



Christy Hemphill

All in a Week's Work: Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Explain Figurative Meaning in Genesis 1

Christy Hemphill

In origins discussions, many people appeal to the “figurative” nature of the account of creation week without really knowing how figurative language is processed. An introductory understanding of conceptual metaphor theory (a subdiscipline of cognitive linguistics) can equip people to discuss the figurative language of Genesis 1 more accurately and to defend figurative biblical interpretations that accommodate scientific realities. Specifically, identification of underlying conceptual metaphors and resulting source domain mapping can help explain how an account of a week of “normal” days does not automatically entail a literal interpretation. Since multiple conceptual metaphors can simultaneously be involved in conceptual mapping in a single text, identifying one metaphor does not rule out the presence of other metaphors, and any new metaphors which are uncovered can provide potential lines of inquiry for future work in biblical interpretation.

1. Introduction and Rationale

The discipline of biblical interpretation is gradually incorporating modern insights from communication theory and applied linguistics, fields which have recently seen paradigm shifts in several areas. Some of these shifts have been driven by advances in cognitive science, in which emerging technology for enhanced neuroimaging has allowed researchers to study brain activity during language processing in new ways. It often takes time for what is considered established theory in one field to influence ideas and methodologies in another field.

In biblical interpretation, it is not uncommon to see people relying on assumptions that are based on a model of communication and approaches to meaning that have been mostly discarded in the fields of cognitive psychology and linguistics. Ideas cross over slowly, but eventually have impact. Some current scholarship in biblical interpretation and theology is endeavoring to apply

more-recent insights from various linguistic subdisciplines. For example, Bible scholars and theologians have begun incorporating insights from speech act theory,¹ relevance theory,² discourse analysis,³ and cognitive linguistics.⁴ This article is offered in that interdisciplinary spirit, to encourage application of an established cognitive linguistic model for analyzing figurative language to the discipline of biblical interpretation.

In discussions of how to interpret the days of creation week in Genesis 1, people are usually defending one of three options: the word “day” has a normal, literal sense, and the whole passage conveys literal meaning; the word “day” has a figurative sense and the whole passage conveys figurative meaning; or the word “day” has a normal, literal sense,

Christy Hemphill works with her husband Aaron on a minority language scripture translation project in southern Mexico. She has an MA in applied linguistics/TESOL from Old Dominion University and an MA in applied linguistics/Bible translation from Dallas International University.

Article

All in a Week's Work: Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Explain Figurative Meaning in Genesis 1

but the whole passage conveys figurative, not literal, meaning.⁵

Many Christians' skepticism of the mainstream scientific consensus in several scientific disciplines stems from an "option 1" reading that interprets the creation week as a literal historical account of the events of seven calendar days. Christians who believe Genesis can accommodate the findings of science that necessarily call into question this literal interpretation usually counter that the creation week of Genesis 1 should be interpreted "metaphorically" or "figuratively," and offer some version of "option 2" or "option 3." This is often seen as dismissive hermeneutical hand-waving by those who read Genesis 1 as a straightforward account of a week of normal days. "If the day is a metaphor, what is the day a metaphor of?" the literalists ask.

Even though many people recognize intuitively that the creation week of Genesis 1 is not meant to be "taken literally," they often do not know much about how human brains process figurative meaning in language, and they often resort to defending their figurative interpretations based on intuition. This article offers a defense of "option 3" (normal days; figurative interpretation), but defends the interpretation with an argument based on cognitive science. It is an argument that applies knowledge of a well-attested, experimentally confirmed cognitive process (conceptual domain mapping) to explain *how* primary sense words contribute to figurative meaning, and therefore, how using the primary, "literal" sense of "day" in Genesis 1 contributes to the overall figurative meaning of the passage.

2. Overview

Research over several decades in the field of cognitive linguistics has led to refined understandings of the function of metaphor in human language and cognition. Extensive research has shown that metaphorical thinking is central to human thought processes, and that *conceptual metaphors* (see section 3.2) are routinely used to understand and to reason, not just to describe. Humans are especially likely to rely on conceptual metaphors when thinking about things that are removed from their embodied, everyday experiences. Throughout history and in every culture, people tend to use their understanding of familiar, concrete concepts from everyday experience to reason about other concepts that are more abstract or less experientially accessible.⁶ It is not surprising

then that human attempts to explain and reason about spiritual and supernatural things rely on conceptual metaphors.

Understanding in two areas proves valuable for explaining *how* the creation week account in Genesis 1 works as figurative language: (1) how conceptual metaphors are different from the traditional idea of the literary metaphor (literary metaphors are called *image metaphors* within conceptual metaphor theory); and (2) how mapping of conceptual domains works (see section 3). Also, with a good grasp of how mapping works, tangential arguments about a figurative sense of the word יום/*yom*/day⁷ are shown to be irrelevant to the discussion of the overall figurative meaning of the passage (see section 4). Since many science-minded Christians are interested in supporting their biblical interpretations with language-based arguments, they should avail themselves of ones that are grounded in current thinking about how figurative language processing works. An examination of Roy Clouser's treatment of figurative language in his *PSCF* article "Reading Genesis"⁸ is critiqued for ways in which it might be improved by using linguistic terms more precisely and by avoiding assertions about how language works that are unsupported from a linguistic perspective.

This article applies conceptual metaphor theory to defend three assertions: First, an underlying conceptual metaphor in Genesis 1 is CREATION IS WORK⁹ (see section 3). God's supernatural creative acts of the target domain are mapped onto the more familiar and experiential source domain of human work. When hearers fail to recognize the underlying conceptual metaphor and cannot reproduce the conceptual mapping involved in processing the resulting figurative expressions, they may mistakenly take the text "literally" and infer a meaning not intended by the author. Second, in the context of Genesis 1, "day" is used in its primary sense to refer to a normal calendar day; it is not used in a figurative sense referring to a long era in that passage. This is not a problem because mapping does not require the mapped words for elements of the source domain to have figurative senses (see section 4). Although conventionalized metaphorical thinking can lead to words taking on figurative senses in addition to their primary "literal" sense, this process should not be invoked when discussing the days of Genesis 1, because it does not apply. Third, since multiple conceptual metaphors can be mapped simultaneously in figurative discourse, the

conceptual metaphor framework allows interpreters to affirm different insights proposed by Bible scholars about the meaning of the creation week passage at the same time (see section 5). Human language and cognition allow for mapping of elements of correspondence with not only the conceptual metaphor CREATION IS GOD'S WORK, but also others, such as THE COSMOS IS GOD'S TEMPLE, HUMANS ARE GOD'S IMAGE, or GOD'S REST IS GOD'S RULE. Affirming the presence of one underlying conceptual metaphor in no way asserts that it must be the only underlying conceptual metaphor in operation. This leaves open interesting avenues of exegetical investigation, as research into the cognitive environment of the ancient Near East can potentially uncover multiple conceptual metaphors that are realized in the figurative language of scripture.

3. Image Metaphors, Conceptual Metaphors, and Conceptual Mapping: CREATION IS GOD'S WORK

3.1 Metaphor in cognitive linguistics

In conceptual metaphor studies, there is an important distinction made between *image metaphors* and *conceptual metaphors*. Image metaphors correspond to most English-speaking people's ideas of the classical literary metaphor, in which one noun is described with reference to another that has a salient point of similarity. "Image metaphor" can refer to any linguistic expression that accomplishes this kind of comparison, including what would traditionally be labeled metaphors, similes, or analogies. George Lakoff gives an example from a poem, "My wife ... whose waist is an hourglass."¹⁰ To understand this image metaphor, the mental image of the shape of an hourglass is mentally linked, or *mapped*, to the mental image of the wife. Any hearer familiar with the conventional shape of hourglasses will infer that the wife has a tiny waist.

In the image metaphor above, the speaker's concept of his wife's waist is independent of his concept of hourglasses. The mental connection, or *mapping*, between the two images is temporary for the purpose of the description. The meaning of an image metaphor can be expressed in descriptive, nonfigurative language that has no metaphor. One could simply say, "My wife has a tiny waist." Image metaphors can be novel expressions that no one has thought of before, as long as the source image (in this

example, hourglass) is conventional enough that all the members of the culture/language group have similar ideas about its qualities and can easily infer the point(s) of similarity between the target (wife's waist) and the source that the speaker intends the hearer to infer. In other words, hearers must be able to successfully map the two images.

3.2 A conceptual metaphor in English: LOVE IS A JOURNEY

In contrast to image metaphors, conceptual metaphors are not merely literary devices used for rhetorical or poetic purposes to *describe* a target. Conceptual metaphors are involved when a person *understands* conceptual domain A in terms of conceptual domain B. Whereas image metaphors make a connection between a salient feature of *one* image and a similar feature of another image, conceptual metaphors involve making *multiple* connections across entire conceptual domains. A conceptual domain is "a body of knowledge within our conceptual system that organizes related ideas and experiences."¹¹ In a conceptual metaphor, the target domain is *understood* by means of making systematic connections between corresponding members of another domain, the source.¹² This is easiest to understand by considering an illustration.

The conceptual domain LOVE would involve a set of concepts that may include such things as lovers, relationship status, commitment, positive feelings, shared life goals, close proximity/togetherness, intimacy, progress toward life goals, conflict, and conflict resolution. The conceptual domain JOURNEY would involve a set of concepts that may include things such as travelers, vehicles, roads, road conditions, landmarks, speed of travel, obstacles, scenery, destinations, and stops. In a conceptual metaphor, multiple members of the set of source domain concepts are mapped onto members of the target domain in a systematic way. With regard to conceptual metaphors, mapping refers to making these mental connections between corresponding elements of two different conceptual domains. A whole set of conventionalized mental connections between two domains is called a "mapping," and this is what forms a conceptual metaphor.¹³ These conventionalized mappings, that is, conceptual metaphors, license a whole range of figurative linguistic expressions.¹⁴

To illustrate how such mapping works, consider the following expressions that rely on the concep-

Article

All in a Week's Work: Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Explain Figurative Meaning in Genesis 1

tual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY.¹⁵ A conceptual metaphor is conventionally labeled by a proposition that relates the target (LOVE) and source (JOURNEY) domains. Research shows that the mappings that constitute conceptual metaphors are not temporary: they are stored in long-term memory.¹⁶ All the linguistic realizations that derive from an underlying conceptualization of one domain in terms of another are referred to as “metaphorical expressions.”¹⁷ The following sentences illustrate metaphorical expressions of LOVE IS A JOURNEY.

When we first got married, the road was pretty smooth.

Things got rocky after the kids were born.

We got back on track eventually.

We eventually came to a crossroads.

We knew we were stuck in a rut.

Our relationship had stalled, and we had come to a dead end.

We decided we needed to get out and go our separate ways.

The love relationship involved in this marriage is the target domain. In order to facilitate understanding about the experience of the two people involved in the relationship, the experience of traveling (the source domain) is mapped onto the experience of love (the target domain). Love is not just compared to a journey descriptively, but it is also understood and conceived of in terms of a journey. Instead of mapping a single image onto another image (as in an image metaphor), a whole set of concepts from one domain is mapped onto a set of corresponding concepts from another domain: travelers map onto lovers, destinations map onto shared life goals, roads and terrain map onto life events and their circumstances, obstacles map onto relational difficulties, and the vehicle maps onto the relationship.¹⁸

It is not possible to convert the mapped elements of the implicit conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY into a series of explicit image metaphors that simply *describe* the marriage and still convey an equivalent meaning. The speaker is not trying to say marriage is similar to a car, life is similar to a road, problems are similar to rocks, major decisions are similar to crossroads, and a failed relationship is similar to a dead end. Rather, the speaker is conceptualizing the abstract complexities of a relationship in terms of something that is experientially familiar and more concrete.

Within conceptual metaphor theory, “metaphor is treated as a general cognitive mechanism, not as a specifically linguistic one that works on the level of individual expressions.”¹⁹ What makes it conceptual rather than purely linguistic is the idea that the motivation for the metaphorical expressions exists at the level of conceptual domains.²⁰ Conceptual metaphors have been a topic of prolific investigation over the last several decades and conceptual metaphor theory is currently one of the most highly developed, empirically tested and refined, and cross-culturally researched subfields of cognitive linguistics.²¹

3.3 A conceptual metaphor in scripture: PEOPLE ARE PLANTS

Conceptual metaphors are ubiquitous in human communication because they are necessary to think about and understand human life experiences. They give rise to many linguistic expressions that are considered idiomatic, or figures of speech. Research in cognitive psychology has demonstrated that conceptual metaphors are conceptual before they are expressed in language. In other words, they are foundational to the thought that is being communicated. Unlike image metaphors, which can be expressed using nonmetaphorical language (“my wife has a tiny waist”), there is no more basic literal or nonfigurative meaning underlying metaphorical expressions derived from conceptual metaphors. They are grounded in everyday physical and social/cultural experiences, and they are so common and unconscious that people are often unaware they are relying on them.²²

An example of an underlying conceptual metaphor in scripture is PEOPLE ARE PLANTS.²³ One specific realization of this metaphor occurs in metaphorical expressions about reproduction. In the ancient world, reproduction was not understood as modern scientific cultures understand it, as the meeting of two gametes resulting in the union of genetic information from both parents and the formation of a new organism. Instead, reproduction was conceptualized in the more concrete and experiential terms of agriculture. Members of the conceptual domain of agriculture were mapped onto corresponding members from the conceptual domain of reproduction. Humans were commanded by God to be fruitful.²⁴ A man planted his seed²⁵ in a woman’s womb, which was either fertile or barren.²⁶ Children were referred to as the fruit of their mother’s womb²⁷ and the fruit of their father’s loins.²⁸ Offspring and descendants

were seeds.²⁹ Jesus was the shoot from Jesse's stump and the branch that grew out of Jesse's root.³⁰ These metaphorical expressions about reproduction reflect the underlying conceptual metaphor that was used in order to conceive of pregnancy, ancestry, and descendance. These expressions are not novel or poetic descriptive comparisons about a point of similarity between humans and plants; they are ordinary, everyday expressions that reflect metaphor-based cognitive processing.

Both the conventional images used in image metaphors and the underlying conceptual metaphors that give rise to metaphorical expressions can differ between cultures. The typical mappings that exist in the minds of people of one culture may not exist in the minds of people from another culture. Therefore, it is an important exegetical exercise to recognize and analyze both kinds of metaphors when they are used in scripture. Because conceptual metaphors are implicit, identifying them and determining whether they are accessible in a receptor culture is a more difficult task than analyzing the accessibility of explicit image metaphors used as literary devices. Considering the previously given examples of metaphorical expressions that rely on LOVE IS A JOURNEY (see section 3.2), it is conceivable to think of a culture or language in which people who did not have ready access to the underlying metaphor might not replicate the mapping it relies on and would interpret the translated metaphorical expressions "literally." They might assume the speaker was simply speaking of the source domain, a journey. But that would clearly be a misinterpretation.

3.4 CREATION IS WORK in Genesis 1

Turning to Genesis 1, there is ample evidence in scripture that CREATION IS WORK was an underlying conceptual metaphor in the biblical cultures. The familiar domain of human work is often mapped onto God's creative work: forming pottery,³¹ working metal,³² setting up a tent and hanging curtains,³³ gardening,³⁴ skilled handcrafting,³⁵ and governing,³⁶ to name a few examples.

The structure of the Genesis 1 creation account is stylized and poetic, and those literary features have been analyzed by numerous scholars. One other aspect to analyzing the figurative language in the account of creation week in Genesis 1 is to look for corresponding members of the source domain WORK that are being mapped onto the target domain CRE-

ATION (a domain which would include concepts such as Creator, acts of creation, domains of creation, functionaries, and unbounded time). The source domain is a set of concepts and experiences related to the human work of an artisan and ruler. The artisan/ruler is mapped onto God. The conventional work activities of decreeing, making things, separating, naming, evaluating results, delegating responsibilities, commanding, and providing resources are mapped onto God's acts of creation. The ruler's realm is mapped onto the domains of creation (day and night, sea and sky, land and vegetation) and the ruler's subjects are mapped onto the functionaries in those domains (sun, moon, and stars; fish and birds; animals and humans). In the Hebrew cognitive environment, human work operated within the constraints of the unique Jewish cultural practice of a six-day work week followed by a Sabbath rest; therefore, the work week is mapped onto the unbounded time of creation.³⁷

As was the case with the hypothetical example of the translation of the LOVE IS A JOURNEY expressions, those who do not access the implicit conceptual metaphor will fail to understand the figurative meaning of the mapped elements and may interpret the metaphorical expressions "literally." This would lead to mistakenly understanding the creation work week to be the actual time frame of creation instead of a member of the set of correspondences from the source domain of human work.

4. Discussing Figurative Meaning with Reference to Established Concepts in Semantics, Pragmatics, and Communication Theory

4.1 Literal and figurative meaning

Because human thought is often foundationally metaphorical, some cognitive linguists do not believe that there is a meaningful distinction between literal and figurative language.³⁸ However, most people still have a notion of literality, and the word "literal" is often used in discussions of biblical interpretations. In order to discuss literal and figurative language in the context of biblical interpretation productively, a basic understanding of some foundational concepts in semantics and pragmatics is necessary. For much of the history of linguistic thought, a model of communication called "the code model" prevailed. This model assumed that words were arbitrary sym-

Article

All in a Week's Work: Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Explain Figurative Meaning in Genesis 1

bols that encoded meaning. When words were put together according to the rules of a language's grammar, the individual meaning units added up to a calculable meaning that could be decoded. Language and meaning were studied primarily as abstractions, divorced from social use.

Over time it became apparent that many of the rules developed by formal semantics did not explain how hearers arrived at the meanings they understood when language was used in natural ways. The linguistic subdiscipline of pragmatics seeks insights into aspects of meaning that are communicated by the social use of language by real people in real contexts. Pragmatics has expanded into an immensely fruitful and complex field of linguistic inquiry. The rise of pragmatics led to new models of language processing and meaning construction, and the code model of communication has largely been abandoned in favor of "an inference-based model."³⁹ In this model, words are seen as triggers that activate mental representations in a person's cognitive environment (their knowledge, memories, and beliefs). Speakers rely on the common ground they share with hearers (shared concepts, shared cultural frames and linguistic conventions, and shared context) to trigger the hearer's inferences about the speaker's intended meaning. Inferences work in predictable ways based on relevance to the shared context.

A sentence's "literal meaning" is the meaning calculated from the combination of the conventional meanings of the words used, independent of any pragmatic inferences that would result if the sentence were used by a speaker in a specific context.⁴⁰ For example, the literal meaning of the sentence "I am starving" is that the subject is dying of malnourishment. If the sentence were spoken as someone perused a menu at a restaurant, most hearers would infer a nonliteral meaning instead, that the subject is hungry and looking forward to a good meal.⁴¹ When we are talking about the interpretation of natural texts, linguists are usually concerned about the speaker's intended meaning and the hearer's inferred meaning, not the literal meaning of the sentences.

Formal semantics involves treating language as an abstraction that can be studied independent of its use in a social, communicative context. Unfortunately, the code model of communication, combined with the idea of literal sentence meaning is sometimes

misappropriated by some Bible translators and biblical interpreters to assert that the "truth" of the biblical text lies in some decontextualized abstraction, instead of in what the author intended to communicate and what the original audience would have inferred. In biblical interpretation, the concern should be the intended and inferred meaning of the original speakers and hearers, not the literal meaning of decontextualized sentences.

4.2 Polysemy and figurative senses

In semantics, "polysemy" is a single word that has multiple related meanings or *senses*. This is represented in dictionaries under a single word entry, with the first definition giving the primary sense (what many people associate with the "literal meaning"), and other secondary senses following in a numbered list. For example, a "hawk" is a bird of prey, but a secondary sense refers to a combative person quick to promote aggressive military solutions.⁴² Over time, conventionalized conceptual metaphors often lead to words developing a secondary figurative sense related to a frequently associated target domain.⁴³ When linguists refer to "senses," they are referring to conventional meanings in the lexicon—in other words, definitions that speakers of the language would be able to provide if asked what the word means.

In discussions of possible interpretations of Genesis 1, there is often confusion between the *figurative meaning* of a text and the *figurative sense* of an individual word used in the text. It is a mistake to conflate the figurative or literal sense of a single word used in a text with the overall figurative or literal meaning of the text in which it is found. When corresponding ideas from the source domain are mapped in a metaphorical expression, the lexical items themselves do not necessarily have a conventionalized figurative sense in the lexicon that corresponds to the target domain. That is to say, the individual words referring to elements of the source domain are usually used in their primary senses even though the overall meaning of the text is calculated as figurative via mapping.

For example, in the New Testament passage where Jesus relies on the conceptual metaphor JESUS IS A SHEPHERD,⁴⁴ a set of concepts related to shepherding is mapped onto a corresponding set of concepts related to Jesus and his followers. The sense of the word ποιμήν in the passage is the primary sense

“shepherd,” a worker who cares for sheep. The same word ποιμήν can be used with a figurative sense “pastor” in Koine Greek, as seen in Ephesians 4:11. But in the Good Shepherd passage, the word ποιμήν that is mapped onto Jesus is not the figurative sense “pastor,” it is the primary sense “caretaker of sheep.” The passage is interpreted figuratively because of the mapping between the two domains, not because a polysemous word with a figurative sense was used.

4.3 Primary sense of a single word does not rule out a figurative interpretation of the text

An analysis similar to the Good Shepard passage applies to the word יום/*yom* / “day” in Genesis 1. Among Christians interested in origins, a significant amount of time and effort has been invested in debating whether יום/*yom* / “day” in Genesis 1 is used in its primary (“literal”) or figurative sense. On nearly every origins-focused organizational website or personal blog, a person can find entries dedicated to “the meaning of ‘day’ in Genesis 1,” often with arguments that either try to establish that the word has a figurative sense or try to prove it is used in its primary sense. The assumption seems to be that if it can be shown that the word “day” is used in a figurative sense, it will prove that the entire text should be interpreted figuratively, and conversely, if it can be shown that “day” is used in a primary sense, then the text necessarily records “literal history.”

Hebrew scholars generally agree that the word for “day” in Genesis 1 is being used in the primary sense; a normal day, not the figurative sense referring to an era of time.⁴⁵ However, it is a fallacy to conclude that, because the word יום/*yom* / “day” is being used in its primary sense, the text in which it is found therefore cannot have a figurative meaning and must be interpreted “literally.” It is expected that words related to source domains invoke primary, “literal” senses, not abstract, figurative ones. The reason humans rely on conceptual metaphors in the first place is that they need concrete, experiential source domains to understand more abstract target domains. Recalling the figurative expressions derived from the conceptual metaphor LOVE IS A JOURNEY (section 3.2), there is no need to invoke special figurative definitions of the individual words “rocky,” “crossroads,” or “dead end” to process the figurative meaning of the sentences. What is necessary is access to the implicit conceptual metaphor, LOVE IS A JOURNEY, which licenses the metaphorical expressions based

on the mapping. The mapping involved in constructing the figurative meaning makes use of the normal, primary senses of the words. Even though it is clear that the speaker is talking about relationship problems, decisions affecting the relationship’s fate, and relationship failure, those meanings are not necessarily part of the conventional senses of the words “rocky,” “crossroads,” or “dead end” from the source domain.⁴⁶ If the journey words eventually develop figurative senses associated with relationships, it is only because the mapping has become conventional, not because the mapping requires the figurative senses to exist for it to work.

4.4 Basing conclusions on intuition instead of on the science of language and language processing

In “Reading Genesis,” an article which touches on the figurative language of Genesis 1, Clouser illustrates the fact that many people discussing figurative meaning do not avail themselves of the tools linguistics provides to analyze it.⁴⁷ Using linguistic terms in imprecise ways and making unsupported claims about how language works weakens an argument. Although Clouser’s assertion that the reference to “literal” days in Genesis 1 contributes to an overall figurative meaning is sound, his arguments in support of this conclusion are flawed from a linguistic perspective. He uses an idiosyncratic definition of literal meaning, he assumes all metaphorical expressions function like image metaphors (and claims “day” is part of one), and he seems to claim that the word “day” can have both a literal and figurative sense in single use.

When fundamentalists appeal to “literal meaning,” they are usually equating “literal meaning” with the assumption that Genesis describes historical facts.⁴⁸ Clouser rightly rejects this misconception, but counters it by using “literal meaning” to refer to the author’s intended meaning. This misuse of the term leads to claims such as “if a text is figurative, symbolic, metaphorical, anthropomorphic, or poetic, then its prima facie literal meaning is figurative, symbolic, metaphorical, anthropomorphic, or poetic.”⁴⁹ This makes no sense from a linguistic perspective, because literal meaning and figurative meaning are considered mutually exclusive. If a text has a figurative meaning, it means that pragmatic inferences prevent a relevant literal interpretation in the context.⁵⁰

Article

All in a Week's Work: Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Explain Figurative Meaning in Genesis 1

Clouser asks questions that reveal confusion about how the sense of individual words relates to the overall literal or figurative intended meaning of the entire text. He asks:

- (1) Why take the days as literal in the midst of an account that is from the outset so thoroughly figurative?
- (2) What could justify the claim that we must switch back and forth between the anthropomorphism of God speaking and a literal understanding of the days of his creating?
- (3) How can such switches avoid being wholly arbitrary?⁵¹

In fact, as demonstrated in section 4.3, words are commonly used with primary, literal senses, even though the intended meaning of the whole text is figurative. Human brains seem to use conceptual domain mapping quite effortlessly to process figurative language that uses primary sense words. Figurative language in Genesis 1 (which does include anthropomorphic imagery about God, since it relies on the source domain of human work) does not in any way entail that the word "day" is used in a figurative sense in the passage. It does indicate that "day" should be processed as part of an overall intended figurative meaning because it is a member of a set of correspondences to the conceptual domain of human work. It is better to talk about how figurative meaning is constructed in terms of the cognitive processing of language, instead of simply asserting that the figurative meaning is intuitively obvious and that switches to primary sense words would be "arbitrary." Such switches prove to be quite systematic and common to human communication.

Clouser also claims that "the literal meaning of 'day' is not incompatible with its also having a metaphorical meaning."⁵² If Clouser is talking about the meaning of the word, this is incorrect. Individual words can be used only with one sense at a time unless a person is intentionally making a pun.⁵³ The sense of the word "day" is not figurative; rather, the intended meaning of the text in which it is found is figurative. This is a more precise and more accurate claim than saying individual words can be used with two intended meanings at the same time.

Clouser also makes the mistake of claiming that "day" functions as a metaphor for God's timeless accomplishment of his purposes. Biblical literalists are right to call foul on this kind of assertion, because there is no such metaphor in the text. The passage does not say, explicitly or implicitly, that a day is

God's timeless accomplishment of his purposes. If it did, what would such a metaphor mean? Image metaphors rely on a salient point of similarity when two images are compared. In order for the intended meaning to be easily inferred, image metaphors rely on conventional images. Most people in the culture/language group must associate similar qualities with the source domain image. Image metaphors describe a characteristic of the target based on something everyone readily envisions about the source. What conventional qualities did most Hebrews associate with the image of a day? What would the point of similarity be between the conventional qualities of a day and God's timeless accomplishment of his purposes? What specific quality would supposedly be in view? What underlying literal description would this alleged metaphor be asserting? The figurative nature of the metaphorical expressions in the passage derives from the underlying conceptual metaphor CREATION IS WORK not from an image metaphor that descriptively compares a day to something else.

5. Simultaneous Mapping Is Allowed and Expected and Useful in Exegesis

One potentially interesting application of conceptual metaphor theory for biblical exegesis and hermeneutics is the identification of underlying implicit metaphors that may not translate well, either culturally or linguistically. John Sanders offers an introduction to the field of cognitive linguistics and its implications for biblical interpretation and theology in his book *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God*.⁵⁴ His book is a challenge to those involved in biblical interpretive work to focus more consciously on the identification of conceptual metaphors and issues that surface with cross-cultural translation. It is a challenge worth accepting because the potential for study in this area is boundless; asserting that one underlying conceptual metaphor is expressed in a text does not assert that it is the only conceptual metaphor used to process a given text in the way the original audience would have understood it. There is always more to uncover.

More than one underlying metaphor can surface in a discourse, especially in highly literary texts. Lakoff explains that simultaneous mappings are very common in poetry:

Take for example, the Dylan Thomas line "Do not go gentle into that good night." Here *go* reflects

DEATH IS A DEPARTURE, *gentle* reflects LIFE IS A STRUGGLE, with death as defeat. *Night* reflects a LIFETIME IS A DAY, with death as night. This one line has three different metaphors for death, each mapped onto different parts of the sentence.⁵⁵

Bible scholars who specialize in Genesis have examined interpretive implications of underlying conceptualizations such as THE COSMOS IS GOD'S TEMPLE,⁵⁶ HUMANS ARE GOD'S IMAGE,⁵⁷ and GOD'S REST IS GOD'S RULE.⁵⁸ The vocabulary and descriptions of cognitive processes offered by conceptual metaphor theory can add strength to these interpretations because they provide exegetes with a model for making explicit the correspondences that they assert were accessible to the original audience. Making ancient Near East conceptual metaphors explicit, equips Christians in a different cultural context to better process figurative language, and to avoid misinterpretations that result from taking metaphorical expressions about the source domain literally instead of mapping correspondences onto the target domain.

6. Conclusion

One does not need to be a linguist to use conceptual metaphor theory to analyze the way people mentally process figurative language. Since all Christians presumably want to get the most meaning possible from scripture and avoid misinterpretation, any tools that help people understand cross-cultural, translated texts better will be beneficial.

To summarize and reiterate, this was the argument presented: Conceptual metaphors are distinct from image metaphors; they are important for understanding and communicating complex, abstract ideas. Underlying conceptual metaphors in the mind are expressed in figurative language, in which a more concrete, experiential conceptual source domain maps onto another more complex, abstract conceptual target domain. In Genesis 1, the conceptual domain of WORK is mapped onto CREATION and results in metaphorical expressions. The individual word "day" used in the passage is a member of the set of mapped elements from the conceptual domain of WORK. Words can have primary and figurative senses, and the word "day" in Hebrew has both. However, words do not have to be used in their figurative sense to be a member of mapped correspondences. In fact, it is usually primary sense words that are mapped onto a target domain because they are more concrete. Concrete words are to be

expected in source domains derived from embodied human experience. The word "day" may be used in its primary sense and still contribute to overall figurative meaning. The figurative meaning results from conceptual domain mapping, not from the semantics of the word "day."

Hopefully, these insights from cognitive linguistics will equip science-minded Christians to better defend their figurative interpretations of Genesis 1. ♥

Notes

- ¹Richard Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* (London, UK: T&T Clark, 2004).
- ²Karen H. Jobes, "Relevance Theory and the Translation of Scripture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50 (2007): 773–97.
- ³Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2010).
- ⁴John Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016).
- ⁵For example, see J. Ligon Duncan III, David Hall, Hugh Ross, Gleason Archer, Lee Irons, and Meredith Kline, *The Genesis Debate: Three Views on the Days of Creation*, ed. David G. Hagopian (Mission Viejo, CA: Crux Press, 2000).
- ⁶Barbara Dancygier and Eve Sweetser, *Figurative Language* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 62–67.
- ⁷Hugh Ross, *A Matter of Days: Resolving a Creation Controversy*, 2nd expanded ed. (Covina, CA: Reasons to Believe, 2015).
- ⁸Roy Clouser, "Reading Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 68, no. 4 (2016): 241–45.
- ⁹It is a convention in cognitive linguistics to label conceptual metaphors with a proposition in small capitals.
- ¹⁰George Lakoff, "Image Metaphors," *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 2, no. 3 (1987): 219–22.
- ¹¹Vyvyan Evans and Melanie Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006), 14.
- ¹²Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 49.
- ¹³Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 8.
- ¹⁴Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, 164.
- ¹⁵For further investigation of this conceptual metaphor, see George Lakoff, "Conceptual Metaphor," in *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings*, ed. Dirk Geeraerts (Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter, 2006), 189–96.
- ¹⁶Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, 295.
- ¹⁷Lakoff, "Conceptual Metaphor," 185–86.
- ¹⁸Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 191.
- ¹⁹Dirk Geeraerts, "A Rough Guide to Cognitive Linguistics," in *Cognitive Linguistics: Basic Readings*, 11.
- ²⁰Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, 295.
- ²¹Raymond W. Gibbs Jr., "Evaluating Conceptual Metaphor Theory," *Discourse Processes* 48, no. 8 (2011): 556.

Article

All in a Week's Work: Using Conceptual Metaphor Theory to Explain Figurative Meaning in Genesis 1

²²Geeraerts, "A Rough Guide to Cognitive Linguistics," 27; and Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 51.

²³Lakoff discusses how this underlying metaphor also affects many of the ways in which English speakers speak figuratively about life and death in "Conceptual Metaphor," 218.

²⁴Gen. 1:28.

²⁵Gen. 38:9.

²⁶Gen. 11:30, 20:18, 25:21.

²⁷Deut. 28:11; Luke 1:42.

²⁸Acts 2:30.

²⁹Gen. 3:15, 4:25; Lev. 18:21; 1 Sam. 1:11; 2 Kings 11:1; 2 Chron. 20:7; Ezra 9:2; Esther 10:3; Isa. 6:13; Jer. 2:21.

³⁰Isa. 11:1, 10.

³¹Isa. 29:16, 45:9, 64:8.

³²Job 37:18.

³³Isa. 40:22.

³⁴Gen. 2:8; Isa. 5:6-7.

³⁵Pss. 8:3, 139:13-14; Eph. 2:10.

³⁶Job 38:11; Prov. 8:29.

³⁷Inherent in this explanation are some assumptions about the compilation and editing of Genesis over time, and that the six-day work week and Sabbath rest were established culturally in Judaism before the Genesis creation account was completed in the form available now. For a discussion of the cultural and religious significance of the Sabbath in relation to the creation account, see Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 71-73. Obviously, if someone takes the written creation account itself as the origin of the unique Jewish cultural practice of six days of work followed by one day of Sabbath rest, he or she will have problems with the explanation provided here. Evaluating arguments for the origins of Jewish Sabbath practices in relation to the dating of Genesis 1 is beyond the scope of this article.

³⁸Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, 287.

³⁹For example, see Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1986) and Thomas Scott-Phillips, *Speaking Our Minds* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁴⁰Paul Kroeger, *Analyzing Meaning: An Introduction to Semantics and Pragmatics* (Berlin, Germany: Language Science Press, 2018), 2.

⁴¹Raymond Gibbs identifies four definitions of "literal meaning": *conventional literality* (literal use is contrasted with poetic use, exaggeration, etc.); *nonmetaphorical literality* (no word or concept is understood in terms of another); *truth conditional literality* (the language refers objectively to things existing in the world and can be rated true or false); and *context-free literality* (the literal meaning is the meaning that does not depend on a communicative situation). The last definition is the one used in this article, but cognitive linguists point out that even when a sentence is interpreted without reference to a communicative context, interpreting words depends on the background knowledge of the hearer, which itself constitutes a cultural and linguistic context. Raymond W. Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 75; Evans and Green, *Cognitive Linguistics: An Introduction*, 289-93.

⁴²Polysemy is not the same thing as homonymy, which occurs when a word has multiple unrelated meanings. A homonym for the noun "hawk" is the verb "hawk," which means to sell wares, typically by calling out in the

street. Homonyms are represented by separate entries in a dictionary.

⁴³Kroeger, *Analyzing Meaning*, 54-55.

⁴⁴John 10:11-18.

⁴⁵John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 90-91.

⁴⁶Lakoff, "Conceptual Metaphor," 194. "Mappings should not be thought of as processes, or as algorithms that mechanically take source domain inputs and produce target domain outputs. Each mapping should be seen instead as a fixed pattern of correspondences across domains that may, or may not, be applied to a source domain knowledge structure or a source domain lexical item. Thus, lexical items that are conventional in the source domain are not always conventional in the target domain. Instead, each source domain lexical item may or may not make use of the static mapping pattern. If it does, it has an extended lexicalized sense in the target domain, where that sense is characterized by the mapping. If not, the source domain lexical item will not have a conventional sense in the target domain but may still be actively mapped in the case of a novel metaphor."

⁴⁷Clouser, "Reading Genesis," 241-45.

⁴⁸Simon Turpin, "Is Genesis Literal, Literalism, or Literalistic?" (Answers in Genesis, May 2, 2016), <https://answersingenesis.org/hermeneutics/is-genesis-1-literal-literalism-or-literalistic>.

⁴⁹Clouser, "Reading Genesis," 241.

⁵⁰John I. Saeed, *Semantics*, 3rd ed. (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 15.

⁵¹Clouser, "Reading Genesis," 243.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Kroeger, *Analyzing Meaning*, 6.

⁵⁴Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*.

⁵⁵Lakoff, "Conceptual Metaphor," 203.

⁵⁶Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 77-85.

⁵⁷J. Richard Middleton, "The Liberating Image? Interpreting the *Imago Dei* in Context," *Christian Scholar's Review* 24, no. 1 (1994): 8-25.

⁵⁸Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One*, 72-76.

ASA Members: Submit comments and questions on this article at www.asa3.org→RESOURCES→Forums→PSCF Discussion.



A Win-Win Opportunity

Are you looking for Christian books and gifts? Check out our online partnership with Christianbook, LLC, a Christian catalog and internet retailer. This company expands our available online resources, gives our website greater visibility, and allows us to offer books recommended by ASA readers at a discount to members and visitors alike.

Login to Christianbook at <https://convention.christianbook.com>. You are not limited to the recommended resources; you may purchase anything on the Christianbook website. You receive the Christianbook discounted prices and the ASA receives a 10% sales commission on all purchases made through this page.