

Biblical Figures of Speech

Why are they important?

In English we may use a phrase like, “raining cats and dogs”. We of course know that this is simply **emphasising the heaviness** of the rain and that we are not referring to real cats and dogs. In Biblical times people also used figures of speech which were used to help them **emphasise** what they were saying. Using figures of speech is a concise way of getting a message across **without having to repeatedly explain or define a situation**. Figures of speech can also create word pictures in our mind which make the subject more interesting and much easier to remember. Bible prophecies, the book of Revelation and many of Jesus' parables use figures of speech. **One of the major causes of incorrect Bible teaching is when readers take obvious figures of speech in a literal fashion.**

Allegory: Continued comparison by representation (metaphor), by comparing one set of events to another event or thing from daily life and thereby extracting a valuable spiritual lesson. The parable Nathan presented to King David is a good example (2 Sam.12:1-7). See also Gen.49:9; Matt.7:3-5; Gal.4:22-24.

Analogy: A likeness by some attribute which corresponds to a person or event with similar attributes or circumstances. Analogies can be drawn between different times and events in history (Luke 17:26-30; Heb.ch7).

- “**And as it was in the days of Noah, so it will be also in the days of the Son of Man.**” Luke 17:26

Ellipsis: Omission from a sentence of one or more words, which are obviously understood, but must be supplied to make the expression grammatically complete eg “This is My body”, and “This is My blood”, (Matt.26:26, Mark 14:24). These elliptic statements grammatically correct would read, “**This is (what represents) My body**” and “**This is (what represents) My blood**”.

Hyperbole: Extravagant exaggeration by which something is presented as much greater or less, better or worse, or as involving a greater intensity than in reality, or beyond possibility. Jesus uses this form of speech in parable form to impress on us the importance of removing anything that would hinder our spiritual well being (Mark 9:43-47). This form of speech **impresses the importance of the point.**

- “**And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes, be cast into hell fire**” Mark 9:47

Metaphor: Representation in which one thing is identified or represents another usually with certain shared characteristics.

- “**...Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**” John 1:29

- “**...Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah**” Rev.5:5.

Metonymy: Change of noun when one name or noun is used instead of another to which it is in some way related eg the cause for the effect, or the effect for the cause.

- “**“Two nations (boys) are in your womb...”** Gen.25:23

- “**“...He condemned sin (desires) in the flesh.”** Rom.8:3

Oxymoron: Wise-foolly where a wise saying may seem foolish to those unskilled in Bible understanding.

- “**“Whoever seeks to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it.”** Luke 17:33

- “**“But she who lives in pleasure is dead while she lives.”** 1 Tim.5:6.

Parable: Continued simile involving a short fictitious narrative of a possible event in life or nature from which a moral or spiritual truth is drawn. Our word 'parable' comes from the Greek word, “parabole” which is based on the root word, “paraballo” which means, 'to throw alongside' or 'compare'.

- “**“To what shall I liken the kingdom of God? It is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”** Luke 13:20-21

Paradox: Apparent contradiction where a person or situation appears puzzling or contradictory. Some very profound Scripture is presented in paradox.

- “**“...these are the ones who come out of the great tribulation, and washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”** Rev.7:14 See also Isa.53:5, 55:1

- “**“for the Lamb who is in the midst of the throne will shepherd them and lead them...”** Rev.7:17

Parallelism: Parallel lines of similar construction of adjacent word groups. These can be contrasting or complimentary in sense. Parallelism is commonly known as Hebrew poetry, and is frequent in the Psalms.

- “**“Then shall He speak unto them in His wrath, and vex them in His sore displeasure.”** Psa.2:5 also v3, v4 and v9

- “**“Does not wisdom cry out, and understanding lift up her voice.”** Prov.8:1

Personification: Personality, sometimes with speech or actions being attributed to inanimate objects or human characteristics.

- **Human body parts** Psa.35:10, 51:8

- **Animals** Gen.9:5; Job 12:7

- **Products of the earth** Nah.1:4

- **Inanimate things** Gen.4:10, James 5:4

- **Kingdoms and countries** Psa.45:12

- **Human actions attributed to things** Gen.18:20; Psa.85:10

- **Wisdom and understanding** Prov.ch8

- “**“I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.”** Luke 19:40

Symbolism: Representation using a material object, person, animal or natural phenomena to symbolise people, historic events, moral or spiritual truths etc. Symbolism is a very common figure of speech and concept used in the Bible.

- “**“The key (authority) of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder.”** Isa.22:22

- “**“It was symbolic (the Tabernacle) for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered...”** Heb.9:9

See also Gen.37:9-10; Luke 21:25; Dan.ch2.

All Scripture quoted on this sheet is from the N.K.J.V.