

Floods, destruction and renewal: An analysis of the metaphors in the Genesis

Inundaciones, destrucción y renacimiento: Análisis de las metáforas en el Génesis

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the metaphorical representation of floods in Genesis 6–9, focusing on how the narrative constructs meanings of destruction and renewal. Using Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) conceptual metaphor theory, the study examines key symbolic elements such as water, the ark, and the rainbow. The analysis shows that floodwaters function not only as a literal natural disaster but also as a metaphor for divine judgment, moral corruption, purification, and the destruction of a violent world. The ark is interpreted as a container metaphor that represents protection, survival, and separation from chaos, while the rainbow symbolizes covenant, hope, reconciliation, and the possibility of a renewed beginning. Through these metaphorical patterns, the Genesis flood narrative communicates abstract ideas about morality, punishment, preservation, and rebirth. The findings suggest that metaphors allow the text to remain meaningful across different cultural, historical, and religious contexts, since they help readers interpret catastrophe not only as destruction but also as a process that leads to transformation and renewal.

Keywords: Discourse analysis; Metaphors; Representation; Morality; Genesis.

Resumen

Este trabajo analiza la representación metafórica del diluvio en el Génesis 6–9, centrándose en cómo la narrativa construye significados de destrucción y renovación. A partir de la teoría de la metáfora conceptual de Lakoff y Johnson (1980), el estudio examina elementos simbólicos clave como el agua, el arca y el arcoíris. El análisis muestra que las aguas del diluvio funcionan no solo como un desastre natural literal, sino también como una metáfora del juicio divino, la corrupción moral, la purificación y la destrucción de un mundo violento. El arca se interpreta como una metáfora de contenedor que representa protección, supervivencia y separación del caos, mientras que el arcoíris simboliza pacto, esperanza, reconciliación y la posibilidad de un nuevo comienzo. A través de estos patrones metafóricos, la narrativa del diluvio en el Génesis comunica ideas abstractas sobre moralidad, castigo, preservación y renacimiento. Los hallazgos sugieren que las metáforas permiten que el texto conserve su significado en distintos contextos culturales, históricos y religiosos, ya que ayudan a los lectores a interpretar la catástrofe no solo como destrucción, sino también como un proceso que conduce a la transformación y la renovación.

Palabras clave: Análisis del discurso; Metáforas; Representación, Moralidad; Génesis.



Introduction

Flood narratives have appeared in many civilizations throughout history, including Mesopotamian, Greek, Hindu, Chinese and Biblical traditions. Stories such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the flood narrative in Genesis share common themes of destruction, survival and renewal. These types of narratives continue to influence cultural interpretations through time, religion, literature and interpretations of morality and catastrophe as well as contributing to the collective memory of communities (Lancaster, 2023). Even though these stories belong to different cultures, many of them present similar elements because they try to explain questions about human behavior, morality, divine powers, punishment and the possibility of a new beginning. These repetitive narratives show how flood narratives have remained meaningful across generations and civilizations.

One reason these narratives remain meaningful is because they use metaphors to communicate abstract ideas through symbols and physical events. However, metaphors are not only used to make a text more expressive but also cognitive tools that help readers picture and understand moral and religious messages. In Genesis, elements such as water, the ark, and the rainbow serve as symbolic representations that go deeper than the literal meaning of the words and guide different interpretations depending on the context of the reader.

Genesis was selected among many existing flood narratives because of its influence on the Judeo-Christian tradition and because it continues to shape religious and cultural understandings of morality, divine judgment and hope. Furthermore, its symbolism has been relevant throughout history and continues to be interpreted in many ways until today. This paper focuses on how symbols in the narrative such as water, the ark, and the rainbow serve as metaphors to construct meanings of destruction and renewal in Genesis. In this study, destruction refers to the symbolic representation of judgment and the end of the previous order because of corruption, whereas renewal or rebirth refers to purification, and the new beginning after restoration. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to analyze how flood narratives in Genesis make use of metaphors to represent destruction and renewal through metaphor theory.

Literature review

Metaphors play an important role in human life as they are one of our principal methods for understanding our physical, social, and inner world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, as cited in Musolff, 2012). Metaphors work in a way that helps mapping conceptual structures that may be abstract or difficult to understand into ways that can be more familiar and easier to imagine. By using metaphors, speakers and writers can imply meanings, emotions, and ideologies indirectly while still presenting them as figurative language (Musolff, 2012). Therefore, metaphors are not only literary or poetic devices, but also cognitive tools that shape the way people perceive reality. Lakoff and Johnson (1989, as cited in Ritchie, 2013), also explain metaphor as a way of experiencing and understanding one concept through another. This means that, metaphors influence the way people interpret events, morality, emotions, and even social reality.

Lakoff's classification of metaphors serves as a useful guide for analyzing metaphors in texts. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1980), metaphors can be *structural*, *orientational*, and *ontological*. First, structural metaphors occur when one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another. However, this structuring



is partial and not total, since one concept is only understood through another and does not completely become that concept. Moreover, *orientational* metaphors organize concepts by spatial orientations such as up-down, inside-outside, or front-back, often reflecting physical and cultural experiences. Finally, *ontological* metaphors allow people to conceptualize abstract concepts such as emotions, ideas, and events as physical entities, substances, or containers. Lakoff (1980) also discusses conceptual metaphors through *image schemas* such as: containers, paths, and force-images. *Container* metaphors portray abstract ideas as things that can be “inside” or “outside” something, whereas *path* metaphors conceptualize experiences as journeys with beginnings, road and destinations. *Force-image* metaphors represent causes, obstacles as physical forces. These classifications become useful for analyzing the flood narrative in Genesis because many of these metaphorical patterns can be found simultaneously which will be discussed in the results and discussion.

Water itself can contain multiple metaphorical meanings depending on the context. As mentioned in research about flood metaphors in Malaysian media discourse (Chong et al., 2020), water can function as a paradoxical symbol as it can represent destruction and renewal at the same time. In some cases, floods are portrayed as divine punishment or expressions of God's anger, reinforcing the idea of disaster as a moral consequence. Chong et al. (2020) argue that metaphors such as “Flood is God's anger and wrath” influence the way people interpret responsibility and disaster, encouraging communities to rely mostly on religion and divine intervention. At the same time, floods may also be represented as unstoppable natural disasters, which can reduce the perception of human responsibility. Other researchers such as Bošnjak and Trišić (2015) explored metaphorical representations of floods in Balkan media discourse and found many frequent conceptualizations, including floods as animate beings, floods as war, floods as containers, and floods as apocalyptic events. These findings demonstrate that flood metaphors frequently portray water as a powerful force capable of trespassing boundaries, uniting people by their suffering, or to represent chaos and destruction.

In the same way, Spero (1999) proposes that the flood narrative in the Genesis may function not only as a historical or religious account, but also as a metaphorical representation of destruction, extinction, and survival throughout human history. According to this interpretation, the story of Noah represents the preservation of a life with an honorable moral after catastrophic events. Other interpretations of flood narratives in the Hebrew Bible also suggest that emotions such as divine anger, grief, and judgment are metaphorically represented through the flood itself (Kotzé, 2005). Therefore, research demonstrates that flood narratives often use metaphorical language to explain abstract concepts related to morality, punishment or purification. Although many studies have explored flood metaphors in media discourse and religious interpretation, fewer studies focus specifically on how metaphors in the Genesis construct meanings of destruction and renewal. For this reason, the present paper analyzes selected passages from the Genesis through metaphor theory to explore how flood metaphors shape interpretations of destruction and renewal.



Methodology

This study aims to answer the following research question: *How do flood narratives in the Genesis employ metaphors to represent destruction and renewal?* The paper focuses on the metaphorical representation of water, the ark, destruction, purification, survival, and renewal in selected passages from the Genesis 6–9. The Bible, as a text that has influenced generations across religion and culture, it contains rich metaphorical language, and the story of Noah remains one of the most recognized flood narratives worldwide. This passage was selected because its metaphors allow us to reflect on multiple interpretations related to morality, catastrophe, divine judgment, and rebirth. The narrative describes how Noah is chosen to survive while the world is purified through the flood, destroying the rest of humanity. Because Genesis functions both as a religious and narrative text from an ancient sacred source, its metaphors continue to shape modern interpretations of morality.

The metaphors analyzed in this paper were selected from the Genesis 6–9. Selected passages containing metaphorical language related to water, the ark, corruption, destruction, and rebirth were identified and grouped according to common themes. Next, the metaphors were categorized using Lakoff and Johnson's conceptual metaphor theory, mainly focusing on ontological, structural and container metaphors. The analysis focuses on interpreting how these metaphors construct meanings related to destruction and rebirth and also to how they may influence the audience's understanding of the text.

Findings and discussion

The Bible often makes use of metaphors to represent moral lessons and abstract ideas through physical elements and events. In the case of the Genesis, floodwaters function as a metaphor of destruction. The flood does not only represent water itself, but also different interpretations regarding what the author attempted to communicate to civilizations of the time and what modern readers may still interpret today. Before the flood even begins, the text describes that “the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence” (Genesis 6:11, NIV). This passage portrays corruption as a form of moral decay, while society itself is perceived as contaminated. Similarly, the expression “I am surely going to destroy both of them and the earth” (Genesis 6:13, NIV) presents destruction almost as an act of cleansing and restarting the world. In this sense, the flood can be interpreted as an ontological metaphor when an abstract idea such as divine judgment is represented through water that is physical.

Another important metaphorical expression appears when “the floodgates of the heavens were opened” (Genesis 7:11, NIV). This passage can be interpreted through Lakoff's classifications of metaphors, particularly container metaphors, where the heavens are represented as a container releasing destruction upon the earth. Water itself becomes an uncontrollable and powerful force driven by divine intervention. Furthermore, “The waters rose and increased greatly” (Genesis 7:18, NIV) shows the flood as an overwhelming force that exceeds human control. This can also be interpreted as a force-image schema (Lakoff, 1993), where abstract ideas such as judgment and divine anger are represented through physical and natural forces. Similar findings were discussed by Chong et al. (2020), who explained how flood metaphors are frequently associated with divine anger and punishment in discourse.



Furthermore, another aspect of the text that contains metaphorical meaning is the ark representing protection and survival. Even though, the literal objective of the ark is the transportation and preservation, symbolically it also represents safety, salvation, separation from the corruption and violence, and the preservation of life. This metaphor can be interpreted as an ontological and container metaphor. The expression “Then the Lord shut him in” (Genesis 7:16, NIV) suggests that God controls access to salvation, portraying the ark as a sacred and protected container. In the same way, “entered the ark to escape the waters” (Genesis 7:7, NIV) functions as a container metaphor where the interior of the ark symbolizes life and protection, while the exterior represents chaos and death.

Additionally, water in Genesis can also represent purification and renewal. Expressions such as “the water receded steadily from the earth” (Genesis 8:3, NIV) can be interpreted as a transition between catastrophe and rebirth and can fit in image schema classification, whereas “the earth was completely dry” (Genesis 8:14, NIV) represents rebirth and the possibility of a new beginning for humanity. This can be interpreted as an ontological metaphor. Finally, God’s command to “Be fruitful and increase in number” (Genesis 9:1, NIV) symbolizes the continuity of life after destruction. This metaphor can be also understood as an ontological metaphor. Through these metaphors, the flood narrative presents purification of corruption, the restarting of humanity, and renewal after catastrophe.

Finally, the rainbow serves as one of the last and most important metaphors in the narrative, symbolizing covenant, hope, and reconciliation. The metaphor of the rainbow can be classified as a structural metaphor. In this context, the rainbow represents peace and the divine promise of not repeating the destruction caused by the flood. The expression “I have set my rainbow in the clouds” (Genesis 9:13, NIV) functions as a symbolic sign connecting heaven and earth after catastrophe. This can be interpreted as a structural metaphor where the rainbow allows readers to understand the abstract idea of God’s covenant through a physical symbol. Likewise, “Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life” (Genesis 9:15, NIV) represents the transformation of destruction into a promise. Therefore, the rainbow reinforces the structural metaphor of hope and collective memory after suffering, reinforcing the transition from chaos and destruction to peace.

Conclusions

The analysis of the flood narrative in Genesis, showcases how metaphors are used to represent destruction, purification, survival and renewal. Through the metaphorical representation of water, the ark and the rainbow, the text communicates abstract ideas about moral, divine judgement and power, hope and new beginnings. Using Lakoff’s conceptual metaphor theory, metaphorical patterns were identified for instance ontological, structural and container metaphors that help shape the interpretation of the narrative. The flood functions not only as a natural catastrophe but as a symbolic force that cleanses corruption and restarts humanity. Similarly, the ark represents the protection and the separation from chaos, while the rainbow symbolizes reconciliation and hope after destruction.

Furthermore, this analysis demonstrates how metaphors can influence how people understand religious narratives and moral lessons across generations. Flood narratives continue to appear in different cultures and civilizations because they communicate fears, catastrophes, punishment and survival through symbols that



people can relate to, even today. At the same time, the interpretations of these metaphors remain subjective and open to multiples perspectives. Some readers may interpret the floods as an act of purification and renewal to achieve a divine purpose whereas others may focus more on the representation of anger, punishment and destruction. Because of this, metaphors allow texts as Genesis to remain meaningful and influential through time, as their symbolic meanings continue to adapt to different cultural, historical and personal interpretations.

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Declaración de uso de IA

I declare that ChatGPT was used in the preparation of this manuscript to assist with editing, grammar, and idea-organization. The content and interpretation are original work of the author.

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