

PEOPLE ARE PLANTS Metaphor in Holy Scripture*

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1. Introduction

This paper attempts to illustrate how the cognitive linguistic notion of metaphor can be utilized for the study of metaphor in Holy Scripture. Metaphors (including simile) are used very abundantly and coherently in Holy Scripture. Among them, this paper takes up PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphors, and their meanings are construed. Also the important aspects of metaphor are discussed, applying the metaphor theory in cognitive linguistics.

Metaphor is considered to be indispensable means to make sense of our experience, and to obtain the novel meaning by establishing semantic connections across two distinct domains. Another important aspect of metaphor is that metaphors have a pervasive and coherently structured system. That is, metaphors are not isolated with each other, nor written in an arbitrary way, but have a certain kind of structure. For example, people who are compared to a tree not only have *branches* and *shoots*, but also *are planted*, *flourish*, and *bear fruit*.

The following sections are consisted of three parts: In section 2, the theoretical framework will be outlined. And we will look at some recent researches made within this framework. In section 3, we will review PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphors in Lakoff & Turner (1989), and confirm how far the discussion has been advanced. And in section 4, we will analyze PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphors in scriptural phrases, consider their inferential meanings, and discuss the vital role of metaphor.

2. Theoretical Framework: Lakoff (1987), Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999), Lakoff & Turner (1989), and Johnson (1987), etc.

Cognitive linguists have conceived of metaphors as the basis of human understanding by which we achieve meaningful experience that we can make sense of.

For example, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) insisted that our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature, and that many metaphors can actually create social, cultural, and psychological realities for us.

Johnson (1987) built a philosophical foundation of the theory of metaphor. He (1987:169) insisted that metaphorical projection is one fundamental means by which we project structure, make new connections, and remold our experience.

In the metaphorical projections, imagination works through a projective process in which structures from one domain are projected to order our understanding of another domain (Johnson 1987:163). Johnson (1987:165, 168, etc.) also stressed the importance of human imagination, saying that imagination is a free, non-rule-governed activity to generate novel meaning, and is indispensable for our ability to make sense of our experience, and to find it meaningful. He (1987:169) argued that:

The conclusion ought to be, therefore, that imagination is absolutely central to human rationality, that is, to our rational capacity to find significant connections, to draw inferences....

He (1987:195) also said that:

Imagination is granted a role in the "context of discovery," wherein we imaginatively generate new ideas and connections.

Lakoff & Johnson (1980, 1999) and Lakoff (1987) established the basis of the cognitive theory of metaphor. They insisted that abstract thought is virtually impossible without metaphors. They also argued that metaphors are so pervasive and widespread that we cannot even notice of using such conventional metaphors. According to Lakoff & Johnson (1999:73),

Our most important abstract concepts, from love to causation to morality, are conceptualized via multiple complex metaphors.

Lakoff (1987) and Lakoff & Johnson (1980) revealed the imaginative routes of conceptualization by means of metaphor (and metonymy) with giving a lot of illustrations, some of which are described below.

CONSCIOUS IS UP; UNCONSCIOUS IS DOWN

Get *up*.

Wake *up*.

I'm *up* already.

He *rises* early in the morning.

He *fell* asleep.

He *dropped* off to sleep.

He's *under* hypnosis.

He *sank* into a coma. Lakoff & Johnson (1980:15)

ANGER IS THE HEAT OF A FLUID IN A CONTAINER

You make my *blood boil*.

Simmer down!

I had reached the *boiling point*.

Let him *stew*.

She was *seething with rage*. Lakoff (1987:383)

AN ARGUMENT IS A CONTAINER

Your argument does not have much *content*.

That argument *has holes in it*.

You don't have *much of* an argument,

but his objections have even *less substance*.

Your argument is *vacuous*.

I'm tired of your *empty* arguments

You won't *find* that idea *in* his argument. Lakoff & Johnson (1980:92)

As is shown in the above examples, the metaphorical mapping is represented by the formula TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN. And the metaphorical expressions concerned are written in italics. The terms "target domain" and "source domain" usually relate to concepts rather than non-linguistic entities. Saeed (1997:303; cited in Haser 2005:14), for example, refers to the target domain as the "described concept," and the source domain as the "comparison

concept.” As to the relationship between target domain and source domain, Croft & Cruse (2004:55) discussed that:

Metaphor involves a relationship between a source domain, the source of the literal meaning of the metaphorical expression, and a target domain, the domain of the experience actually being described by the metaphor. For example, to *waste time* involves comparing TIME (the target domain) to MONEY (the source domain) in the metaphor represented by the Lakoffian formula TIME IS MONEY (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Time is construed as a valuable asset that is possessed by human beings and can be ‘used’ in the same way that money is.

Following Lakoffian formula with a cognitive linguistic view of metaphor, many exemplified analyses were made through empirical investigations. First, for instance, Wolf & Polzenhagen (2003) analyzed the text of newspaper article, and extracted the conceptual metaphors for the domain of trade negotiations. They discussed such metaphors as TRADE IS WAR and TRADE NEGOTIATIONS ARE BATTLES, and argued that conceptual metaphors display particular highlighting-and-hiding effects. For example, above metaphors highlight a combative understanding of the nature of business (*conquer a market; secret weapon*), colliding interests of the participants, a hostile atmosphere, and an asymmetrical outcome of winner and loser. They also insisted that there is high degree of systematicity in the metaphoric expressions, which are not isolated figures of speech but constitute and reflect a global pattern (Wolf & Polzenhagen 2003:261, 263).

Secondly, Santa Ana (2003) examined the metaphors that everyday Americans use to make sense of Latinos. Through the empirical analysis that uses contemporary public discourse, Santa Ana (2003) revealed the conceptual metaphors of immigrants. Santa Ana (2003:206-209) found out that immigrants were depicted as animals that are lured (The *lure* is jobs, however ill paid, not welfare; Wilson said he believed public benefits are a *lure* to immigrants, etc.). Also, IMMIGRATION AS DANGEROUS WATERS was found out to be highly frequent conceptual metaphor. Examples include: Foreigners who have *flooded* into the country so far this year; While there have been *several great waves* of immigration; Stem the *tide and flow* of illegal immigration, etc. (Santa Ana 2003:209-211).

Thirdly, examining the language that American couples used to talk about marriage, Quinn (1991:66; cited in Kövecses, Palmer, & Dirven 2002:146) found out eight conceptual metaphors of sharedness, lastingness, mutual benefit, compatibility, difficulty, effort, success or failure, and

risk.

Lastly, Kövecses (2002) discussed the metaphor SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS ARE PLANTS. Kövecses (2002:8; cited in Croft & Cruse 2004:205) gives the following examples: “He works for the local *branch* of the bank.” “There is a *flourishing* black market in software there.”

Cognitive linguistic notion of metaphor is thus utilized by these recent researches, which showed many ways of classifying the metaphorical expressions.

3. PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor in Lakoff & Turner (1989)

In their application of metaphor theory to literature, Lakoff & Turner (1989) discussed the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor. They not only showed the conventional metaphors in ordinary expressions like “*a young sprout*,” “*in full bloom*,” and “*withering away*,” but also examined many metaphorical expressions in the literature. They gathered the expressions of PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor from such works as: *Iliad*, *Macbeth*, *Job*, *Psalm*, Edward Arlington Robinson’s “For a Dead Lady,” Shakespeare’s sonnet 73 and 116, etc..

Lakoff & Turner (1989:6) argued that:

In this metaphor, people are viewed as plants with respect to the life cycle —more precisely, they are viewed as that part of the plant that burgeons and then withers or declines, such as leaves, flowers, and fruit, though sometimes the whole plant is viewed as burgeoning and then declining, as with grass or wheat. As Psalm 103 says, “As for man, his days are as grass: as a flower of the field, so he flourisheth.” Death comes with the harvest and the falling of the leaves. The stages of the plants and parts of plants in their yearly cycle correspond to the stages of life.

According to Lakoff & Turner (1989:13), offspring is regarded as the seed of parents, and the stages of life correspond to the seasonal stages of grain. They (1989:13) cited the following passage in the Bible:

Thou shalt know also that thy seed shall be great, and thy offspring as the grass of the earth. Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in in his season. (Job 5:25-26)

And, being harvested corresponds to the moment of death in this metaphor. Therefore, to be

cut down is to die:

Man that is born of woman...cometh forth like a flower, and is cut down.

(Job 14:1-2)

(Lakoff & Turner 1989:13-14)

Lakoff & Turner (1989:16, 26, 41, 74, 75, 79, etc.) stated that human death is compared to a reaper, and discussed why we have such an understanding. Besides the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor, they considered the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor and TIME IS A REAPER metaphor, and said that the understanding of human death as a reaper would come from the image of the special scenario of planting, cultivation, and harvesting. They (1989:75) discussed that:

First, the EVENTS ARE ACTIONS metaphor structures the event of death as the result of an action and adds to the event of death an agent who brings that event about. Second, the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor can be elaborated via a scenario of cultivation of plants, in which the plants at the end of their life cycle are harvested. The source domain of harvesting may contain a reaper, which, as we saw above, is not inherently part of the mapping from plants onto people.

Although Lakoff & Turner (1989) gathered the data of linguistic expressions of PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor in the literature, more adequate insight of this metaphor seems to be necessary with more sufficient data from the Bible, where most comprehensive and important expressions of this metaphor come from. In the next section, we will examine PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor in the Bible more fully.

4. Analysis

Looking into Holy Scripture, there are a large number of linguistic expressions that are categorized into the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor. Also, there are many subdivided groups of metaphor under the PEOPLE ARE PLANTS metaphor. Among them, the following subdivided metaphors are discussed in this section: PEOPLE ARE GRASS, THE RIGHTEOUS PERSON IS A BIG TREE, HUMAN POSTERITY IS THE FRUIT, INFANTS ARE SHOOTS, PEOPLE OF ISRAEL IS A VINE, and JESUS IS THE TRUE VINE; PEOPLE ARE THE BRANCHES. For each metaphor, several scriptural phrases are shown as data, which are cited from *The Holy*

Bible, New International Version. And, following the custom, the source is quoted in this way: (The name of the Book Chapter: Verse).

PEOPLE ARE GRASS

While still *growing* and *uncut*, they *wither* more quickly than grass.

(Job 8:12)

the wicked *spring up* like grass and all evildoers *flourish* (Psalm 92:7)

the exalted of the earth *languish*. (Isaiah 24:5)

they are like the new grass of the morning—though in the morning it

springs up new, by evening it is *dry* and *withered*. (Psalms 90:5-6)

The conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE GRASS imposes the transient perspective on humans. That is, the transience of human life is compared to herbal transience. Human life is very short like grass which wither quickly. Concerning the statements of the form X is Y, Croft & Cruse (2004:212) argued that they are to be interpreted as class-inclusion statements. For example, PEOPLE ARE GRASS means that people are members of the class of grass. The words refer to a supercategory for which the literal category is a prototypical example (cf. Croft & Cruse 2004:212). The comparison of the two highlights the special nature of the target domain. That is, what is highlighted in this metaphor is the transient understanding of the nature of humans. Since the grass is considered to be in the category that has withering and languishing life, PEOPLE ARE GRASS simply means that people have withering and languishing life.

I *wither away* like grass. (Psalms 102:11)

My heart is *blighted* and *withered* like grass (Psalms 102:4)

When a man is severely in pain and loses his vitality and energy, he is compared to grass which is shriveled up. These examples include both metaphor and simile. And simile serves to clarify that the source domain is “grass.” Concerning the role of simile, Croft & Cruse (2004:213) stated that:

in the vast majority of similes, there is a specification of the respect in which the resemblance holds, without which a proper interpretation is not possible. This feature will be called restricted mapping between the two domains.

Owing to the words “like grass,” we can evoke the image of a man’s state of mind, how his heart is blighted and withered. Thus, the linking of otherwise distinct domains by metaphor and simile is said to create similarity. As Lakoff & Johnson (1999:59) put it, abstract thought is virtually impossible without such metaphors and similes.

THE RIGHTEOUS PERSON IS A BIG TREE

they will *grow* like a cedar of Lebanon; *planted* in the house of the Lord,
they will *flourish* in the courts of our God. They will still *bear fruit* in old
age, they will stay *fresh* and *green* (Psalm 92:12-14)
They will be called *oaks* of righteousness, a *planting* of the Lord for the
display of his splendor. (Isaiah 61:3)

In these metaphors, we understand a righteous person in terms of a big tree such as a cedar of Lebanon and oaks. Each metaphor provides structure for comprehending different aspects of the target domain (Lakoff & Turner 1989:53). That is, the conceptual structure of a big tree in the source domain is mapped onto the conceptual structure of a righteous person in the target domain. And rich images of a big tree in the source domain, such as its luxuriance, hugeness, vitality, and freshness, etc. are used to reason with the unknown properties of a righteous person in the target domain. Understanding of the full meanings of a righteous person is made possible by virtue of these metaphors. And RIGHTEOUS PERSON IS A BIG TREE metaphor even creates novel meanings and new significance of a righteous person in the target domain. Thus, the metaphor goes beyond the confines of our established conceptual system in the target domain (Johnson 1987:162).

HUMAN POSTERITY IS THE FRUIT

He will bless the *fruit* of your womb, (Deuteronomy 7:13)
The *fruit* of your womb will be blessed (Deuteronomy 28:4)
The *fruit* of your womb will be cursed (Deuteronomy 28:18)

INFANTS ARE SHOOTS

his *young shoots* will *grow*. (Hosea 14:5-7)
A *shoot* will come up from the *stump* of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1)
your sons will be like *olive shoots* around your table. (Psalm 128:3)

To superimpose the figure of a tree upon people is another way of connecting people with

plants. The above metaphors show that fruit of a tree corresponds to human posterity, and shoots to infants. In HUMAN POSTERITY IS THE FRUIT metaphor, a particular aspect of the source domain, the image of fruit that is protected by the shell, is mapped onto the human posterity that may be fetus in the target domain. INFANTS ARE SHOOTS metaphor activates the conceptual structure of the source domain so that it can describe particular properties of human infants in the target domain. What is activated in the conceptual structure of the source domain is its young and fresh nature, small and green appearance, and soft and pliable touch. As Croft (2002:163) argued, “one of the central tenets of cognitive semantics is that the meaning of words is encyclopedic.” Such encyclopedic knowledge is utilized to highlight the otherwise hidden aspects of the target domain. Metaphors, in general, are not literally paraphrasable, and that they have a character that no literal expression has (Croft & Cruse 2004:194). Only by virtue of metaphor can we conceptualize the wealth of the target domain, and by importing the whole conceptual structure from the source domain can we delineate the full richness of the target domain (cf. Lakoff & Turner 1989:52).

PEOPLE OF ISRAEL IS A VINE

Joseph is a *fruitful vine*, a *fruitful vine* near a spring, whose *branches* climb over a wall. (Genesis 49:22)

Let them *glean* the remnant of Israel as thoroughly as a vine; pass your hand over the *branches* again, like one *gathering grapes*. (Jeremiah 6:9)

Israel was a *spreading vine*; he brought forth *fruit* for himself. (Hosea 10:1)

In this metaphor, people of Israel are viewed as a vine tree. Together with the metaphor, HOUSE OF ISRAEL IS THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD “The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the house of Israel (Isaiah 5:7),” we understand that the whole set of agricultural concepts in the source domain are mapped onto the people of Israel in the target domain. That is, these metaphors trigger to evoke the every process of the cultivation of vines. And we superimpose the image that people of Israel were planted, cultivated, and taken care of so that they might bring forth much fruit.

JESUS IS THE TRUE VINE; PEOPLE ARE THE BRANCHES

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He *cuts off every branch* in me that *bears no fruit*, while *every branch* that does *bear fruit* he *prunes* so that it will be even more *fruitful*. (John 15:1-2)

No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the *vine*. Neither can

you *bear fruit* unless you remain in me. *I am the vine; you are the branches*. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will *bear much fruit*
(John 15:4-5)

The above metaphors play a significant role in understanding the relationship between Jesus and humans. In order for a branch to bear fruit, it should remain in the true vine. In the same way, humans should remain in Jesus to bear much fruit. These metaphors provide rich inferential structures to the target domain. Because the logic of the source domain structure is mapped onto the logic of the target domain structure, the logic of pruning to remove the unnecessary branch in order for the other good branches to increase vigor is mapped onto the logic of the target domain. Thus, therapeutic function of pruning in arboriculture carries over to the target domain, which has strong implications on us. Concerning the motivation of such figurative use of language, Croft & Cruse (2004:193) stated that:

The figurative use may simply be more attention-grabbing, or it might conjure up a complex image not attainable any other way, or it may permit the conveyance of new concepts. As far as the hearer is concerned, the most obvious reason for opting for a figurative construal is the fact that no equally accessible and relevant literal construal is available.

In this section, we have seen the metaphorical expressions in Holy Scripture, which are categorized into the one unifying metaphor of PEOPLE ARE PLANTS, and discussed the important aspects of metaphor from the cognitive linguistic point of view.

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