CHAPTER TWO

A CONTEMPORARY THEORY OF METAPHOR

The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.¹

Many philosophers, linguists, cognitive scientists, and scholars in other fields recently have been working to understand metaphor in greater detail. There was divergence of opinion regarding metaphor among traditional thinkers, and contemporary scholars have carried on that part of the tradition—the tradition of disagreement.² But one major stream of contemporary theory of metaphor is gaining increasing support from scholars working in several disciplines. It is the metaphor theory whose major features were first worked out by linguist George Lakoff with philosopher Mark Johnson.³ This chapter introduces that

contemporary theoretical understanding of the nature, function, and structure of metaphor, and points to some of the ways it can be applied to the issues and questions biblical ethics addresses.

**Conceptual and Experiential Grounding**

*The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another.*\(^4\) This is the working definition George Lakoff and Mark Johnson offer in the ground-breaking book, *Metaphors We Live By*. According to this theory, metaphor is not merely a matter of words, it is the main way we comprehend abstract concepts and perform abstract reasoning. In fact, research data support the claim that metaphor is essentially conceptual, not linguistic, in nature, and that metaphorical expressions in language are ‘surface manifestations’ of conceptual metaphor.\(^5\) Much that we need to think about and communicate can only be comprehended via metaphor, and this includes both highly difficult and complex matters (like scientific and philosophical theories) and ordinary, everyday matters. In fact, the linguistic data show that metaphor is ubiquitous in ordinary, everyday language, and that this is true not just in English or Indo-European languages, but cross-linguistically.

Metaphor is ubiquitous, but not omnipresent. A significant part of our conceptual system is *non*metaphorical. In fact, metaphorical understanding appears to be grounded in nonmetaphorical understanding. Much conceptual metaphor seems to have an experiential basis—particularly in bodily experience.\(^6\) The author of *1 Peter*, for instance, uses the word δοῦλος (‘slave’) metaphorically when he enjoins his

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\(^4\) Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 5.

\(^5\) The term “surface manifestations” is from Lakoff, “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor.” Five major types of evidence support the notion of a system of conventional conceptual metaphors: 1) generalizations governing polysemy [the use of words with a number of meanings]; 2) generalizations governing inference patterns; 3) generalizations governing novel metaphorical language; 4) generalizations governing patterns of semantic change; 5) psycholinguistic experiments. Bibliographic references for studies in each of these areas can be found in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).