abstract:

The intricate relationship between religion and metaphor has long been a focal point of academic inquiry. This study uses the Bible as its main research topic to analyze the function and varieties of metaphors in religious texts and their effects on human cognition. It does this by drawing on cognitive linguistics and hermeneutic techniques. The study divides religious metaphors into two categories: single- and multi-interpretation kinds. It then uses concrete examples to examine how these metaphors are expressed and what cognitive underpinnings they have in the Bible. The paper underscores the diversity and dynamic nature of metaphor interpretation, revealing the essential role metaphors play in religious communication and belief formation. Ultimately, this study not only enhances our cognitive understanding of religious metaphors but also offers new perspectives for cross-cultural religious research.

Keywords: Metaphor; Bible; Cognitive theories.

1. Introduction

Metaphors are not only present throughout the historical development of humanity but also permeate all aspects of life, playing an indispensable role. Religion, in particular, is deeply intertwined with metaphor in many respects. The paper focuses on the Bible as its primary text of study. The Bible is a highly seminal and influential text in Western culture. Biblical metaphors are extensively used, with Augustine noting that the Bible frequently conveys its messages through metaphorical language. For a very long time, the study of metaphor has been highly valued by a large number of specialists and academics from many fields. In order to examine metaphor's important function in thought and communication, this research employs hermeneutic techniques and cognitive linguistics theory.

1.1 Definition of Metaphor

It is widely accepted that the essence of metaphor lies in understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another. There are two primary methods for defining metaphor in general, which correspond to two distinct schools of thinking. Metaphor is commonly understood by classical tradition scholars as a figure of speech and language strategy that enables someone to describe one thing in terms of another. With the advancement of study in this field, the definition of metaphor has expanded as well.

In contemporary metaphor theory, the study of metaphor encompasses two important aspects: cognitive and pragmatic. Regarding metaphor comprehension, there has long been a difference between these two schools of thought:

the pragmatic perspective maintains that comprehension of metaphors primarily depends on the language elements used in communication, while the cognitive perspective argues that comprehension of metaphors primarily depends on non-verbal cognitive processes and reasoning [1]. Despite their differences, cognitive linguistics and pragmatics should offer complementary rather than contradictory perspectives on metaphor. Metaphor is not merely a linguistic phenomenon that reflects cross-domain mappings in the conceptual system and expresses these mappings in thought, it is also an independent communication tool with distinct value for every party in a discourse context.

2. Literature Review

This section will present the definition and relevant theories of metaphor, as well as biblical interpretation. Additionally, it will introduce theoretical foundation and research methods of this article.

2.1 Western Studies on Biblical Metaphor

In the Western history, Aristotle was the first to delve deeply into the meaning of metaphor. He offered a figurative interpretation of texts, in contrast to the Antioch School, which emphasized literal and historical interpretations. Afterwards, Aurelius Augustinus similarly examines the ambiguity of biblical metaphors and offers guidance on how to differentiate between literal and figurative meanings.

In the 1970s, as the study of metaphor gained momentum, Paul Ricoeur provided a comprehensive review of

the contributions and limitations of traditional metaphor studies from Aristotle to the present in *The Rule of Metaphor* [2]. He began exploring metaphor from a semantic perspective, shifting its from word level to the discourse level.

In their 1980 co-authored works *Metaphor We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson elevated the role of metaphor in cognitive progress and introduced a new approach to studying metaphor from a cognitive perspective [3]. However, cognitive research often focused too heavily on the underlying cognitive processes, sometimes overlooking the role that language units themselves play in meaning comprehension. In his 1982 book *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature*, Northrop Frye highlighted the significance of metaphor and symbolism in language. After analyzing and summarizing the parables and imagery in the Bible along with their implied meanings, he categorized them into two groups: Apocalyptic Imagery and Demonic Imagery [4]. During this period, the Bible has consistently served as one of the most significant sources of religious metaphor. Additionally, Stephen Pihlaja explored a case study on the interpretation of metaphorical language, using it to demonstrate how authoritative texts are understood within social interaction and suggesting a new direction for interpreting biblical metaphors [5]. In recent years, in *Cognitive Linguistics and Religious Language* co-authored by Peter Richardson, Charles M. Mueller and Stephen Pihlaja, the authors have defined the concept of metaphor analysis and applies it to religious language, drawing on authentic samples from a range of faiths, text types and modes of interactive discourse [6].

2.2 Chinese Studies on Biblical Metaphor

The study of biblical metaphor began relatively in China. In *Sacred Implication: A Comparative Study of the Book of Songs and the Bible* by Zhang Lixin, and *Comparative Study of Zhuangzi and the Bible* by Gao Shen, they treated metaphor as a literary device, comparing the Bible with traditional Chinese classics in terms of creative techniques, ideological content and cultural influence [7]. For instance, Gao Shen specifically explored the parallels between the metaphors in the Bible and the allegories in *Zhuangzi*. However, the study of the type of metaphor has remained largely confined to the field of rhetoric.

Ye Shuxian's *The Biblical Metaphor* is an extensively studied work in the field in China. In this work, Ye selected dozens of symbolically significant images, such as forbidden fruit, serpent, Babel, etc., and analyzes them from multiple perspectives, exploring their potential mythological meanings and theological implications [8]. Moreover, Lu Yan and Yi Ruiying analyzed various model metaphors and metaphorical language in Bible in their article [9]. The study showed that interpreting the Bible metaphori-

cally has important literary and rhetorical significance as well as being a useful cognitive tool for appreciating and comprehending language. Additionally, using the purposeful metaphor theory as a framework, Ma Junjie and Zhang Xiaoxuan investigated the cognitive building process of intentional metaphor in literary texts [10]. The study also highlights two linguistic forms—deviation and parallelism—that help biblical texts' intentional metaphors be constructed and foreground their meaning in the reader's mind. However, these publications frequently overlook to take into account how the reader's subjective goals and social relationships affect the interpretation of metaphor, instead focusing on the theological significance of the cognitive structure of biblical metaphorical passages.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

Cognitive metaphor theory is mainly represented by the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) proposed by Lakoff and Johnson and the Conceptual Blending theory (CBT) put forward by Fauconnier and Turner. These theories deconstruct the generation and application of metaphorical relations and the associated mental processes.

Cross-domain mapping (CMT) emphasizes the significance of metaphor and proposes that metaphor is a cognitive strategy for comprehending one conceptual domain through another. The target domain is the one being explained, and the source domain is the one giving the analogy. A classic example is "time is money," where money (the source domain) and its features are used to understand the idea of time (the target domain). According to CBT, the core of metaphor is the integration of mental realms. Mental spaces, which include both conceptual domains and the particular setting in which individuals find themselves, are imaginary realms that are triggered when people think or talk about something. By interacting and projecting onto one another, these spaces generate novel conceptual frameworks. The mapping of the source domain to the target domain is just one aspect of this broader process.

This paper analyzes biblical metaphors based on CMT. CMT posits that metaphor is a universal phenomenon in human daily life, influencing language, thought and behavior. According to this theory, the term "conceptual metaphor" describes a cognitive process that goes into creating and managing a metaphorical idea system. It also mirrors cognitive thinking processes in humans. This theory holds that the foundational metaphors created from cognitive experiences in interacting with the outside world, as well as the function of cross-domain mapping inside the human conceptual system, are essential to comprehending metaphor [1]. This paper will examine the reciprocal relationship between biblical metaphors and human experience from the standpoint of this philosophy.

2.4 Research Methods

This paper will employ the method of regional hermeneutics to distinguish between literal and metaphorical interpretations and to analyze the textual meaning of the latter. Additionally, it will investigate the influence of the interpreter's subjective experience and understanding of objective relational networks in the reconstruction of metaphorical meaning.

3. The Function and Types of Metaphor in Religious Texts

3.1 The Function of Metaphor in Religious Texts

The significance of metaphor is first evident in its ability to make concepts more accessible and understandable. Metaphors help simplify complex ideas by using familiar and specific source domains to explain more abstract and less comprehensible concepts. In religious language, the use of metaphor is especially important in deepening people's religious experience, as religious rituals and beliefs often lie "at the far end of the spectrum of intersubjective inaccessibility" [6].

However, the use of metaphor can also lead to ambiguity, causing believers' interpretations of religious texts to vary. For religious organizations, metaphor can serve a self-serving function, as believers may interpret doctrines according to their own purposes and preferences, which are influenced by their personal experiences. Nonetheless, this ambiguity is not entirely negative, as it can foster openness and encourage active participation in the lives of believers [7].

Therefore, metaphors can also reflect the specific ideas of the interpreter. These characteristics of metaphor allow interpreters to decide which aspects of a metaphor to emphasize and which to overlook. This interpretive flexibility is available to all believers. Therefore, metaphor and its interpretation can serve to solidify specific ideas and act as markers of membership within certain group. For example, the differing metaphorical interpretations of God, as seen in the debates over GOD IS FATHER versus GOD IS MOTHER, highlight a sectarian division. While Christians generally recognize that God cannot be accurately described in gendered terms, some similarly reject the use of GOD IS MOTHER.

3.2 The Types of Metaphor in Religious Texts

Metaphors are much more than just ordinary expressions with new meanings. Conversely, the metaphor's source domain draws attention to particular aspects of a target domain while hiding others that have nothing to do with the target domain [6]. It is the particulars that need academic interpretation. This article divides religious meta-

phors into two categories: single-interpretation metaphors and multi-interpretation metaphors, based on these characteristics of metaphor interpretation. The metaphor with a single interpretation implies a common understanding of the target domain as it is projected by the source domain of the metaphor. Put differently, interpreters typically perceive the metaphor in a consistent way. For example, symbolic objects like doves are frequently connected to traits like peace and docility.

Multi-interpretations metaphor stands in contrast to those with a single interpretation. These metaphors can be understood in various ways, as different interpreters may draw on their social background or cognitive experiences to arrive at distinct meanings. For example, the metaphor of "the Way" in the *Analects* of Confucius can be interpreted in various ways, including as a moral guide, a symbol of social, or a path for spiritual practice. In diverse cultural contexts, interpretations of these metaphors can vary widely, and they may shift over time as the perspectives of readers evolve.

4. Cognitive Study on Biblical Metaphors

4.1 The Biblical Single-Interpretation Metaphor

Human experiences with objects have given rise to numerous ontological metaphors, where events, activities, emotions and opinions are conceptualized as entities or substances. These metaphors allow people to understand abstract concepts through familiar objects and experiences. Among these, metaphors involving plants and animals are particularly prevalent in the Gospels.

In the Bible, the metaphor of sheep and shepherd serves as a prominent illustration of the relationship between humanity and God. The sheep represent the righteous and the goats symbolize the wicked. God is portrayed as the shepherd who discerns between them, guiding, nurturing and protecting the sheep who are expected to trust and be grateful to their shepherd. Here are an example: All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. (Matthew 25:32-33).

The metaphor has its origins in the people who lived nomadic lives during that era, when sheep—especially lambs—were frequently connected to purity and humility. It enhances and mirrors their mental experience. The relationship between the sheep and other sheep provides the fundamental structure of this metaphorical mapping, but only certain aspects—like the shepherd's protection and guidance—are highlighted. By leaving out details like shearing or butchering, the metaphor becomes more ap-

petizing and convincing. Moreover, after these metaphors are created, they frequently get embedded in daily life, impacting both language use and cognitive processes. As a result, a lot of comparable metaphors start to lose their original meaning in classical works and start to be used more widely..

4.2 The Biblical Multi-Interpretation Metaphor

Unlike single-interpretation metaphors, multi-interpretation metaphors are typically multifaceted, allowing a single target domain to be linked with multiple source domains. This relationship enables personalizes interpretations. A contemporary example is the discussion of using “father” and “mother” as metaphors to describe God. In male-dominated social structures, God is typically portrayed with masculine language, often overlooking the maternal aspects of God’s nature. For instance, in Isaiah, God is likened to a mother: “But Zion said, The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me. Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!”(Isaiah 49:14-15) It was in modern times, with the rise of the secular feminist movement, that feminist theologians sought to reinterpret Christian beliefs through the lens of female experience, uncovering and reexamining these female-positive elements in the biblical texts [11]. Most of the metaphors in the Bible convey the doctrine of the Kingdom of Heaven through detailed exposition. These metaphors often draw from elements of nature or everyday life, capturing readers’ attention with their vivid or sometimes enigmatic qualities, prompting deeper reflection on their true meaning [12].

In addition to the text itself, readers must use their own reading experiences as well as pertinent social and cultural knowledge to fully comprehend these metaphors, which adds to their complex meaning. Furthermore, changes in social theory may also have an impact on how these metaphors are understood because of the way that readers’ personal experiences and the secular world are influenced by Christian faith. Metaphors with a single interpretation and those with several interpretations result from this divide. The former usually explain enduring religious ideals or values. Usually, they are made by taking similar components from previously encountered social situations and making comparisons. There will be more social reinforcement of these concepts. The latter type of metaphor addresses broader issues or those more closely tied to the secular world, and as such, they tend to generate varying conflicts and changes in response to the evolution of social trends.

5. Conclusion

Using the Bible as a model for metaphor usage in religious texts, this paper explores the cognitive role of religious metaphors. By redefining the term metaphor and expanding its scope to include multidisciplinary research, the essay examines how religious metaphors create belief systems, simplify difficult concepts, and strengthen collective identities. Through the differentiation of single- and multi-interpretation metaphors and their analysis with specific instances, the paper also reveals the intricacy of metaphorical comprehension influenced by readers’ individual experiences. This work greatly advances interdisciplinary communication and integration by deepening our understanding of religious metaphors and offering analytical insights for examining metaphorical phenomena in various cultural contexts.

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