Scriptural Models and Metaphors:
The Power of the Visual Word

Bernard A. Taylor

Introduction

Though the attribution is erroneous, the putative Chinese proverb "a picture is worth a thousand words" is well known and often quoted.[1] When hearing this it is natural to think of something seen with the physical eye, whether painting, drawing, or illustration; but what if the picture were created with words? Imagination is a powerful tool, a high form of creativity, and in this age of video games, DVDs, and high-tech movies, it is past time to rediscover the value of imagination. When all the ideas are from the visual media, creative imagination is crippled; when stories are told by someone or from a book, the mind is free to create the scene in the imagination.

In biblical studies, much time is spent on stories at the macro level, whether from the Old Testament or New Testament. However, precious little time is spent considering the role of key individual words, which are story at the micro level. Yet each of these is a vignette, a metaphor, a teaching model, a mini picture with a story to tell. Each draws on some human situation to illustrate a truth being taught.

Arguably the most effective way to teach is to bridge from the known to the unknown. *Inter alia*, similes and metaphors are used in literature to this end. The simile is easy to recognize, since it announces itself with the use of "like" or "as" to indicate that something is being compared to something else. At the same time, it clearly indicates that the two are not exactly the same. If A is only like B, then A is not the same as B; so there will be similarities, but also differences. The same is true of metaphors, but these are much more difficult to recognize since there is no overt indication of comparison. Thus it is all too easy to assume that A is in fact B.

Knowing God

It is important to understand at the outset that we know nothing of God except by analogy through human or earthly models. Jesus made this clear to Nicodemus when the latter came to Jesus to discuss theological issues. In typical Johannine fashion playing on the double entendre behind the Greek words, Jesus spoke first of regeneration ἄνωθεν

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[1] Frederick Barnard, a publicist, in an advertisement published in Printers' Ink, December 8, 1921 captioned his advertisement "One look is worth a thousand words." In the March 10, 1927 edition of the same publication, he revised the saying as "One picture is worth ten thousand words," calling it a Chinese proverb in the hope that it would be taken more seriously. Since then it is not uncommon for the quotation to be attributed to Confucius. What is interesting is that he never did quite say "One picture is worth a thousand words."

('again' and 'from above'), and then of πνευμα (wind' and 'spirit'). When Nicodemus expressed his difficulty understanding Jesus' earthly models, Jesus cautioned, "If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven [to learn about heavenly things to return and tell you] except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man."[2] Further, it follows that there is no one human model capable of representing the truth about God; and the converse is equally true: combining all human models is still inadequate to convey the fullness of truth about God. This should come as no surprise, and in fact should have been anticipated given that so many models are used in Scripture.

Consider for a moment some of the models used to describe the Christ event: *salvation*, *redemption*, *ransom*, *regeneration/new birth*, *justification*, *sanctification*, *faith*, *law*, *grace*, *love*, *wrath*, *peace*. Each is a metaphor, each draws on some human situation to illustrate a truth that is being taught. The salvation/savior model is a picture of somebody in a desperate situation—whether subterranean, stranded on a mountainside in a storm, or in a storm-tossed boat—where survival depends upon help from outside; an apt portrayal of the ministry of Jesus.

Perhaps the major obstacle preventing us from understanding the role of metaphors is that for us these are theological words; for the hearers and initial readers they were everyday terms that created a picture in the mind that in turn bridged to some aspect of Christ's life or ministry.[3] Theology was secondary. In a real sense, if the meaning of such a word—whether in their language or ours—has to be looked up, the instinctive significance intended to be conveyed is already lost. In all such instances, the intention was clarification, not obfuscation, and the models were chosen for immediacy, not durability.

Note the following two verses:

> When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.[4]

> "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."[5]

The first contains a simile, drawing an analogy from a flock of sheep left to their own resources as a way to picture the people as Jesus saw them. The second is a metaphor; but it is all too easy to overlook this, and assume that it tells us that Jesus is a shepherd. Such is the nature of metaphors.

Perhaps the closest John comes to telling a parable is in John 10, where he talks at length about sheep and shepherds, using two metaphors along the way: "I am the gate for the sheep" (vv. 7, 9); "I am the good shepherd" (vv. 11, 14). When understood literally,

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[2] John 3:12, 13. All English quotations are from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.
[3] However, I confess to having wondered how the words of John the Baptizer in Mark 1:4 would have played to a first century audience: κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν (baptismum paenitentiae in remissionem peccatorum), "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins."
[4] Matt 9:36.
[5] John 10:11.

they clearly are contradictory because in a temporal world they are mutually exclusive; when understood as metaphors, the problem is resolved. Each paints a clear picture, and tells us something about Jesus and what he does.[6]

I remember well my first encounter with the twin worlds of metaphor and reality. My first-grade class had spent time on this particular day acting out Humpty Dumpty. My role was a horse, a bearer of one of the king's men. That afternoon when my parents came to pick me up after school, the teacher offered to have us perform the play again. Dutifully, Humpty Dumpty fell. Then came the putting-together part. When I began to assist, the teacher chided me and said, "You can't help, you're a horse." I said nothing, but I went away feeling very misunderstood, for it said:

> All the king's horses,
> And all the king's men,
> Couldn't put Humpty
> Together again.

She was bound by the "real" world; I was in the metaphor.

The Power of Metaphors

Since we have no direct knowledge of God metaphors are immensely important, because unless they are carefully chosen we are at risk of creating God in our own image. The world of Bible times knew much about masters and slaves, so naturally they thought of God in the same terms. In this context it is natural to talk about obedience, but it is difficult to say much about love, even though a few good masters did exist. Paul had an affinity for this model, frequently describing himself as a δοῦλος or 'bond slave' of Jesus Christ.[7]

In John's Gospel, Jesus specifically addresses this issue. After telling his disciples, "you are my friends (φίλοι) if you do what I command you," he goes on to say "I do not call you slaves (δοῦλοι) any longer, because the slave (δοῦλος) does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my father."[8] While the metaphor of slave was useful, it had its strict limitations, and it was now time to move beyond. In so doing, Jesus was offering a new possibility. Slavery involved a top-down relationship; friendship introduced a new measure of equality. Given the setting in John's Gospel where Jesus and the disciples have just left the upper room on their way to the garden, the offer of

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[6] Note further in this model, that in John 1:29, 36 and in Revelation (27x), Jesus is a/the Lamb. In John he is the Passover lamb, and the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. However, in the OT sacrificial system lambs were not used for sin offerings or as sin bearers.

[7] The translation of δοῦλος is in fact "slave," as in "bond slave." For whatever reason, Bible translations published in North America consistently substitute the benign "servant" for the much more accurate "slave."

[8] John 15:14, 15. Note that this is the only place in the NT where this idea occurs. The NRSV uses "friend(s)" in place of gender specific nouns like "brother(s)" which serves to mask the uniqueness of Jesus's expression here in John.

friendship is not for Jesus and his disciples, but for the risen Lord and the Christian Church. A new model for the new church.

Military Models

In 1993 Gary Patterson, under the rubric "Surrendering a Military Model of Leadership,"[9] wrote of the impact the GI bill had on Adventism when in the early 1950s the denomination absorbed in large numbers servicemen returning from the Korean War. They were accustomed to the top-down military leadership style which was perceived to be successful, and so brought it over into the denominational organization. I expect at the time it felt "right" because a hierarchy is: "a system of Church Government by priests or other clergy in graded ranks,"[10] or in other words, top-down leadership. The impact of this approach to leadership has been felt at many levels, and very visibly in the Pathfinder organization.

At the time of Patterson's writing, that generation was retiring in large numbers and being replaced by leaders who in the sixties and seventies had opposed war in general, and the Vietnam War in particular. Faced with the prospect of significant changes not only in leadership style but in basic biblical understanding, Patterson saw the danger of counter-moves to enshrine time-honored models as the truth, including and especially the military model.

Given the impact of the military model, it is ironic that the surrender model has become normative for so many Adventists. While the concept of surrender is at home in a military context, it is the enemy who surrenders, and conversely the enemy is the weaker force that was defeated. No army has or could be built upon a model where the *modus operandi* for the troops is surrender. Yet a whole generation and more of Adventist young people has been raised on this model, but it simply is not biblical. Paul does not know of it. Note the following:

> I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.[11]

For the surrender model to be present here, it would have to read something like: "And the life he lives . . . ," but that is clearly not what it says.

Another model based on the military, this time from the OT, is encapsulated in the expression "the Lord of hosts." It occurs first in 1 Samuel without introduction or explanation.[12] As time passes it becomes more popular, until by the time of later prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah it is a standard term. It simply means "the Lord of armies."

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[9] *Adventist Today*, Nov/Dec, 1993.
[10] Webster's New Collegiate.
[11] Gal 2:19b, 20.
[12] 1 Sam 1:3. It is interesting that no explanation is offered, since this is the same book that pauses to note the word change for prophet from רֹאֶה to נָבִיא (9:9, ". . . the one who is now called a prophet [*propheta*, Vg] was formerly called a seer [*videns*, Vg]").

Behind that lies the concept that the gods each had an army, and the one with the biggest army would win. When Israel took up the theme, God was willing to adapt to their understanding, and even calls himself the Lord of armies. However, in the NT the concept is not found except as included in a verse quoted from the OT,[13] and the familiar transliteration Lord of Sabaoth (צְבָאוֹת ')[14] in the book of James written for Jewish Christians.

The Family

In the face of the subsequent history of the Israelites where kings and prophets and elders are in the limelight, it is easy to forget that at its core the OT is a saga around one family. The story begins with the call of Abram from Ur, to which the record of prior events serves as a proem. From the outset God makes promises, and in time, a covenant with the childless couple in anticipation of countless offspring. It is an act of faith pregnant with promise.

In turn, the family serves as a model for the spiritual life. On the one hand there are the evils that can arise: *alienation*, *estrangement*, *rebellion*, *divorce*; on the other hand the great blessings: *love*, *marriage*, *reconciliation*, *harmony*, *parenting*, *nurture*, *support*.

When Jesus responded to the disciples' request for a model prayer he began with the justly famous "Our Father." It is a powerful metaphor, especially when understood in the light of Jesus' use of the Aramaic *Abba* ('father') for God. Unfortunately the models where God appropriated feminine qualities were overlooked, such as:

> As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you; you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.[15]

> He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed him with produce of the field; he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock;[16]

The same Hebrew word translated 'nursed' is found *inter alia* in Gen 21:7 of Sarah.

A key model based on the family found only in the NT is adoption. There is no evidence that Israelites and Jews adopted. However it was a Roman practice, and it is used to great effect in the NT. There is nothing that a child does to be adopted except to be an orphan, or be in dire straits. However, when adoption takes place there is no interim period, no time of probation. One enters into all the rights and privileges. My experience is that even those whose family life was a total disaster for whatever reason know of at least one family that they would love to be a part of, and this is a fitting backdrop for presenting the model of God's desire to adopt into the heavenly family.

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[13] Rom 9:29.
[14] James 5:4 (KJV); NRSV: "Lord of hosts."
[15] Isa 66:13.
[16] Deut 32:13.

The Church[17]

I expect all of us at some time have heard the etymological derivation of the meaning of ἐκκλησία 'church': ἐκ means 'out of' and *κλησία is related to the verb καλέω 'to call'; *ergo* ἐκκλησία means 'the called out ones.' As true as that is etymologically, it played no part in the meaning of the word at the time, since the word simply meant 'an assembly duly summoned', whatever the assembly might be, whether secular or religious, meeting regularly or spontaneously. It is used in the LXX of the Israelite assemblies,[18] and in the NT of the Christian church. Thus it is a neutral term with no particular model beyond that of a group assembling.

To this neutral word were brought various models: Christ as the living foundation (an interesting juxtaposition), as the cornerstone; the people as living stones, the house of God, the bride of God,[19] the gathered, saints, the justified, the sanctified, the glorified, believers, stewards, servants/slaves, ministers, witnesses, ambassadors, friends, soldiers, holy nation, royal priesthood, the temple, flock, ark,[20] seed of Abraham, vineyard (in the parable), vine branches, a body made of many parts, fellowship.

Ransom

Historically, there have been surprisingly few standard models. For the rest of the first millennium following Origen's lead the standard explanation of the Christ event was the ransom model. In English we have the two related words, 'ransom' and 'redeem'. In fact scripture draws no distinction, and in bible dictionaries entries are found under one or the other, or in a few cases both together.

The reality behind the model was as well known then as it is today with the constant hostage taking in the Middle East and elsewhere. The model is found in both the OT and the NT. However, Deutero-Isaiah has a twist that is important:

> 1 But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. 2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. 3 For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you. 4 Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you, I give people in return for you, nations in exchange for your life.[21]

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[17] 0ur English word came from Late Greek κυριάκον 'of or belonging to the master', and in the Christian Church, 'the Lord's house'; and is thus related to German *Kirk*.

[18] It usually translates קהל.

[19] Note the gender clash of the church as both sons and bride.

[20] This model was so prevalent the interior of churches was known by the Latin word for ship, *navis*, hence the modern term, "nave." It is an interesting clash of models to think of the pastor/shepherd and his flock meeting in a ship each week.

[21] Isa 43:1–4.

First, note the context, and the rapid recital of various models: *creator*, *potter*,[22] *redeemer/ransomer*,[23] *adopter*,[24] *deliverer*, *protector*, *inviter*, and *savior*. Then in vv. 3, 4 God offers to ransom them, in the process involving himself in wholesale trafficking of entire nations. This is shocking language, especially since in Amos 1 God condemned Gaza and Tyre because respectively "they carried into exile entire communities, to hand them over to Edom" and "they delivered entire communities over to Edom, and did not remember the covenant of kinship."[25]

Commentators in general find this unworthy of God, but are not entirely surprised that the God of the OT should behave in this way. However, in this case it is best not to rush to judgment, because the prophet returns to the topic, this time in connection with Cyrus. Within the context of the ransom model God says:

> 13 I have aroused Cyrus in righteousness, and I will make all his paths straight; he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward, says the LORD of hosts. 14 Thus says the LORD: The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia, and the Sabeans, tall of stature, shall come over to you and be yours, they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will make supplication to you, saying, "God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him."

Central to the ransom model is payment in cash or in kind to have the hostage(s) returned. However, *contra* the model, in this case no money will be transacted. And if it should be argued that the language is not entirely specific, the prophet later turns again to the model, saying unambiguously, "For thus says the LORD: 'You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money.'"[26] In the light of these verses it is clear that in chap 43 God is speaking the language of love: I will do anything to bring you home to me. In chap. 45 the Ethiopians and the Sabeans will indeed be involved, but not in the manner originally anticipated. They will come voluntarily, seeking to know the God of Israel. Clearly the model of redemption/ransom is used, but the prophet is not slavishly bound to the literal understanding. While the model is useful since the people readily understand, it is not the truth.

Conclusions

First, as can be seen, models are eminently adaptable. So long as the basic scenario is understood, they touch all time with equal closeness. One does not have to have been in a certain time or place as part of some particular experience for them to be understandable. Once the underlying meaning is grasped one can substitute one's own experience. And if any particular model is not applicable, many others will be.

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[22] The Hebrew verb יצר describes the work of the potter, and is the word in Gen 2 of God "forming" Adam, in contradistinction to his "building" Eve (בנה is the term from construction denoting 'building a structure' and similar).

[23] 1n Hebrew there is only the one word.

[24] "You are mine" is understood as the language of adoption, though, as noted, Hebrew lacks a term for this.

[25] Amos 1:6, 9.

[26] Isa 52:3.

Second, within clear boundaries, each model illustrates some kernel of truth; but none of the models—nor all of them combined—presents all truth. Jesus specifically told his disciples that there were many things that he desired to tell them that they were as yet not able to receive, perhaps because the models necessary to convey the information were not yet available. As our knowledge increases and circumstances change, it is to be expected that new models will be found. However, the most helpful human models at their very best are still that: human models.

Third, the models do not—in fact cannot, and must not—be seen to define God. God stands above and outside it all, and is in no way limited to our finite experiences.

Fourth, concomitantly the use of models is not a way to mask the reality of God. While the models have strict limitations, those limitations are human limitations. God is real.

Fifth, in heaven we will not be held to our current limitations, but once we understand the heavenly language we will begin to see the true reality behind the models. "The theme of redemption . . . will be the science and the song of the redeemed throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity."[27]

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[27] *The Signs of the Times*, April 18, 1906, "They are They Which Testify of Me," para. 4.