To What Does the Bible Refer? On Metaphor and Analogy

Phil Enns

Introduction

What makes the Bible more than a collection of texts is the belief that the Bible reveals God. It would seem, then, that the answer to the question 'To what does the Bible refer?' is 'God'. However, God is by essence that which we cannot know and therefore cannot say anything about. The answer 'God' is, by faith, appropriate, but the focus of the question necesssarily shifts from the answer to the question itself and, more precisely, the matter of reference. How can the Bible be about God? The answer requires a consideration of who God is, the character of the Biblical texts, and finally the reader. This paper offers a narrow constructive response focusing on Paul Ricoeur's work on metaphor and Thomas Aquinas's treatment of analogy, which together provide robust grounds for understanding both the question and the answer.

Ricoeur: Metaphor and the Names of God

> Naming God comes about only within the milieu of a presupposition, incapable of being rendered transparent to itself, suspected of being a vicious circle, and tormented by contingency. This is the presupposition: naming God is what has already taken place in the texts preferred by my listening's presupposition.[1]

For Ricoeur, listening to the Bible presupposes that what is being listened for – that is, God – has already been named by the Bible. There we find a variety of forms of discourse, including narrative and prophetic, that are in different ways about God, so that when the Bible names God, it is not according to a single tone but rather polyphonic.[2] The narratives provide accounts of God as "Divine Actant" serving as the horizon within a history of deliverance.[3]

Prophetic discourse establishes God as the 'voice behind the voice' who calls and sends. It would seem, however, that acknowledging so many different forms of discourse within the Bible only makes less convincing the claim that the Bible as a whole is about God. If the narrative bits of the Bible refer to God in one way and the prophetic bits in another way, the temptation

is to choose one's favorite discourse as the only legitimate referring one. For example, we might claim that the prophetic form of being called and sent is the primordial encounter with God and serves as the criterion for reading the rest of the Bible. Or we might allow that the various discourses each talk about God in their own unique manner and that the best we can do is simply describe what each is doing. In the first case the referential function of the Bible is identified with only one of its parts, while in the second the referential function is dropped altogether in favor of mere description. Either way, we would no longer be in a position to claim that the Bible is about God.

To say the Bible is about God is to claim that while the word 'God' has different senses there, it always has the same referent. Reference in this case, therefore, requires a relationship between the name 'God' with its various senses and what they are about. According to Ricoeur, "the literary work through the structure proper to it displays a world only under the condition that the reference of descriptive discourse is suspended."[4] This suspension is grounded in the metaphorical process where the literal or established meanings of words are suspended in order to bring to light new meanings, senses, and, ultimately, references.[5] For example, the sentence 'My love is a rose' fails to be meaningful when 'rose' is given its ordinary meaning. The one I love is not a flower and thus 'rose' cannot mean what it literally means.

Metaphor, therefore, involves three steps. First, the reader experiences a deviation so that a literal reading fails. Second, she is forced to shift her attention from individual words to the sentence as a whole.[6] There can be no definition of a word as used in a metaphor because the meaning can only be discerned at the level of the sentence as a whole. Third, the reader herself must work out the meaning of the metaphor. Because there is no established contextual meaning for the words used, she is forced to produce a new contextual meaning.[7] With the metaphorical process, the literal meaning of language is suspended in favor of a figurative meaning that makes possible ways of seeing the world that extend beyond established contexts.

According to Ricoeur, a similar metaphorical process is at work in the Bible. For example, where the narrative discourse provides an account of traditions and remembrance of founding events, the prophetic discourse warns of an imminent threat.[8] When these individual discourses are combined in a single text, the Bible, the reader is forced to move beyond the established

meanings that belong properly to the individual discourses in order to produce a unique context within which a new level of meaning is produced. The Bible refers to a God remembered as one who in the past has acted to establish the present community of believers and who presently threatens that very same people. The tension between God's promise and God's threat requires that the reader step away from the individual texts and view the Bible as a whole. It is at this secondary level of meaning that the Bible can refer to God.

The Bible is able to refer because the diversity of discourses comprising the text force the reader to consider a new context, one that begins with the Bible as a whole. However, Ricoeur stresses that as these discourses shift the reader's attention to that context, they also ensure that the reference to God is never complete. The tension between the discourses forces the reference to God to circulate through all of them, never being fixed in any one.[9] Instead of hindering the reference to God, the diversity is fundamental for the very possibility of the Bible referring to God. Negatively, the tension between discourses makes it impossible for the reader to fix the Biblical reference to God in any particular discourse. Positively, this tension forces her to consider the Bible within a new context where God is named dynamically.

The metaphorical function may open up the possibility for God being named, but what is missing so far is the 'aboutness' that characterizes reference. The question is not whether the Bible can merely *name* God but whether it can *refer to* God. According to Ricoeur, metaphor, through the suspension of the literal or established meaning, allows not only for the possibility of a new sense but also of a new reference.[10] 'My love is a rose' cannot mean what it literally means, yet whatever it does mean depends in some way on what it literally says. Ricoeur calls this the split reference of metaphor.[11] My beloved is certainly not a flower, yet there is something about the flower that allows for it to be meaningfully ascribed to my beloved. The metaphor holds within itself an 'is and is not' where the literal reference is suspended in favor of a metaphorical reference. The latter transfers meaning from the original reference into a new realm, so that what is said about the rose is now said metaphorically of my beloved.[12] This transference or metaphorical importation is made possible due to some fittingness or appropriateness between the literal reference and the metaphorical one.[13] There must be something that makes it appropriate to metaphorically refer to my beloved as

a rose or else the utterance would fail to be meaningful. Through the metaphorical function, then, the original reference is suspended in order to serve as grounds for a transference establishing the new metaphorical reference.

While metaphor simultaneously suspends an established realm in order to open up a new realm within which a new reference is possible, this new one remains figurative and therefore undetermined.

> The metaphorical utterance functions in two referential fields at once. This duality explains how two levels of meaning are linked together in the symbol. The first meaning relates to a known field of reference, that is to the sphere of entities to which the predicates considered in their established meaning can be attached. The second meaning, the one that is to be made apparent, relates to a referential field for which there is no direct characterization, for which we consequently are unable to make identifying descriptions by means of appropriate predicates.[14]

The metaphorical reference cannot be conceptually fixed into an idea or fact and therefore remains figurative. Yet, if it can take on only a figurative form and thereby lacks any determination, how can we say the metaphor is about something? If it lacks the clarity that comes with concepts and ideas, what does it add to our understanding of the world? Ricoeur responds by arguing that the experience of the fittingness or appropriateness of a metaphor suggests a primordial or pre-objective encounter with the world.[15] There is a world that precedes us, and only because we are responding to it is there something to say.

> If language were not fundamentally referential, would or could it be meaningful? How could we know that a sign stands for something, if it did not receive its direction towards something for which it stands from its use in discourse?[16]

In possessing a fittingness and appropriateness, the metaphor refers by showing something about the world. According to Ricoeur, once we reject the claim that only the discourse of objects and facts can refer, then we open up greater possibilities of understanding the world. Since the poetic and speculative

discourses refer in their own ways to the same world, the extension of meaning through metaphor makes possible the extension of understanding.[17]

For Ricoeur, the Bible opens up a realm within which we can meaningfully talk about God and thereby it refers to God. This reference is not determined by concepts and ideas but instead functions through hints and gestures. By circulating the reference to God through diverse and incommensurable discourses, the Bible ensures that the name 'God' is meaningful yet never determined by concepts and ideas. Through the metaphorical function, the one who listens to the Bible engages a world where God is encountered as present and active.

Aquinas: Analogy and the Names of God

For Aquinas it is also true that the Bible refers to God. While particular texts may be about things other than God, they belong in the Bible in so far as they ultimately have their reference to God.[18] Aquinas divides up the senses of the Bible into four: the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical.[19] The latter three have their signification through a spiritual sense, in that they signify not by words that signify things but by the things themselves. The Old Law allegorically signifies the New Law, the things done by Christ signify what we are to do as well as things belonging to eternal glory. However, this spiritual sense is grounded in the literal sense to which belong history, etiology, and analogy. History applies to whatever is simply recounted, and etiology to the causes or reasons for what is done. What is noteworthy, however, is that analogy is listed under the literal sense. If we follow the logic of Aquinas's literal sense, the movement is from event to natural causes to revealed causes. Analogy is, then, the means by which the relationship between the material and divine is articulated.

Aquinas makes it clear that we cannot comprehend God nor have any knowledge of God.[20] The temptation is then to say that God is inaccessible to our understanding. But Aquinas rejects this move. Human beings have a natural desire to know why things happen, and as God is the first cause of things, to be unable to understand God would result in this desire being empty. Therefore, something of God must be available to human beings.

> From effects not proportionate to the cause no perfect knowledge of that cause can be obtained. Yet from every effect the existence

> of the cause can be clearly demonstrated, and so we can demonstrate the existence of God from His effects; though from them we cannot perfectly know God as He is in His essence.[21]

When activity is purposeful, the effect depends on the cause, and so from the effect we can derive at least some awareness of the cause.[22] Now in the case of God, Aquinas argues that the difference between God as cause and the world as effect is of a kind that we cannot have any knowledge of God, yet from the world as effect we *can* draw two conclusions. First, there is a general awareness that God exists, without this awareness being knowledge. Aquinas uses the example of knowing that someone is approaching but not knowing that it is Peter.[23] The second conclusion is that the effects we see in the world show something of God. We cannot comprehend God nor have any knowledge of God, yet it is possible to know that God exists and to see something of God's essence.

For Aquinas, in every effect something of the cause is to be found, and this likeness can only be thought of according to analogy. Drawing on Aristotle, he gives the following definition of analogy:

> Now names are thus used in two ways: either according as many things are proportionate to one, thus for example "healthy" predicated of medicine and urine in relation and in proportion to health of a body, of which the latter is the sign and the former the cause: or according as one thing is proportionate to another, thus "healthy" is said of medicine and animal, since medicine is the cause of health in the animal body. And in this way some things are said of God and creatures analogically, and not in a purely equivocal nor in a purely univocal sense.[24]

Analogy is comprised of a prior term and a posterior term that relate according to a proportion. This proportion can take two forms. In the first case, various different uses of a word have their meanings determined by a single prior point of reference. Thus the word 'medical' can be said of doctors, surgery, and scalpels. In the second case, only two terms are considered and a word applies to both due to a particular relationship between the two. Here the example is of 'healthy', which is said of medicine as it causes the body to be healthy. Analogy, therefore, allows for a single word to be used in different

ways without its meaning being either univocal or equivocal but, rather, similar.

As we have seen, Aquinas draws on analogy in order to explain how an effect has a likeness to its cause. If God is first cause of all things and there is a similarity between an effect and its cause, then there can be an analogical likeness between effects in the world and God. However, this likeness cannot produce knowledge of God. Aquinas therefore qualifies his use of analogy in two ways. First, human beings by their natural powers cannot see that which is beyond the natural, so an act of grace is necessary.[25] God, through the gift of grace, makes it possible for us to see the essence of God by preparing our understanding. This gift of grace does not provide something other than what is given by the intellect but is instead added to the intellect.[26] There can thus be no conflict between what is given by reason and what is added through grace. Analogy, in referring to God, provides what cannot be given by natural reason and can be seen only through the activity of grace.

The second qualification is to distinguish two different modes of signification. Since we cannot have any knowledge of God, the meaning of all the terms in the analogy comes from their ordinary use. When we say 'God is good', the meaning of 'good' comes from how it is used in ordinary and established contexts. There is no special meaning to 'good' when it is applied to God. However, the analogy is about God and therefore has God as its referent. The question is, how can words with meanings derived from ordinary usage refer to God? Here Aquinas draws on the two different forms of analogy mentioned above. In the first, a thing is signified by its effects. The example he gives is that of applying the name 'lion' to God.[27] The analogy takes its primary meaning from the lion and posits that something similar can be said of God. With this form of analogy, while God is the referent, signification remains primarily with the effects seen in creation, so that any created thing can serve as an analogy of God. With the second form of analogy, a thing is signified by a proportion between two things. There are some terms, like 'good', that are intended to say something substantial about God.

> Now since our intellect knows God from creatures, it knows Him as far as creatures represent Him. Now it is shown above that

> God prepossesses in Himself all the perfections of creatures, being Himself simply and universally perfect. Hence every creature represents Him, and is like Him so far as it possesses some perfection; yet it represents Him not as something of the same species or genus, but as the excelling principle of whose form the effects fall short . . . So when we say, 'God is good,' the meaning is not, 'God is the cause of goodness,' or 'God is not evil'; but the meaning is, 'Whatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God,' and in a more excellent and higher way.[28]

In dealing with terms that allow for perfection, such as 'good' or 'wise', God is their cause by eminence. The terms signify, not by beginning with how they apply to God and then moving to human beings, but rather from how they are used of human beings and then moving towards God. The goodness of God emanates to God's creation, but the signification of the word 'good' moves in the opposite direction. We can say that God is good, but what is meant by God's goodness lies beyond our understanding. Therefore, the analogy 'God is good' has God as its referent, its meaning from the word 'good' as used of human beings, and its signification by eminence. For Aquinas, while analogy can only draw on words as they are ordinarily used, it is able to signify God through either effects or eminence.

It is now clear why Aquinas places analogy under the literal sense. For him, analogy is not figurative because it can only function within the ordinary, established meanings of words. The statement 'God is love' can only be meaningful if we keep the established meaning of the word 'love'. Yet this statement refers to God when we understand that 'love' as applied to God signifies something higher and more excellent than when applied to human beings. Furthermore, the created order reveals in itself the likeness of its first cause. The lion can represent the strength of God because the literal strength of the lion is an effect of God's creative activity. Analogy is the means by which the Biblical text refers to God by establishing the causal relation between the literal meaning of words and the revelation of God's essence and God as first cause.

Conclusion: Both Metaphor and Analogy

Ricoeur rejects analogy as a means of referring to God largely on the grounds[29] that it is incompatible with our modern understanding of the physical universe.[30] We can no longer accept any view of causality that extends beyond one event following after another, a position that rules out claiming that an effect has a similarity to its cause. This may be true, but it may also be true that we need a broader understanding of causality, particularly if we want to confess that the Bible refers to God. Ricoeur notes that the Bible refers to God by circulating this reference through the various names of God found in its various discourses. However, this circulating reference can only be possible if the various names of God, in their literal sense, already refer in some way to God. If they didn't, there would be no sense in including them in the cycling of the reference to God.

Yet, according to Ricoeur, reference occurs only when the literal meaning of the names of God is suspended. It is as though he climbs up the ladder of the literal names of God, but upon reaching the top, claims the ladder can be dispensed with. Ricoeur is not completely unaware of this problem, since he insists that metaphors have a fittingness or appropriateness, but he is curiously silent as to what the grounds might be for this similarity. How are the names of God consistent with the historical account of God delivering the Hebrews from Egypt, when the production of these names requires that we suspend claiming this account has any literal meaning regarding God? Given the above, it seems that analogy would account for the fittingness of metaphors, except that Ricoeur rules out this possibility. He can explain how the Bible produces the diverse names we give to God but cannot explain how they are about the God described in the particular discourses comprising the Bible. Thus he undermines his claim that the Bible is about God.

Ricoeur allows that for the Bible to refer to God both metaphor and analogy might be necessary, so that analogy verticalizes metaphor and metaphor gives analogy its concrete form.[31] If the modern understanding of causality, which is limited to mere succession, were to be rejected for being too narrow, we would feel no need to choose between Ricoeur's account of metaphor and Aquinas's account of analogy. Analogy allows for the Bible to be about God while metaphor provides the content. To believe that the Biblical text refers to God, and that therefore God has already been named, requires

that as listeners we must attend to both what is literally said and how this is then about God. As Aquinas tells us, when the Bible is talking about the essence of God, what is said of human beings is found in God in a more perfect and higher way. When the Bible is talking about the created order, God is revealed but in a metaphorical sense. As human beings we begin with what is given to us through literal and established means, but as Christians we believe that what is given also reveals God. The faithful reader is called to attend to the Biblical text because the Bible, with its literal and spiritual senses, is about God, and therefore God has already been named in it.

Notes

[1] Paul Ricoeur, "Naming God," in *Figuring the Sacred*, ed. Mark Wallace, trans. David Pellauer (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 218.
[2] *Ibid*., 224.
[3] *Ibid*., 225.
[4] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin, and John Costello (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 221.
[5] *Ibid*., 197.
[6] *Ibid.*, 67.
[7] *Ibid*., 95.
[8] Ricoeur, "Naming God," 226.
[9] *Ibid*., 228.
[10] Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 221.
[11] *Ibid*., 231.
[12] *Ibid*., 238.
[13] *Ibid.*, 239.
[14] *Ibid*., 299.
[15] *Ibid*., 306.
[16] Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 21.
[17] Ricoeur fixes interpretation as the means by which the semantic content of poetic discourse is brought to speculative discourse. Interpretation, through schematizations and imaginative illustrations, produces the concepts and ideas which make understanding possible. Instead of being in conflict, poetic and speculative discourses engage in a symbiotic relationship where the poetic extends the field of meaning while the speculative provides understanding through determination within that field of meaning.
[18] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981, c1948), I, Q1, a7.
[19] *Ibid*., I, Q1, a10.

[20] *Ibid*., I, Q12, a1.
[21] *Ibid*., I, Q2, a2.
[22] For more on the importance of purposefulness in Aquinas, see John Milbank, "Intensities," *Modern Theology* 15 (October 1999).
[23] Aquinas, *ST*, I, Q2, a1.
[24] *Ibid*., I, Q13, a5.
[25] *Ibid*., I, Q12, a5.
[26] *Ibid*., I, Q1, a8.
[27] *Ibid*., I, Q13, a6.
[28] *Ibid*., I, Q13, a2.
[29] Ricoeur makes clear that his objection lies solely at the physical level. He does not want to deny the validity of the attempt to find an adequate way of referring to God that belongs to speculative rather than poetic discourse. There is a rather ironic tension in his thought. In developing his account of metaphor, he rejects the suggestion that scientific discourse constrains the referential function of metaphor. But when it comes to analogy, scientific discourse proves to be the undoing of Aquinas's account of analogy. A more consistent position would be to distinguish between scientific and speculative discourse, and to allow that speculative discourse must not be constrained by scientific discourse. That Ricoeur fails to do this is surprising, given his Kantianism.
[30] Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 277.
[31] *Ibid*., 279.