

Figures of Speech used in the Bible

A figure of speech is a literary mode of expression in which words are used to suggest a picture or to create an image in the reader's mind. There are literally thousands of these in the Bible, each of which needs to be identified and interpreted. These are some of the most important types of figures of speech used in the Bible.

Simile

A simile is a direct comparison of two things that are essentially different. It is characterized by use of words such as 'like', 'as' or 'so'. *"the rich will disappear like a flower in the field"* (James 1:10), *"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs"* (Matt 23:27), *"As a lily among brambles, so is my love among maidens"* (Song 2:2).

Metaphor

A metaphor is an indirect comparison of two things. It asserts that one thing is another, substituting the name of one thing for another. It is like a simile, but the 'like' or 'as' are omitted. *"James and Cephas and John, who were acknowledged pillars"* (Gal 2:9), *"You brood of vipers"* (Matt 3:7), *"They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit ..."* (Jude 12-13).

Analogy

An analogy is an extended metaphor giving a full comparison showing several points of similarity between unlike things. An example is Jesus' teaching on the vine and the branches (John 15:1-9), or Paul's teaching on the olive tree (Rom 11:17-24).

Allegory

An allegory is a greatly extended metaphor that has the form of a story. Several different elements of the story, often the main characters, stand for something else. The only example in the Bible is found in Galatians, *"This is an allegory: these women (Hagar and Sarah) are two covenants"* (Gal 4:21-31). It is sometimes argued that **parables are allegories**. However, although some parables do contain allegorical elements, most parables are not intended to be interpreted allegorically.

Irony

Irony implies something different, even the opposite of what is stated. It is used for the effect of humor or sarcasm. *"Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Quite apart from us you have become kings!"* (1 Cor 4:8), *"Can it be that there is no one among you wise enough to decide between one believer and another ...?"* (1 Cor 6:5).

Personification

Personification is the attribution of life or human qualities to inanimate objects. *"And the scripture, foreseeing that God will justify the Gentiles by faith ..."* (Gal 3:8), *"Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars ..."* (Prov 9:1-3).

Apostrophe

Apostrophe is when the author addresses or speaks to things, abstract ideas or imaginary objects. *"O death, where is your sting?"* (1 Cor 15:55).

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the description of God as a human being with physical attributes like hands, feet or face, or having human feelings. There are many of these in the Psalms and other poetical writings. *"God remembered Abraham"* (Gen 19:29), *"Rise up, O LORD; O God, lift up your hand;"* (Ps 10:12), *"I (God) will change my mind about ..."* (Jer 18:10).

Hyperbole

Hyperbole is exaggeration, not with the intent to deceive, but for emphasis and to intensify an impression. *"you would have torn out your eyes and given them to me"* (Gal 4:15), *"If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off"* (Mark 9:43), *"I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth"* (Zeph 1:2).

Rhetorical questions

These are questions to which the author does not expect a direct answer. They are used to create a question in the reader's mind as part of the author's argument. *"Should we continue to sin in order that grace may abound?"* (Rom 6:15), *"Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles?"* (Matt 7:16). Paul often uses this technique to fire a series of questions one after

another. *"Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or where you baptised in the name of Paul?" (1 Cor 1:13).*

Idiom

An idiom is a familiar expression in the original language, but with a meaning that cannot always be guessed from the actual words. *"the mustard seed ... is the smallest of all seeds (Matt 13:31). "Elijah mocked them (the prophets of Baal) ... either he (Baal) is meditating, or he has wandered away" (meaning he is sitting on the toilet) (1 Kg 18:27).*

Euphemism

Euphemism is when a mild, indirect or vague expression is used for something that could be offensive, normally concerning sex or death. *"Now the man knew his wife Eve" (Gen 4:1).*

Figurative language

Figurative language is often used in the Scriptures to communicate spiritual truths.

Types

A **type** is an Old Testament person, place, object or event which prefigures some particular aspect of the work of Christ. Types should be explicitly defined in the New Testament. One example is Christ being the Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7). Paul uses a series of types from the exodus and wilderness, including drinking from the spiritual rock which is Christ (1 Cor 10:1-5).

Symbols

A symbol is an object or visual image that represents an invisible spiritual concept. We must be guided by the author's overall intention. He may give his own definition. John does this when he describes Christ being among the seven golden lampstands, which represent the seven churches (Rev 1:12,20). Some symbols are used consistently throughout scripture, like the church being the bride of Christ, and the word of God being like a sword.

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