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## NEW TESTAMENT

### *Metaphor Theory and Theology*

*From Substitution to Conceptual Metaphors*

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**M**uch of the Bible speaks in metaphors. God is “light.” Jesus is a “lamb.” Believers are “slaves.” Reading Scripture well requires knowing how to read metaphors. No surprise, then, that the major changes in metaphor theory over the last few decades have triggered significant shifts in theology. Initially, twentieth-century theologians inherited a “substitution theory” in which a metaphorical word replaces the “proper” word the author really intended. Theology often tried to avoid the resulting ambiguity by translating metaphors into explicit and literal language. “God is light” means “God is a source of guidance.”

By the 1950s, though, a reassessment of metaphor was underway in philosophy and literary criticism. Pioneered by the likes of Max Black and Paul Ricoeur, the new “interaction theory” found in each metaphor a dynamic tension between two semantic fields.<sup>1</sup> One field (the “tenor”) is identified, in violation of normal categories, with a very different second field (the “vehicle”). In the metaphor “God is light,” God is the tenor and light is the vehicle. The statement affirms, nonsensically, that this tenor and this vehicle are identical. How can this be, since we know that “God” and “light” are very different things? The audience resolves this metaphorical tension by finding some relevant commonality between tenor and vehicle. An author might have similarities in mind, but the audience is free to discover further points of connection. Hence, metaphors cannot be exhaustively translated the way older theologies tried to do. Any list of relevant similarities might always be expanded. God may be “light” in the sense that he is difficult to look at, is fascinating, makes other things visible, pushes back the threatening darkness, etc. Some similarities between the two semantic fields are even created in our understanding by the metaphor itself as it prompts us to consider new aspects of the tenor. If God is light, can he blind those who approach him unprepared?

Interaction theory suggested to many theologians that the quest for full systematic clarity was mistaken. Since each metaphor conveys only a partial truth, a range of conflicting metaphors for, say, Je-

sus’ atoning work on the cross might each be valid in the proper context. Some, like Sallie McFague, called on theologians to experiment with new metaphors that better express Christian faith for an “ecological and nuclear” era.<sup>2</sup> Others, like Colin Gunton, were less convinced that the old metaphors needed replacing. He also emphasized, in a way McFague did not, the realist side of interaction theory, focusing with Black on the role of metaphors as conceptual models in science.<sup>3</sup> Gunton stressed that interaction theory still allowed for an innate affinity between metaphor and cosmos. Yet McFague and Gunton could both celebrate diverse images for the same reality because a given metaphor only provides access to certain dimensions of its tenor. The cross is a sin offering, an offering for Yom Kippur, a lamb being killed at Passover, God’s final judgment of Israel, etc. It can be all these simultaneously, because it is not any of them completely. Both McFague and Gunton also allowed for agnosticism about exactly how far a given metaphor should be pushed. Despite attempts to find “controlling metaphors” to unify the diverse imagery of Scripture, most theologians now assume some degree of conceptual pluralism, largely because of interaction theory.

In the 1980s, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson launched the “conceptual metaphor theory” that has since come to influence a wide range of fields.<sup>4</sup> Interaction theorists were preoccupied with novel metaphors, often denigrating conventional ones as “dead.” Lakoff and Johnson instead focused on the way conventional metaphors continue to structure discourse and thought. A conceptual metaphor structures one concept (the target domain) by mapping its elements to the elements of a second concept (the source domain). The metaphor “Jesus is a lamb” invites us to relate the target (Jesus) to the source (lamb) systematically. Not only is Jesus a lamb, but Jesus’ death on the cross is a lamb’s death at slaughter. Jesus is weak and vulnerable, just as a lamb is weak and vulnerable. Jesus faces violence from the Jerusalem leadership, just as a lamb suffers violence at the butcher’s hand. This mapping allows us to draw inferences, or “entailments,” by transferring patterns of interaction from one domain to the equivalent elements of the other. Since a lamb’s death is not deserved, neither is Jesus’ crucifixion. Just as a lamb’s death brings nourishment to the household, so Jesus’ death will “feed” his people. Because this is a metaphor, though, not every pattern in the source domain can be transferred to the target. The butcher may be innocent, but this does not imply Jesus’ killers were sinless. Still, conceptual

metaphor theory encourages us to look critically for the valid entailments, letting each source domain act as a (partial) structural model for its target domain. In this way metaphors, as metaphors, are primary tools for reasoning.

We have begun to see exegetical studies of specific conceptual metaphors in Scripture.<sup>5</sup> Theologians, though, are only just beginning to engage with conceptual metaphor theory. John Sanders's recent cognitive linguistic account of theological language illustrates both the potential of the approach and the kind of questions it will raise for theology.<sup>6</sup> Sanders highlights, for example, how some soteriological debates are really disagreements about which entailments of a given metaphor are valid. In many cases these are, in principle, decisions that Scripture itself cannot make for us. Our cultural assumptions about a source concept will also affect the way it gives structure to the target. We may agree that God is "Father," but the resulting entailments will depend on how we think a good parent behaves. Sanders even makes the intriguing suggestion that the Trinity is structured as a metaphorical "blend" of concepts. What seem like contradictions from the perspective of traditional logic just reflect the necessary limits of each source domain when structuring our understanding of God. On the other hand, Sanders embraces the tendency in some conceptual metaphor theory to ground the relationship of metaphor and reality in bodily experience and our sensory apparatus. Does this concede too much to naturalistic empiricism? Conceptual metaphor theory is not monolithic, and it will have to be engaged thoughtfully. Sanders' work illustrates its potential, though, to influence the way we do theology in the twenty-first century as much as interaction theory did in the twentieth. Anyone talking about theological metaphors today will have to grapple not just with Black and Ricoeur but with Lakoff and Johnson as well. **D**

theorists are Mark Turner and Gilles Fauconnier.

<sup>5</sup> E.g., Frederick S. Tappenden, *Resurrection in Paul: Cognition, Metaphor, and Transformation*, ECL 19 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> John Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think About Truth, Morality, and God* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2016).



**IAN W. SCOTT** is writing a book on Jesus' parables as "conceptual metaphors," part of a larger project on New Testament epistemology.

<sup>1</sup> Max Black, *Models and Metaphors*, Studies in Language and Philosophy (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1962); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning* (New York: Routledge, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982).

<sup>3</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). Gunton's approach is not unlike that of Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>4</sup> George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1980); see also Zoltan Kövecses, *Metaphor: A Practical Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Two other influential