Guiding Socio-Rhetorical Commentary with Conceptual Integration Theory (Blending Theory)

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Eastern Great Lakes Biblical Society; April 1, 2011

Introduction

This is an exciting time to be engaged in religious studies in general and biblical studies in particular. Developments in the cross disciplinary endeavor known as cognitive science, a "blanket term for a set of disciplines … concerned with the empirical investigation of the human mind," have opened up new avenues of inquiry in the study of religion.¹ The development of the cognitive science of religion promises to reorient the way some scholars of religion study and analyze this particular human phenomenon.² Cognitive science brings to the table an interdisciplinary array of tools that can, at its best, allow us to rethink our work and our conversation partners.³ By taking advantage of some of these newer modes of analyzing religious discourse, I hope to shed light how these models are useful for the craft Bibelwissenschaft and how engaging texts with the help of these new tools can help biblical scholars enter a broader conversation within the academy. I engage an aspect of the cognitive science of religion referred to as conceptual integration theory, also known as blending theory. I argue that the insights of conceptual integration theory have a natural home within the

interpretive framework known as socio-rhetorical interpretation (SRI). In this paper I will
describe what I see as the promise of blending theory and further demonstrate how this cognitive
mode of examining texts is driving the development of SRI as it produces richly textured
interpretations of biblical texts for the 21st century. I argue that two insights form blending theory
are particularly useful for socio-rhetorical exegesis: framing and compression.

**Cognitive Science of Religion: Embodied Cognition**

Petri Luomanen, Ilkka Pyysiäinen, and Risto Uro have recently written an excellent
primer on the promise of the cognitive science of religion for the study of formative Christianity
and Judaism in which they note that "a basic presupposition [of the cognitive science of religion]
is that there are no specifically religious cognitive mechanisms or processes; what is known as
'religion' is based on ordinary cognitive processes that also support non-religious behavior."4
Whatever one might say about religion, in order for it to be meaningful for human beings it must
be processed through the same brains that apprehend and make sense of the rest of the
physical/cultural world.5 Moreover, human brains are located within, not apart from, human
bodies. Human bodies are critical in this understanding of human cognition, since, as Raymond
Gibbs argues, "embodiment provides the foundation for how people interpret their lives and the
world around them."6

Despite humanity's common embodied nature, human cultures across space and time
have demonstrated a remarkable creative diversity. Simply put, the human body does not exist

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4 Luomanen, Pyysiäinen, and Uro, “Introduction: Social and Cognitive Perspectives in the Study of
Christian Origins and Early Judaism,” in *Explaining Christian Origins and Early Judaism* (eds. Patri Luomanen,
5 Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., *Embodiment and Cognitive Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press,
2005), 10 and 13. See also Edward Slingerland, "Who's Afraid of Reductionism? The Study of Religion in the Age
reality as physical space for us."
See also Jerome A. Feldman, *From Molecule to Metaphor: A Neural Theory of Language* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT
Press, 2008); Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (New York: Clarendon Press, 2005); Mark Johnson,
*The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007);
George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western
in a vacuum, rather it is always already located within this or that human culture. While human bodies are generally the same, the experience of these bodies is always a cultural experience. Raymond Gibbs explains that, "Bodies are not culture-free objects, because all aspects of embodied experience are shaped by cultural processes. Theories of human conceptual systems should be inherently cultural in that the cognition that occurs when the body meets the world is inextricably culturally based." The cultural nature of human embodiment requires biblical scholars to be able to deal with the particularities of culture when analyzing meaning production and interpretation. Dealing with embodiment within physical and cultural space demands that human thought, indeed consciousness, be conceived of "in terms of dynamical interactions of brain, body, and world."

Theories about the embodied and dynamic realities of human cognition give biblical scholars the ability to analyze persuasive arguments from an angle other than that of cold, propositional logic. This is crucial because, as Antonio Damasio argues, "Emotion, feeling, and biological regulation all play a role in human reason. The lowly orders of our organism are in the loop of high reason." Damasio's research has led to the development of what he refers to as the "somatic marker hypothesis," which has become influential in the field of the cognitive science of religion. A somatic marker can work consciously or unconsciously as a "gut feeling" that pushes people toward or away from certain actions. What is important for the current

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discussion is Damasio's contention that while somatic markers have their roots in biology, they have been "tuned to cultural prescriptions designed to ensure survival in a particular society." Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 200; see idem, 179.

Humans are embodied agents who always already exist embedded in particular cultures. A dynamic systems understanding of human cognition, in which human consciousness is conceived of as an emergent property of the interactions within and among various systems, can help biblical scholars flesh out the emotional texture of the rhetoric of biblical texts in order to make sense of them. See Slingerland, "Who's Afraid of Reductionism?" 378.

Conceptual blending theory, the area of cognitive science that concerns us today, is described by Edward Slingerland as "'second generation' cognitive linguistics." Much more than standard theories of metaphor, blending theory gives interpreters the tools to trace the accumulation and creative development of complex conceptual blends throughout an extended piece of discourse and to analyze how they organize and serve the rhetoric of the text. The ability to explain various kinds conceptual blends that are produced "on the fly" in a progressive piece of discourse also, according to Slingerland, helps explain the dynamics of human creativity in a way that the source-target model of metaphor theory cannot: "Seeing A as B certainly provides us with a degree of conceptual flexibility, but what seems really unusual about human beings is their ability to go beyond A and B and create an entirely new structure, C." This new thing (C) that human cognition produces is referred to as the "emergent structure" of a conceptual network. These emergent properties can explain human conceptual creativity as well as the power of rhetoric to persuade people to think and act in new ways.

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11 Damasio, *Descartes' Error*, 200; see idem, 179.
12 See Slingerland, "Who's Afraid of Reductionism?" 378.
At its most basic, a conceptual integration network contains four elements: two input spaces, a generic space, and a blended space. The input spaces contain elements and structures from different cognitive arenas. Through a process known as cross-space mapping, "[t]here is partial mapping of counterparts between input spaces" which means that some elements and structures of the inputs carry over into the blend, while others are left out. The generic space "reflects some common, usually more abstract, structure and organization shared by the inputs and defines the core cross-space mapping between them."\textsuperscript{16}

The blended space, or simply "the blend," contains only selected elements from each input space. Because of this selective projection, the blend prompts a new emergent structure throughout the network. This emergent structure is located neither in the two input spaces, nor the blended space, but in the dynamic system of the network taken as a whole.\textsuperscript{17} It is through this emergent structure that creative cognitive and rhetorical work gets accomplished in the blend – work that often helps to sustain reasoning as any given discourse unfolds.\textsuperscript{18}

What makes conceptual integration theory more flexible than standard theories of metaphorical and analogical meaning construction lies in its ability to explain different kinds of conceptual integration networks that allow for the creation of novel emergent structures. Indeed, Philip Eubanks argues that "Because blends take so many forms and so readily build on one another, the pervasiveness and recursiveness of conceptual blends would be difficult to overestimate."\textsuperscript{19} Despite the radical creativity blends prompt, however, Fauconnier and Turner argue that all blends are grounded in the same basic cognitive processes that can be described through the conceptual integration network.

\textsuperscript{16} Fauconnier, \textit{Mappings}, 149. See Todd V. Oakley, "Conceptual Blending," 337, n. 1: "The generic space is a distinct mental space operating at a low level of description which can provide the category, frame, role, identity, or image-schematic rationale for cross-domain mapping."

\textsuperscript{17} Fauconnier emphasizes this point in "Compression and Emergent Structure," (2005) more so than he and Turner did in \textit{The Way We Think} (2002).

\textsuperscript{18} Coulson and Oakley, "Blending Basics," 180; Eubanks, "Globalization," 174.

\textsuperscript{19} Eubanks, "Globalization," 189.
A Socio-Rhetorical Framework: Embracing Embodied Cognition

Socio-Rhetorical interpretation (SRI) is an interpretive analytic that enables exegetes to examine how persuasive language works from multiple angles. Vernon Robbins argues that there is a philosophical difference between an interpretive analytic, such as SRI, and a method. "The philosophy of a method," Robbins writes, "is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is 'in something itself.' In contrast, the philosophy of an interpretive analytic is grounded in a belief that the true nature of something is exhibited in the way it relates to all other things. This is a difference between a philosophy of essence or substance and a philosophy of relations."²⁰ Because SRI provides theoretic space for putting multiple analytical tools into conversation with one another when examining relations that allow interpreters to make sense of texts, it is possible to adopt a late twentieth/early twenty-first century theory of meaning construction such as conceptual integration theory to help explain a first century document. Part of the reason this is possible is because cognitive science itself focuses on the "capacity for meaning shared by all human beings" based on common physiology, yet it also "successfully takes into account cultural and situational data."²¹ Based on common human anatomy, including neural anatomy, cognitive science understands itself to possess the tools necessary to begin to understand human meaning making in general while maintaining that human subjects are embodied in specific cultural environments. Thus, the full tapestry of human meaning production is only understandable in relation to specific social and cultural worlds.

Conceptual integration theory is a natural fit to Robbins's SRI approach, which is why a new socio-rhetorical commentary series is making use of it.²² Gilles Fauconnier argues that "discourse configurations are highly organized and complex within wider social and cultural contexts, and the raison d'être of grammatical constructions and words within them is to provide

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²⁰ Robbins, Invention, 1:5.
²² I am referring specifically to the Rhetoric of Antiquity Series published by Deo, Blandford Forum, UK.
us with (imperfect) clues as to what discourse configurations to set up."\(^{23}\) Although developed independently, the ideas about relational meaning construction found in conceptual blending theory fit well into SRI's concern to look at multiple aspects of textual discourse. Conceptual integration theory's concern with "how language prompts for meaning" makes it a powerful exegetical tool when combined with a programmatic interpretive analytic such as SRI.\(^{24}\)

**Framing and Compression**

*Framing*

The mental spaces of a conceptual integration network do not exist in a conceptual vacuum, but are usually *framed*. A frame is typically understood as the requisite background knowledge that is required to make sense of the elements within and among mental spaces.\(^{25}\) Fauconnier and Turner refer to a frame as "long-term schematic knowledge" and it is this knowledge that helps emergent logic to develop in the blend.\(^{26}\) It is the use of frames that makes conceptual blending a particularly useful way to investigate biblical texts. "The appeal of frames," Seana Coulson writes, "lies chiefly in their ability to account for all the 'extra' information readers infer in the course of meaning construction."\(^{27}\) By making theoretical space for explicating that which structures the elements within and among mental spaces, conceptual blending analysis allows interpreters to move from a general theory about human cognition to a usable interpretive analytic for unraveling the specific meanings prompted by a discourse written in a particular social and cultural milieu for local, rhetorical purposes. In order to implement an

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\(^{23}\) Fauconnier, *Mappings*, 5. For more on the importance of culture in conceptual integration theory, see Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*, esp. 72-73, 102, 217, 259, 356, 369, 382-83, 393, 396; Slingerland, *What Science Offers the Humanities*, ch.4.

\(^{24}\) Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*, 139; see also 277.


\(^{26}\) Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*, 40. Note that Fauconnier and Turner (*Way We Think*, 103) also describe frames as "entrenched mental spaces that we can activate all at once." One notes, in this quotation, that Fauconnier and Turner are not as exact with their descriptive language as one might hope. In this quotation they seem to suggest a frame is a mental space. A better description, for the sake of clarity, would be that a frame structures elements and relations in and among mental spaces in a way that is easily retrievable. See Fauconnier and Turner, "Conceptual Integration Networks," 134.

\(^{27}\) Coulson, *Semantic Leaps*, 83.
analysis of conceptual blending properly, understanding the social and cultural worlds out of which the discourse arose is crucial.

Frames, while lending conceptual blending greater utility for the biblical scholar, also have the potential to muddy the exegetical waters because of their complexity. A frame can have a greater or lesser degree of specificity, therefore for just about every frame described, there exists also super- and sub-frames. Determining what level of frame specificity yields the greatest exegetical returns is the job of the interpreter. In other words, the analyst may map out several levels of framing, but opt to focus the interpretation on that level which yields the most plausible and productive explanation for the meaning production of the rhetoric within the discourse being examined. Typically, the most useful level of framing is referred to as an "organizing frame," or what I call cultural frames. These cultural frames organize the logic and background information of a particular piece of discourse and structure the ways in which the elements of the discourse are rhetorically employed.

**Rhetorolects**

In 1996, Vernon Robbins proposed that early Christian discourse produced six main "rhetorolects." A rhetorolect is a neologism that simply stands for a "rhetorical dialect." As Robbins defines them, rheorolects are "cultural-religious frames that introduce multiple networks of thinking, reasoning, and acting that were alive and dynamic in early Christian thought, language, and practice." Robbins correlates rhetorolects most closely with Idealized Cognitive Models (ICM) as described by George Lakoff. More specifically, Robbins suggests that rhetorolects, with their "distinctive configuration," most resemble what Lakoff refers to a "cluster

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28 Fauconnier and Turner, *Way We Think*, 102. When examining discourse one can also speak of frames that operate in the background and those that are at work in the foreground.

29 See Coulson, *Semantic Leaps*, 120 for a discussion of "the hierarchal organization of frames."


ICMs." Cluster ICMs act as Gestalts in which the whole is conceptually easier to grasp than the parts. Like cluster ICMs, rhetorolects

appear to contain clusters of topoi related to networks of meanings that configure first century Christian discourse in ways that are, at one and the same time, linked to multiple meaning networks in Mediterranean culture and distinctive of people with particular experiences in particular places and spaces in the Mediterranean world.32

For Robbins, cultural frames, ICMs, and rhetorolects are different ways of labeling similar conceptual phenomena.33 Socio-rhetorical interpretation, then, provides a natural space in which to fully exploit the interpretive potential of framing as explicated by blending theorists. Research among socio-rhetorical interpreters since the mid-1990s has led to the conclusion that, in the first century, "six rhetorolects functioned as prototypical modes of discourse that assisted early Christians in their energetic work of creating dynamic, adaptable, and persuasive modes of discourse within Mediterranean society and culture."34 To be sure, these six modes of discourse do not exhaust early Christian discursive creativity, but rather reflect those that Robbins and other socio-rhetorical interpreters have documented, based on available data, in the first century of Christian rhetorical development.35 Although the terminology for these six cultural frames has developed since their first exposition in 1996, socio-rhetorical interpreters now use the following terms for the six rhetorolects documented in the NT: wisdom, prophetic, apocalyptic, precreation, priestly, and miracle.36 While each of these rhetorolects specifically moves Christian storylines forward, they are dialect variations of larger ancient Mediterranean discourses. Robbins has made a provisional conclusion that there are three main discourses operative in the ancient Mediterranean world of which early Christian rhetorolects are local dialects: mantic discourses (divine communications), philosophical discourses (mental searching), and ritual

34 Robbins, *Invention*, 1:7, see idem 115.
35 See Robbins, *Invention*, 1:77 where he notes that "the NT writings are a small sample of the earliest ways the earliest Christians used language to communicate their picturing of God's world and to persuade others that their picturing was reasonable and truthful."
discourses (religious action). Robbins describes prophetic and apocalyptic rhetorolects as localizations of mantic discourses. Wisdom and precreation rhetorolects are Christian expressions of philosophical discourses, while priestly and miracle rhetorolects are Christian dialects for ritual discourses. 37 This typology helps interpreters understand how early Christian discourse was understandable to larger Mediterranean cultures while at the same time representing idiosyncratic expressions of specific belief systems and storylines of emerging Christian sub-cultures.

Understanding rhetorolects as cultural frames allows socio-rhetorical interpreters to help "fill in," as it were, the background information that a certain segment of discourse might be evoking. To be sure, given our limited data, exegetes will at times no doubt argue, on the basis of "clusters of topos," which cultural frame a discourse may be evoking, but such disagreement is natural in the robust application of any interpretive analytic. Moreover, it is important to note that while NT texts, and portions of them, may operate predominantly within one rhetorolect, Robbins explains that each of these modes of discourse regularly pushes outward and into the other modes. 38 The resources available in the rhetorolects blend in creative ways in the rhetoric of the New Testament.

Compression

The emergent structure produced by a conceptual integration network "is not the mere sum of its parts." 39 Rather, something new and different from its constituent elements, although

37 Robbins, Invention, 1:493-94.
38 Vernon K. Robbins, "Argumentative Textures in Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation," in Rhetorical Argumentation in Biblical Texts: Essays from the Lund 2000 Conference (eds. Anders Eriksson, Thomas H. Olbricht, and Walter Übelacker; Emory Studies in Early Christianity 8; Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2002), 27. For a similar discussion of different modes of discourse interpenetrating one another, see also Roland E. Murphy, The Tree of Life: An Exploration of Biblical Wisdom Literature (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 101: "The sages were concerned in a broad way with (right) living, but they were not ethicists or framers of law. Because human conduct is the common denominator between wisdom and law, it is sometimes difficult to separate the two and to determine influence. … These difficulties also occur with respect to the social concerns of the prophets."
39 Howe, Because You Bear This Name, 84; Fauconnier, "Compression and Emergent Structure," 524. See Slingerland, "Who's Afraid of Reductionism?" 378.
related to them to be sure, emerges out of the dynamic interplay of various inputs. "How," Fauconnier asks, "can we start out with input mental spaces and end up with more than we started out with?" He answers this question by noting that "The paradox of simple, and yet conceptually creative, emergent structure is resolved when we understand that emergent structure is not confined to the blended mental spaces, but instead resides in the entire integration network and the compressions that operate within that network." For any blend to function well, of necessity it needs to be rather simple and to recruit structure that already exists in the input spaces in order to be quickly grasped and understood. The "simple" nature of blends is important since they are produced, as noted above, "on the fly," thus in order for them to work (and be rhetorically persuasive) they must be simple enough to apprehend in a moment. The "power of integration" lies in the "linking of such simple structure to the array of mental spaces in the entire network." It is in the dynamism of the entire network that allows for creative emergent structure.

Fauconnier argues that "a central feature of integration networks is their ability to compress diffuse conceptual structure into intelligible and manipulable human-scale situations in a blended space." The notion of Compression has evolved in the development of blending theory and now has perhaps the most explanatory power when analyzing how the links among mental spaces become conceptually and rhetorically powerful in the creation of novel emergent structure. Compression describes how the elements located in various mental spaces within a conceptual integration network can have numerous relations within and among spaces. There are about twenty or so of these "vital relations" that play an important role in understanding how Compression happens, including Analogy and Disanlaogy, Part-Whole, Representation, Identity,  

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40 Fauconnier, "Compression and Emergent Structure," 524, see idem, 527-28.
41 Fauconnier, "Compression and Emergent Structure," 532.
42 Fauconnier, "Compression and Emergent Structure," 523.
Similarity, and Uniqueness.\textsuperscript{44} "It is vital relations," Coulson and Oakley write, "that tend to be subject to compression in the blended space."\textsuperscript{45}

The goal of conceptual integration is to achieve \textit{human scale} so that conceptually difficult situations can be more easily grasped in a blend than in its diffuse input spaces. According to Fauconnier and Turner, "The most obvious human-scale situations have direct perception and action in familiar frames that are easily apprehended by human beings."\textsuperscript{46} Blended spaces often appear simple because they have achieved this human scale and it is this simplicity that allows the blend to work rhetorically by giving power to the entire network. Compressing vital relations to achieve human scale simplifies conceptually complex situations so that "The logical, emotional, and social inferences within the blended space are inescapable; their validity is not in question."\textsuperscript{47}

Achieving human scale in the blend often has rhetorical power because of its ability to activate human emotions in the reasoning process. Slingerland concludes that "the primary purpose of employing a metaphoric blend to achieve human scale is not to help us intellectually \textit{apprehend} a situation, but rather to help us to know how to \textit{feel} about it." Thus the reasoning prompted by blends often relies on the power of emotions and achieving human scale is an important element in provoking such emotional reactions. Slingerland highlights this when he writes that "human scale inputs are recruited polemically to inspire somatic-normative reactions in the listeners."\textsuperscript{48}

\textit{Rhetography}

[Vernon's paper: check to see what needs to be edited/added.]

\textsuperscript{44} Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{Way We Think}, 92-101; Fauconnier, "Compression and Emergent Structure," 523-24.
\textsuperscript{45} Coulson and Oakley, "Metonymy," 60.
\textsuperscript{46} Fauconnier and Turner, \textit{Way We Think}, 312.
\textsuperscript{47} Fauconnier, "Compression and Emergent Structure," 529.
\textsuperscript{48} Slingerland, \textit{What Science Offers the Humanities}, 188. See idem, 307: "A growing number of cognitive scientists and philosophers have come to agree with Hume and the Greek Stoics that … normative judgments are ultimately derived from human emotional reactions."
Compression, as noted, makes blends easy to grasp and to manipulate. Though not always, compression in blends often creates a mental picture that is relatively easy to exploit rhetorically. As we have just heard from Vernon Robbins, socio-rhetorical interpreters refer to graphic images that lend a text rhetorical force as a text's rhetography. Socio-rhetorical commentary aims to take human embodiment in geophysical space seriously. According to Robbins, this demands a mode of analysis wherein "it is necessary not only to interpret reasoning in argumentation but also to interpret picturing of people and the environments in which they are interacting." All too often, according to Robbins, exegesis re-inscribes a mind-body dualism that focuses predominantly on a text's rhetorical reasoning, that is, on its rhetology. As we have heard, Robbins pushes interpreters to take the rhetorical power of graphic picturing just as seriously. As Robbins reminds exegetes, "the picture an argument evokes (its rhetography) is regularly as important as the reasoning it presents (its rhetology)."

The importance of rhetography in the development of SRI cannot be overestimated and it is in analyses of the images evoked by the rhetoric of texts that the indebtedness to and usefulness of cognitive science in a socio-rhetorical framework is most prominently demonstrated. The rhetography of a text, often created by compression, allows for the very "rapid online reasoning" that cognitive linguists argue is the main goal of conceptual blending.

Concluding by Example

Conceptual integration theory is a powerful means to explore human meaning making. When its insights are used within a socio-rhetorical framework, I argue that it allows exegetes to produce interpretations with a principled means of examining background information evoked by the blends created by the text, as well as a means to engage critically the graphic images deployed rhetorically by biblical authors. Examining how biblical authors craft conceptual

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blends with emergent structure that evokes different aspects of early Christian rhetorical dialects helps us to explain how certain texts gain the emotional traction they do.

An all too brief example: In 1 Cor 6:18 and 10:14 Paul employs an embodied metaphor and commands the Corinthians to "flee" something detrimental. In using the spatial metaphor of fleeing, Paul is bringing his argument down to human scale. As Fauconnier and Turner write, "Human action, with motion and intentionality in physical space and time, is a basic human-scale structure." Paul's rhetoric creates human scale in order to show the Corinthians, via rhetography, why sexual immorality and idolatry are wrong in 1 Cor 6 and 10 respectively. In 1 Cor 6:13-19, he does this by compressing the relationship between the individual believer and Christ from Analogy to Part-Whole to Identity. Such individual union with Christ precludes engaging in πορνεία. While the progression of Paul's argument is not nearly as neat in 10:14-17 as it is in 6:13-19, the relationship there between the Corinthian community and Christ is compressed to Identity here through the one bread ingested in the cultic meal. Such cultic union with the body of Christ provides the rationale for fleeing idolatry. Gilles Fauconnier argues that an optimal blend has "human scale, only two objects, simple concrete action, clear-cut outcome." A socio-rhetorical analysis of 1 Cor 6 and 10 using the tools of blending theory demonstrates that in these chapters Paul creates blends that involve the Corinthian body (individual or corporate), a detrimental activity (πορνεία or εἶδωλολατρία), simple concrete action (φεύγετε), and a clear-cut outcome (avoiding that which would contaminate the body of Christ). Drawing on cultural resources from numerous rhetorolects Paul creates human scale blends in rhetoric that relies on emotional responses to function. Conceptual integration theory gives us tools that help exegetes to explain what gives Paul's rhetoric such power in 1 Corinthians. And socio-rhetorical commentary gives a principled way of using these tools to craft full-bodied biblical interpretations for the 21st century.

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51 Fauconnier and Turner, Way We Think, 378.
52 Fauconnier, "Compression and Emergent Structure," 531.