

II. Scripture as a Tool for Redescription

The concept of “redescription” is a useful tool for understanding one of the principle ways that Scripture functions within the first two chapters of Galatians. This concept is related to the function of metaphor in human discourse as it has been described by Paul Ricoeur. According to Ricoeur, when we consider the function of “metaphor” beyond the simple sentence level,

the issue is no longer the form of metaphor as a word-focused figure of speech, nor even just the sense of metaphor as a founding of a new semantic pertinence, but the reference of the metaphorical statement as the power to “redescribe” reality.¹³

In Ricoeur’s view “metaphor is the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality.”¹⁴ He refers to “the *redescriptive* power that belongs to the model and, by reflection, the metaphor.”¹⁵

Ricoeur relates metaphor to what Gilbert Ryle called a “category mistake” which is the “presentation of facts belonging to one category in terms of another.”¹⁶ It “consists in speaking of one thing in terms of another that resembles it. It is tempting to say that metaphor is a planned category mistake.” Metaphor can be understood in the light of the role that models have in scientific work:

The central argument is that, with respect to the relation to reality, metaphor is to poetic language what the model is to scientific language. Now in scientific language, the model is essentially a heuristic instrument that seeks, by means of fiction, to break down an inadequate interpretation and to lay the way for a new, more adequate interpretation.¹⁷

In this way “the model is an instrument of redescription.”¹⁸ The concept of a “model” is not the analog of the simple metaphorical statement: “Rather, as the model consists in a complex network of statements, its exact analogue would be the extended metaphor – tale, allegory.” That is, the metaphor finds its equivalent “in a metaphoric network and not in an isolated metaphor.”¹⁹ Ricoeur refers to “the constitution of the metaphoric

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, 6 (his emphases).

¹⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 7.

¹⁵ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 88 (emphasis his).

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 197, citing Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind*, 10.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 240.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 240.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 243.

universe as a network”²⁰ and basing himself on the concept of “root metaphors” which “organize metaphors into networks” he suggests the need to subordinate isolated “figures” to “schemas” that govern “regions”: “It is to be expected that the referential function of metaphor should be carried by a metaphoric network rather than an isolated metaphorical statement.”²¹

Richard Rorty follows a similar line in claiming that discourse serves to redescribe socially significant phenomena. This involves the recognition that “anything [can] be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed.”²² Rorty explains how this is done:

The method is to redescribe lots and lots of new things in new ways, until you have created a pattern of linguistic behavior which will tempt the rising generations to adopt it, thereby causing them to look for appropriate new forms of nonlinguistic behavior, for example, the adoption of new scientific equipment or new social institutions.²³

If we look at Galatians 1–2 with this concept in mind we can ask about the nature of the particular redescription that Paul offers his readers in this material. For Paul, Scripture may be “about” Christ, the gospel, and the eschatological people of God, but besides talking *about* Scripture and its message, or expounding Scripture and its message, Paul also *uses* Scripture as a tool for redescribing the world around him. He uses Scripture as a tool for redescribing *himself* (as an authoritative eschatological prophet of the gospel); his *opponents* (as false prophets and unclean persons); his *message* (as the eschatological equivalent of God’s revelation on Sinai); his Gentile *converts* (as children of Abraham, inheritors of God’s promises to Israel); and *Scripture itself* (as God’s message of eschatological salvation in Christ directed to Paul’s Gentile churches).

In fact, it seems that redescription is one of Paul’s most important and difficult projects. His ministry depends upon the success of his redescription of the world, the people of God, the nature of the life God desires, and the message of Scripture. This last redescription is fundamental since he uses Scripture to redescribe everything else and in the process has to redescribe Scripture itself.

²⁰ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 243.

²¹ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 244.

²² Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 7. It is not necessary to buy fully into Rorty’s radical philosophical pragmatism to recognize the rhetorical power of the technique of redescription. For a critique of Rorty in the context of an open dialogue, see Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*.

²³ Rorty, *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 9.

It seems that there may be a root metaphor at the base of all the others in Paul's redescription in Galatians 1–2, and that is the understanding of his gospel as the restoration/eschatological/apocalyptic equivalent of the Mosaic covenant and law. It is on the basis of this identification that all of the others fall into place. Paul's prophetic stature is based on his commission to proclaim this revealed message. His opponents are cast as false prophets because of their attempt to distort or overthrow that message. The Galatians are equivalent to the apostatizing Israelites at Sinai because they are turning to a different message. The dualistic world that is described is the context for Paul's understanding of his gospel message as the apocalyptic equivalent of the earlier revelation and is therefore an even more basic element of the metaphoric network.

It is this whole model, metaphoric network, or redescription of the world based on a particular conception of its structure and present salvation-historical stage and the related concept of his gospel that allows Paul to make the striking hermeneutical move of describing those preaching the law, or turning to it, as false prophets or biblical apostates.²⁴

This understanding of Scripture as a tool for redescription is very similar to the description Jacob Neusner gives of what he calls "writing with Scripture." This concept was discussed in the conclusion of the analysis of Gal 1:6–10 in Chapter 2, but part of Neusner's explanation bears repeating here. According to him the founders of Judaism "used scripture as an artist uses the colors on the palette, expressing ideas through and with scripture as the artist paints with those colors and no others."²⁵ In other words,

Scripture formed a dictionary, providing a vast range of permissible usages of intelligible words. Scripture did not dictate the sentences that would be composed

²⁴ The use of Scripture as a tool for redescription can also be seen in Paul's other letters and in other New Testament authors as well. Richard Hays has already suggested that Phil 1:19 contains an echo of Job 13:16 (LXX) and that "By echoing Job's words, Paul the prisoner tacitly assumes the role of righteous sufferer, as paradigmatically figured by Job" (Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 22). That is to say, Paul redescribes himself and his situation by reference to Job and his situation. More obvious is Paul's manner of redescribing the situation of the Corinthians in terms of the situation of the Israelites who committed idolatry after experiencing divine redemption in 1 Corinthians 10. A similar phenomenon is expressed when Jesus is described as "the lamb of God" or as the Temple. Outside of Paul's writings, 1 Pet 2:5–10 is an example of a case where the church in general and Christians as members of it, though not explicitly stated to be a "new," "spiritual," or "eschatological" Israel, are described as though they were Israel itself.

²⁵ Neusner, *Writing with Scripture*, 4.

through the words found in that (limited) dictionary. Much as painters paint with a palette of colors, so authorships wrote with scripture.²⁶

The idea of Scripture as a tool for redescription also has much in common with Richard Hays' suggestion that "Paul's intertextual readings are metaphorical in character"²⁷ although Hays seems to ascribe an inordinate amount of freedom and perhaps even arbitrariness to Paul's metaphorical use of Scripture.²⁸ One of Hays' "Christian presuppositions" or "hermeneutical constraints" would be his conviction that "Paul operates with an *ecclesiocentric* hermeneutic."²⁹ That is, in answer to the question "When Paul reads the Bible, what does he find there?" Hays responds that "What Paul finds in Scripture, above all else, is a prefiguration of the church as the people of God."³⁰ Yet he recognizes that this emphasis in Paul's letters is due to the issues that they were confronting. As he explains,

the ecclesiocentric character of Paul's readings is to be understood as a consequence of the historical contingency of his writings as pastoral letters. For Paul's communities, Jesus' identity was not the contested issue, as it was at a later date for the writer of the Gospel of John.... Paul, writing to small, newly formed communities composed of Gentile Christians (e.g., in Galatia) or perhaps of mixed Gentile-Jewish composition (e.g., in Rome), was confronted most urgently by questions of communal self-definition. How were such communities to interpret their relation to Israel?³¹

²⁶ Neusner, *Writing with Scripture*, 3.

²⁷ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 156.

²⁸ According to Hays Paul "seems to have leaped – in moments of metaphorical insight – to intuitive apprehensions of the meanings of texts without the aid or encumbrance of systematic reflection about his own hermeneutics" (Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 161). As a consequence, "Paul provides us with a model of hermeneutical freedom. *If we learned from Paul how to read Scripture, we would learn to appreciate the metaphorical relation between the text and our own reading of it*" (Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 186, his emphasis). James Scott thinks that according to Hays "Paul engages in a private reading of Scripture, a spontaneous and intuitive reflection on the Old Testament text which is largely unaffected by intervening Jewish tradition because his reading occurs in the isolated 'cave of resonant signification'" (Scott, "'For as Many as are of Works of the Law are under a Curse' (Galatians 3.10)," 192 note 18). He suggests that in Hays' view "Paul is basically an idiosyncratic reader of the Old Testament with some Christian presuppositions and a few hermeneutical constraints" (Scott, "'For as Many as are of Works of the Law,'" 192 note 18). While Scott has perhaps gone too far, Hays does seem to put the accent on the concept of "freedom." See also Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, 264–66.

²⁹ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 86 (his emphasis).

³⁰ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 86 (his emphasis).

³¹ Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 162.

In this context “Paul’s pastoral concern for community formation expresses itself through the metaphorical strategy of reading Israel’s story as a prefiguration of the eschatological community.”³²

This study of Galatians 1–2 would suggest that what Paul sees when he looks in Scripture depends on what he is looking at in the world around him. This is to say that Hays is correct in recognizing that when Paul looks in the Bible to understand the church he finds his understanding in what the Bible says about (eschatological) Israel. But when Paul looks in the Bible to understand himself he finds his understanding in the picture of a prophet called to preach good news in the last days. Although it is not a polemical issue in his letters, the evidence still suggests that when Paul looked in the Bible to understand Jesus, he found his understanding in the Bible’s promises of a Davidic king, Son of God and suffering servant (among other concepts).

The point we want to make here is that although Paul sometimes looks *in* the Bible, he seems to spend much of his time looking *through* it. Whatever it is that he focuses his attention on, he sees it through the lens of Scripture. This use of Scripture as a lens, or as a tool for redescribing things, is one of the primary ways that Scripture has functioned in Galatians 1–2. It is not an arbitrary practice, however. There are a number of constraints and controls. The most fundamental of these is the global hermeneutical perspective which seems to be reflected in the various scriptural concepts and ideas found in these chapters. This global hermeneutical perspective suggests that for Paul Scripture is a source of apocalyptic-restorationist concepts, structures and theology.

³² Hays, *Echoes of Scripture*, 162.