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Figures of Speech Used in

The Bible



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Introduction

All the writers of the books of the Bible were Jewish (although Luke is disputed as being a non-Jew). This is evident in how they wrote. Their rich cultural background influenced the contents of their writing. Various idioms, maxims and metaphoric languages are used. Hence, not EVERYTHING they penned down were literal and should not be read as such. We must be careful not to overlook the artistic elements of Scripture in the process of interpreting it. An encoder's mode of writing must be considered as well. Figurative language is language that employs the use of figures of speech or the non-literal. This book provides the reader with examples of the major figures of speech used in the Bible.

Figures of Comparison

- Simile

A simile is a figure of speech used for indirect comparison inbetween two persons, things or events. It employs the use of "as" and "like." E.g.

Isaiah 1:8

8 So the daughter of Zion is left AS a booth in a vineyard, AS a hut in a garden of cucumbers, AS a besieged city.

Isaiah 53:6

6 All we LIKE sheep have gone astray;
We have turned, every one, to his own way;
And the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Malachi 3:2

2 "But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is LIKE a refiner's fire and LIKE launderers' soap.

Matthew 24:27

27 For AS the lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west, so also will the coming of the Son of Man be.

Luke 10:3

3 Go your way; behold, I send you out AS lambs among wolves.

1 Thessalonians 5:2

2 For you yourselves know perfectly that the day of the Lord so comes AS a thief in the night.

• Metaphor

A metaphor is a figure of speech used to in invoking a direct similarity between two persons or objects. A metaphor is similar to a simile, although it doesn't employ the use of "as" or "like." E.g.

2 Samuel 22:3

2 And he said:

"The Lord IS MY rock and my fortress and my deliverer;

Psalms 100:3

3 Know that the Lord, He is God; It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves; WE ARE His people and THE SHEEP of His pasture.

John 10:16

16 And other SHEEP I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one FLOCK and one SHEPHERD.

The seven "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel of John are all metaphors.

"I am the bread of life" (John 6:35).

"I am the light of the world" (John 8:12).

"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9)

"I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11).

"I am the the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25).

"I am the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6).

"I am the true vine, and My father is the vinedresser" (John 15:1).

Hebraism

This has to do with idioms common amongst the Jews

Exodus 33:3

3 Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, lest I consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people."

"Milk and honey" here is not literal. It is hebraism for abundance. "Stiff necked" also doesn't mean they have literal stiff necks. It is a hebraic term descriptive of arrogant and stubborn people.

The term "fear and trembling" is also a form of Hebraism. In its occurrences in the Old Testament texts of the Bible, it is NEVER used in a negative light but a positive one.

Jeremiah 33:9

9 Then it shall be to Me a name of joy, a praise, and an honor before all nations of the earth, who shall hear all the good that I do to them; they shall FEAR AND TREMBLE for all the goodness and all the prosperity that I provide for it.'

Fear and trembling is used here as a RESPONSE to goodness and prosperity. It is not negative.

Also in Isaiah 60:5

Isaiah 60:5 (KJV)

Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart SHALL FEAR, and be enlarged; because the abundance of the sea shall be converted unto thee, the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee.

Also used again in a positive light.

Psalms 119:161

161 Princes persecute me without a cause,

But my heart stands in awe of Your word.

"Awe" here is translated from the same Hebrew word translated as "fear." It is used here as reverence for God's Word.

"Fear and trembling" is used in the Hebrew texts of the Bible for awe or reverence. It is not literal trepidation.

Paul, being a Jew, also made use of the Hebraic term "fear and trembling" in Philippians 2:13

Philippians 2:12

12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with FEAR AND TREMBLING;

"Fear and trembling" here, based on corroborative evidence from the Old Testament texts of the Bible would refer to a RESPONSE of awe to goodness. What goodness? The post text tells us

Philippians 2:13

13 for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

God CONTINUALLY works the fruits of salvation (the will to do His good pleasure) IN the believer. Now, his response to this is simply to work it out. He must let this blessed fact overwhelm his mind, so much so that he produces good conduct effortlessly. This is not a SALVATION verse (Philippians 2:12) but a CONDUCT verse (see vs. 14-15). "Fear and trembling" is simply a response of awe and reverence to all what God is doing in the believer and this awe is evident in his conduct.

Figures of Association

- Metonymy

In metonymy, the name of one object or concept commonly associated with or similar to someone is used in their place.

E.g.

Genesis 42:38

38 But he said, "My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is left alone. If any calamity should befall him along the way in which you go, then you would bring down my GRAY HAIR with sorrow to the grave."

Gray hair, which is associated with old age is used here as a metonym.

Luke 16:29

29 Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

Here, "Moses and the prophets" is used in reference to their writings (the Law and the Prophets in the Hebrew Scriptures).

Romans 3:30

30 since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith.

In the days of the Apostle Paul, circumcision was commonly associated with and used for the Jew while uncircumcision was used for the Gentile.

Ephesians 2:11-12

11 Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh—who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands—12 that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.

See that? Gentiles are called "Uncircumcision" by the "Circumcision." Here, we see both terms used variably for the Jewish and Gentile nations.

Ephesians 5:16

16 redeeming THE TIME, because the days are evil.

"Time" is used here as a metonym for days or a period.

• Synecdoche

In a synecdoche, a part is used for a whole, or a whole is used for a part.

Genesis 6:12

12 So God looked upon the earth, and indeed it was corrupt; for ALL FLESH had corrupted their way on the earth.

"Flesh" here is used as a synecdoche for the whole person, "ALL flesh" is the entirety of humanity.

John 3:16

16 For God so loved THE WORLD that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

"The world" here, by way of synecdoche, is used for the inhabitants of the world.

Luke 12:19

19 And I will say to my soul, "SOUL, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry."

"Soul" here is used for the whole person.

Figures of Humanization

- Personification

Personification takes the attributes of living or animate beings and confers it upon non-living or inanimate objects.

Job 28:22

22 Destruction and Death say,

'We have heard a report about it with our ears.'

Here, "Destruction and Death" are given the human attribute of speech and hearing. This is non literal.

Proverbs 8:1

8 Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice?

Wisdom and understanding are given the female gender and the human attribute of speech and crying.

Genesis 4:7

7 If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, SIN LIES AT THE DOOR. And ITS DESIRE is for you, but you should rule over it."

Here, sin is personified as laying at Cain's door and desiring him. This is figurative for the conception of sin in Cain's heart and in his desires.

Joel 1:10

10 The field is wasted, THE LAND MOURNS; For the grain is ruined, the new wine is dried up, the oil fails.

Here, the land is given the human attribute of mourning.

Matthew 6: 34

34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.

"Tomorrow" cannot worry literally. It is personified here to mean that the solution to every day's problem is in itself.

• Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is a figure of speech which takes a human characteristic and applies it to God. E.g.

Exodus 33:23

23 Then I will take away MY HAND, and you shall see MY BACK; but MY FACE shall not be seen."

God (a Spirit) does not have hands, a back or face. These are all non-literal figures of speech.

Zechariah 2:8

8 For thus says the Lord of hosts: "He sent Me after glory, to the nations which plunder you; for he who touches you touches THE APPLE OF HIS EYE.

Psalm 130:2

2 Lord, hear my voice! Let YOUR EARS be attentive to the voice of my supplications

John 10:28

28 And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of MY HAND.

• Apostrophe

This is a sudden explanatory dialogue addressing something or someone not necessarily presently there.

1 King 13:2

2 Then he cried out against the altar by the word of the Lord, and said, "O ALTAR, ALTAR! Thus says the Lord: 'Behold, a child, Josiah by name, shall be born to the house of David; and on you he shall sacrifice the priests of the high places who burn incense on you, and men's bones shall be burned on you.'"

1 Corinthians 15:55

55 "O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?"

Figures of Illusion.

- Irony

Irony is employed when the speaker says the opposite of what he really means.

E.g.

1 Kings 18:27

27 And so it was, at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Cry aloud, for he is a god; either he is meditating, or he is busy, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened."

2 Corinthians 11:19

19 For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise!

Judges 10:14

14 "Go and cry out to the gods which you have chosen; let them deliver you in your time of distress."

Zechariah 11:13

13 And the Lord said to me, "Throw it to the potter"—that princely price they set on me. So I took the thirty pieces of silver and threw them into the house of the Lord for the potter.

2 Corinthians 12:13

13 For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

- Hyperbole

In hyperbole, the writer or speaker exaggerates to create a strong effect. E.g.

Judges 20:16

16 Among all this people were seven hundred select men who were left-handed; every one could sling a stone at a hair's breadth and not miss.

Not literal AT ALL. The description is exaggerated for a heightened effect.

Psalm 6:6

6 I am weary with my groaning; all night I make my bed swim; I drench my couch with my tears.

Matthew 7:4

4 Or how can you say to your brother, 'Let me remove the speck from your eye'; and look, a plank is in your own eye?

John 21:25

25 And there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. Amen.

Matthew 5:29-30

29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell.

Figures of Understatement

- Euphemism

This is the use of a word or phrase to replace another with one that is considered less offensive, blunt or vulgar than the word or phrase it replaces. E.g.

Genesis 15:15

15 Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.

A euphemism for death

Psalms 94:17

17 Unless the Lord had been my help, my soul would soon have settled in silence.

A euphemism for death and burial

John 11:11

11 These things He said, and after that He said to them, "Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up."

Acts 1:25

25 to take part in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place.

A euphemism for Hades, the place of the dead.

Leviticus 18:6

6 'None of you shall approach anyone who is near of kin to him, to uncover his nakedness: I am the Lord.

A euphemism for incest

• Litotes

Litotes is a deliberate understatement or belittling in order to achieve a literary effect. E.g.

Isaiah 40:15-17

15 Behold, the nations are as a drop in a bucket, and are counted as the small dust on the scales; Look, He lifts up the isles as a very little thing. 16 And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor its beasts sufficient for a burnt offering. 17 All nations before Him are as nothing, and they are counted by Him less than nothing and worthless.

1 Samuel 24:14

14 After whom has the king of Israel come out? Whom do you pursue? A dead dog? A flea?

Acts 20:12

12 And they brought the young man in alive, and they WERE NOT A LITTLE COMFORTED.

Acts 21:39

39 But Paul said, "I am a Jew from Tarsus, in Cilicia, a citizen OF NO MEAN CITY; and I implore you, permit me to speak to the people."

Figures of Emphasis.

- Pleonasm

Pleonasm is a figure that uses an excessive number of words for the sake of emphasis. E.g.

“Yet the chief butler did not remember Joseph, but forgot him” (Gen. 40:23). The redundant “but forgot him” adds force to the statement.

“Then Jephthah fled from his brothers” (Judg. 11:3). The literal expression is “from the face of his brothers.”

“And it came to pass in those days” (Mark 1:9). The emphatic “and it came to pass” is common in the Old and New Testaments.

“Knowing that God had sworn with an oath” (Acts 2:30). The redundant “with an oath” adds emphasis.

- Repetition

Emphasis is gained by a number of techniques that repeat the same word, phrase, or sentence.

“Moses, Moses!” (Exod. 3:4).

“The waters saw You, O God; the waters saw You” (Ps. 77:16).

“For His mercy endures forever” is repeated in each verse of Psalm 136.

“Blessed” is repeated through the beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-11.

“Eloi, Eloi” (Mark 15:34).

“Nor” is repeated several times in Romans 8:38-39.

- Climax

This figure lists a series of actions or qualities in ascending order.

“What the chewing locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the crawling locust has eaten; and what the crawling locust left, the consuming locust has eaten” (Joel 1:4)

“In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it” (John 1:4-5).

“And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope. Now hope does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:3-5).

“But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love” (2 Pet. 1:5-7).

Figures requiring Completion.

•Ellipsis

Ellipsis refers to the omission of one or more words that must be supplied by the reader to complete the thought. In this case, words in italics or in the parenthesis are not found in the original manuscripts but were added by the translators for easy reading, in an attempt to complete the thought of the text.

2 Samuel 3:7

7 And Saul had a concubine, whose name [was] Rizpah, the daughter of Aiah. So [Ishbosheth] said to Abner, "Why have you gone in to my father's concubine?"

The words "was" and "Ishbosheth" are italicized in the translation because they are not in the Hebrew text. They were added to complete the sense of the passage.

2 Samuel 6:6

6 And when they came to Nachon's threshing floor, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled.

"His hand" must be supplied to complete the thought.

Psalms 103:9

9 He will not always strive [with] us, nor will He keep [His anger] forever.

Note that "with" & "His anger" are not present in the original Hebrew texts.

Romans 6:5

5 For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be [in the likeness of His] resurrection

- Aposiopesis

This is a rhetorical figure that breaks off a thought in mid-sentence.

“And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’--therefore the Lord God sent him out of the garden of Eden” (Gen. 3:22-23).

“Yet now, if You will forgive their sin--but if not, I pray, blot me out of Your book which You have written” (Exod. 32:32).

“But if we say, ‘From men’--they feared the people, for all counted John to have been a prophet indeed” (Mark 11:32).

“And if it bears fruit, [well.] But if not, after that you can cut it down” (Luke 13:9).

Extended Figures of Speech

- Parable

A parable is an extended figure of comparison that uses a short narrative to illustrate a lesson. Jesus frequently used parables in His teachings to get to the minds of His audience (Mark 4:33-34), employing the use of familiar imagery to expound the unfamiliar. The characters & events in parables are not literal and must NEVER be seen as so. Parables have a SINGULAR message, this should be looked out for rather than a direct interpretation of the parables. Direct/literal interpretation of parables would lead to gross error. In most parables, assigning allegorical meanings to each of the details can lead to confusion and obscure the point. Each parable has A POINT it is trying to pass across, stick to it! Let the point come home to you. Nathan's parable of the rich man who slaughtered the poor man's lamb came home to David IMMEDIATELY Nathan said, "You are the man!" (2 Sam. 12:1-7). That was the point of the the whole story. Some of the parables of Jesus were designed to reveal mysteries to those on the inside and to conceal the truth to those on the outside who would not hear (Matt. 13:10-17; Mark 4:10-12). This was especially true of the parables that related to the kingdom of God. However, other parables like the parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25- 37) and the parable of the landowner (Matt. 21:33-46) could be grasped by unbelievers.

- Allegories

An allegory is a symbolic representation using non literal instances or figures. It is not the same as a parable and the two must be differentiated. While parables are extended similes, an allegory is an extended metaphor. The allegory of the vine and the branches in John 15, for example, develops the metaphors of Christ as the true vine (vss. 1,5), the Father as the vinedresser (vs. 1), and believers as the branches (vs. 5). Also, while parables use realistic imagery, allegories often use words in a figurative rather than literal sense. The allegories in the Old Testament include Israel as a vine in Psalm 80:8-15, the woman of folly in Proverbs 7, the allegory of old age in Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, and the allegory of the two sisters in Ezekiel 23. New Testament allegories include the allegory of the Shepherd and sheep (John 10:1-18), foundation and structure in 1 Corinthians 3:10-15 and the spiritual armor in Ephesians 6:11-17. On rare occasions, the New Testament allegorizes Old Testament narratives that were not intended to teach truth by correspondence. Paul does this in Galatians 4:21-31 when he turns the story of Hagar and Sarah into an allegory of law and grace.

• Dark Saying

Scriptures, especially the Old Testament portion, contain a large number of enigmatic statements that state truth in an obscure way and must be searched out to find the meaning.

Numbers 12:8

8 I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in DARK SAYINGS; and he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against My servant Moses?"

Psalm 49:4

4 I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will disclose my DARK SAYING on the harp. •

Psalm 78:2

2 I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter DARK SAYINGS of old,

Examples to such dark sayings can be found in

Genesis 49:10

10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh comes; and to Him shall be the obedience of the people.

Isaiah 11:1

11 There shall come forth a Rod from the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.

Matthew 9:16

16 No one puts a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment; for the patch pulls away from the garment, and the tear is made worse.

Daniel 5:25-28

25 "And this is the inscription that was written:

MENE, MENE, TEKEL, UPHARSIN.

26 This is the interpretation of each word. MENE: God has numbered your kingdom, and finished it; 27 TEKEL: You have been weighed in the balances, and found wanting; 28 PERES: Your kingdom has been divided, and given to the Medes and Persians."

Isaiah 21:11-12

11 The burden against Dumah. He calls to me out of Seir, "Watchman, what of the night?

Watchman, what of the night?"

12 The watchman said, "The morning comes, and also the night. If you will inquire, inquire; Return! Come back!"

- Riddles

A riddle is an intellectual puzzle or mystery needing explanation. E.g.

Samson's riddle in Judges 14:12-19

Revelation 13:18

18 Here is wisdom. Let him who has understanding calculate the number of the beast, for it is the number of a man: His number is 666.

- Fable

A fable is a fictitious narrative intended to enforce some useful truth or precept, usually with animals as characters. Examples include the fable of the trees in Judges 9:8-15 (interpreted and applied in 9:16-20), the fable of the thistle in 2 Kings 14:9, and the fable/allegory of the two eagles in Ezekiel 17:2-10.

Symbols and Types.

- Symbols

Symbols are expressions or things representing an idea, concept or object. Symbols are literal objects that convey a lesson or truth. Examples of the use of symbolism in the Bible include

The pillar of cloud and fire (Exod. 13:21-22) symbolized God's glory and presence among His people.

Blood symbolized the life of an animal or human (Lev. 17:11; Deut. 12:23-25).

Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (Ezek. 37:1-14) symbolized the judgment and restoration of Israel.

The basket of summer fruit in Amos 8:1 symbolized the end (8:2) that would come in judgment. The Hebrew words for "summer fruit" and "end" sound almost alike, and ripe fruit is either consumed or spoiled—an apt symbol of judgment.

(Also see Jeremiah 1:13; 13:1-11; 24:1-10; Daniel 2:31-45; Zechariah 1:18-19; 5:1-4; Revelation 1:20)

- Types and Shadows

Types are prophetic symbols present in the Old Testament texts of the Bible. They foreshadow realities present today in the New Covenant. A number of Old Testament people, events, and things are types (representations) that correspond to New Testament antitypes (the reality). This form is a beautiful way of reading the Old Testament, Jesus Himself did same in Luke 24:27. He taught us HOW to study the Old Testament Scriptures, they are about HIM, they are to reveal HIM. Jesus is in the Old Testament CONCEALED and in the New Testament REVEALED. So, in identifying types and shadows, you must first go to the New Testament and examine

those already CLEARLY explained and then follow the pattern in tackling others in the Old Testament Scriptures. Those that are already explained in the New Testament give us clues as to how to locate these christological presentations of Christ in the Holy Scriptures. For example, Jonah's three days in the whale's belly is explained by Jesus as a foreshadow of His three days and three nights in the place of the dead (Matthew 16:1-4). Jonah in this case is a type of Christ and Christ is the antitype. Now, note that not ALL of the events that transpired in Jonah's life typified Christ but certain significant events do. This gives us a clue as we look out for types of Christ in the Old Testament, we realize as we study the type that not ALL that transpired foreshadows Christ but SIGNIFICANT events, acts or utterances.

Other examples of types in the Old Testament include

Melchizedek was a type of Christ (Gen. 14:18-20; Ps. 110:4; Heb. 7:1- 10).

Moses' earthly tabernacle was "a copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (Heb. 8:5).

Isaac was a type of Christ (Genesis 22:1-19, Hebrews 11:17-19)

"Dazzle" (verb) or "dazzling" (adjective) is a property of very bright and overwhelming light – the sort that takes your attention off everything else and has you gazing with awe. For us, Christ Jesus is that Light (John 8:12, 2 Corin. 4:3-6, Rev. 21:23) & it is all about Him! In a world full of so much darkness, we live to reveal the knowledge of Christ to all men & light them up with His revelation. We do so by getting them saved, filled with the Holy Ghost, meeting their needs via the power of God & getting them to grow in the Gospel of His Grace.

This is the Dazzle mission. This is what God called us to do & we are convinced about the same. We envision ignorance and spiritual blindness dispelled and men in every part of the world full of the glorious light found in the knowledge of Christ.



