Clusters, roots and hierarchies of metaphors in Scripture and the quest for Christian scholarship

M. Elaine Botha
Professor of Philosophy (Emerita)
Potchefstroom Campus
North-West University
POTCHEFSTROOM
and
Redeemer University College
ANCASTER, Canada
E-mail: ebotha@redeemer.ca

Abstract:

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This article explores how the confessional thrust of Scriptural and root metaphors relate to the Christian scholar's quest and how choices for hermeneutical keys to Scripture relate to metaphorical keys chosen as means of access to reality. With respect to Biblical interpretation it is argued that the text of Scripture itself provides the theologian or reader with leads concerning the kind of metaphorical access that functions as its hermeneutical key. I argue that there are clusters or hierarchies of metaphors, central and root metaphors, that regulate the interpretation of Scriptural texts and that a redemptive historical reading of Scripture as a confessional text guides the meaning of such clusters and hierarchies of metaphors. I argue that root metaphors in Scripture set the certitudinal parameters for the metaphors chosen and utilised in the disciplines.

Regarding reality I argue that the recognition of the multi-dimensionality of reality and the plurivocity of meaning and signification on which we rely in both literal and metaphorical language use and reference assumes the existence of non-linguistic and pre-conceptual bases that guide the recognition of similarities, differences and analogies in reality. They in turn are pointers to a design plan for reality which one could call a God-given order of creation.

Metaphorical meaning appeals to and presupposes such an ordered and categorised world to which language and texts refer and which provides limits and boundaries to the multiplicity of deferrals of meaning that intertextual relationships seem to imply.

In disciplines concerned metaphorical models play a hermeneutical role in the understanding and interpretation of reality. In these metaphorical models, control beliefs steer, guide and condition the access of the discipline to reality. For Christian scholars the ultimate presuppositions embedded in control beliefs need to comport with the thrust of Scripture and its root metaphors. Scholars are at work in God's creation and their metaphorical approximations of the structures of this creation are guided by the contours of created reality. These approximations in turn are influenced and constrained by what they attribute ultimacy to in the process of attempting to understand this reality. Stable God-given order provides the conditions and parameters for the common differentiation of contexts within which the interpretation of God's Word in creation is to take place.

Opsomming

Klusters, grondmetafore en metafoorhiërargieë in die Skrif en die soeke na Christelike wetenskapsbeoefening

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die onderlinge verhouding tussen die konfessionele aard van Skriftuurlike metafore en grondmetafore en die roeping en taak van die Christen-akademikus wat Christelike wetenskap wil beoefen. Ook word ondersoek hoe 'n mens se keuses vir hermeneutiese sleutels vir die verstaan van die Skrif verband hou met daardie hermeneutiese sleutels wat gekies word om die werklikheid te interpreteer.

Met betrekking tot Bybelse interpretasie redeneer die outeur dat die teks van die Skrif self aan die teoloog of leser van die Skrif die aanknopingspunte verskaf wat kan dien as hermeneutiese sleutels. Klusters van Bybelse metafore en grondmetafore wat 'n sekere hiërargie vertoon, word in die interpretasie van die teks van die Skrif bepaal deur 'n heilshistoriese fokus. Hierdie lesing van die Skrif en die metafore wat daarin voorkom, word gekwalifiseer deur die feit dat die Skrif 'n konfessionele teks is. In hierdie heilshistoriese benadering bepaal sekere grondmetafore in die Skrif die konfessionele parameters van metafore wat deur die dissiplines gekies word.

Met betrekking tot die werklikheid redeneer die outeur dat die her- en erkenning van die multidimensionaliteit van die werklikheid en die betekenisveelvoud waarop wetenskaplikes in letterlike en metaforiese taalgebruik staatmaak, die bestaan van 'n nie-talige en pre-konseptuele basis veronderstel. Hierdie basis rig, stuur en lei die herkenning van ooreenstemming, verskeidenheid en analogieë in die werklikheid. Die analogieë is op hulle beurt vingerwysings na die

Godgegewe orde van die skepping. Metaforiese betekenis verwys na en veronderstel sodanige 'n ordelike en gekategoriseerde werklikheid waarna taal en tekste verwys. Die betekenis van metafore verskaf ook die grense vir die veelvoud van 'n potensiële uit- en afstel van betekenisse ("deferrals of meaning") wat soms deur intertekstuele verhoudings geïmpliseer word.

In die vakwetenskappe speel metaforiese modelle 'n hermeneutiese rol in die verstaan en interpretasie van die werklikheid. In hierdie metaforiese modelle rig en stuur kontrole-oortuigings die dissipline se toegang tot die werklikheid. Vir die Christen-wetenskaplike is absolute vooronderstellings ingebed in sodanige kontrole-oortuigings wat normatief moet korreleer met die grondmetafore en die konfessionele heilshistoriese fokus van die Skrif. Vakwetenskaplikes ontgin die skeppingswerke van God op teoretiese wyse en hulle metaforiese benaderings tot die struktuur van die skepping word vanuit die werklikheid gestuur en gelei deur die kontoere van die werklikheid self. Hierdie benaderings word egter weer beïnvloed en aan bande gelê deur dit wat hulle in die uitgangspunte van hulle teorieë absoluut verklaar. Die uitgangspunte funksioneer in die kontrole-oortuigings wat in teorieë ingebed is. Die vaste en betroubare orde van God se skepping veronderstel en stel die voorwaardes vir die differensiasie van kontekste waarbinne die interpretasie van die Woord van God vir sy skepping moet plaasvind.

1. Some introductory reflections: Biblical metaphors as the source of theorising?

The central question to be addressed in this article is how a Christian scholar should attempt to relate his or her choices for Biblical points of departure and his Biblical world view to the pursuit of theoretical knowledge concerning the structures for and in God's world. My hypothesis is that this relationship is mediated by metaphor, both Scriptural metaphors and metaphors utilised in the theories in the disciplines. Historically there have been diverse ways in which scholars have attempted to relate Scriptural insights and images to scholarship. Brooke (1991:16-51) has given an important analysis of the different possible relationships between faith and science that can be discerned in the history of science. He lists the following possibilities:

- Religious convictions as *presuppositions* of science
- Religious convictions as *sanction* for science
- Religious convictions as *motive* for science
- Religious convictions in a *selective* role

- Religious convictions as *regulative* principles
- Religious convictions in a *constitutive* role in science.

These possibilities do not only hold for religious convictions, but also for the role of Biblical notions in scholarship. One more way, however, not directly addressed in the list mentioned by Brooke, implies the way in which Biblical notions function in the pursuit of Christian scholarship: as a *source* for theorising. The critical issue in the possibilities mentioned above is the way in which the notion of *religious* convictions is defined. In this article I shall follow Roy Clouser's (1991:21, 22) definition of religion: "A religious belief is any belief in something or other as divine. *Divine* means having the status of not depending on something else". This view implies that any kind of belief can actually function in a religious fashion.

Some Christian scholars derive their ideas from religion or theology and are often influenced by theological or religious notions in the process of theory formation. A much-cited example of such an approach from the history of science is James Clerk Maxwell, the nineteenth-century physicist in whose scholarly work the notion of the Trinity is claimed to have played a pivotal role. This approach emphasises the stance that if a scientist is guided by or influenced by ideas which have their *origin* in Scripture, faith or theology, this would be proof of the *influence* of faith in theorising (Torrance, 1984:215-242). In this respect faith, the Bible or theology is seen and used as the *source of* theory formation. Although the history of science abounds with examples of this kind, careful analysis soon indicates that such sources, origins or themes do not necessarily cause the theories to be Christian or religious. The important works of Funkestein (1986) and Brooke (1991) are relevant in this respect. Moreover, it is often the case that such so-called religious notions are at times based on a suspect theology and exegesis clearly influenced by non-Christian philosophical influences.[1] To the extent that theorising is rooted in the Biblical narrative about God's covenantal love for his world and his gift and call to all his creatures to obey Him, it will produce perspectives that shed light on the path of scholarship and are conducive to growth of insight into the nature of social reality and human relationships. Due to its confessional focus and nature the Biblical narrative, however, does not prescribe or proscribe the content and substance of theories with which to

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1   The influence of Cambridge Neo-Platonism on Isaac Newton's voluntarist theology and natural philosophy is a case in point.

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approach or explain dimensions of reality. The Biblical narrative does not provide the metaphors that can function as explanatory models in scholars' theories about the world. It does, however, set their direction and focus. I intend to argue that in this guiding and direction-setting process there are different kinds of Scriptural metaphors, root metaphors and clusters of metaphors. In these metaphors a certain hierarchy can be discerned. This approach needs to be differentiated from those that urge a return to Scripture in the limited sense below.

2. Back to Scripture?

In the work of a number of recent Christian scholars one finds a call to return to the Scriptures – a call one can resonate with in many ways. Nicholas Wolterstorff's proposals to relate Scripture and learning have elaborated central themes of the Gospel and situated them in the midst of contemporary societal issues.[2] Wolterstorff suggests the Biblical notion of *justice and peace* (Wolterstorff, 1983 and 1984). Other scholars propose to resurrect the notion of *care* (Goudzwaard & De Lange, 1991:72-73) and an *ethos of compassion* (Hart, 1995:67-96) in social relations. In epistemological stalemates posed by naïve realism and radical constructivism some have proposed the consideration of an epistemology of *stewardship which emphasises gift and* call, i.e. a relational epistemology "... committed to respecting the other, attending to how the other discloses itself to us"[3] (Walsh & Middleton, 1992:167-171) or to replace the idea of knowledge as power and knowledge as control with the understanding of knowledge as *intimacy* (Jennings, 1997:124) for us to come to know and love others. *Knowledge with love,* Jennings says, will mean the transformation of current symmetries of production, reproduction and arrangement of knowledge. These worthy proposals have one refrain in common, that is a return to the very concrete claims of Scripture on the way society is structured and also on the way we form knowledge and theories of social reality. They are also characterised by the fact that they do not

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2   N. Wolterstorff (1983; 1984) deals with both epistemological and social articulations of this central issue. In both books the notion of "justice-in-shalom" is central to the articulation of the relationship.

3   The South African philosopher H.G. Stoker introduces the notion of "fanerosis". He advocates an epistemology which recognises the intrinsic revelational (fanerotic) character of reality.

propose the search for reformed principles or creational ordinances as the way to go.**4**

Why choose the one dimension and not the other? Why emphasise love, or compassion, or community, or intimacy, or care, or justice, or peace? Do they not all have to come into the full-orbed image of our daily lives in obedience to the Lord? Why privilege the one Biblical emphasis over the other? Moreover, do all these Biblical emphases not also require philosophical articulation in order to become fruitful in the enterprise of the academy? One needs to recognise the multi-valency of God's law both in Scripture and in creation and to honour the multi-dimensionality of its validity. This view presents an element of truth in postmodern insights into the pluriformity of the nature of the world we inhabit. It is also an element of truth concerning the wide spectrum of possible ways of coming to grips with it – human language is only one possible way. I argue that all signification has as prerequisite the existence of a stable, constant and reliable order which makes it possible and conditions the broader process of knowing (i.e. "being gripped by ...") God's law. Metaphorical models and language refer to this stable structure. Although articulated by the theoretician, this structure conditions the intentions of the author or actor and the bias of the interpreter. The central question to be addressed in this article is how the Christian scholar should attempt to relate his or her choices for Biblical points of departure and his Biblical world view to the pursuit of theoretical knowledge concerning the structures for and in God's world. The question is also what the relationship is between Biblical metaphors and the metaphors utilised in the formation of theories in disciplines concerned with hermeneutical issues.

3. Metaphor as views of the world in Scripture and in various disciplines

Not only are metaphors constitutive of world views made (Postman's use of World makers, 1996:172, 177) by groups and cultures, they are also constitutive of world views construed by academics and theorists (Kuhn, 1974:459-517; 1979). Metaphors form part of the elements with which human language habits imagine and construct a world view. To what extent such metaphorically based theoretical

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4   See Griffioen (1997). See also the analysis of this historical development in Botha (2000).

world views in different disciplines are informed by, depend upon or are conditioned by *Biblical insights and views of the world,* is a critical issue for Christian scholars in different disciplines. Christian scholars are as dependent on answers to questions concerning the role, place and meaning of metaphor in Biblical and religious language as their counterparts in Biblical scholarship are. In order to gain access to the nature, structure and functioning of some dimensions of reality Christian scholars are challenged by the relationship between the following methaphors:

- *root metaphors* found in Scripture (e.g. creation, fall, redemption, covenant, kingdom, law, etcetera);

- *metaphors chosen as hermeneutical keys* to interpret Scripture (e.g. narrative, liberation, feminist, structure, historical-critical approaches, etcetera);

- *metaphors developed in different disciplines* (e.g. mechanisms, organisms, systems, conflict, drama, play, etcetera).

How the metaphors of everyday language, of religious experience and of theoretical models relate to those in Scripture is the focal question to be explored in this article. This approach requires an exploration of how the confessional thrust[5] of Scriptural metaphors and root metaphors condition and constrain the parameters of theoretical meaning within which terms and concepts function in the Christian scholar's quest. Implicit in this exploration is the question how choices for hermeneutical keys to Scripture relate to hermeneutical keys chosen as access to reality.

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5   Certitudinal questions are those that deal with the ultimate issues of certainty and trust. The critical question for Christian scholars is the question how confessionally qualified religious (root-) metaphors relate to his/her scholarship. In what manner does trust or faith in some assumption provide a scholar with a sense of certainty concerning the proposed approach to reality? (cf. Sinnema, 1975; Olthuis, 1987). The terms *confessional and certitudinal* was introduced by Jim Olthuis of the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto to designate a dimension of human life and experience which deals with one's confession of certainty. The confessional dimension of human life is the most complicated of all human functions. This dimension is an expression of deep religious heart commitment to that which is regarded as ultimate and which guides all human activities. The focus of Scripture, Olthuis says, is "certitudinal". Human life as a response to such a call to certitude is confessional. This view does not mean that human knowledge can be characterised by certitude, but it does point to the fact that humankind has such a dimension which relates to its deepest quest for ultimate certainty (Olthius, 1976). All scientific theories harbour absolute pre-suppositions which are held in a confessional manner.

Philosophical (theoretical) choices with respect to the nature of language made in all three these areas determine how Christian scholars will in actual fact integrate faith and learning. Not only do philosophical choices concerning the nature of language condition the way scholars approach their subject matter, but they are also confronted with the challenge to give some account of the ultimate grounding of the categories, classifications, differences and similarities which they regard basic to the nature of the world and which their language attempts to articulate. These are philosophical issues that entail positions on realism (Botha, 1986), reference and truth, both in an ontological and epistemological sense.

4.   Contours of the argument

With respect to our theoretical access to reality, I argue that the multi-dimensionality of reality and the plurivocity of meaning and signification on which we rely in both literal and metaphorical language use and reference, points to the existence of non-linguistic and pre-conceptual bases which guide the recognition of similarities and differences and analogies in reality. They in turn are pointers to a design plan for reality that is often called a God-given order of creation. Metaphorical meaning appeals to and presupposes such an ordered and categorised world to which language and texts refer. The contours of this discernable order provide limits and boundaries to the multiplicity of deferrals of meaning that inter-textual relationships seem to imply. That there is such an order is primarily a matter of faith, but it also becomes apparent in the constraints that reality imposes on conceptual meaning. I argue that this has become apparent in what has become known as "conceptual metaphors"**6**. Weighty evidence in recent empirical research in cognitive semantics and cognitive linguistics demonstrate that metaphors are more than mere lingual phenomena and are based in "experiential gestalts" expressing embodied human understanding and empathic interaction among human beings and among human beings and reality. This view of "experiential gestalts" has led to the postulation of the notion of "conceptual metaphor" by Lakoff, Johnson and others and to proposals for new approaches to issues of meaning, reference, truth, cognition and ontology (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; 1999). The significance of deeply embedded

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6   The notion of "conceptual metaphor" is dealt with extensively in a book I am currently working on with the provisional title: *Metaphor and its moorings.* A number of new publications have recently also dealt with this phenomenon, cf. Kovecses (2002*; 2005).*

experiential conceptual metaphors (Lakoff, 1993:202-203) is an indication of how closely our language habits are related to the way we imagine the world. Moreover, metaphor provides access to a discipline's assumptions about how the world is structured. Elsewhere I have argued that theory-constitutive metaphorical language harbours and mediates access to the structure of the world (Botha, 1993a:60-73). This article is an elaboration on this thesis and an attempt to differentiate the diverse types of Biblical metaphors and indicate how they relate to theory-constitutive metaphors in some disciplines.

Disciplinary and theoretical approaches to subject matter are often embedded in perspectival overviews of reality. This is apparent in pervasive world views that permeate the perspectives of theories (Clouser, 1991:66). In these approaches a root-metaphor often provides the theoretical vocabulary (permissible metaphors and analogies) on the basis of which explanatory hypotheses are developed and pursued. Such root metaphors can consist of a selection of one or more aspects of reality which are assumed to provide a framework in terms of which reality can be understood. A central issue for Christian scholars is the relationship among root metaphors found in Scripture and those chosen as hermeneutical keys to interpret Scripture and those in disciplines which are used to gain access to the nature, structure and functioning of some dimension of reality.

Systems theory is an example of a philosophical view developed on the basis of such a (root-) metaphor and which gave birth to a number of alternative systems theories in various disciplines. A systems metaphor functions as a screen or a filter in terms of which the reality under scrutiny (the explanandum) is to be explained. A systems metaphor focuses, selects and organises the perceptions and observations and guides the process of theory formulation. In this process it provides the theoretical vocabulary (permissible metaphors and analogies) on the basis of which explanatory hypotheses are developed and pursued. Organic, mechanistic or cybernetic emphases in systems theory point to different analogical moments of systems metaphors that guide the process of exploration. Systems root metaphors set the parameters of interpretation of reality. In the case of each one of these analogical articulations (organic, mechanical or the cybernetic/information model), however, a different shoot of the root functions as controlling belief set in the specific theorical explanation. Most taxonomies of

philosophical frameworks of theories in the Social Sciences do their analysis on the basis of the identification of such key notions.**7** I would like to argue that when a choice of this kind is made for one or the other, such a root-metaphor provides the basis for the understanding of (deep religious) truth or perspective on the world. The question is whether and how metaphorical notions discerned in Scripture relate to knowledge formation in the disciplines. I will argue that there are clusters, roots and hierarchies of metaphors that can be discerned in Scripture and that they relate in different ways to the metaphors found in the disciplines.

5.   The omnipresence of metaphor in Scripture

The metaphorical nature of the language of the Bible is indisputable. In this respect it does not differ from the nature of ordinary language or from the language used in science and theology. Scripture is replete with well-known metaphors about God, his revelation in Scripture and about believers: God is portrayed as *Creator*, *Father*, *King*, *Judge*, *Shepherd*, *Redeemer,* etcetera. Scripture is depicted as the *Word of God* and a *light* by which the light is actually seen (Ps. 36). Christians are described as the *body of Christ*, a *temple*, the *children* of God, *friends* of God, *slaves*, *ambassadors*, *light*, *salt*, *fishers*, *letters*, etcetera. These and much other entity-*like metaphors* and metaphorical utterances are to be found *in* Scripture. Scripture also utilises other kinds of anthropomorphic metaphorical images which relate to *aspects or facets* of reality and God's existence: God is love, He is justice, He is righteousness, etcetera. Both types of metaphorical utterances are woven into the warp and woof of God's revelation to humankind. Scripture as a book of revelation to humankind utilises both kinds of anthropomorphic images to portray and represent God, human experiences of their relationship to God and experiences of His world. One way in which Scriptural root metaphors function is by conditioning and guiding views of the world and setting limits to the permissible ways the world can be seen.

With respect to *Biblical interpretation* I argue that the text of Scripture itself provides a theologian or reader with leads concerning the kind of metaphorical access that functions as its hermeneutical key. Clusters or hierarchies of metaphors, central and root metaphors regulate the interpretation of Scriptural texts. One such

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7   Cf. Altman and Rogoff (1987:7-40), Brown (1977) and Stein (1963).

dominant cluster is the feminine image of wisdom in Old Testament wisdom literature (cf. Perdue, 1994 and Gammie & Perdue, 1990). A far more encompassing root-metaphor on the other hand, is the notion of *redemption* of the *fallen* creation. A reading of Scripture as a confessional text in the light of this central root-metaphorical notion guides the meaning of all other clusters and hierarchies of omnipresent metaphors in Scripture.

It is often argued that religious utterances are dependent on metaphor, because of the difficulties related to establishing the "reality" of the referents in these fields. It is argued that metaphorical language indicates the inability of the believer to fully approximate, grasp and articulate the reality of the transcendent God who escapes full human comprehension (Van Huyssteen, 1997). No doubt this is true, but a similar argument is also possible with respect to fully grasping or articulating much else in reality. So, for example, the reality of justice, love, communication, etcetera always transcends and escapes the full grasp by human language and ubiquitous metaphorical language is indicative of this fact. In this sense, the way metaphorical language is utilised in and about Scripture does not differ fundamentally from ordinary and everyday language, even though the transcendent God as referent obviously does. Yet, it is common knowledge that religious utterances which are replete with metaphorical language have a unique character, which distinguishes them from other language use, and more specifically, other uses of metaphorical language in poetry, myths, or therapy. It is the unique and typical character of this religious type of metaphorical language and its relevance to metaphorically mediated world views and scholarship that requires closer scrutiny. A few examples should suffice at this stage.

Scripture often speaks about the intimate relationship between the (Biblical) notions of *justice and shalom.* Obviously these terms are used in contextually qualified situations in Scripture, but the central-religious thrust of Biblical terms are comprehensive in scope. Epistemologists, legal scholars and specialists in conflict resolution too are deeply interested in notions of peace and justice. Justice and peace in this sense are closely related to comprehensive Biblical notions, but are not synonymous with these Biblical notions. The former relates to a specified form of justice and peace. In a similar fashion the epistemological claim that Christian theories are those that pursue justice-in-shalom as Wolterstorff (1984) argues is related to the full and comprehensive Biblical meaning of the terms, yet requires indicating what *theoretical* shalom is all about. It requires an articulation of the notion of *theory.* Legal scholars who appropriate

biblical notions of justice as bases for their legal theories can not escape the task of indicating and articulating how justice in a legal sense differs from political and economic justice and how these two forms of differentiated justice in turn relate to the full, total and whole Biblical notion of justice. When appeals to justice-in-shalom are made with respect to societal issues it assumes a philosophy of society which can accommodate a Biblical understanding of society and the way in which peace and justice can be articulated in a "societal" sense This means that shalom and justice in the full religious and Biblical confessional sense of the Word is more than its differentiated articulations in diverse concrete situations. When confronted with this ubiquitous nature of all language the quest for literal meaning inevitably surfaces. Before we deal with some aspects of this issue, let us look at a recent proposal relating Scriptural metaphors to theorising.

In a recent publication, *The Gift of the Stranger* (2000) by David Smith and Barbara Carvill on the Biblical basics for the teaching of foreign languages they do not reject the role of the over arching narrative or root metaphor of Scripture, but claim that there are also limited metaphors that are relative to the pursuits of scholars. They argue that Scripture gives a significant position to strangers in our midst and requires hospitality to be part of the life of a Christian community. This Biblical image or metaphor should form the basis of the teaching of foreign language, they argue. This type of approach is certainly a more sophisticated hermeneutical approach than fundamentalist or Biblicist proof texting and yet it raises some interesting questions about the use of Scripture in Christian scholarship. Is this the way that religious beliefs or convictions enter the intrinsic structure of theorising? How does one relate Bibical teachings and metaphors to the nature of "language" as such? Does the choice for a specific metaphor as basis for a specialised discipline not divorce the limited Biblical injunctions chosen as basis of theory from the overall thrust of the Biblical message? To illustrate the point: Could an appeal to the Biblical injunction of hospitality to a stranger not also justify other theoretical positions such as e.g. sanctioning an open immigration policy at the expense of the citizens of a country, or a refugee policy of some kind? The point is that a Biblical metaphor often allows a wide diversity of possible theoretical positions, but is characterised by the fact that it rules our prevents or prohibits certain positions or assumptions. Clusters of metaphors or individual metaphors still need to be read against the background of the central redemptive historical thrust of Scripture. The Biblical injunction or metaphor is a pointer, a

compass and not a road map – it sets direction, delimits parameters but does not dictate the exact way to go. Moreover, the direction it dictates acquires its calibration from the central thrust of Scripture – a thrust which can be expressed in a central or root metaphor. Theoretical work requires far more detailed and elucidated theoretical approaches than can be provided by or gleaned from these (theoretically) limited metaphorical Biblical insights. It requires an approach to scholarship conditioned by what can be regarded as the root metaphor of Scripture. The critical question is which Biblical metaphors are decisive and central to this project.

6.   Metaphorical keys to Scripture and reality

Metaphorically constituted theory language harbours and mediates the underlying root-metaphorical assumptions about the nature of the "possible worlds" (Kuhn, 1989:9-32) imagined by theories. This is true too, of theories that attempt to articulate views of reality within the parameters of the thrust and content of the Biblical message. On *the level of meta-discourse*[8] about the discursive practices in Scripture the question arises whether it is possible to discern one or more central, traditional, privileged, or classic (root) metaphors that regulate both the pre-understanding of Scripture in the life of the church and the theologies that are imaginatively generated to give account of this pre-understanding. Van Leeuwen (1990:112) speaks of the "nucleus symbol" of specific sections or books in Scripture that would by nature of their status capture that which is essentially the intent and purpose of God's revelation concerning Himself, his plan of redemption, or the nature of his reign. Such (root) metaphors, being central themes of Scripture, would dictate the

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8   Metaphorical language is often employed as a meta-discourse to describe and interpret discursive practices found in Scripture (to quote Gaonkar [1997] who makes this distinction in a different context). Thus for example, a marxist, feminist or structuralist meta-discourse can be employed in an attempt to give an adequate interpretation of the discursive practices in Scripture. In such meta-discourses a choice is often made for some metaphor (often originating in Scripture, but often also imported into Scripture) in terms of which the whole corpus of Scripture is read, interpreted and understood. This metaphor functions as a hermeneutical key or type of logic-of-discovery or the exploration of Scripture. Feminist readings for example, interpret masculine metaphors relating to God the Father as paternalistic, oppressive and authoritarian. A Freudian reading of the same Biblical material would in turn interpret the notion of a deity called *father* quite differently – as projection of the human psyche and deeply imbedded in sexual relationships. These examples could be multiplied, but mainly function to demonstrate that Scriptural metaphors are often exegeted and interpreted through other metaphors that function at a hermeneutical level.

manner in which Scripture ought to be read or understood. They express those insights that have been regarded as permanent and essential components (McGrath, 1988:185) of the truths of the Christian tradition. This could be called the *root metaphor issue.* Does Scripture harbour a hierarchy of metaphors or metaphor clusters which could be interpreted as its central motif or theme that claims primacy in providing access to its central message and regulates and conditions the interpretation of the rest of Scripture? Positions on this matter have far-reaching consequences for the *regulating function of such metaphors* – an issue which functions in both non-theoretical and theoretical (theological) interpretation of Scripture.

The relevance and significance of choices for or against the primacy of specific Biblical images, events, symbols, or metaphors as hermeneutical keys to the understanding of Scripture are also decisive in the relationship between Scripture and scholarship. Choosing the centrality of the redemption in Christ (Van Huyssteen, 1997:144), covenant and kingdom or law in Scripture leads to different emphases, as would a choice for the primacy of the notion of creation (Stoker, 1967; Wolters, 1985) or the Word (Olthuis, 1976:88).

Various attempts have been made to characterise the essential message of the text of Scripture as a whole.[9] "The story-line of the Bible" found in the Introduction of the Bible Society version of the Bible *Into the Light* and Al Wolters' *Creation Regained* comes to mind. Obviously these choices beg the question of whether the nature of Scripture is such that one can actually choose these metaphors or whether one has no choice but to accept those metaphors that are given (McGrath, 1988:185).

Others (Spykman, 1992; Bartholomew, 1995:11, 32) differ on the choice of a specific central or primary theme in Scripture. Some argue that *covenant* and *kingdom* are the main themes of Scripture and that both are rooted in the creation covenant. Bartholomew (1995:32) says if one sees the Bible as an edifice with many entrances, then covenant is one of the main entrances that give us a unified and overall picture. Similar insights which take the notion of

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9   Perhaps one of the most recent examples of such an interaction is the choice of theologians during the era of apartheid in South Africa to interpret the Biblical message from the vantage point of God-given creational ordinances with the emphasis on ethnic and cultural separation and diversity.

God's covenantal law as a central notion and also the key to the understanding of creation formed the basis of the Dutch philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy, which was developed on the basis of seminal insights formulated by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper.**10** The original title of the Dutch version of his philosophy was *De Wijsbegeerte der Wetsidee* (*The Philosophy of the Cosmonomic or Law Idea of Herman Dooyeweerd)* set the notion of law central to this philosophy). Recently Hart (1995:67-96) and others have criticised Dooyeweerd's one-sided choice for the notion of law and have argued that it has led to a legalistic and logicistic interpretation of Scripture.

I agree with those who make a strong case for the fact that creation should be understood in terms of the covenantal law which governs its existence and which is also the merciful trustworthy relationship between God and his Kingdom creation. These encompassing notions recognise the fallen nature of this creation and the redemption and restoration of creation.

Whether we choose a central metaphor as point of entry to understand the "holistic grammar" of the whole text of Scripture or whether we come to discern the governing metaphors of specific texts within Scripture or just identify an inventory of common metaphors to be found in Scripture, Scriptural metaphors have one thing in common: They are certitudinally or confessionally qualified. This is what Olthius (1987:86) calls "... the overriding focus of Scripture".

It is possible to develop solid arguments for a number of possible points of entry to God's revelation in Scripture, as it is possible to access creation from a diversity of points of entry. The choice for any one of these Scriptural metaphors and root metaphors as hermeneutical keys will have a different impact on the Christian scholar's quest and access to reality. There is obviously a correlation between most central Biblical notions like justice, love, righteousness, care, frugality, stewardship, discernment and com-

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10 Dooyeweerd would not agree that these are metaphorical notions. He still adhered to a view of metaphor which regarded it mainly as the expression of aesthetic imagination. Metaphors have no other role to play than to evoke a visionary picture of nature, he argues. He did not appreciate the role of metaphor in theorising and contrasted the "visionary world of the poet" with the imperative faced by the philosopher to explain the exact theoretical meaning of the concepts he uses (Dooyeweerd, 1957:68; see also the discussion in Botha, 1999).

passion in the full Biblical sense of the word and the concrete expression of love as it presents itself in a diversity of aspects of human experience. These Biblical themes are not enclosed in a single restricted meaning, but have a multivocity of meanings which are qualified by their depth-dimensional religious meaning. These Biblical metaphors play a guiding, controlling and directing role in human life and the understanding of reality and do not dictate the contents of theorising.

7. Religious language between the poles of pan-literalism and pan-metaphoricism

Positions concerning the nature of religious language and more specifically the language of Scripture can be mapped out on a continuum between the extremes of pan-metaphoricism on the one hand and pan-literalism on the other. Pan-literalism would simply state that although the Bible makes use of metaphorical language these metaphors can ultimately be reduced to literal language. Not all authors would agree to a pan-metaphoricist reading of everyday language or the language of theology and science. Some would claim this privileged position of metaphor only for the language of faith, religion and Scripture. Polkinghorne (1991:2), for example claims that metaphor and symbol are par excellence the language of Scripture, theology, and religion, whereas mathematics is the natural language of physics and science. Such a view is often combined with one that argues that metaphors are our only access to Scripture or that all talk of God is metaphorical in nature (McFague, 1987:34). This kind of pan-metaphoricist approach needs to be distinguished from arguments such as those of Mary B. Hesse (1983:40) and others who argue that "... all language is metaphorical" – a position sometimes also dubbed pan-metaphoricist. The former position rests on the double-language thesis and then claims that metaphor is our only access to spiritual and religious reality. Hesse's (1983) claim is a revision of the double-language thesis. She recognises that within specific contexts one still requires to work with this distinction, but then argues that the distinction is not only contextually determined, but also relative and embedded in a network of meanings that are not cast in natural-kind categories, but are fluid and changing, variant and dynamic. Her network theory of meaning acknowledges the cognitive claims of metaphor.[11]

The arguments of Van Huyssteen (1997) and McFague (1987:33) about God talk being irreducibly metaphorical is the kind of argument that could be called theological pan-metaphoricism – one of the many species of pan-metaphoricism. This theological pan-metaphoricist claim attributes primacy to metaphorical language. Van Huyssteen (1997:87) sees literal language being replaced by an awareness of the metaphoricity and relationality of all language, but within the framework of postmodernism it is especially religious language, he claims, that is characterised by this change. Van Huyssteen says, religious narrative leads us to see through the window of metaphor, to the way we ought to believe. Epistemic access through metaphor is therefore neither empirically deductive, nor literally true, nor subjective illusion. Such a position is disputed by Van Woudenberg (1998:231-247) who argues that it is untenable mainly because "... in principle it is possible that what is said with metaphor can be transposed into literal speech". Perhaps the most critical question raised in the case of a choice for a pan-metaphoricist position is what the implications of a primacy of a metaphorical position are for the interpretation of Scripture. Does a pan-metaphoricist understanding of the nature of Biblical language necessarily commit one to the rejection of the historicity of the events being described in Scripture or to scepticism with respect to the reality of God? Does it imply textual indeterminacy? In this respect Soskice (1987:108) states that "... this debate centres not on *whether* religious language is ineradicably metaphorical, but *what follows* if this is so (cf. also Soskice, 1985). When language and specifically religious language is seen as metaphorical it implies that this language has as much cognitive import as so-called literal language. The nature of its cognitive weight is qualified by the fact that it pertains to matters spiritual and religious (content) on the one hand, but also by the fact that such a metaphor functions in a religious manner.

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the seminal essay of Michael J. Reddy "The Conduit Metaphor" (in Ortony, 1993). In Philosophy of Science this issue surfaced within the context of the theory-ladenness of observation discussions in the wake of the Popper-Kuhn developments. The transition from the classical double-language thesis to the far stronger position that "all language is metaphorical …" had also already been introduced in the very early publications of Mary B. Hesse and was an elaboration of the earlier reflections of I. A. Richards and Max Black on the "interactive" nature of metaphor.

8.　Central or privileged metaphors?

Which Biblical metaphors are candidates for the most likely and most biblically responsible root construal of the central reality of Christianity? Those which have traditionally been regarded as the classic or traditional Biblical metaphors have been challenged by Sallie McFague *(*1985 and 1987) and others. McFague argues that the basic metaphors and images used to interpret faith for our times have remained relatively constant: triumphalist, monarchical, patriarchal. These are outmoded and oppressive metaphors and models, she claims, and ought to be replaced by a remythologising of the relationship between God and the world. She then experiments with the models of God as mother, lover and friend of the world and with the image of the world as God's body (McFague, 1987:65, 66, 71). In this respect the source of the metaphors is not Scripture, but contemporary human experiences. Her analysis is provocative and worthy of consideration, albeit only because it is serious about the injustices perpetrated on women and the world in the name of a patriarchal reading of Scripture. Her alternative metaphors are read into Scripture and then exegeted out of Scripture; a dubious methodology to say the least.

Yet much needs to be said about the pervasive and overarching meta-narrative of Scripture which illuminates all human experiences and provides perspective on the origin, nature and ultimate goal of this world. An integral historical-redemptive reading of Scripture in which reality is portrayed as created by God, fallen and broken through human hand and redeemed in and through Jesus Christ, provides the indispensable understanding of both Scripture and reality. Here the central metaphor is the creative Word of God, at work in creation, coming to expression in Scripture and becoming incarnate in Jesus Christ. Other Christian scholars have proposed alternative central Scriptural metaphors as guiding principles for Christian scholars.

One philosophical tradition that has taken this quest to identify how this central metaphor of the creative Word or Law of God comes to expression in reality, is the Reformational tradition based on the philosophy of the Dutch legal philosopher, Herman Dooyeweerd. Where the Reformational tradition initially attempted to find the creational ordinances or law structures and elaborate them in a philosophical system they were confronted with the enigmatic question as to what these reformed principles actually were. This question surfaces in every commemoration of the history of the Free University of Amsterdam, where Dooyeweerd's philosophy was

developed and taught. It seemed to have been a bone of contention from the very beginning. The emphases in the articulation of the nature of the principles also vary from time to time: At times "Christian" and "Reformed" (principles) are equated, at other times the emphasis is on the *Calvinist* nature of Christian principles (in contrast to general Christian or Protestant). Fabius, a constitutional theorist, on the other hand interprets these principles as par excellence the "national" or historical Calvinism referring to the lifestyle developed in the Netherlands during the course of the 16th and 17th century. When the creational ordinances were eventually embodied in the philosophical system of Herman Dooyeweerd and D.Th Vollenhoven, this system was seen by some as an answer to prayer and by others as a bane. No wonder that later Christian scholars sought their own way back to the Scriptures.

The point is that a central Biblical notion is explored and the implication of this root-metaphor for philosophical understanding of reality is articulated.

Up to this point the question of the cognitive claims of such metaphorical notions has not been explicitly addressed. Some would argue that the choice for central metaphorical notions does not necessarily imply the acceptance of the consequences of such choices. If one held to the double-language thesis one would be faced with the question whether the recognition of the metaphor excludes literality or historicity. No doubt this concern motivates some Bible translations which attempt to avoid the use of metaphor or attempt to reduce it to literal language. On the other hand Scripture is replete with injunctions that are to be understood "literally". To what extent these literal injunctions for example "… pay unto Caesar …" can and should function as basis of theorising for a Christian scholar, pose as challenging questions as the ones related to the use of metaphor.

9.   The "literal" truth and Biblical metaphor

Biblical and religious language, which is intrinsically certitudinal[12] and confessional, relates to concrete, experiential relationships of the community of faith and expresses their way of seeing reality. In these utterances or statements, metaphors mediate the construction of a religious perspective on the world. Everyday religious metaphors like for example the statement the *Lord is my Shepherd*

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12   See the earlier description in footnote 5.

are part and parcel of the confessional and certitudinal expression of a way of looking and being in the world. These metaphors are time and history bound and as such are very closely related to the system of categories and classifications characteristic of the specific culture. And yet, exactly because a metaphorical expression is utilised to express this deep religious and certitudinal insight, it remains valid and true in vastly different settings.

When such religious and Biblical metaphors function within highly theoretical and abstract contexts like, e.g. in theological reflection, it fulfils a similar constructive role. Religious and Biblical metaphors select, organise and focus the attention on a specific dimension of Scripture. The choice for the root-metaphor of *liberation* in Liberation Theology is a case in point. Between the everyday uses of religious metaphors the contextualised qualification of the meaning of Biblical metaphors and their theological utilisation there is both commonality and difference.

The metaphor of God's guiding hand expresses some basic human metaphorical insight into and belief concerning the nature of God's guidance and providence in human life. The same notion of the hand of God can be abstracted from the overall thrust of the broad scope of the Scriptural narrative in order to utilise it as pivotal theoretical key for the development of a theological doctrine concerning God's providence. Then it functions in a different, highly theoretical fashion, often as explanatory model. These issues are compounded when scholars claim to do scholarship in the light of the Word of God. They are confronted by the additional question of how the chosen theological models for the interpretation of Scripture relate to the metaphors and models chosen to approximate the structure of phenomena in reality? The outcome of the debate on issues of this kind is crucial to the understanding of the authority of Scripture within the church, theology and the academy. If a theological approach reads Scripture from a dualistic perspective, assuming that it teaches a division of reality into a sacred and secular sphere it inevitably conditions approaches to reality followed in the disciplines by this approach. Wolters (1985:40, 41) has indicated how different readings of 2 Peter 3:7 can lead either to a shunning of the world or to an integral understanding of the nature of the redemption of the world. In this framework the metaphor of "God's Kingdom" would have a different meaning to one set within an integral redemptive historical reading of Scripture.

Another example is posed by the post-modern challenge to textual determinacy. The multivocity of meaning of texts and plurality of

perspectives mediated by metaphor is at the root of many debates dealing with plurality of perspectives and indeterminacy of textual meaning. Both theological realists and theological instrumentalists recognise the presence and role of metaphorical language, yet differ fundamentally concerning the question whether this metaphorical language actually refers to a cosmos transcending divinity in the traditional sense (Soskice, 1987:108). While many of the issues raised in debates about the determinacy or indeterminacy of texts remain on the level of language, Soskice's statement introduces the reality depiction of metaphor into the discussion. Reflection on metaphor in religious texts and religious language inevitably invokes the intersection of both sets of issues, namely the semantic and ontological (theological?) which in turn raises the issue of limits and conditions of meaning. Hermeneutics in ordinary interpretation of Scripture and its theoretical theological counterparts are both bound to the overall "itinerary of meaning" of the overarching Biblical story.[13] In this itinerary certain Biblical root metaphors fulfil a direction-setting function. This issue of the meta-discourse on textual (in)determinacy requires far more focused attention and can not be dealt with here.

The wide-ranging debates on metaphor in most other disciplines have clearly shown that this ostensibly linguistic issue is more than just that. This issue is inextricably embedded in epistemological and ontological issues, like matters of truth, reference and meaning. A simple choice for the primacy of the metaphorical or the primacy of the literal has consequences for Biblical interpretation, translation and theological reflection. The outcomes of such choices in turn resonate in other areas of life. The most salient example of this is probably the literal reading of the creation narrative in Genesis with its inevitable impact on Christian scholars committed to the implementation of such a literal reading in their natural scientific explanations of the origins of the earth. In both cases a literal reading of the Biblical account or the claim of a scientific theory to being literally and factually true, ignores the fact that both forms of interpretation lean heavily on the mechanism of metaphor to convey its meaning and that the respective metaphorical meanings are in turn conditioned by contextual factors. Perhaps some of the difficulties related to the literal-truth paradigm in the use of Scripture

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13   I have adapted Ricoeur's (1980) use of "itineraries of meaning" for my own purposes.

can be adumbrated in the following example from the history of science.

Michael Faraday's commitment to the *plain sense* of Scripture (Glas, 1811) and the literal reading of Romans 1:20 (God's invisible power) functioned as Biblical framework in much of his experimental and theoretical work in electro-magnetism and formed the basis of a whole set of metaphysical assumptions that regulated his discoveries. Michael Faraday was a member of the Sandemanian church and this literalist understanding of Romans 1:20 is ascribed to the Sandemanian injunction to read "plain meanings" of Biblical texts (Cantor, 1985; 1991:65,197). In spite of his commitment to the literal understanding of Scripture as dictated by the Sandemanian faith, an analysis of the change in conceptual structure which the concept of "force"undergoes in his work – the transition from a mechanistic to a dynamistic metaphysical framework in his physics – shows the role of the metaphor of "force" in the development of his theory. His theory also shows the subtle transition of dominant analogical controlling beliefs in the historical development of his theory (Nersessian & Andersen, 1997:111-152; Botha, 1993a:60-73; Botha, 1993b:141-168). His attempt to explain the magnetic movement of iron filings leads him to subtly change the meaning in the concept of force from an emphasis on the mechanistic understanding to the dynamic dimension. The Biblical metaphor of God's power functions as a metaphysical belief that forms a framework for his scientific work. The framework allows for both his initial mechanistic and his later dynamistic understanding of force. The transition from one metaphysical framework to another does not make the meaning of this Biblical statement less literally true. Nor does the transition of emphasis from the mechanistic to the dynamistic readings of the force metaphor invalidate the respective experiments he was involved in under the guidance of the different emphases. These transitions of emphases only highlights that Scriptural metaphors are per definition to be read within the context of faith and belief, whereas the use of metaphorical concepts which cannot be avoided in scientific theorising require their meaning from the network of meanings incorporated in the theoretical framework developed within the parameters of a certain set of metaphysical assumptions. The decisive matter is the extent to which the guiding metaphorical notion is allowed to open up the nature of reality or to close it. The resulting electro-magnetic theory which was later superseded by James Clerk Maxwell's theory of electro magnetism was as bound to the use metaphorical concepts as Michael Faraday's theories were. Fundamental to all these developments

was the constitutive role of the metaphor of power/ force. The (literal) reading of the religious and confessional notion of God's power (force) functioned as sets of metaphysical assumptions which initially set the parameters of Michael Faraday's scientific and experimental work. This work was guided by the polyvalent metaphorical notion of force which functioned as metaphysical belief. This evidence points to the fact that literal language and metaphorical language depend on the context within which they function. There is no primordial uncontaminated literal language that can form the basis or the final court of appeal when it comes to meaning ascription. Mary Hesse (1983:40) says: "All language, including ordinary descriptive language, is metaphorical in the sense that its use of general terms implies a normative qualification of the vastly various multiplicity of things." This view implies that both what has traditionally been called "literal" and "metaphorical" language depends on similarities and differences that are present in the categorisations of reality and the approximations of the categorisations change over time. Moreover, what is regarded as literal and metaphorical also changes in the course of history.

10. Some concluding reflections

Metaphors make and remake the world by classifying and categorising it in certain ways. What at some point in time is regarded as literal language in a specific vocabulary is as much tied to a system of categories or family resemblances as is metaphorical language (Hesse, 1985/1986:32). At the root of both literal and metaphorical language is the basic (ontological) structure of differences and similarities on which all predication rests. This being the case, literal language deserves as much attention as metaphorical language has acquired. Lakoff (1986:291-296) and Leddy (1995:205-222) have attempted to disentangle the multiplicity of meanings of literal language. It is the contextual qualification and function of language which determines metaphoricity and/or literality. This also rings true in the case of texts. What at a given time is regarded as the "plain sense" or the literal sense of a text, is bound to the function it fulfils in a community (Tanner, 1987). So-called "literal descriptions" too, are stratified and categorised (Hesse, 1985:32). Literal language is as dependent on classification and categorisation as metaphorical language is and both are dependent

on some prior (I would like to argue ontological) stratification.**14** This being the case it is clear that an appeal to literal language in Biblical exegesis is inadequate to stem the tide of relativism ushered in by postmodernism. The solution needs to be sought elsewhere. Such a solution would at least recognise the relativity and contextuality of the literal-metaphorical description and the decisive nature of the contexts within which metaphorical utterances function. It would also need to accommodate the fact that many concepts harbour a potential multiplicity of meanings.

Biblical scholars often appeal to the literal sense or plain sense of Scripture in response to postmodern attacks that question essentialist and foundationalist claims to knowledge. Such a position often presupposes a reductionist notion of metaphor in which metaphor is viewed primarily as an aesthetic or decorative device and is seen as ultimately reducible to literal meaning. Opting for the literal sense of texts or for the primacy of the literal, avoids addressing the issue of how both literal and metaphorical sense is both context-bound and conditioned by conventional categorisation and social consensus. The reason for this is simple: Literality is as problematic an issue as metaphoricity, not only for Bible interpreters, but also for interpreters of reality. What is at stake in relating Scripture to the work in the disciplines is discerning what the typical character of the Biblical narrative is all about and how it prescribes the parameters and limits of translation and interpretation of both literal and metaphorical Biblical language. God's inscripturated Word**15** is addressed to reality but in a unique, certitudinal fashion. It also entails the recognition that Scripture as religious and confessional text speaks to the whole or totality of human life, whereas the disciplines usually have a far more limited and theoretically restricted focus. These disciplines too have their own typical specialised narratives coloured by the contexts which they investigate. The challenge for Christian scholars who profess that God's revelation is normative for their own work is that some clear and meaningful relationship between metaphor-mediated Scriptural truth and metaphor-mediated truth about the world needs to be established. This challenge obviously entails a theory of metaphor

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14   At this point I refrain from addressing the important issue of the relationship between essences, so-called natural kinds and the ontological structure of reality. It will be dealt with elsewhere.

15   J.H. Olthius (1976) distinguishes between the Creational Word of God, the Inscripturated Word in Scripture and the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ.

which does justice to what is conventionally called *literal meaning* both in Scripture and in statements about the nature of reality. It also entails a clear understanding of the fundamental difference and relationship between Scriptural (confessional/certitudinal) language and theoretical, disciplinary language.

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Key concepts:

metaphor: religious – , root – ,conceptual –
hermeneutic key to Scripture; metaphors as
Scriptural metaphors
metaphorical models in interpreting reality
Christian scholarship

Kernbegrippe:

metafoor: relieuse – , grond-, konseptuele –
hermeneutiese sleutel vir die Bybel; metafore as
Bybelse metafore
metaforiese modelle in werklikheidsinterpretasie
Christelike wetenskapsbeoefening