CONCEPTUAL BLENDING AND EARLY CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

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1. Introduction

The emergence of early Christianity during the first century C.E. is a truly remarkable phenomenon. The literature this movement produced during its first seventy years of existence exhibits profound creativity in the context of traditional cultures, which are known for their conservative nature. Years ago, scholars like Amos Wilder (1964) observed that there were amazingly “new” formulations of phrases and words in New Testament literature. There has, however, been only limited progress in our understanding of how this “newness” emerged. Many scholars have exhibited and discussed the wide reaching diversity in traditions, concepts, and practices among different groups of early Christians. There have been only a few attempts, however, to develop modes of analysis and interpretation that show what one might call the “inner workings” of visualizations, conceptualizations, and orientations in the context of this diversity.

Ilkka Pyysiäinen has done some very interesting thinking about this in a paper entitled “Intuition, reflection, and the evolution of traditions.” For my purposes, his discussion of “selection,” “guided variation,” and “biased cultural transmission” are very helpful (Pyysiäinen 2005: 289–92). His discussion feeds naturally into analyses of “partial mapping” and other things in conceptual integration theory (alternatively called conceptual blending theory), which I will discuss below. Pyysiäinen also observes the presence of “pre-narrative” as frameworks that guide reproduction (Pyysiäinen 2005: 290). István Czachesz (2007) also has presented some very helpful concepts in “Toward a Cognitive Psychology of Early Christian Transmission.” In the context of three alternative approaches to religion in cognitive science, Czachesz discusses schema theory, and introduces four “scripts” upon which he thinks early Christian literature relies: martyrdom script; gospel script; healing script; and divine call script (Czachesz 2003). In my view, this is a very promising approach, especially when it is correlated both with “serial recall,”
when scripts serve as underlying story-grammars to narrative (Czachesz 2003: 21), and with “the cognitive relevance hypothesis of Christology,” which Czachesz describes as “the early Christian conceptualization of Jesus adapted to the economy of the mind by closely approaching the archaic idea of ancestors” (Czachesz forthcoming).

In the context of various new approaches to religion from the perspective of cognitive science on brain and mind, my approach is especially informed by Conceptual Blending (or Conceptual Integration) Theory and Critical Spatiality Theory. Instead of four scripts (Czachesz), my socio-rhetorical analysis exhibits six rhetorical dialects (called rhetorolects) that blend dynamically with one another in first century Christian discourse. Each of the rhetorolects emerges in embodied cognition through interaction with specifically located contexts that provide picturing based on seeing places and spaces through social and cultural experiences. This aspect of discourse I call rhetography, namely evoking pictures through pictorial expression (Robbins forthcoming a). Each rhetorolect is nurtured in the mind through cultural frames that evoke story-lines containing a sequence of pictures in the context of pictorial narration. Each rhetorolect also contains reasonings, which I call their rhetology, namely “assertions,” “supports,” and “juxtapositions” of thoughts that evoke “meanings” in the context of images, actions, feelings, and so forth. Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner’s *The Way We Think* (2002) and Seana Coulson’s *Semantic Leaps* (2001) have been especially helpful in my analysis and interpretation of the dynamic and complex conceptual blending that occurs among the six rhetorolects that have emerged in my socio-rhetorical analysis.² An excellent Afterword in the 2003 publication of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (2003) explains the relation of Conceptual Blending (Integration) Theory to conceptual metaphor theory. The first programmatic conceptual blending interpretation of a New Testament passage in a socio-rhetorical framework has now been completed and will be forthcoming soon as a published book (von Thaden 2007).

The six rhetorolects that have emerged in my analysis are: wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, miracle, and priestly rhetorolect. One of the challenges is to discover how these rhetorolects blend with one

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