

## Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics, and Divine Imagery

**David H. Aaron**

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When we read a biblical passage that in some way involves the deity, *how do we know* whether its language was meant literally or figuratively? This study endeavors to develop a language-based interpretive strategy for understanding God-related idioms in the Hebrew Bible. In this sense, our primary focus is the character of language usage in expressions pertaining to God. However, this study does not constitute a general history of biblical God belief. Rather, it involves an extended consideration of how semantic theory might become a factor in writing such a history, especially when it comes to interpreting metaphors.

The term “figurative” is a general designation for nonliteral speech acts, including many standard rhetorical devices such as irony, sarcasm and cynicism, allegory, hyperbole, metonymy, and of course, metaphor. Each of these requires us, as interpreters, to recognize that the literal meaning of an expression is not identical to what the speaker intends us to understand. Most figurative, rhetorical devices thrive on ambiguity. This is especially true of metaphor. Ambiguity in metaphorical expressions results from uncertainty as to how the first part of a nonliteral statement is to be understood in terms of its second, or implied, part. Usually, in metaphor, it is thought that some aspect of the first subject

of the comparative statement is similar to some aspect of the second subject. For instance, in the phrase, “all the world’s a stage,” there is ambiguity with regard to how the world is to be understood as a stage – or, to put it as a question, in what way is the world like a stage? We might think of this ambiguity as “internal” to an expression. That is, once you recognize something as figurative, there is ambiguity involved in decoding how its parts evoke meaning. As an aesthetic element, ambiguity contributes to an expression’s richness.

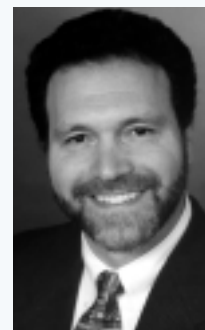
Besides this internal ambiguity, there is also often a lingering ambiguity as to whether something is even meant to be understood metaphorically. Given the phrase “God is a warrior,” we must first establish whether or

not we should be interpreting this statement literally or metaphorically. If we determine that the phrase was meant literally, our interpretive process is relatively straightforward. If we determine that the phrase was meant figuratively, then we must establish possible meanings and the limits of its implications. Admittedly, these two ambiguities – each derived from different structural element in discourse – are often interrelated, but they are not the same linguistic phenomenon. Although this study will recognize repeatedly these two levels of ambiguity, the main focus will be on the problem of how we determine whether a given statement harbors the kind of ambiguity that gives license to a metaphorical interpretation.

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Dr. Aaron’s publications are in the areas of Biblical Studies, Midrash and more broadly, the history of interpretation. Pursuing a deep interest in linguistics, Aaron’s first book, *Biblical Ambiguities: Metaphor, Semantics and Divine Imagery*, merges contemporary semantic theory with biblical exegesis, especially regarding metaphorical imagery in the Hebrew Bible. Two books are currently underway: *Authentic Decalogue*, which seeks to teach how we go about sequencing the origins of biblical narratives based on evidence internal to the text and uses the Ten Commandments as an entry point; *Syncretism and Self-Definition: Essays on the Problem of Myth and Meaning in Early Rabbinic Judaism* will explore issues such as anti-mysticism in Genesis Rabba and the rhetoric of “literalism” in rabbinic midrash.

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with the belief that each person should act now according to messianic ideals rather than wait for the coming of the messiah.

**Rabbi Yehoram Mazor, Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, and Rabbi Maya Leibovich** ed., *Barukh She'asani Isha?* [Blessed for Creating Me a Woman?] (Yediot Acharonot Publishers). An exploration by prominent scholars and lecturers in Judaic studies of various aspects of Jewish Womanhood throughout the ages.

**Rabbi Yehoram Mazor, Rabbi David Ariel-Joel, and Rabbi Maya Leibovich** ed., *Milchemet Gog Umagog* [The War Before the Messianic Era] (Yediot Acharonot Publishers). Analysis by prominent Israeli scholars of Apocalyptic Messianic beliefs from biblical times until recent Zionist ideology with reflections on "the final war between Good and Evil."

**Dr. Ellis Rivkin**, *The Unity Principal: The Shaping of Jewish History* (Behrman House). An exploration of how monotheism has enabled Jews throughout history to adapt themselves, their communities, and their vision of the Covenant, whenever they were confronted by new circumstances or historical forces, to ensure Jewish survival and vitality.

**Jean Bloch Rosensaft**, ed., *Thirty Pieces / Thirty Years: Sculpture by Ann Sperry* (Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion Museum, New York). An exhibition catalogue with essays by **Laura Kruger**, **Dr. Norman J. Cohen**, and **Pepe Karmel**.

**Dr. Gary P. Zola**, ed., and **Dr. Fred Krome**, managing ed., *The American Jewish Archives Journal*, Vol. LIV, No. 1 (The Jacob Rader Marcus Center of the American Jewish Archives). Highlights from this volume include articles on American Jewish philanthropist Felix Warburg's attitude toward the Palestinian Arabs in the aftermath of the 1929 riots; the Independent Order of True Sisters, a 19<sup>th</sup> century American Jewish women's organization; and the edited and annotated collection of letters from Rebecca Aaronson Brickner to her husband Rabbi Barnett Brickner written from Palestine in the early 1930s.

## Biblical Ambiguities

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The idioms to be considered are most often very simple, as far as syntax is concerned. Many are predicate nominatives or nominative phrases with a simple verb, for example: *God said, God is King, God is a rock, God is an army, God is creator*. Despite syntactic simplicity, some idioms involve more abstract concepts, such as when God *regrets* that he had made humans on earth (Gen 6:6)<sup>3</sup> or when God reflects (via Jeremiah) that it was he who (physically) *smote* the children of Judah because of their religious waywardness (Jer 2:30), or when God *commands* laws (e.g., Exod 21-24), or when God *declares* (via the prophet) that he never *demand*ed sacrifice (Isa 1:12-14; Jer 7:21-22; Amos 5:21-23).<sup>4</sup> Just how we categorize and then interpret these phrases – and the many hundreds of others that are spoken by or about God in the Tanakh – will determine how we write the history of Israelite God-belief. (pages 1-2)

One generation's solutions to the unknown become another generation's source of uncertainty, just as one generation's literalisms became another's metaphors. The tolerance for uncertainty constantly shifts with an era's preferences. There is no progression from concrete to abstract, literal to metaphorical, plurality of meaning to singularity of meaning. All of these are natural by-products of the human struggle to make sense. When researching the development of a given religion, we can distinguish the mystic from the straightforward pietist just as much on the basis of their semantic theory as by the outward structures of their beliefs and practices. These theories may never be articulated, but they are always operative. Thus, as we seek to decipher the distinct approaches to meaning that are at the foundations of religious texts and practices, we need to be forever cognizant not only of how ideologies understand the creation of meaning, but also, how they cope with the inevitable ambiguities. (page 199)

<sup>3</sup> See Fretheim 1984 on God's change of mind.

<sup>4</sup> There is much scholarly literature on the question of whether these phrases are to be taken as literal statements or hyperbolic ones. See, for instance, Kaiser 1983, 24-33.

## The Self-Renewing Congregation: Organizational Strategies for Revitalizing Congregational Life

ISA ARON

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Each of these dual capacities is discussed in a separate chapter of the book. In each case, I explain why both of these seemingly opposite capacities are critical for synagogues to cultivate. Drawing on organizational theory and research from the worlds of business, education, and government, and on selected Jewish texts, I explore what each capacity entails. Drawing on sociological studies of religious organizations, and on my own decade-long experience working with synagogues, I offer examples of the problems which arise when these capacities are absent and the benefits that accrue when they are present. Developing these capacities, and balancing one against the other, is no easy matter, and each chapter includes exercises designed to help a synagogue committee or task force understand and practice the capacity in question. It also includes text study guides that can serve as spring-boards for discussion. Finally, each chapter includes a real-life case study of a synagogue's efforts to develop the capacity in question.

Framing these four chapters, which form the core of this book, are introductory and concluding chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the recent history of American synagogues, and explains why, at this juncture, it is critical that they develop the capacity to become self-renewing. At the end of the book, chapter 7 deals with two kinds of synergy – between the four capacities discussed in this book, and between the congregation as a whole and the individuals within it.

<sup>1</sup>see, for example, Thomas Hawkins, *The Learning Congregation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997).