

## Cognitive Linguistics and Theology

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# Radial Extension, Prototypicality, and Tectonic Equivalence

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**Abstract:** In his book “Without Metaphor, No Saving God: Theology After Cognitive Linguistics”, Robert Masson describes a metaphoric process by which newly accepted truths emerge: for example, in the assertion “Jesus is the Messiah,” Christians reconfigure the field of meanings associated with an existing concept from the Hebrew scriptures (MESSIAH) by asserting its identification with Jesus. Masson dubs this process a “tectonic equivalence” or “tectonic shift.” In this paper I build on Masson’s work by examining some of the shifts he describes as tectonic through the lens of the cognitive linguistics concepts of radial extension and polysemy. I propose that a lasting tectonic shift may be understood as a blend creating a radial extension that substantially alters the category structure of the original source frame so that the blended space comes to be understood as a central instance of that category. Such an approach allows a fruitful analysis of the similarities and differences among three example blends: GOD IS A ROCK, JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, AND JESUS IS GOD.

**Keywords:** tectonic shift; tectonic equivalence; conceptual metaphor; analogy; literal; proper; figurative; truth; conceptual blending; cognitive linguistics

## 1 Introduction

In his 2014 book *Without Metaphor, No Saving God: Theology After Cognitive Linguistics*, Robert Masson brings the toolkit of cognitive linguistics into systematic theology. One of Masson’s most important contributions is to describe a metaphoric process by which newly accepted truths emerge, both in theology and in other areas of life. For example, as Masson notes, in the assertion “Jesus is the Messiah,” Christians reconfigure the field of meanings associated with an existing concept from the Hebrew scriptures (MESSIAH) by asserting its identification with Jesus. Such an assertion results in a claim to proper truth: for Christians, Jesus really is the Messiah. It is thus different from a statement like “God is a rock,” which serves as an illustrative metaphor but does not result in a lasting modification of the concept ROCK to refer primarily to God.<sup>1</sup>

On some accounts of language, the former type of assertion might be understood as literal and the latter as metaphorical. However, as Masson argues, from a cognitive linguistics perspective both must be seen as metaphorical, since both involve cross-frame mappings.<sup>2</sup> Because conceptual metaphor theory on its own does not lend itself easily to accounting for the difference between the two, Masson introduces the idea of a “tectonic equivalence” or “tectonic shift” to describe the process of meaning change involved in

1 Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 59, 67–72.

2 Following recent work by Karen Sullivan, Barbara Dancygier, and Eve Sweetser, I have chosen to treat metaphors as mappings between frames rather than domains (the terminology used in most earlier literature). See Sullivan, *Frames and Constructions in Metaphoric Language*; Dancygier and Sweetser, *Figurative Language*, esp. 17–21.

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a claim such as “Jesus is the Messiah.”<sup>3</sup> Such a claim, for those who accept it, can be understood as true in the strongest sense—what is often called “literally” true, but what Masson prefers to call “properly” true, or true *propre* (a term drawn from scholastic usage).<sup>4</sup> This allows the term “literal” to be reserved, as it generally is in cognitive linguistics, for concepts that do not require mappings or blending and that are amenable to direct sensorimotor experience.<sup>5</sup>

Masson’s work on tectonic shifts provides a clear and convincing way to distinguish between metaphorical theological statements such as “God is a rock,” which express important truths but fall short of proper predication, and metaphorical statements such as “Jesus is the Messiah,” which, for Christians, are true in the proper sense. I regard Masson’s work as groundbreaking and important, and here I seek to build on it by drawing upon the cognitive linguistics concepts of radial extension and prototypicality, which I believe offer a useful and complementary lens through which to examine at least some of the shifts in meaning Masson refers to as tectonic.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, I suggest that to accept a metaphor as true *propre* is to have incorporated the blended space of that metaphor as an instance of the category represented by the source frame, and that such a metaphor can be understood as more or less tectonic to the degree that that source category is reorganized around the blended space as a new prototype. With this approach in mind, I offer analyses of two metaphors examined by Masson, GOD IS A ROCK and JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, as well as another metaphor central to Christian faith: JESUS IS GOD. The first remains an ordinary first-order metaphor, while JESUS IS THE MESSIAH and JESUS IS GOD (for those who accept them) are both tectonic equivalences—yet with intriguing differences in the resulting prototype structures of their respective source categories.

## 2 Masson on tectonic shifts

As Masson observes, a statement like “God is a rock” is a straightforward example of conceptual metaphor, a single-scope blend. In the blend, attributes from the source frame ROCK are mapped unidirectionally onto the target frame GOD. Appropriate inferences generated in the blended space can be floated up to the target space: perhaps that God is strong, immovable, a source of shelter or defense, and so on. “The Lord is my shepherd,” “Christ is the vine,” and other similar statements work in the same way. In each of these, the target space is conceptualized in terms of the source, but the source frame itself remains unaltered.

The affirmation “Jesus is the Messiah” is different in a very important way: if accepted as true, it forces a reassessment not only of the target frame but also of the source frame. Not only is JESUS understood in a new way by being thought of as MESSIAH; for Christians the concept MESSIAH is permanently altered as well by its association with JESUS. As Masson writes,

By ordinary logic [Jesus] was not a victorious King of Israel; he was not a Son of Man who descended gloriously from the heavens; he was not acknowledged by his people nor did he vanquish their enemies. To affirm that Jesus is the Messiah is to force an equivalence between him and Israel’s expressions of hope and trust in God. . . . It is not simply a case of mapping some of the things known about the Messiah to Jesus. The claim tectonically reconfigures the meaning of “Messiah,” the identity of Jesus, and the field of meanings associated with messianic hope and God’s relation to Israel.<sup>7</sup>

Masson’s approach to this type of metaphor that reconfigures the meanings of both target *and* source frames is inspired in part by the work of Mary Gerhart and Allan Melvin Russell.<sup>8</sup> Gerhart and Russell do not focus

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<sup>3</sup> Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 66.

<sup>4</sup> See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.13.3.

<sup>5</sup> Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 52–54, 132–36, 196–207.

<sup>6</sup> A brief introduction to radial extension and prototypicality is given below; for an overview of these concepts, see Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, “Polysemy, Prototypes, and Radial Categories.” An earlier, seminal work is Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*.

<sup>7</sup> *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhart and Russell, *Metaphoric Process*; Gerhart and Russell, *New Maps for Old*. Gerhart and Russell do not draw upon cognitive linguistics, and so a distinct contribution of Masson’s is to bring their work together with that field—particularly with the conceptual blending theory of Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner. See Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*; Fauconnier, *Mental Spaces*; Fauconnier, *Mappings in Thought and Language*.

on everyday metaphors like “God is a rock.” Rather, they seek to describe the kind of significant shift in understanding that takes place when a flash of insight permanently reconfigures the field of meanings associated with a concept. Gerhart and Russell use the phrase “the metaphoric process” to describe this kind of shift. However, they sometimes describe this process (in a metaphor that is itself picturesque) as generating a “tectonic” change in worldview.<sup>9</sup> Since the term “metaphor” as used in cognitive linguistics describes a much broader phenomenon than what Gerhart and Russell describe, Masson chooses to use “tectonic” in his own work as a technical term for this more specific kind of metaphor.<sup>10</sup>

Masson’s proposal makes an important breakthrough in that it offers a clear way to describe how figurative language can express truth in the proper sense. “Jesus is the Messiah” is an example of just such a statement: it is both figurative and, in the understanding of Christians, properly true. It expresses meaning by means of a blend, and for Christians this is “a meaning that within the blended space is semantically proper, logically warranted, and factually the case.”<sup>11</sup> As Masson notes, Christians do not affirm that Jesus is *like* the Messiah, or *a kind of* Messiah, but that Jesus *is* the Messiah.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, while ordinary illustrative metaphors like “God is a rock” are not reversible (Christians would not say that a rock is God), a claim like “Jesus is the Messiah” actually *is* reversible (Christians *would* say that the Messiah is Jesus).<sup>13</sup> Masson’s work thus offers a way to distinguish between those figurative statements that remain at the level of first-order conceptual metaphor and those that become true *propre* by means of a tectonic shift in meaning. This distinction corresponds to the scholastic distinction between metaphor and analogy, in which the former is understood to convey truth *improprie* and the latter to convey it *propre*.<sup>14</sup> From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, both types of statements are in fact metaphorical, since both rely on cross-frame mappings. Masson’s category of “tectonic shifts” allows both types to be resituated within the realm of conceptual metaphor while preserving the distinction between them.

A tectonic shift, for those who accept it, makes a very real change in the world. As Masson puts it, a successful tectonic shift “has the character of a ‘speech act’ in the sense of ordinary language philosophy—that is to say, a speaking such as a marriage vow or judge’s pronouncement that has some practical effect.”<sup>15</sup> This is true not only of theological assertions like “Jesus is the Messiah” but also of other paradigm shifts in science, art, and other areas of human experience. In 1803, for example, John Dalton announced that he was embarked on a study of “the ultimate particles of bodies.”<sup>16</sup> Soon Dalton would choose a term coined by the ancient Greek philosophers Leucippus and Democritus to refer to these particles as “atoms.”<sup>17</sup>

Dalton’s use of this term can at first be seen as a simple metaphorical extension of an existing concept; we might imagine his audience in 1803 saying, “What Dalton is suggesting seems to be something like an atom.” With the success of Dalton’s atomic theory, however, the concept of an atom has undergone a tectonic shift so that what Dalton described has become the central example of the category ATOM. Today we can take for granted that what Dalton discovered was what Democritus had in mind all along. We might say, “Democritus never knew it, but we know now that there are many more than four types of atoms.” Yet it is perfectly possible to imagine an alternate reality in which Dalton had used a different term, so that today we would say, “Democritus believed in atoms, but now we know there are no such things: matter is composed of blickets.” The fact that it is true to say “Democritus and Dalton both believed in atoms” is not an observer-independent reality about the physical universe; rather, it is the result of a successful tectonic

<sup>9</sup> *New Maps for Old*, 3, 16, 45–60.

<sup>10</sup> While it is too early to know whether Masson’s terminology of “tectonic” will be more widely adopted among cognitive linguists or theologians, it has been mentioned appreciatively in the reviews by Tilley and Clark listed in the bibliography.

<sup>11</sup> *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 198.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 297.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 90–92.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 129–61.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>16</sup> “An enquiry into the relative weights of the ultimate particles of bodies is a subject, as far as I know, entirely new: I have lately been prosecuting this enquiry with remarkable success.” Dalton, “On the Absorption of Gases by Water and Other Liquids,” 286.

<sup>17</sup> “All bodies of sensible magnitude, whether liquid or solid, are constituted of a vast number of extremely small particles, or atoms of matter.” Dalton, *A New System of Chemical Philosophy*, 1:141.

shift. Dalton's use of the term "atom" was a performative act that both *claimed* and *created* continuity with an already-existing concept, changing that concept itself into the bargain.

A tectonic shift, then, is not simply a metaphor in which a target concept is understood in terms of a source concept. Rather, in a shift like the one described above for ATOM, both the target *and* source concepts come to be understood in new ways. In order to account for this, Masson has recourse to Fauconnier and Turner's concept of double-scope blending. Whereas a single-scope blend (the type of blend involved in standard conceptual metaphor) is asymmetric, a double-scope blend is more unpredictable, drawing structure from both inputs and allowing for implications to be projected back to each. As Fauconnier and Turner write, "In such networks, both organizing frames make central contributions to the blend, and their sharp differences offer the possibility of rich clashes. Far from blocking the construction of the network, such clashes offer challenges to the imagination; indeed, the resulting blends can be highly creative."<sup>18</sup>

### 3 Building on Masson's work: radial extension and prototypicality

One phenomenon of major interest to cognitive linguists is polysemy: the fact that a word can be used in multiple, mutually related, ways. The various uses of a given word are neither arbitrary nor wholly predictable. Rather, they are motivated by what cognitive linguists call *radial extension*: the extension of a word's semantic range to incorporate a new usage.<sup>19</sup> Radial extension can take place on the basis of literal shared features. It can take place via metaphor, as when the primary metaphor KNOWING IS SEEING allows a verb originally meaning "to see" to come over time to mean "to know."<sup>20</sup> It can arise via metonymy, as when a word originally meaning "eye" comes over time to mean "face."<sup>21</sup> Or it can arise on the basis of a more complex, double-scope blend, as when the word "desktop" comes to refer not only to a workspace for writing with pens and paper but also to a computer screen on which icons can be dragged around.<sup>22</sup> Radial extension can take place at any time, by any of these avenues, as a word is applied to a new situation. This means that word meanings, and the conceptual categories that underlie them, are almost endlessly productive.

Not all radial extensions are perceived as equally good examples of a category, of course. In a 1987 study, George Lakoff observed that the concept MOTHER is structured by means of a set of radial extensions from a central, or *prototypical*, case. This prototypical instance is easiest for users to identify, but users also readily extend the category to account for variations.<sup>23</sup> For English speakers in modern Western society, a prototypical mother may be one "who is and always has been female, and who gave birth to the child, supplied her half of the child's genes, nurtured the child, is married to the father, is one generation older than the child, and is the child's legal guardian."<sup>24</sup> However, not all of these features need to be true for a person to be called a mother. Nonprototypical examples (adoptive mother, birth mother, stepmother, etc.) can also be treated as members of the category: each of these people might rightly and uncontroversially, in various contexts, be able to say "I'm this child's mother." New instances may also arise over time: for example, the development of egg donation has given rise to the concept of a genetic mother. The category is not structured by a single set of necessary and sufficient conditions that must be true for all its members. Instead, it is a network of instances, each of which is linked to at least one other instance by a radial extension.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 131.

<sup>19</sup> On the concept of motivation as distinct from arbitrariness or determinism, see Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 113, 146–47.

<sup>20</sup> This particular pattern of meaning change is well attested in Indo-European languages: Sweetser, *From Etymology to Pragmatics*, 32–34.

<sup>21</sup> Dancygier and Sweetser, *Figurative Language*, 108.

<sup>22</sup> See Fauconnier and Turner's analysis of the Computer Desktop as a double-scope blend in *The Way We Think*, 22–24, 340–42.

<sup>23</sup> Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 74–76, 80–86, 91.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> This is the phenomenon of "family resemblances" described by Ludwig Wittgenstein in the mid-twentieth century. On Wittgenstein and other forerunners of cognitive linguistics, see Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 12–57.

Most English speakers would not think of all these instances of “mother” as representing separate “senses” or “meanings” of the word “mother.” However, they might consider some instances to be more central examples of the concept than others. The groundbreaking 1970s work of psychologist Eleanor Rosch demonstrated that cognitive categories generally demonstrate prototype effects: for example, English speakers consistently identify sparrows and robins as “best examples” of birds. Chickens and penguins, while still birds, are identified as less “birdlike.” Certain category members are privileged over others, serving as mental “anchors” for the category as a whole and as reference points for determining the typicality of other members.<sup>26</sup>

Some categories (such as *BIRD*) exhibit fairly discrete boundaries: a penguin may not be as central as a robin, but it is still uncontroversially a bird. Other categories, however, have fuzzy boundaries in which edge cases are hard to classify. Individuals may disagree, for example, over whether a stepmother or a genetic mother is “really” a mother or not.<sup>27</sup> Users may find it difficult to decide whether such edge cases fit within a category; they may resort to expressions like “Technically, she’s his mother,” “Strictly speaking, I guess she’s not his mother,” or “That’s on the edge of what I’d call a mother.”<sup>28</sup> In some cases, different communities apply different boundaries to a category. *MARRIAGE*, for example, may be defined in one way by a government and in another by a religious authority. Many cases may fit within both, but others are excluded from one or the other. Meanwhile, individuals have their own understandings of *MARRIAGE*, which may exhibit less distinct boundaries.

Radial extension and prototypicality offer a way of thinking about tectonic shifts that complements Masson’s account, which is based on conceptual blending theory. Because a conceptual blend can form the basis for a radial extension, it is possible to describe a tectonic shift as the creation of such an extension in a way that substantially alters the category structure of the original source frame, so that the blended space comes to be understood as a central example of that category. This can happen to a greater or lesser extent: a given blend may be understood by some hearers or readers as evoking a simple first-order metaphor, by others as creating a legitimate new edge case that is nonetheless far from prototypical, and by others still as reconfiguring the entire field of meanings of the source category around this new instance which has come to be understood as central. The question of whether or not a given blend remains an ordinary conceptual metaphor or provokes a strong tectonic shift is fundamentally, as Masson points out, a question of reception.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.1 GOD IS A ROCK

Consider, first, the statement “God is a rock,” which, as already noted, sets up a metaphoric or single-scope blend with *GOD* as the target frame and *ROCK* as the source frame. In the blend, aspects of a rock are mapped onto God. Many readers or hearers will draw inferences from the metaphor such as “God is strong,” “God is indestructible,” “God is a good source of shelter,” and so on. Once these inferences have emerged in the blend, they can be mapped (or “floated”) back up to the target domain, influencing readers’ or hearers’ understandings of God even when they are no longer consciously using this particular metaphor.<sup>30</sup> Yet

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<sup>26</sup> These results are replicated by many different experimental methods: direct questioning, identification response times, and even asymmetry in similarity ratings (chickens are seen as more similar to robins than robins are to chickens). On Rosch’s work, see Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 39–55.

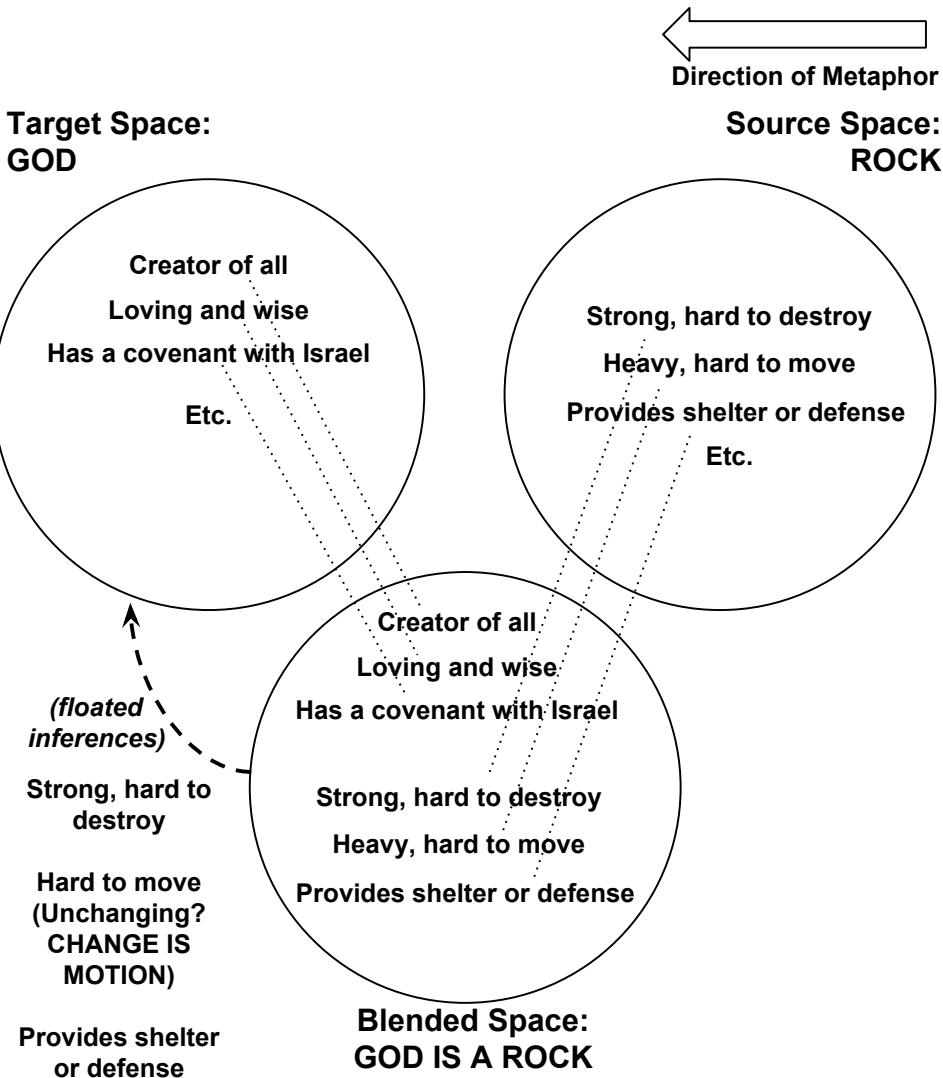
<sup>27</sup> Cf. Dirk Geeraerts’s analysis of the category fruit in *Diachronic Prototype Semantics*, 12–17.

<sup>28</sup> On hedges like “strictly speaking”, see Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 122–25. “On the edge of” draws upon the primary metaphors **CATEGORIES ARE BOUNDED REGIONS** and **SIMILARITY IS CLOSENESS**—metaphors that also inevitably underlie much of my own discussion here, including the phrase “edge cases.” It is almost impossible to talk about categories without invoking some spatial metaphors—a good example of how our most basic ways of thinking are grounded in bodily experience.

<sup>29</sup> See the discussion of reception in Masson, *Without Metaphor, No Saving God*, 68–72, 113–14.

<sup>30</sup> This process in which emergent structure is mapped back to one or both input spaces can also be called “backward projection”; see Fauconnier and Turner, *The Way We Think*, 49. For the term “float,” see Fauconnier, *Mappings in Thought and Language*, 61, 112.

this process is not deterministic but dynamic and emergent, so that there is no question of eliminating the metaphor in favor of a more precise literal equivalent. The range of possible entailments is constrained only by the pragmatics of the situation and by each individual's encyclopedic knowledge about rocks and God.<sup>31</sup>

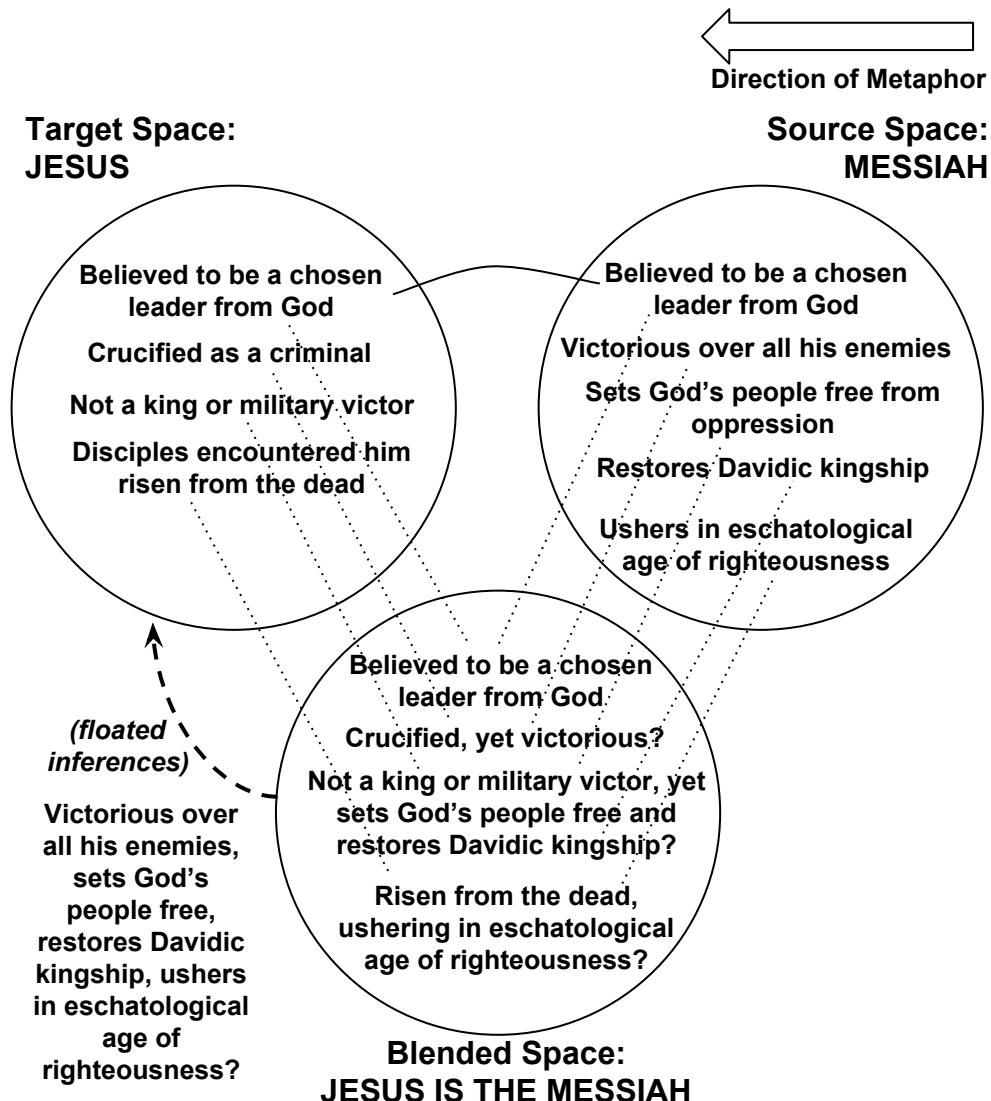


However, most readers and hearers will *not* come away from this blend with their concept of ROCK significantly modified. In other words, they will not create a lasting radial extension of the concept ROCK to include the blended space. Outside the context of the metaphor, the word “rock” still prompts primarily for a mental image of a piece of stone, not of God; their prototype structure of ROCK remains what it was. Many Christians might very naturally say something like “Yes, my God is a rock, but of course God is not *really* (or *literally*) a rock.”

<sup>31</sup> Diagrams of conceptual blends conventionally include a generic space at the top, which includes material common to both input spaces and which plays an important role in constraining the mappings that are possible between these two spaces and the blend. In the diagrams that follow I have omitted the generic spaces for the sake of brevity and clarity; however, they remain active in structuring each blend.

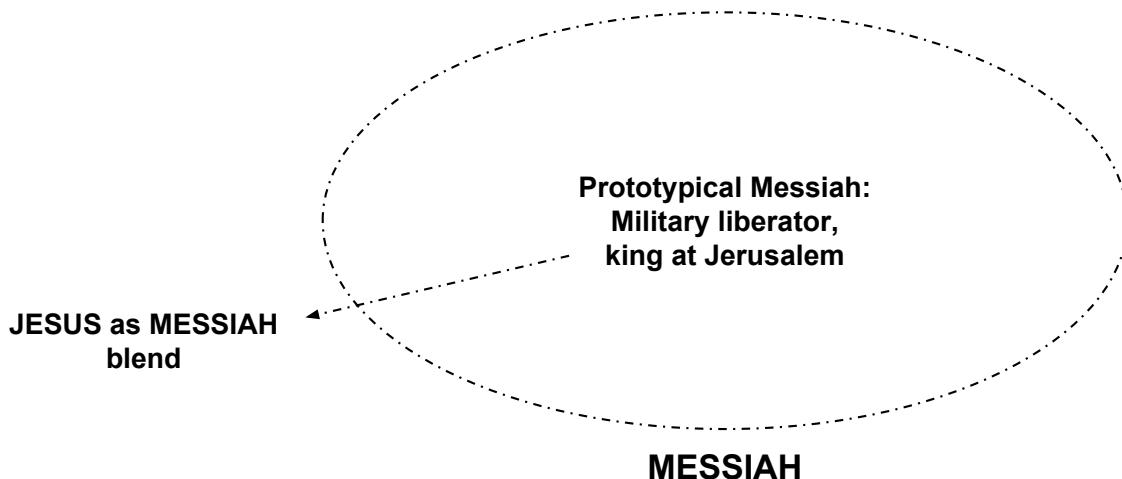
### 3.2 JESUS IS THE MESSIAH

Now consider the blend set up by the statement “Jesus is the Messiah” as it might have been heard by a first-century disciple. In the blend, attributes of the Messiah are mapped onto Jesus: it is Jesus who is king of Israel, an eschatological victor figure, the restorer of God’s reign, the savior of the oppressed, and so on. There are likely to be clashes as expected aspects of the **MESSIAH** frame conflict with truths about Jesus: Jesus was not a military victor, for example, nor did he sit on a throne at Jerusalem. As always with the blending process, these clashes are resolved creatively and non-deterministically; for example, the Messiah’s expected literal victory over foreign armies may in the blend become metaphorical victory over the spiritual power of evil.

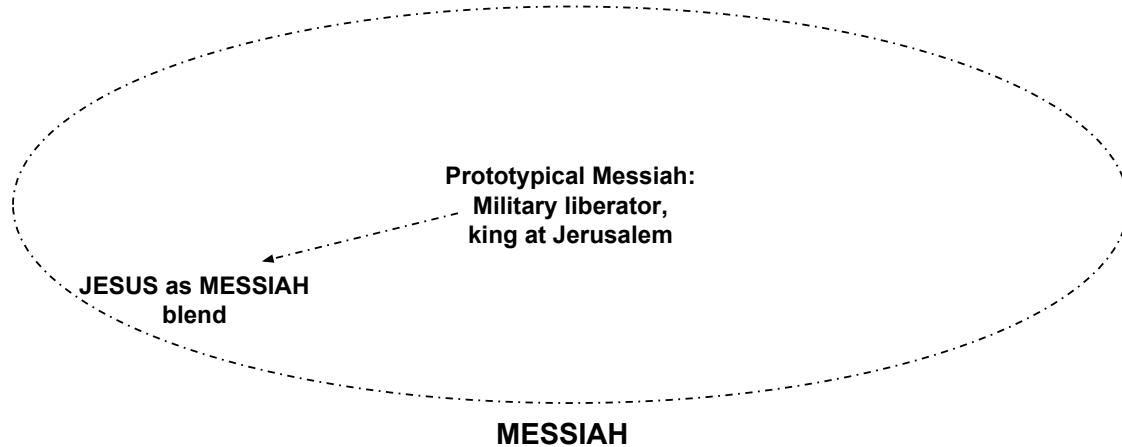


It is quite possible that, for some hearers of this assertion, the blend remains an ordinary conceptual metaphor, a single-scope blend similar to “God is a rock.” In this scenario, the **MESSIAH** frame remains essentially unaltered and the mapping remains unidirectional: insights about Jesus are drawn from the blend, but the previously existing concept of **MESSIAH** remains unchanged. The radial category structure of **MESSIAH** for these hearers might be depicted as shown below: the blend of Jesus-as-Messiah creates a radial extension from the prototype, but it is one that falls outside the boundaries of the category itself and is thus clearly perceived as “nonliteral” (that is, as true *impropri*e). Someone accepting the metaphor in this way

might say something like, “Yes, you could call Jesus a Messiah of sorts, although of course he’s not *really* (or *literally*) the Messiah.”



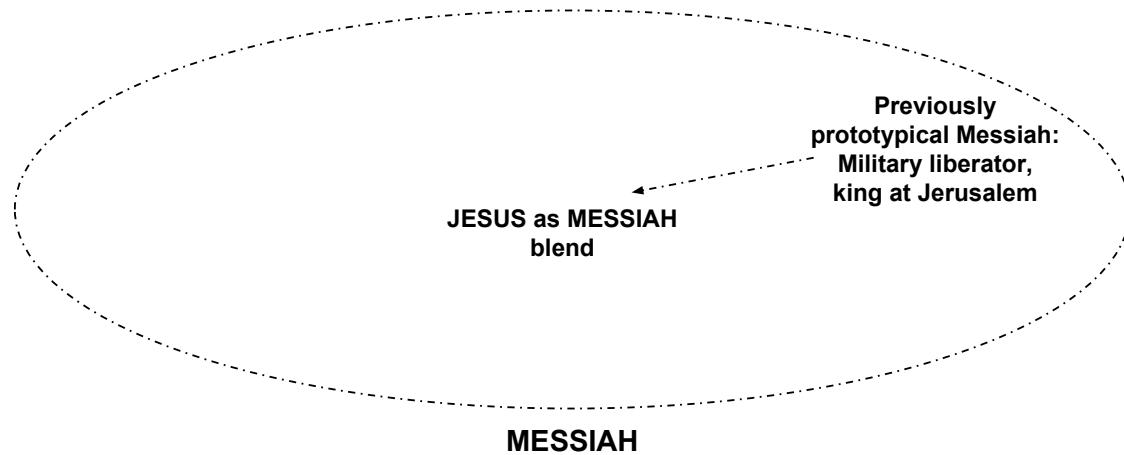
As noted above, however, a core principle of the cognitive linguistics understanding of categorization is that categories are often flexible. A metaphorical radial extension can become entrenched enough to constitute an expansion of the category boundary. In a second reception scenario, then, an individual or group might actually incorporate the Jesus-as-Messiah blend *into* their mental category of **MESSIAH**—but without displacing the Davidic military liberator as the prototypical instance. Like Cyrus, the Persian king referred to as Messiah in Isaiah 45:1, Jesus might be seen as a secondary but legitimate bearer of a title still meant primarily for another. Someone for whom this scenario was the case might say something like, “Well, I’d call Jesus a sort of Messiah” or “Yes, I guess Jesus really is a Messiah, although maybe not *the* Messiah.”<sup>32</sup> Such a development would represent a sort of midway point on the spectrum between first-order metaphor and strong tectonic equivalence, in which “Jesus is the Messiah” might arguably be seen as true *propre*, albeit only as an edge case.



A very different possibility for reception is the path taken by historic mainstream Christianity. Christians do not simply assert that Jesus is called Messiah because the church names him as Messiah in a new, peripheral sense, as would be the case in the second scenario described above. Rather, they assert that in Jesus they discover a fuller, deeper central meaning for a concept they had previously understood only in part. In other words, to accept Jesus as Messiah is to restructure the prototype structure of the category **MESSIAH** so that the blended space, Jesus-as-Messiah, is placed *at the center*.

<sup>32</sup> On these verbal hedges, see Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things*, 122–25.

We might imagine a first-century Christian preacher exhorting his or her community, “Zechariah told us the Messiah would be humble and ride on a donkey. Listen! This means that Jesus really is the Messiah!”<sup>33</sup> This member is making a claim not only that the Jesus-as-Messiah blend should be included within the category **MESSIAH** but that the prototype structure of the category itself should be recentered around this very instance. For believers who do accept it, Jesus becomes the central example of the category against which other examples are to be measured, and the concept **MESSIAH** can no longer be adequately understood without reference to Jesus.



It is this restructuring of the prototype structure of the source frame that accounts for the bidirectionality Masson observes in the tectonic process. Because Jesus-as-Messiah is, in this scenario, not a temporary metaphoric extension of **MESSIAH**, nor even simply a peripheral member, but enshrined as a central instance of the category, it becomes true to say not only “Jesus is the Messiah” but also “The Messiah is Jesus.” Moreover, attributes of Jesus can now be predicated of the Messiah: “The Messiah is a Galilean carpenter’s son”; “The Messiah is a crucified victim.”

It is important to note that the three scenarios just explored are not sequential stages in a linear process. While an individual or group might conceivably pass through all three understandings over time, it is at least as likely that they might take “Jesus is the Messiah” to be fully tectonic from the outset, placing Jesus directly at the center of the category in a sudden flash of insight rather than undergoing a gradual process of seeing him first as “a sort of Messiah” and only later as “*the* Messiah.”<sup>34</sup> Nor are these three meant as the only possible options. Rather, they are illustrative points along a spectrum of possibilities by which a metaphoric blend might be taken to fit outside or inside a given source category, and if inside, might be incorporated into its prototype structure as a more or less central member.

One noteworthy feature of both the second and third scenarios I have described (as well as all the possibilities that lie between them) is that they result in a situation of polysemy, in which the previously existing prototypical sense (an earthly Davidic king as Messiah) now exists alongside a newly accepted sense (Jesus as Messiah). In the second scenario, the former prototype remains prototypical, while in the third it is displaced by a new prototype. Yet some tectonic shifts remain somewhere in between. A new sense can also become a central member of a category *without* displacing the previous prototype, as can be seen in another example: **JESUS IS GOD**.

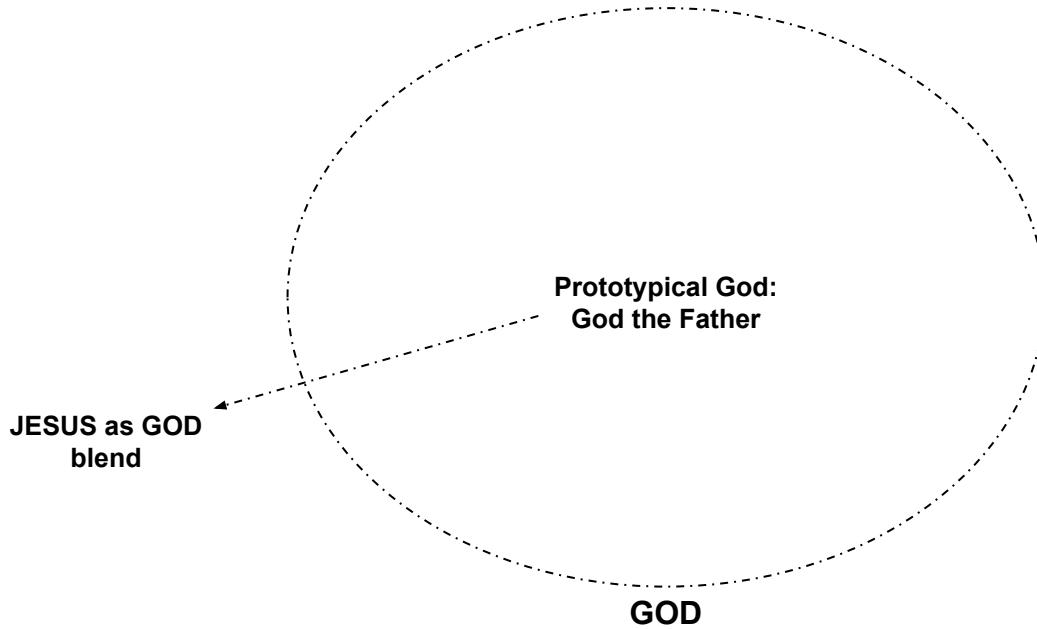
<sup>33</sup> Zech. 9:9.

<sup>34</sup> In earlier versions of this work, including my dissertation, I *did* envision these scenarios as sequential stages. I am grateful to Robert Masson (personal correspondence) for comments that have pointed me toward a more flexible and dynamic perspective. What inadequacies remain in this proposal are of course wholly my own.

### 3.3 JESUS IS GOD

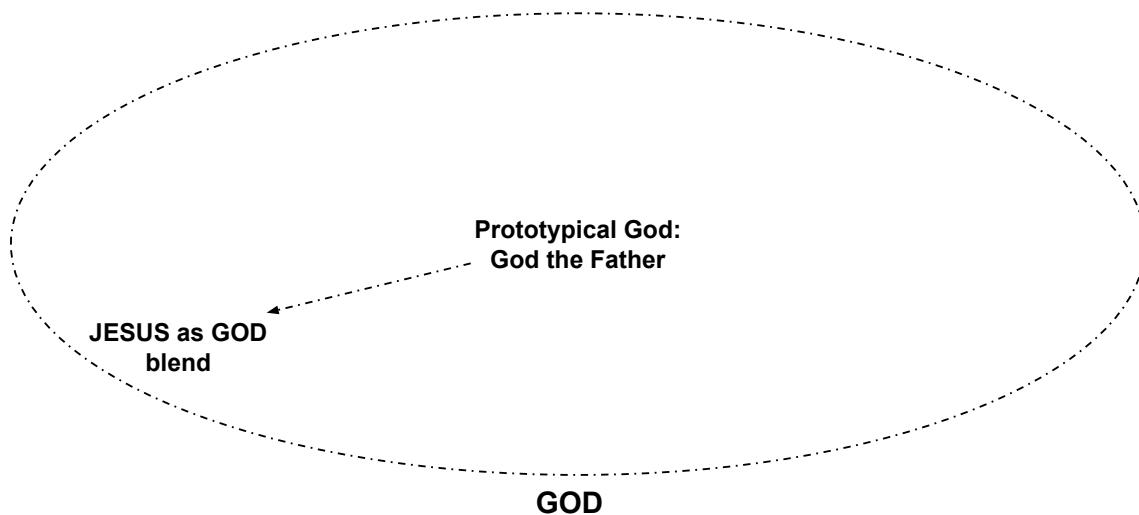
Like “Jesus is the Messiah,” but even more radical in its implications, “Jesus is God” is an assertion that Christians take to be not only a first-order metaphor but properly true. Once again, the assertion prompts for a blend, here one in which qualities of God mingle with qualities of Jesus in a blended space representing Jesus-as-God. As always, this is a dynamic rather than an algorithmic process, but some salient attributes of God likely to be mapped into the blend might include God’s power, immortality, infinite love, and omniscience. Certain clashes are likely to arise: Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament is a finite physical being, seems to have limited knowledge, can suffer and die, and so on. And, as always, these clashes are resolved in creative and nondeterministic ways. Various ways of accounting for these clashes animated several of the christological controversies of the first four centuries: for docetists, for example, to assert that Jesus was God meant that divine attributes trumped human ones to the extent that Jesus’ humanity was only illusory. In contrast, mainstream Christian orthodoxy came to assert that both human and divine attributes were fully true of Jesus, held together in paradox.<sup>35</sup>

Despite their disagreements over Jesus’ humanity, docetists and proto-orthodox Christians agreed that he was truly God—in other words, that the blend JESUS IS GOD was to be understood as properly true. Yet not all members of the early Christian movement agreed. For Arius and his followers, for example, Jesus was a created being, albeit the first and greatest of all created beings and one who shared uniquely in many of the divine attributes. To Arians, while the blend JESUS IS GOD expressed genuine truth, it did so in essentially the same way as GOD IS A ROCK: at the level of single-scope blending. It was not true *proprie*; the blend Jesus-as-God had not come to be incorporated *into* their cognitive category of GOD.

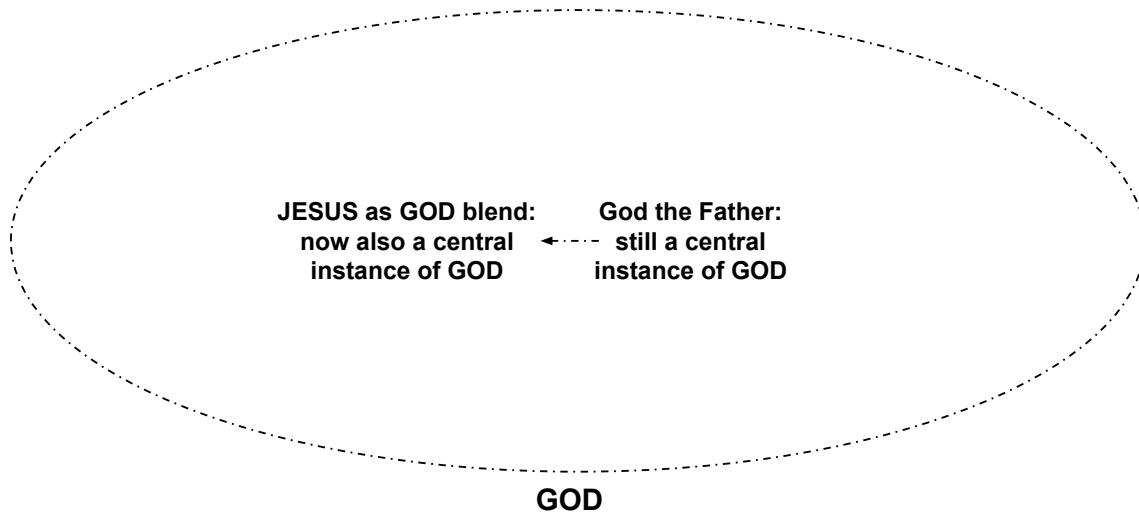


The christological perspective known as semi-Arianism would seem to represent an intermediate position, one in which Jesus may well be seen as truly divine—truly God—and yet to a lesser extent than God the Father. In this scenario, the category structure of the concept GOD has been expanded to include Jesus as a genuine instance, but an edge case. God the Father remains the single prototype, and Jesus’ divine status is seen as clearly derivative. This second possibility is represented below:

<sup>35</sup> One way to describe this paradox was the notion of κένωσις, inspired by Phil. 2:5-11, which suggests that Jesus voluntarily emptied himself of divine attributes to take up his earthly ministry. A fourth-century hymn of Ephrem of Edessa expresses this idea well: “Who then, my Lord, compares to you? / The Watcher slept, the Great was small, / the Pure baptized, the Life who died, / the King abased to honor all: / praised be your glory.” *Hymnal 1982*, 443.



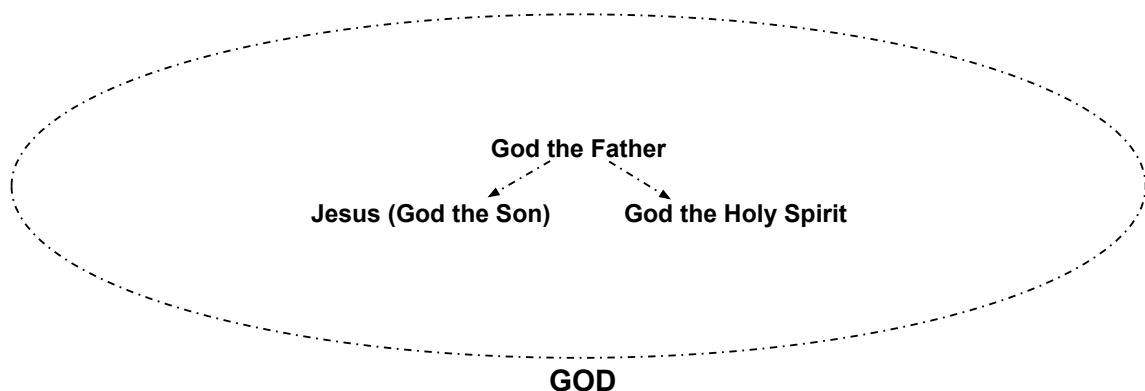
In a third scenario—that which would come to be the position of Chalcedonian Christianity—the prototype structure of the category GOD is significantly altered so that Jesus-as-God comes to take a place within the center of the category. Here the blend is taken as strongly tectonic, so that “Jesus is God” is unquestionably true in the proper sense:



Yet there is an intriguing difference here from the category structure in the third scenario explored above for JESUS IS THE MESSIAH. In this case, the previously existing prototypical concept for GOD has *not* been replaced or displaced to the periphery. God the Father remains central to Christians’ understanding of GOD even as Jesus-as-God takes a central place *alongside* God the Father. For Christians God can no longer be understood without reference to Jesus, and yet it is also true that God the Father remains a central and prototypical member of the Godhead. It is not, then, necessary to a tectonic shift that a previous prototype be replaced outright. In some cases, the blended space may become a new central instance alongside previous prototypes rather than instead of them.

This process by which Jesus is incorporated into the prototype structure *without* displacing the previously prototypical sense of God accounts for the fact that “Jesus is God” does not display the same bidirectionality Masson notes in “Jesus is the Messiah.” For trinitarian Christians, “Jesus is God” is true *propre*, and yet it is inadequate to say “God is Jesus” without further qualification, because Jesus is not the only prototypical member of the concept GOD.

Over time, of course, the same tectonic shift took place with regard to the Holy Spirit, so that for trinitarian Christians the concept GOD is actually a radial network with *three* equal central members:



It remains the case that the Father is identified as the source or fount of the Godhead, from whom the other two persons are begotten and proceed, respectively—a theological claim about the immanent Trinity that corresponds to the order of revelation of the economic Trinity.<sup>36</sup> In cognitive terms, even as there are now three equally central members of the concept GOD, it remains true that the First Person of the Trinity was the original prototype and served as the source domain for the tectonic blends by which the other two members were incorporated into the concept.

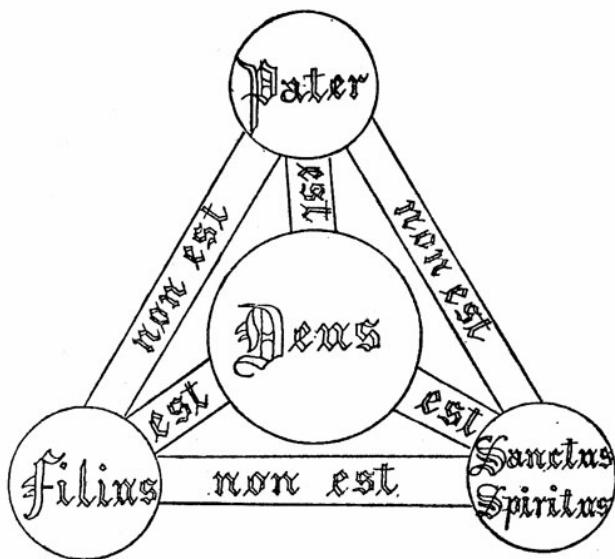
Yet the diagram above still does not tell the whole story. As it stands, it could simply depict a polytheistic category of GOD with three central members, very similar to the Greco-Roman category of GOD with twelve central members (and a number of peripheral members, such as demigods). Christian theology, however, while insisting that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God, adds the assertion inherited from Judaism that there is only one God, the God of Israel. This means that, for Christians, GOD is not simply a superordinate category into which these three members fit. Rather, at the center of the category GOD are not only the three persons (*ὑπόστασεις*) of the Trinity but also the one being (*οὐσία*) of God. While God's *οὐσία* is unknowable, the concept of the *οὐσία* can be described cognitively as an underspecified schema, or generic space, abstracted over what is common to all three persons.

Trinitarian theology as it developed over the first four centuries is in fact a remarkably sophisticated example of radial extension and polysemy. It asserts that the relation between each *ὑπόστασις* and God's *οὐσία* is not one of category membership but one of identity. Meanwhile, paradoxically, it also asserts that these identity relations do not exist among the various *ὑπόστασεις*: while the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each to be identified with the central *οὐσία*, they cannot be identified with one another. The result is challenging for formal logic but poses no problem to the human capacity for cognitive mapping.<sup>37</sup> The traditional image of the *scutum Trinitatis*, or “shield of the Trinity,” diagrams this radial category structure admirably, succinctly expressing the Christian claim that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all distinct from one another, yet all truly God in the proper sense.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Here I summarize the relations among the persons as described in the original version of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, still used in the Eastern churches. The West, of course, eventually came to add the *filioque*, the assertion that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father *and* the Son.

<sup>37</sup> For a more detailed study of various metaphors and metonymies that contribute to trinitarian theology as further developed in the Nicene Creed and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, see Barcelona, “The Metaphorical and Metonymic Understanding of the Trinitarian Dogma.”

<sup>38</sup> The image below is in the public domain and is reprinted from Woodward, *Embroidery for Church Guilds*. It was downloaded from <http://anglicanhistory.org/vestments/woodward1896/plates.html> (accessed July 24, 2017).



## 4 Conclusions

Examining tectonic shifts through the lens of radial extension and prototypicality offers a helpful way to describe the degree of reception a particular blend has achieved—that is, the extent to which it may be understood as true *propre* by a given individual or community. In a strongly tectonic blend such as JESUS IS MESSIAH or JESUS IS GOD, a source frame is substantially reconfigured by the introduction of a new prototype member drawn from the target frame. Such a reconfiguration results in both real continuity and real disjunction between the earlier and later versions of the source frame.

This combination of continuity and disjunction is reflected in an intriguing reversal on the part of Herbert McCabe, one of the twentieth century's most distinguished interpreters of the scholastic tradition.<sup>39</sup> In a 1976 paper, McCabe argued that God's self-revelation in Jesus was so utterly distinctive as to render any preexisting concept of God essentially irrelevant: "God has ceased to be a pre-understood category for understanding Jesus. We understand what we are to mean by God (as an interpretation of the mystery of Jesus) simultaneously with understanding Jesus as the Word of God."<sup>40</sup> By the mid-1980s, however, McCabe had abandoned this point of view, asserting instead that "Our use for the word 'God' does *not* begin with christology. To put it at its simplest, we cannot ask the question: 'In what sense is Jesus to be called Son of God?' without some prior use for the word 'God'. And, of course, the New Testament did have such a prior use. The NT is unintelligible except as the flowering of the Hebrew tradition and the asking of the creation question that became central to the Jewish Bible."<sup>41</sup>

Both McCabe's initial and later positions, in different ways, attempt to do justice to the fact that, for Christians, Jesus represents a radical transformation of the concept of God. McCabe's initial position emphasizes the thoroughgoing nature of that transformation: Jesus is not simply an instantiation of a preexisting category that leaves that category unchanged. Rather, he is central to the category, which must be understood with reference to him. Yet by rejecting the notion of a "pre-understood category" altogether, this position risks discarding any link with the story of the God of Israel and reducing trinitarian theology to christology without qualification. Recognizing the problems with this view, McCabe came to believe

<sup>39</sup> McCabe served as translator for the third volume of the influential Blackfriars translation of Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae*—the section of the *Summa* that deals with the questions of knowing and naming God, analogy and metaphor, and truth expressed *propre* and *improperie*.

<sup>40</sup> McCabe, "Sacramental Language," 97; reprinted in McCabe, *God Matters*, 172.

<sup>41</sup> McCabe, "The Involvement of God," 467; reprinted in McCabe, *God Matters*, 42. See also McCabe's comment in *God Matters*, 115: "I now think . . . that I was wrong to say . . . 'God has ceased to be a pre-understood category for understanding Jesus'."

that a prior concept for God was indeed necessary. His final position emphasizes the fact that the God of Israel remains central to the Christian understanding of God, so that there remains a link between that understanding and those of the other Abrahamic faiths. McCabe's initial position, then, insists on the disjunction between concepts of GOD before and after the reception of the tectonic blend JESUS IS GOD, while his final position insists on the continuity between them.

The approach to tectonic shifts I have proposed in this paper holds both emphases together. A tectonic shift requires a preexisting source category, and there is substantial continuity between that initial category and the result. Yet there is also radical change insofar as the structure of that category is reorganized around a new prototypical instance. At times this reorganization can result in a demotion of an earlier prototype to a more peripheral position within the category, as with the Christian understanding of MESSIAH and the modern scientific understanding of ATOM. At other times it can mean that the new sense represented by the blend joins earlier prototypes as an equal member, as with the Christian understanding of GOD.

In either case, a tectonic shift relies on the process of cross-frame mapping known in cognitive linguistics as metaphor—and this in no way negates the fact that the assertions it makes can be understood as true in the proper sense. For, as cognitive linguistics suggests, there is no unambiguous division between literal and figurative language: rather, all human cognition is grounded in sensorimotor experience, and metaphor and related forms of figurative language are basic building blocks of meaning-making. As John Sanders puts it, “Truth, like meaning, is related to understanding and human understanding is embodied.”<sup>42</sup> The truth of a statement is not found in precise correspondence to a reality independent of human bodies and minds, but in its aptness to the lived experience of life in the world.<sup>43</sup> For Christians who believe that “Jesus is the Messiah” and “Jesus is God” are expressions of revealed truth in the fullest sense, these statements are indeed metaphors to live by.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Sanders, *Theology in the Flesh*, 95.

<sup>43</sup> On metaphorical aptness, see Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, 72–73.

<sup>44</sup> Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*.

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