

# The usage of metaphors in pauls letters religion essay



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Reading through the letters of Saint Paul it is clear that he is a master on using metaphors. Actually, one of his main ways to communicate is the using of metaphorical imagery. Inspired by his religious genius, his biblical background and considering that he had a magnificent knowledge of the Hellenism, Paul has all the ingredients to outline a very persuasive speech. Paul's letters were written in order to persuade his audience of the powerful truth of the gospel that he learned from Christ himself. As such Paul is called to preach the crucified Christ in various sets of circumstances and in its many ramifications. Any reader of his letters is delighted by the many images he uses to transmit his message, which are very helpful for the reader to be close of Paul himself.

### 1. Usage of metaphorical speech by the first Christians

As Francois Vouga states, in the early Christianity the pursuit for the truth about the Gospel had accepted a plurality of ways to express the same Creed in order to maintain a fundamental unity. Surely this plurality happened because the impossibility to reduce the God of Jesus Christ to a single's person view or to one's single discourse[1]. This could be one of the reasons why that Paul was impelled to use an imaged language.

Generally speaking, in the Bible the metaphors are tropes of language which are largely used to communicate the knowledge and the message of God to his children. As so it is very important to have over and over a deeper understanding of them. At same time each metaphor assumes various significances, in the sense that they can be interpreted starting from different angles[2]. Even, the metaphors within themselves can multiply

themselves; those are the “ metaphors squared” as Beverly Gaventa likes to call them[3]. For instance, when Paul says “ like a nurse nurturing their own children” (2, 7) he has multiplied automatically its meanings. Later on this work I will take a closer look to this example.

## 2. How Paul uses metaphor

When analyzing a metaphor it is a need to be aware of the context, mainly because the metaphors are always born on a specific environment and refer to it. At the same time it is a requirement to pay attention to all its power: “ metaphors ask us change our minds”[4]. Also the relationship between intimacy and metaphor is very important, especially in the paternal imagery that Paul uses[5].

Moreover, Paul in his letters uses many powerful images. It is very significant to work of Raymond Collins called “ The Power of Images in Paul”[6]. On this book Professor Collins takes up the seven letters of Paul and pulls up the metaphors and all the imagery language that Paul uses. Through this work Raymond Collins concludes that Paul uses the ordinary to describe the extraordinary. Actually, it is correct to say that Paul is skillful on this matter and he uses a wide range of metaphors. Using many sources (for instance: secular language; religious language and biblical themes) Paul intends to speak to various audiences. Certainly Paul tries to persuade his addressees and also clarify them.

It is also important that metaphors played an important role in Hellenistic rhetoric mainly because of their philosophical traditions. So, as some of the listeners of Paul were Hellenistic he had to “ speak in their language”. Also, <https://assignbuster.com/the-usage-of-metaphors-in-pauls-letters-religion-essay/>

he had to trust me to the same doctrine those who had Jewish faith.

Meanwhile, being Jew Paul had to appropriate some of his language: " For Paul, a Jew addressing a Hellenistic audience, correct relationships with God and one's fictive kin can be summed up in the dyad " faith and love." For believers facing the impending eschaton, faith and love must be complemented by hope, the attitude that faith takes in the face of the future"[7].

## **II Chapter**

In the second chapter, I will focus on Paul's itself, in his seven authentic (better, undisputed) letters[8]. Afterwards I will isolate some of the sentences where Paul uses the paternal metaphors, does how seemed from my reading of his letters to be the most important on this matter. Also, the order that I present them is according to my understanding of their strength as metaphors. So, after a brief introduction to the letter itself I will do a simple lexical analysis of the Greek words. Doing so, going to a deeper understanding of those metaphors. From there I will draw some of the implications of such images in their contexts as well as in parallel with modern psychology.

### **First letter to the Thessalonians**

In the first letter to the Thessalonians Saint Paul is quite happy as he writes. This shows Paul's trust that the Thessalonians are following the Lord's commandments. As many scholars say, this letter did not pretend to transmit a lot of theories, corrections or teachings. The main goal of Paul's letter was just to show a spiritual closeness to his community, exhorting them to be faithful. About its author in beginning this letter aims to be a <https://assignbuster.com/the-usage-of-metaphors-in-pauls-letters-religion-essay/>

coauthored letter (1, 1) by Paul, Silas and Timothy (as it does the second letter to the Thessalonians - 2 Thess 1, 1-2). The scholars accept this authorship as true (especially concerning the first Thessalonians). Apparently this correspondence with the Thessalonians were started long after the departure of Paul and his companions from Thessalonica to Athens - certainly Paul himself was hoping to come back but was hindered (2, 18), but he managed to send Timothy back. So surely this letters (and perhaps also the second letter also) was written after Timothy's return with good news from Thessalonica concerning the stability of the community there (3, 6)[9]. So from Athens, a little after the year 50, Paul is exulting full of happiness with the good news the Timothy brought, showing at same time his interest for his fellow missionaries[10].

Together with Ugo Vanni I agree that there are three different parts on this letter. First off, there is an autobiographical part. On this one he speaks about himself as so as he recalls some aspects of the community. For instance he says " We cared so much for you that we were pleased to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us." (2, 8). For sure, Paul wrought this letter just a few months after the foundation of this community, so it is interesting to see how he indicates right away those highest ideals of Christian faith. The second part Paul exhorts and explains what it means to be a Christian[11].

It is also important to note that the first letter to the Thessalonians was very close to the preaching of Paul himself: because the community was just in the beginning when Paul wrote to them. It also signifies that Paul was doing his first experiments on letter writing. " Despite their brevity and their

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Paul wants to be considered in the role of father and mother, founding his authority in Jesus [16]. Actually, it is in this context that Paul calls himself a “nurse”. In Greek the word  $\nu\theta\rho\upsilon\sigma\iota\sigma\tau\eta\rho$ , does not mean a biological mother but an adoptive mother. So this word is full of symbolic meaning. This term refers to one “adoptive mother”, a nurse. As such, the word  $\nu\theta\rho\upsilon\sigma\iota\sigma\tau\eta\rho$ , gives us a sense of motherhood, and, even though it is not a biological mother, it is a mother who nurses “her own children” ( $\nu\theta\rho\upsilon\sigma\iota\sigma\tau\eta\rho$   $\alpha\iota\tau\iota\sigma\mu\alpha\tau\omega\sigma\upsilon\tau\omega\sigma\upsilon\tau\omega\sigma\upsilon\tau\omega$ ) [17].

Going deeper in the analysis, it is possible to conclude that Saint Paul shows that, in reality, those “children” are not his own but Christ's children. If that is true, it is also true that he loves them just as if they were his own.

Consequently, this metaphor is full of tender care. It is important also to take a look on the verb that expresses the action of nursing:  $\theta\upsilon\tau\tau\omega$ . Literally, this verb means “to keep warm”, like a bird keeping warm her eggs. As Raymond Collins claims, the images used by St. Paul are powerful, In this case he says that the word  $\nu\theta\rho\upsilon\sigma\iota\sigma\tau\eta\rho$  (children) used by Paul describes his coworkers. He also notes that there are some doubts about this word: some scholars argue that the word here should be  $\theta\epsilon\tau\tau\omega$  (“gentiles”). He doesn't agree with that position like most scholars, saying that this word fits better with all the metaphor; it even helps to intensify it. The word  $\nu\theta\rho\upsilon\sigma\iota\sigma\tau\eta\rho$  can even be translated as “babies”, so it goes along well with the word “nurse”, expressing the closeness and the deep knowledge shared by Paul and the Thessalonians [18].

## 2. Rhetoric of excess - metaphor in the context

Context itself

Parenetic perspective

Affective perspective

Theological perspective

Apocalyptic perspective

Other sources (ancient world use of this imagery)

Thus, when Paul was in Athens, he remembered the Thessalonians and was afraid that their faith might weaken. As a result he sent them an affectionate message. As Jerome Murphy-O'Connor asserts, Paul had a special concern for newly Christians that they left behind at Thessalonika. Of course they were under attack, as Paul himself was. But the physical persecution was just a part of the problem; the true danger was more subtle as Paul knew the Thessalonians were easily convinced of other doctrines. " Paul feared that they would spread because of disillusionment, followed by a disappointment so great as to make them renounce their new faith. If the believers in Thessalonika would come to feel cheated, surely all would be lost"[19].

3. Before the modern psychology

### **First letter to the Corinthians**

As its founder, Paul feels the responsibility to take care, at least through letter writing, of all his communities. The first (and the second) letter to the Corinthians are documents that express that concern of Paul for the



community at Corinth and all the communities in the region of Achaia. On first Corinthians especially Paul applies his theological convictions, mainly Christology and Eschatology, when facing practical issues in the church.

The authorship of this letter is generally accepted as authentic: is accepted to be Paul's letter (together with Second Corinthians). The foundation of the Church in Corinth (attested by Act 18) took place between the years 49-51 as part of Paul's second missionary journey. After Paul left, the Corinthians had some problems, mainly concerning ethical exclusions. So Paul, as the scholars agree, wrote a letter to them (which was lost) correcting them and giving them some specific advices. From there the Corinthians wrote back saying that they didn't understand or they didn't agree with Paul (also, was lost). So, the canonical first Corinthians followed, answering this letter from the Corinthians (cf. 1 Cor 1, 11; 5, 1; 16, 15-18). Paul was, probably staying in Ephesus trying making arrangements to go to Corinth when he wrote this letter. In the meantime he sent Timothy to visit the Corinthians on his behalf (1 Cor 16, 10-11; Acts 19, 22). This happened between the autumn of 52 and the spring of 55. The visit of Timothy, and the sad news brought by him triggered a "painful" visit of Paul to Corinth (cf. 2 Cor 2, 1; 2, 5-8; 7, 8-13; 11, 4). Then Paul wrote a second letter, which was to be at least a third following the studying line of some scholars, called by many as the "tearful letter" which he mentions on the second canonical letter (2 Cor 7, 6-13)[20].

Concerning to the general structure of First Corinthians it is right to say that it has five main parts. The first part is a salutation (1, 1-3) in which are two situations that should be noted: first, it is a joint authorship "Paul (...) and our brother Sosthenes" (even though afterwards it appears mainly the pronoun " <https://assignbuster.com/the-usage-of-metaphors-in-pauls-letters-religion-essay/>

l"); secondly this letter is addressed to the Corinthians "together with all those who are calling upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place". The second part is a "opening thanksgiving" in which Paul, despite of the problems of the community, thanks God for them: The problems in Corinth are not due to their spiritual gifts per se, but to their attitude toward and use of them (cf. 12-14). From 1, 10 to 6, 20 is the third part on which Paul responds to the reports that he received about Corinth and also tries to clear Corinthian's misunderstanding of his earlier correspondence. The fourth section of this letter responds to the letter from Corinth, dealing with specific issues like marriage (cf. 7, 1-40), food and idols (cf. 8, 1-11, 1); on the chapter ten Paul shows what are to be the consequences of their sinful acts, calling them to be instead "imitators" of him. Between chapters 12 and 14 Paul turns his attention to what means to behave Christlike in worship. Finally Paul closes this part calling to mind the cross of Christ on which he had grounded his letter (cf. 1, 18-25), drawing from there the consequences to the Christians, particularly regarding to the resurrection (cf. 15, 1-16, 12). The letter is completed with some concluding remarks, with a closing sequence of admonitions (especially the need for perseverance in one's faith as it works itself out in love) and greetings from Paul and those with him in Asia (cf. 16, 13-24)[21].

Taking a closer look to the third chapter of first Corinthians, there is a metaphor that, again, shows the deep affection that Paul has for his communities. Despite the immense sin of the recipients, Paul is still showing a tender care in his letter. Actually, this metaphor seems like a strategy to get their attention and to make them listen to something important. Even

though Paul was saying that the Corinthians "are babies in Christ"

(1½1·ĭĕĭ~ĭĵĭĭ, á¼ ¼ ĩ ĩ ĩ ĩĭ, áĵ·) and he fed them with milk (ĭ³ĭ~ĭ» ĭ±) (1Cor 3, 1-2), it also points out what is wrong among them. He reminds the ministers that they are to be humble (1Cor 3, 5); reaffirms the equality among all the members of the community (1Cor 3, 6-10); reminds them that they are built upon the same foundation (1Cor 3, 11-15); they are the Temple and in them the Spirit of God is indwelling (1Cor 3, 16-17); As so, at the conclusion of the chapter he alerts each member to not fall on merely human assessments (ministers specially) and manipulative attitudes (1Cor 3, 18-23)[22].

### 1. Paul feeds his babies in Christ (1 Cor 3, 1-2- lexical analysis)

ĭšá¼ĕĭ³ĭŽ, á¼ĕĭ'ĭμĭ» ĭĭĭĭ, ĭĵá½ ¼ ĩ° á¼ ĭ'ĭ...ĭ½ĭ®ĭ, ĭ·ĭ½ ĭ» ĭ±ĭ» áĵĭĭĭ±ĭ' á½'  
 ĭ¼áĵ~ĭ½ á½ĭĭ, ĭĕĭ½ĭμĭ...ĭ¼ĭ±ĭ,, ĭ°ĭĵáĵ~ĭ, á¼ĕĭ» ĭ» á¾½ á½ĭĭ, ĭĭĭ±ĭ ĩ ĩ°ĭ~ĭ½ĭĵĭĭ,,  
 á½ĭĭ, ĭ½ĭ·ĭĕĭ~ĭĵĭĭ, á¼ ¼ ĩ ĩ ĩ ĩĭ, áĵ·. ĭ³ĭ~ĭ» ĭ± á½'  
 ĭ¼á¾ĭĭ, á¼ ¼ ĭĕĭĕĭ,, ĭĭĭĭ, ĭĵá½ ¼ ĭĭ ĩ áĵĭĭ¼ĭ±· ĭĵá½" ĭĕĭ% ĭ³á½°ĭ ĩ á¼ ¼ ĭ  
 'ĭ~ĭ½ĭ±ĭĭĭ, ĭμ. á¼ĕĭ» ĭ» á¾½ ĭĵá½ ¼ ĭ'á½² á¼" ĭ,, ĭ ĭ½áĵĭ½ ĭ'ĭ~ĭ½ĭ±ĭĭĭ, ĭμ,

" Brothers, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ. I fed you milk, not solid food, because you were not yet able to receive it. In fact, you are still not able"

Chose key words - analysis

Relations with other Pauline passages and biblical texts

In 1Cor 3 Paul has a corrective tone, even though it is still very affectionate.

There can be find the maternal imagery once again, but this time it assumes  
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a different approach. The newness lies in the action of "feeding with milk", and calling the community "babies/children" (1½·ĪĒĪĵĪĪ).

Actually here is notorious the difference from 1Tess 2 because Paul juxtaposes metaphors of "mother" and "father" to express his relationship with the community at Corinth[23]. It is clear that this familiar metaphor starts right away with the word "brothers" (á¼ĒĪĪĵĪĪ). But instantaneously he changes his discourse, calling these "brothers" "little children", the ones who should see Paul as someone capable of feeding them spiritually. He does not feed them with solid food because they were immature in terms of faith.

It is also very interesting that Paul uses a contrast between "milk" (Ī³ĪĪĪĪ) and "solid food" (Ī²ĪĪ ĪĪĪĪĪĪ). Various scholars have intended to give a meaning to this contrast. For example Raymond Collins claims that given that Paul does not propose two types of membership in the church or two levels of preaching and acceptance of the gospel message, any pursuit of specific references for "milk" and "solid food" seems to be inconsistent with his thought. It is also right that Paul does not say that he has provided solid food to anyone. Surely the pursuit for specific references for milk and solid food is not what should be done mainly because it deprives Paul's metaphor of its rhetorical force. It is simple for us to get the sense of the contrast between milk and solid food: it fits with Paul's metaphorical description of the Corinthians as mere infants. "Proclaiming themselves to be fully mature, they are really like infants who can only drink milk, incapable as they are of eating solid food"[24]. Even the phrase construction has some implications for our interpretation: Paul uses the phrase "have given to drink milk"; this <https://assignbuster.com/the-usage-of-metaphors-in-pauls-letters-religion-essay/>

use of the past perfect tense shows the maternal affection with which Paul nourished them. Raymond Collins also explains that, in another way, Paul intended to describe himself as a servant of Jesus, and so is a keeper of his "little brothers"[25].

Note: compare to 1 Cor 4, 14-15 (I'm not writing this to shame you, but to warn you as my dear children. For you can have ten thousand instructors in Christ, but you can't have many fathers. Now I have fathered you in Christ Jesus through the gospel.); 1Cor 15, 8 (Last of all, as to one abnormally born, He also appeared to me.)

## 2. Rhetoric of excess - metaphor in the context

Context itself

Parenetic perspective

Affective perspective

Theological perspective

Apocalyptic perspective

Other sources (ancient world use of this imagery)

## 3. Before the modern psychology

### **Letter to the Galatians**

There were some problems among the Galatians, so Paul in writing them rehearses a number of perspectives with the goal of strengthening those

Christians, who were influenced by Judaizing Christians. On this letter Paul shows some fury about this going to the extreme of calling the Galatians "foolish Galatians" (3, 1). Hence, freedom and unity in Christ are central themes of Paul's letter to the Galatians.

About the authorship all the scholars (except a few radical critics) accept that Paul wrote this letter and it is considered as a standard example of Paul's style and theology. The proximity of themes between the letter to the Galatians, second Corinthians and Romans (particularly connected by the controversy over the role of the Jewish Law in Gentile churches) may perhaps point out that these three letters were written during the same time. If that is true, it is also true that it doesn't help much on defining an exact year when this letter was written. It is still a "fascinating historical puzzle", but the outcome does not have much effect on the interpretation of the major themes of the letter. Despite all the controversies it is at least generally accepted that this letter was written after the so-called "second missionary journey" (after Acts 18, 22), sometime between 53 and 57[26]. Following Murphy-O'Connor, Paul wrote this letter on the first year that he has staying at Ephesus (between 52 and 53)[27].

On its constitution this letter shows some influence of the appearance of an ancient letter form. As Betz does, the letter can be grouped as follows: Epistolary Prescript (1, 1-5); Exordium ("introduction", 1, 6-11) Narratio ("narration", 1, 12-2, 14); Propositio ("proposition", 2, 15-21); Probatio ("confirmation", 3, 1-4, 31); Exortatio (5, 1-6, 10); Peroratio ("epistolary postscript or conclusion", 6, 11-18)[28]. In a simpler way, as G. W. Hansen does, this letter can be divided in four sections: "salutation" (1, 1-5); <https://assignbuster.com/the-usage-of-metaphors-in-pauls-letters-religion-essay/>



My children, again I am in the pains of childbirth for you until Christ is formed in you.

Chose key words - analysis

Relations with other Pauline passages and biblical texts

Focusing on the verses 19 and 20 the verb ἀναίμακτος (that translated means "having labor pains") calls the attention right away. The use of this verb presumes a double significance: in one way it expresses force in the sense that Paul has difficulty giving birth to his spiritual sons into a perfect life of faith; in another way, Paul recognizes the frailty of those "little ones", meaning that they don't yet have spiritual strength to resist the attacks coming from outside thinkers. Paul shows, at the same time, that the ones at the head of a community should have a diligent presence in their communities, considering the "little ones" as a priority.

The fact stated by Paul is also important that this birth only progresses as the community lets Christ's body take shape among them. They still have to grow spiritually as individuals and as a community. The adverb ἄνωθεν, meaning "once again" also worthy of note. It tells us that this suffering is not the first time for Paul. "Christ must be formed in the Galatians once more, i. e., the Galatians must be conformed to the crucified Christ (2: 19-20)"[29].

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Raymond Collins argues that, by writing these two short verses, Paul transmits what a mother would feel about her own children: "just before his exposition of the Sarah-Hagar allegory, Paul writes to the Galatians as a frustrated mother might do: "My little children (teknamou), for whom I am again in the pain of childbirth (odino) until Christ is formed in you, I wish I were present with you now and could change my tone, for I am perplexed about you" (4: 19-20)"[30]. As Collins continues, even though the internal image is still current, he says that the meaning in this context is quite different from that of the other metaphor found in the letter to the Thessalonians: in 1Thess 2, 7-8 Paul uses this metaphor to show the affection he had for them while he was with the community; in Gal 4, 9, on the other hand, the image of mother that he applies to himself is used to speak about the sufferings caused by the community. This image gets stronger if placed together the two ideas transmitted by Paul: in one way, Paul feels again "labor pains" (ἐκ τῆς κοιλίας μου ὡς ἡ μήτηρ ἡ πόλις ἡ ἐκκλησία); in another way, he continues to be puzzled "until Christ is formed" (ἕως ἃν γεννηθῆται ἡ ἐκκλησία ἐν ὑμῖν).

See also Gal 1, 15-16 (But when God, who from my mother's womb set me apart and called me by His grace, was pleased to reveal His Son in me, so <https://assignbuster.com/the-usage-of-metaphors-in-pauls-letters-religion-essay/>

that I could preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone.)

### 3. Before the modern psychology

## **Letter to the Romans**

The letter to the Romans as J. Dunn explains his bold least controversial of the major New Testament letters and the most important. Actually this text is a well-developed theological statement by a Christian theologian and one which has had incalculable influence on the framing of Christian theology ever since. About the author is accepted (as it has been accepted through the centuries) that the letter to the Romans was written by Paul. Most of the scholars would point its date somewhere between the year 55 and 57, probably when Paul stayed at Corinth for three months. Surely Paul had to calm down and concentrate himself as to write this marble piece of work[31].

About the recipients should be noted that some manuscripts omitted the word "Rome", so is needed to search deeper for who were to be the recipients. As Paul himself states some of the recipients would be Jews: as known there was a large Jew community in Rome in the first century (between 40,000 and 50,000). It is also known, from the letter to Galatians, that there were some Christians over there bringing the Gospel to "the circumcised" (Gal 2, 9). Actually those Christians had a fruitful ground among the Gentiles proselytes and "God-fears" who were attached to many Diaspora synagogues as the book of Acts points out. So not just for Jews but also for Gentiles: "to Jew, but also to Gentile" (Rom 1, 16; 2, 9-10; 3, 9; 3, 29; 9, 24; 10, 12). Actually Paul writes not only addressing special groups of

people but seeing the larger social context. Actually Jews, Christians and Gentiles attached to Judaism were largely influenced by Roman culture. Also there were among them some issues to resolve, at the least because they didn't have a central spiritual authority in Rome.

About the purposes of this letter can be said that they are drawn from the context that was just described. For sure one of the goals of Paul's letter was to provide a support base for his project mission to Spain (cf. Rom 15, 24-28). Also Paul had an apologetic purpose because he felt himself and his understanding of the gospel under attack and needing to be justified. So this letter is an apology of the Gospel and also self apology, since his whole life's work was bound up with the gospel preached. Altogether with his purpose the letter shows a pastoral reason mainly because Paul was writing to heal potential or real divisions among churches in Rome.

Attempting to have a general understanding of the argument of the letter it can be divided it in seven parts. Firstly an introduction in wh