

John Sanders. *Theology in the Flesh: How Embodiment and Culture Shape the Way We Think about Truth, Morality, and God.* Fortress Press 2016. 320 pp. \$79.00 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9781506408422).

‘Wars over biblical interpretation or how one sees God are not what separates Christian scholars. No, the problem goes much deeper but the divisions can be mended if we would simply stop employing human depictions for God.’ Many would agree with that opening statement, arguing that theology is best when metaphor and human imagery are eschewed. However, it is not too difficult to recognize the metaphors and conceptual images used in the opening statement, such as ‘war,’ ‘see,’ ‘deep,’ and so on. John Sanders argues that is just fine since ‘human conceptual structures are all we have to understand anything, including God’ (3).

Sanders’ book title is a play on Lakoff and Johnson’s *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodiment of Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought* which used cognitive science to show that reasoning and language are shaped by our being embodied. Sanders utilizes cognitive linguistics and its various models of meaning to show that theology cannot really be performed by stripping language of all human imagery and embodied thinking. ‘The stance taken in this book is that there is no human conceptual structure that is specifically designed for thinking about religious matters. There is no divine mental tool kit in our minds. Rather, the ordinary cognitive apparatus we use to reason about and understand mundane topics, such as containers or family life is also used to understand religious topics such as God and salvation’ (5).

The book has a three-part structure that begins with an overview of cognitive linguistics, which examines thinking as linked to a whole host of human experience including motion, relationships, causation, entities, and more (17). Sanders shows that, contrary to much of twentieth-century Western linguistics, which holds a modular view of the mind and language, cognitive linguists desire to find ‘general principles that explain the various aspects of language.’ Furthermore, cognitive linguistics, which is interdisciplinary in nature, ‘hold[s] that these principles should cohere with what is known about the mind from a range of disciplines’ (43). The five common themes found throughout the book are that human cognition is dependent upon embodied human experience; all human understanding is perspectival; meaning is encyclopedic; linguistic meaning is grounded in usage and experience; and linguistic meaning is flexible and dynamic (19-20).

Chapter three surveys some of the more important ways in which we structure meaning. One way in which everyone (panhuman) makes meaning is with the use of image schemas: ‘orientational notions such as up-down (verticality), front-back (horizontality), part-whole, center-periphery, near-far, link, lockage, balance, containment, and source-path goal’ (46). It is with schemas like these that we speak of ourselves being ‘in’ time and God ‘outside’ of time which makes use of a containment schema. We can also think of a goal or situation before or ahead of us, but Sanders notes that these only makes sense because of our physicality; we are beings with a face and that if we had bodies like a jellyfish front-back image schemas would not work. Significant space is devoted to conceptual metaphors and to how literal language, while possible, is severely limited. Metaphors, he argues, are not simply rhetorical decorations but are how we actually reason about the real. ‘Metaphorical reasoning is unavoidable and ubiquitous’ (67). Sanders concludes the section declaring, ‘A cognitive approach to metaphor, metonymy, and [conceptual] blending reveals that much of the language used to give meaning to our lives is figurative. Though we use literal language, a vast amount of the way we think about important ideas is figurative’ (77).

In part two Sanders uses the notions of embodiment and culture to discuss truth, meaning, and morality, devoting a chapter to each. In chapter four, Sanders unpacks four significant ideas in

light of cognitive linguistics. First, truth is polysemic and has a range of meaning. He notes that we can use object metaphors and speak of 'covering up' or 'twisting' the truth. Metaphor is also used when speaking of 'following' the truth or when we say that something does not 'look' right. Critical of the dominance of correspondence theories, Sanders sets out to show how biblical writers used 'journey' as well as 'object' metaphors when speaking of truth. Biblical authors speak of 'walking' or 'loving in the truth.' Apostle Paul even tells his readers 'to truth one another' (Eph 4:25), meaning more than simply speaking factually. Next, Sanders shows that truth is anthropogenic and dependent upon embodiment. It is 'dependent upon our embodied interaction with our environment and the specific perceptual and cognitive capacities we possess as creatures' (113). Third, while there is objective truth, or fact, these are never from a 'God's eye' view. Said another way, 'objective truth always refers to the way humans understand the situation' (97) and so all truth is perspectival. Even God cannot overcome our embodiment and must 'communicate by thinking like a human and utilize particular cultural forms of meaning' (98). Fourthly, Sanders argues that there are panhuman concepts. One example is that 'more is up' and 'no language has been found in which 'MORE IS DOWN' (105). Sanders ends by noting that cognitive linguistics does not result in 'wholesale relativism' for we have some panhuman truths and many widespread concepts to 'constrain the pluralism' (114).

Chapters five and six explore Christian notions of meaning and moral reasoning. Regarding meaning, Sanders argues that cognitive linguistics shows us that meaning does not reside in texts, even those that are sacred. Rather, texts prompt the construction of meaning. He rightly shows that all readers of the Bible 'pick and choose' meaning. Key, however, is to do so in a 'principled manner.' In chapter six Sanders pays special attention to the metaphors and prototypes used in moral reasoning. A discussion of moral rules versus moral exemplar reasoning serves Sander's basic goal of showing that differences in thinking are often due to our location or cultural frames. He ends by saying, 'The call for humility ... is to acknowledge that the stands we take are always couched in terms of metaphors, what we take to be exemplary, and cultural frames' (170).

The final section of the book is the most theological. Sanders applies cognitive linguistics to conceiving God, reading the Bible, and as done previously, demonstrating that the most important of Christian doctrines rely on metaphors. The Bible and Christians over the centuries have used a variety of images in forming doctrines such as sin, salvation, judgment, and Church. This is because 'no single metaphor captures all of our experiences' (202). Most interesting in this chapter was his discussion of sin and judgment and how these have been understood in terms of law breaking and metaphors that utilize moral accounting. Others have emphasized familial over forensic metaphors that conceive of sin less as law breaking and more as relational unfaithfulness. Sanders does not seek to jettison or favor any metaphor for there is 'no single universal metaphor for sin that fits everyone's experience.' This is because these metaphors do not 'necessarily have the same meaning for a white American suburban male as for a Mexican American female immigrant' (187).

The final focus of the book regards how we conceive of God, using both biblical imagery and philosophical categories. It is not unusual for theologians to dismiss any depiction of God as purely metaphoric and thus not literally applicable. When biblical authors depict God as angry or frustrated these are said to be mere anthropomorphisms. Sanders embraces divine metaphors since these are part of the conceptual tools needed to understand God. 'Even if one believes that information in a text such as the Bible is from God ... biblical writers made use of ordinary conceptual tools, such as image schemas and metaphors ... Any communication from God will access our species-specific cognitive capacities' (245). For Sanders 'the "problem of anthropocentrism" is misplaced since we have no alternative but to use the only cognitive apparatus available to us to think about God' (249). Sanders is critical of removing all agency from God and instead speaking of God as 'Being itself,'

‘infinite,’ or ‘pure act.’ The problem with this, according to Sanders, is that even these concepts are anthropogenic. ‘Many have thought these abstract concepts were not anthropomorphic because they do not ascribe body parts to God, but they are just as anthropomorphic as GOD IS SHEPHERD in that they use concepts derived from human embodiment’ (261). Sanders concludes his discussion by suggesting that in our attempts to not limit God we avoid speaking of God as ‘completely unlike everything in the world’ but instead think of God as ‘not completely like anything in the world’ (274).

Sanders’ book accomplishes what it sets out to do: not to resolve theological and moral discussions, but to help readers better understand cognitive linguistics, how and why we think the way we do, and thus foster better dialogue (281). This book should be required reading for any person interested in biblical studies or philosophical theology.

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