

Figures of Speech

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Introduction

Idioms or figures of speech are combinations of words whose meaning cannot be determined by examination of the meanings of the words that make it up. Or, to put it another way, an idiom uses a number of words to represent a single object, person or concept. Unless you recognise when an idiom is being used you can easily misunderstand the meaning of a text. Modern translations, such as the NIV, use an equivalent figures of speech in English to translate many biblical idioms. More literal versions, particularly the King James Version, translate idioms word for word. It is the reader of the literal versions who needs to be most aware of the meanings of biblical idioms.

Figures of Comparison

Simile

Definition: The likening of one thing to another (usually translated using the English words “like” or ”as”).¹

For a thousand years in your sight are like a day that has gone by, or like a watch in the night.
(Psalm 90:4)

When calamity overtakes you like a storm,
when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind,
when distress and trouble overwhelm you. (Prov. 1:27)

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs,
which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything
unclean. (Matt. 23:27)

His head and hair were white like wool, as white a snow, and his eyes were like burning fire.
(Rev. 1:14)

Metaphor

Definition: An implied comparison between two objects without the use of “like” or ”as”.²

But you are a shield around me, O Lord;
you bestow your glory on me and lift up my head. (Psalm 3:3)

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?
(Matt. 5:13)

Now I want you to realise that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man,
and the head of Christ is God. (1 Cor. 11:3)

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the
dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. (Col. 1:18)

Idioms of Overstatement

Hyperbole

Definition: A exaggeration to make or reinforce a point.

Perhaps the most famous (and most misunderstood hyperbole is found in Matt. 19:24 (Mark 10:25; Luke 18:25): "...it is easier for an camel to go through the eye of needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." Traditionally it has been said that there was a gate in the walls of Jerusalem called the "Needle's Eye," through which an unladen camel could squeeze through with great difficulty. Unfortunately this interpretation is simply not true, there was no gate in Jerusalem called the "Needle's Eye" and there never has been. The first reference to this is found in the writings of Theophylact, Archbishop of Achrida in Bulgaria in the 11th century.³ Jerusalem had been destroyed twice by this time (in AD 70 and 134-136), but Theophylact had never visited it anyway. He simply made up the interpretation to get around the obvious meaning:⁴

After all, it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of needle, and that was precisely Jesus' point. It is impossible for one who trusts in riches to enter the kingdom. It takes a miracle for a rich person to get saved, which is quite the point of what follows: "All things are possible with God."⁵

Jesus was very found of hyperbole, and used it frequently in His teaching. Write out in your own words what you think the following verses mean.

- 1) If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters - yes, even his own life - he cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:26)

- 2) If your right eyes causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. (Matt. 5:29)

- 3) It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest seen you plant in the ground. (Mark 4:31)

Answers in endnote.⁶

Hendiadys

Definition: The combination of two or three things to express the same meaning.⁷

The Lord is my light and my salvation -
whom shall I fear?

The Lord is the stronghold of my life -
of whom shall I be afraid? (Psalm 27:1)

Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
for they had rebelled against the words of God. (Psalm 107:10)

...encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his *kingdom and glory*. (1 Thess. 2:12)

May the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole *spirit, soul and body* be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thess. 5:23)

while we wait for *the blessed hope - the glorious appearing* of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. (Tit. 2:13)

Idioms of Understatement

Irony

Definition: Stating one thing while meaning the exact opposite.⁸ When used to taunt and ridicule irony is called **sarcasm**.

Go and cry out to the gods you have chosen. Let them save you when you are in trouble! (Judges 10:14)

When David returned home to bless his household, Michal daughter of Saul came out to meet him and said, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, disrobing in the sight of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would!" (2 Sam. 6:20)

When he arrived, the king asked him, "Micaiah, shall we go to war against Ramoth Gilead, or shall we refrain?"

"Attack and be victorious," he answered, "For the Lord will give it into the king's hand." (1 Kings 22:15)

The Job replied:

"Doubtless you are the people, and wisdom will die with you." (Job 12:1-2)

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men because you pay no attention to who they are." (Matt. 22:15-16)

...and they twisted together a crown of thorns and set it upon his head. They put a staff in his right hand and knelt in front of him and mocked him. "*Hail, king of the Jews*" they said. (Matt. 27:29)

Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have become kings - and that without us! How I wish that you really had become kings so that we might be kings with you! (1 Cor. 4:8)

Litotes or Meiosis

Definition: A phrase that understates or lessens one thing in order to magnify another.⁹

The Abraham spoke up again: "Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes. (Gen. 18:27)

We saw the Nephilim there (the descendants of Anak come from the Nephilim). *We looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes, and we looked the same to them.* (Num. 13:33)

Do not be afraid, O worm Jacob, O little Israel,
for I myself will help you, declares the Lord. ((Isa 41:14)

Paul answered, "I am a Jew, from Tarsus in Cilicia, *a citizen of no ordinary city*. Please let me speak to the people. (Acts 21:39, italics added)

For I am the least of all the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect... (1 Cor. 15:9-10)

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:10)

Euphemism

Definition: The substitution of a cultured or less offensive term for a harsh one.¹⁰ Monty Python's famous "Parrot Sketch" utilises English euphemisms concerning death, e.g. "it's snuffed it", "it's pushing up the daisies", "it's popped its clogs", "it's shuffled off this mortal coil", etc. The Bible contains many similar expressions, particularly in subjects concerning death, bodily functions and reproduction.

Adam *lay with his wife* Eve, and she became pregnant and gave birth to Cain... (Gen. 4:1)

You, however, *will go to your fathers in peace* and be buried at a good old age. (Gen. 15:15)

After he had gone, the servants came and found the doors of the upper room locked. They said, "*he must be relieving himself* in the inner room of the house." (Judges 3:24)

Deal with him according to your wisdom, but *do not let his grey head go down to the grave in peace*. (1 Kings 2:6)

After he had said this, he went on to tell them, "*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep; but I am going there to wake him up.*" (John 11:11)

Antithesis

Definition: A direct contrast in which two sets of figures are set in opposition to one another.¹¹ Perhaps the best example of this in the New Testament is found in Romans 5:12, where Adam and Christ are the two figures being contrasted.

So, justice is far from us
and righteousness does not reach us
We look for light, but all is darkness
for brightness, but we walk in deep shadows. (Isa. 59:9)

Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned. (Rom. 5:12)

Exercise: Write down the two figures being contrasted in the following verses:

1) So I say, live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. (Gal 5:16)

2) This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light, in him there is no darkness at all. (1 John 1:5)

3) But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. (Phil. 3:7)

Answers in endnotes.¹²

Idioms involving Omission

Ellipsis

Definition: A grammatically incomplete expression that requires the reader to add concepts in order to finish the thought.¹³ Most of these omissions are already supplied by the translators of our Bibles.

May the Lord cut off all flattering lips and [may the Lord cut off] every boastful tongue. (Psalm 12:3)

Don't we have the right to food and drink? (1 Cor. 9:4)

Idioms of Association or Relationship

Metonymy

Definition: *The substitution of a noun for another closely associated noun.*¹⁴ The substituted noun derives its meaning in the context it is used by the association produced in the reader's mind.

In contemporary English when we speak of a statement from the "White House" we understand that this is not a talking building, but an official communication with the authority of the President of the United States who lives in the White House. There are many Biblical examples of this idiom: "He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever." (1 Chron. 17:12) Here Kingship is replaced by the word "throne". "These double calamities have come upon you - who can comfort you? Ruin and destruction, famine and sword -" (Isa. 51:19) Where "sword" stands for "judgement" (cf. Rom. 13:4, "bearing the sword" refers to capital punishment.)

Exercise: Complete the gaps in the following:

1) I will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David; what he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. (Isa. 22:22, cf. Matt. 16:19)

"key" = _____

2) My shield is God Most High, who saves the upright in heart. (Psalm 7:10).

"shield" = _____

3) Dogs have surrounded me,
a band of evil men has encircled me,
they have pierced my hands and my feet. (Psalm 22:16)

“dogs” = _____

- 4) Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them. (Luke 16:29)

“Moses” = _____

- 5) God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor. 5:21)

“he became sin” = _____

- 6) The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. (Acts 10:45)

“Circumcised believers” = _____

- 7) His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the ruler and authorities in the heavenly realms. (Eph. 3:10; cf. 6:12)

“rulers and authorities” = _____

- 8) Woe to you, Ariel, Ariel, the city where David settled... (Isaiah 29:1)

“Ariel” = _____

For answers see endnotes.¹⁵

Synecdoche

Definition: A figure of speech in which the part stands for the whole or the whole for the part.

He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to an idol
or swear by what is false. (Psalm 24:4)

“Clean hands and a pure heart” stands for the whole person.

Let me know that it is your hand,
that you, O LORD, have done it. (Psalm 109:27)

Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father in heaven. (Matt 16:17)

Eponymy is a sub-division of synecdoche in which an individual stands for the whole nation.

Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek your face, O God of Jacob. (Psalm 24:6)

Ephraim has surrounded me with lies,
the house of Israel with deceit.
And Judah is unruly against God,

even against the faithful Holy One. (Hosea 11:12)

Merismus is a combination of parts of the whole to express totality.

At midnight the LORD struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh, who sat upon the throne, to the firstborn of the prisoner, who was in the dungeon, and the firstborn of all the livestock as well. (Exod. 12:29)

He will rule from sea to sea
and from the River to the ends of the earth. (Psalm 72:8)

My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:2)

Idioms Stressing the Personal Dimension

Personification

Definition: The representation of an object or concept as if it were a person.¹⁶

Wisdom calls aloud in the street,
she raises her voice in the public squares;
at the head of the noisy streets she cries out,
in the gateways of the city she makes her speech. (Prov. 1:20-21)

The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works,
before his deeds of old;
I was appointed from eternity,
from the beginning, before the world began. (Prov. 8:22-23)

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon
under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. (Rev. 12:1)

Apostrophe

Definition: A development of personification in which the writer addresses the object or concept that he has personified.¹⁷

The mountains of Bashan are majestic mountains;
rugged are the mountains of Bashan.
Why gaze in envy, O rugged mountains,
where the Lord himself will dwell forever. (Psalm 68:15-16)

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting.” (1 Cor. 15:55)

Biblical Idioms and Everyday Speech

We often fail to realise how deeply the English language is in debt to the Bible. Having had the Scriptures available in the common tongue for over five centuries has meant that many Hebrew idioms and biblical sayings have become part of our language. This can be a

handicap at times when reading the Bible because we are so familiar with saying which, to their original audience, were often meant to be startling. Consider the following examples and write a short explanation of what you think it means, including the biblical reference if you can. Then turn to the endnotes to see what it meant to the original readers of the Scriptures.

1) To kill the fatted calf.¹⁸

2) Be sure your sin will find you out.¹⁹

3) It covers a multitude of sins.²⁰

4) Ah! The prodigal returns.²¹

5) Hiding your light under a bushel.²²

6) The mark of Cain.²³

7) Salt of the Earth.²⁴

8) In the lion's den.²⁵

9) Eat, drink and be merry.²⁶

10) Weary in well-doing.²⁷

Further Reading

The most complete treatment of Biblical idioms is that by:

E.W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible Explained and Illustrated*, 1898. Grand Rapids: Baker Books House, 1968 reprint.

Final Exercise

Identify the figure of speech used in each example (shown in italics).

- 1) And I tell you that on this rock I will build my church, and *the gates of Hades* will not overcome it. (Matt. 16:18)
- A))Simile
B))Hyperbole
C))Metonymy
D))Personification
E))Litotes
- 2) *Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth, I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.* (Matt. 10:34)
- A))Hyperbole
B))Antithesis
C))Metonymy
D))Personification
E))A), B) & C above
- 3) When the Almighty scattered the kings in the land,
it was like snow fallen on Zalmon.
- A))Litotes
B))Metonymy
C))Personification
D))Simile
E))Synecdoche
- 4) Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. (Psalm 50:5)
- A))Metaphor
B))Simile
C))Apostrophe
D))Litotes
E))Hyperbole
- 5) He will cover you with his feathers, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness will be your shield and your rampart. (Psalm 91:4)
- A))Metonym
B))Metaphor
C))Personification
D))Irony
E))Simile

6) Let the *rivers clap their hands*, let the *mountains sing together* for joy; let them sing before the Lord, for he comes to judge the earth... (Psalm 98:8-9)

- A))Metaphor
- B))Simile
- C))Merismus
- D))Personification
- E))Ellipsis

7) At noon Elisha began to taunt them, "Shout louder!" he said. "Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." (1 Kings 18:27)

- A))Metaphor
- B))Irony
- C))Mersimus
- D))Simile
- E))Personification

8) They rose greatly on the earth, and all the high mountains under the entire heavens were covered. (Gen. 7:19)

- A))Irony
- B))Synecdoche
- C))Merismus
- D))Simile
- E))Apostrophe

9) Although I am less than the least of God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ. (Eph. 3:8)

- A))Synecdoche
- B))Metonymy
- C))Personification
- D))Simile
- E))Litotes

10) Let them know that it is your hand,
that your, O Lord, have done it. (Psalm 109:27)

- A))Synecdoche
- B))Personification
- C))Merismus
- D))Simile
- E))Metonym

- 11) This is what the Lord says:
 “A voice is heard in Ramah,
 mourning and great weeping,
 Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted,
 because her children are no more.” (Jer. 31:15)
- A))Metaphor
 B))Eponymy
 C))Synecdoche
 D))Litotes
 E))Personification
- 12) Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,
 like a bird from the snare of the fowler. (Prov. 6:5)
- A))Simile
 B))Personification
 C))Eponymy
 D))Metonym
 E))Merismus
- 13) Why was it, O sea, that you fled,
 O Jordan, that you turned back,
 you mountains, that you skipped like rams,
 the hills like lambs. (Psalm 114:5-6)
- A))Merismus
 B))Personification
 C))Metonymy
 D))Apostrophe
 E))Simile
- 14) Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all have gifts of healing?
 Do all speak in tongues? Do all interpret? (1 Cor. 12:29-30)
- A))Personification
 B))Simile
 C))Euphemism
 D))Metaphor
 E))Ellipsis
- 15) The last enemy to be destroyed in death. (1 Cor. 15:26)
- A))Merismus
 B))Personification
 C))Simile
 D))Metaphor
 E))Litotes

Answers in Endnotes.²⁸

1 Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1991), 103.

2 Osborne, 103-104.

3 F.L. Cross & E.A. Livingstone, *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd edition, 1974. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 1364

4 F.F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP, 1983), 181-182: "Others point out that there is a Greek word (*kamilos*) meaning 'cable' very similar in appearance to the word (*kamelos*) meaning camel. In fact the word meaning 'cable' appears in a few late witnesses to the gospel text.... In any case, the substitution of 'cable' or 'rope' for 'camel' should probably be recognised as 'an attempt to soften the rigour of the statement' .To contrast the largest beast of burden known in Palestine with the smallest of artificial apertures is quite the manner of Christ's proverbial sayings.' In Jewish rabbinical literature an *elephant* passing through the eye of a needle is a figure of speech for sheer impossibility." Emphasis in original.

5 Gordon D Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read The Bible For All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 21.

6 1) This is clearly not to be taken literally, as Jesus Himself spoke of responsibility to obey the 6th commandment (Mark 7:9-13), and cared for his own mother (John 19:25-27). Jesus was teaching that following and obeying Him was to have number one priority in the life of believer. Nothing was more important than that obedience. See further Bruce, 119-121.

2) Carson, "Matthew," 151: "Cutting off or gouging out the offending part is a way of saying that Jesus' disciples must deal radically with sin. Imagination is a God-given gift, but if it is fed dirt by the eye, it will be dirty. All sin, not least sexual sin, begins with the imagination. Therefore what feeds the imagination is of maximum importance in the pursuit of kingdom righteousness (compare Phil. 4:8). Not everyone reacts the same way to all objects. But if (vv. 28-29) your eye is causing you to sin, gouge it out, or at the very least, don't look... The alternative is sin and hell, sin's reward."

3) In Jewish thought the mustard seed was proverbially the smallest of all seeds. This is not to be taken as an botanical statement, but as a reflection of popular thought. The point of Jesus' parable is not the size of the seed in relation to other seeds, but the size of the plant that it produces when it grows. William L. Lane, "The Gospel According to Mark," *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), 171; Larry W. Hurtado, "Mark," *New International Biblical Commentary* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989), 80.

7 Osborne, 106.

8 Osborne, 107.

9 Osborne, 107.

10 Osborne, 107.

11 Osborne, 107.

12 1) The Holy Spirit / The sinful nature. 2) Light / darkness. 3) Personal position and achievements / relationship with Jesus Christ.

13 Osborne, 106.

14 Osborne, 108.

15 1) Authority. 2) God's protection. 3) adversaries. 4) The Torah or Pentateuch. 5) "Christ bore the penalty of our sins" .This is clearly an metonym because it is impossible for a real person to *become* an abstract concept, whether it is love, peace or sin. 6) Jewish Christians. 7) The demonic realm. 8) Jerusalem.

16 Osborne, 108.

17 Osborne, 108.

18 Luke 15:23-24. A fatted calf was an animal kept for occasions of special celebration.

19 Num. 32:23

20 James 5:20; 1 Peter 4:8 (KJV)

21 Luke 15:11-31.

22 Matt 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33. A *bushel* is a tub or bowl that might be used for measuring grain.

23 Genesis 4:15. This verse has an unfortunate history of interpretation., having been used to justify hatred of black people when it has been argued that the mark God put on Cain was a black skin. How descendants of Cain could have survived Noah's flood and be alive today is not explained! We only know of the mark's purpose; not its nature.

24 Matt 5:13

25 Dan 6:1-24.

26 This verse is more often than not used out of its original context and its meaning reversed. Paul uses this quote from Isaiah 22:13 in 1 Corinthians 15:32: "Eat, drink and be merry, *for tomorrow we die.*" Paul is intending to show the pointlessness of life if there is no resurrection. Without that hope a Christian might as well enjoy himself as much as possible, because there is nothing to look forward to after death.

27 2 Thess 3:13 (KJV).

28 Answers to Final Exercise.

1) C - Metonymy. Gates of Hades is most likely to mean "the power of death." See also Job 17:16; 38:17; Psalm 9:13; 107:18; Isa. 38:10. D.A. Carson, "Matthew," F.E. Gæbelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 7. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 370.

2))E - A), B) & C) above. Hyperbole. Bruce, 131: "...when Jesus said he had come to bring 'not peace but a sword', he meant that this would be the effect of his coming, not that it was the purpose of his coming. His words came true in the life of the early Church, and they have verified themselves subsequently in the history of Christian missions. Where one or two members of a family or other social group have accepted the Christian faith, this has frequently provoked opposition from other members." It is also an antithesis because it contrasts "peace on earth" with "a sword" . "Sword" stands as a metonymy for "conflict".

3))D - Simile. The scattering of the kings was *like* snow falling on a mountain.

4))E - Hyperbole. Some have seen in this verse evidence to support the belief that sin is passed down through the family line, or that David's birth was illegitimate. All of these meanings are read into the Psalm, not out of it. See Fee & Stuart, 190.

5))B - Metaphor. God is not a big chicken, but his protection is pictured here as being like that enjoyed by a nestling.

6))D - Personification.

7))B - Irony. Irony here is in the form of biting sarcasm.

8))C - Merismus. The context here rules out any kind of localised flooding. Noah's flood was a world-wide event.

9))E - Litotes. Paul denigrates himself in order to magnify God's grace.

10))A - Synecdoche. The Lord's hand stands for all of God's activity.

11))B - Eponymy.

12))A - Simile.

13))D - Apostrophe.

14))E) - Ellipsis.

15))B - Personification.