

# An Overview of Figurative Language in Scripture

Recognizing and comprehending figurative language is essential to understanding the Bible. By correctly assessing figures of speech in scripture, false doctrines can often be exposed, and apparent contradictions can be explained.

At first, we might wonder why so much scripture is laced with symbolism. In fact, more than one form of figurative language often appears in one statement. Why did the Holy Spirit not just come out and plainly state His revelation? We can easily sympathize with the apostles who were often confounded by some of our Lord's expressions.

*John 16: 17-19 Some of His disciples then said to one another, "What is this thing He is telling us, 'A little while, and you will not see Me; and again a little while, and you will see Me'; and, 'because I go to the Father'?" So they were saying, "What is this that He says, 'A little while'? We do not know what He is talking about." Jesus knew that they wished to question Him, and He said to them, "Are you deliberating together about this, that I said, 'A little while, and you will not see Me, and again a little while, and you will see Me'?"*

*vs 25 "These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father.*

Our study will show that the figurative language of the Bible is very much like what we use in common speech for highly descriptive or emphatic communication. The Holy Spirit wrote the same way we speak. Nevertheless, figurative language sometimes requires insight to comprehend. This review examines some figures of speech found in scripture.

## 1. Simile

A simile is a word or phrase by which one thing is likened to another so that the characteristic of one is revealed by comparison to the other.

*Matthew 23:27 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.*

A feature of the simile is that "as" or "like" or some similarly functioning word makes the connection between the things compared.

## 2. Metaphor

Similarly, a metaphor is calling one thing by another term intending to thereby reveal its true character.

*Matthew 26:26 While they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body."*

While the simile would say, "life is like a song," the metaphor says, "life is a song." The statement is more biting, so the implication is more forcefully presented. In the above example, Jesus is not revealing the doctrine of transubstantiation. The bread is not literally His body, but a communion with Christ is implied, which emphasizes the personal and intimate characteristic of the observance (1 Cor 10:16).

The metaphor is a powerful figure of speech easily used, recognized, and understood. Some of the most compelling metaphors are found in Jude 1:12, 13. However, a metaphor can also be confusing if the hearer is not of the same mindset. For example, Jesus says euphemistically of dead Lazarus, "he is sleeping." Lazarus was not literally sleeping, but those hearing did not understand; Jesus had to explain it to them (John 11:11-14).

## 3. Parable

A parable is a statement or story about real or possible every-day life from which a moral or heavenly message is presented.

*Matthew 7:19 Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

This presents what farmers in real life actually do with non-producing orchard trees. Jesus is not trying to teach us about farming but that punishment is reserved for worthless people. Unlike the simile and metaphor, a parable contains no mention of the application; it is left to the hearer alone to draw the intended conclusions. For example, consider how Matthew 13:31 would be expressed by these three figures. The simile (the form used by our Lord) says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed." As a metaphor, it would have been, "The kingdom of heaven is a grain of mustard seed." However, as a parable, it would have been simply, "A grain of mustard seed... becomes a tree." The hearer would have to deduce on his own that the kingdom of heaven is the figurative subject matter, not the literal grain. This figure is particularly both revealing and concealing: revealing to the spiritually minded, concealing to the carnally minded. Jesus' parables were therefore often misunderstood. When Jesus warns of the "leaven of the Pharisees," the carnally-minded disciples thought He was talking about literal bread (Mark 8:14-21).

In Luke 10:30-37, Jesus presents a classic parable in the story of the good Samaritan. Unlike an allegory (explained later), this story contains no clear types and anti-types. Though we may be able to see the application to the original audience or even to ourselves, neither the victim, the highway, the thieves, the mugging, the by-passers, nor any other thing in the story needs to represent anything else in order to understand the message.

#### 4. Allegory

An allegory is a special form of parable where characters, objects, and events portrayed in the story represent other things in an analogous but totally unrelated story. The portrayed story can be from actual history or from supposition. The moral message is derived by the similarities between the types and anti-types. The hearer is expected to figuratively apply to one what is literally and intuitively understood about the other. In Luke 8:5-9, Jesus presents the so-called parable of the sower. As usual, the disciples do not understand, and our Lord's explanation reveals the allegorical nature of the parable:

*Luke 8:11-15 Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. "Those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved. "Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. "The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. "But the seed in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance.*

Notice that the explanation of the allegory is a connective string of metaphors. Not all parables have this exact feature of type and anti-type representation; those that do are allegories. For additional examples, see 2 Samuel 12:1-7 and Galatians 4:22-31.

#### 5. Fable

A fable is a whimsical imaginary story of events impossible in nature but through which a moral or ethical message is delivered. While the parable is taken from real life possibilities, in a fable, trees can talk or horses can fly.

*Luke 19:40 But Jesus answered, "I tell you, if these become silent, the stones will cry out!"*

Jesus is not suggesting that stones can literally speak. This fictitious notion teaches us that nothing can prevent God from manifesting His glory on earth. Fables are often used as a rebuke. Additional examples are found in Judges 9:6-21; 2 Kings 14:8-10; and Isaiah 14:7-10.

#### 6. Irony

Irony is a statement that implies something different or especially completely opposite of what is literally stated. In common use, we might say, "It's very nice to start the day with a tree falling on my house." Irony exposes error by seemingly defending or approving it.

*1 Corinthians 4:8, 10 You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.... We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.*

By pretending to claim that the Corinthians were wealthy, kingly, prudent, strong, and distinguished, Paul pungently affirms that they were actually none of those things.

## 7. Sarcasm

Sarcasm is a sharp form of irony delivering a rebuke through scorn, mockery, or taunt. When developed into a story, like a parable, it is called satire.

*1 Kings 18:27 It came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, "Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened."*

Elijah is not literally defending that Baal is an actual god but rather exposing the falsehood of the notion. Further examples of sarcasm are seen in Matthew 27:29 and Acts 2:13.

## 8. Metonymy

In metonymy, one word or thing is put for another. An instrument is put for its effect (Eph 2:16); a possession is put for its owner (Matt 25:35-40); an author is put for his writings (Luke 16:29, 31); a container is put for its contents:

*1 Corinthians 11:25-28 ...For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes....*

Paul did not intend to say that the container itself is consumed by drinking but only its contents. Division exists in the church today because some adamantly defend that, since "cup" here is singular, Paul is hereby ordaining that only one container must be shared in an assembly of Christians observing the Lord's Supper. To the contrary, by metonymy, Paul is not even actually talking about the literal container but the wine.

## 9. Synecdoche

Synecdoche is a special form of metonymy where the whole is put for a part or a part is put for the whole.

*Matthew 13:31 ..."The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,... leaven (vs 33),... a treasure hidden (vs 44),... a dragnet (vs 47),... a head of a household (vs 52)."*

It would be folly to try to understand how the kingdom as a whole is like any one of these things. The intent is that a particular feature of the whole kingdom is like this or that.

*Acts 2:44 And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common;*

Here and throughout the book of Acts, Luke identifies some individuals as believers. However, they were not believers only, but their belief is put for their whole submission process. We understand that salvation is not for those with faith alone (Jam 2:24) but for those who, in faith, are also willing to repent, confess, and submit to baptism. Failing to recognize Luke's use of synecdoche, Calvinism cites these passages to suggest that baptism is not necessary, since it is not always literally mentioned.

Other forms of this figure include the plural for the singular (Gen 21:7 "children"), the singular for the plural (Gen 2:24 "a man"); the definite or specific for the indefinite or general (1 Cor 14:19 "five," "ten thousand"), and the indefinite or general for the definite or specific (Mark 16:15 "creature").

## 10. Ellipsis

In ellipsis, some words are intentionally omitted in a statement. In many cases, this is not to exclude one thing to the inclusion of another, but only to emphasize a more important thing over another. The understood missing words must be added for construction of the literal. To illustrate, the figure might state, "Not this but that;" the understood literal construction would be, "Not *only* this but *also* that."

*1 Corinthians 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.*

Some today argue that Paul here declares that baptism is not essential to salvation. However, the preponderance of scripture indicates that baptism is certainly necessary. To harmonize scripture and understand the literal, Paul's use of ellipsis must be recognized. Without ellipsis, (that is, by inserting the

missing words) Paul is literally saying, "Christ did not send me *merely* to baptize, but *particularly* to preach the gospel." The emphasis is not on simply getting people wet but on persuading men. Do that, and the baptism will follow naturally.

Additional examples of ellipsis are found in Matthew 12:7 and 1 Timothy 2:9, 10.

## 11. Hyperbole

Hyperbole is the use of exaggeration to form a description of things or a comparison between them which more vividly brings to light certain features. We often use this figure when we speak of an event occurring a million times. The intent is to intensify the truth, not misrepresent it.

*Numbers 13:33 "There also we saw the Nephilim (the sons of Anak are part of the Nephilim); and we became like grasshoppers in our own sight, and so we were in their sight."*

*Matthew 5:28 But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*

Adultery is concisely defined as unlawful sexual intercourse with the spouse of another. It is the special case of fornication involving at least one married person. Fornication is unique to other sexual sins, such as lust, lewdness, or vulgarity, in that physical sexual contact is always involved (1 Cor 6:13, 18; 7:1, 2). Since God's law permits divorce for the cause of fornication, some preachers declare that divorce is lawful for the cause of lust, that is, so-called fornication in the heart. However, imagined fornication is a contradiction, since fornication always involves outward bodily action. Jesus is not here redefining terms; by hyperbole, He is emphasizing the seriousness of the inward sin over the outward. Avoid the former, and the latter is already averted. The lusting man is no more literally a fornicator than the hating man is literally a murderer (1 John 3:15).

In Matthew 5:29, 30, Jesus continues further with additional examples of hyperbole.

## 12. Parallelism

Parallelism is a form of speech where two or more statements follow each other saying essentially the same thing with different expressions or in different viewpoints for embellishment. The words match to words and the things match to things in contrast or comparison, as if fitting together in measures of a chant. This figure is often utilized in the poetic verbalization of deep emotions coming out of dire or elating circumstances. This is most easily understood by examples.

*Isaiah 1:3  
An ox knows its owner,  
And a donkey its master's manger,  
But Israel does not know,  
My people do not understand.*

There are no intended differences between the ox and the donkey, the owner and the manger, Israel and the people, or knowing and understanding. We miss the point if we seek for such. This figure is found in many of the psalms and proverbs (e.g. Psa 27:1; Pro 1:8).

*1 Corinthians 7:10, 11 Let not the wife depart from her husband:... and let not the husband put away his wife.*

There is no intended difference between the specific instructions for the wife and for the husband. It is essentially the same message but from two different perspectives. We miss the point if we seek to determine some literal gender distinction in this ordinance.

## 13. Apostrophe

Apostrophe is where the one speaking turns aside from the real audience and addresses an imaginary or absent one.

*Matthew 23:1-3 Then Jesus spoke to the crowds and to His disciples, saying: "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses; therefore all that they tell you, do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds; for they say things and do not do them."*

*vs 13 "But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you shut off the kingdom of heaven from people; for you do not enter in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in."*

*vs 37 "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling."*

It is possible that there are not actually any scribes and Pharisees in the crowd at this time but that Jesus turns to address them directly in verse 13 by the use of apostrophe. Without doubt, apostrophe is employed in verse 37 where His words are redirected to the whole of Jerusalem's inhabitants throughout all time, though they are not literally in His audience. Additional examples of this figure are found in Jeremiah 47:6 and 1 Corinthians 15:55.

#### **14. Personification**

Personification includes applying the characteristics of animated things to the inanimate. For instance, personification will attribute human traits to other things or even to abstract concepts and ideas. This figure finds its way into common English phrases as "the hand of fate," "the long arm of the law," and "mother nature."

*Numbers 26:10 and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up along with Korah, when that company died, when the fire devoured 250 men, so that they became a warning.*

Here are two instances of personification in one verse. First, it suggests that the earth has a mouth like a man with a throat for ingestion and the volition to consume. Second, it suggests that fire has the ability to eat flesh like a wild animal. Of course, earth and fire do not literally have mouths for feeding. Many other examples of personification appear in scripture (Psa 114:3-7; Hab 3:10, 11; Matt 6:34; Jam 1:26).

#### **15. Interrogation**

Interrogation is the use of a rhetorical question: an inquiry about a matter so unquestionably pre-accepted that the answer is understood, and no response is actually expected. The speaker is not literally seeking to know but presenting a conclusion with such force as to bring an end to any further investigation. This figure is so commonly utilized that its occurrence often goes unnoticed. A most profound use of this appears in Paul's epistle to the Romans:

*Romans 8:32-35 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things? Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?*

The rhetoric question is often used as a rebuke. In fact, the Lord's rebuke to Job (chapters 38-41) is put almost completely in this form. Jesus uses it frequently both in gentle instruction (Matt 5:46, 47; 6:25, 27, 28, 30; 7:3, 9-11, 16) and in scathing rebuttal (Matt 23:17, 19, 33).

#### **16. Prolepsis**

Prolepsis is an intentional error in chronology to facilitate the passing of information. By this we might speak of "the conversion of the apostle Paul." However, at the time of his conversion, he was not yet an apostle nor called Paul, but by this figure, we legitimately and conveniently express it rather than laboriously and literally: "the conversion of Saul who was later known as Paul and became an apostle."

*John 11:1, 2 Now a certain man was sick, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. And it was the Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment, and wiped His feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was sick.*

At the time Lazarus was sick, Mary had not yet performed this anointing (Jn 12:1-3). By prolepsis, John further identifies the Mary about whom he is speaking, as if the action has already taken place. We understand that John's record contains no contradiction here. Prolepsis will be the explanation for many

apparent contradictions in scripture. Inversely, we ought to be very careful about not readily assuming a time record to be proleptic, or else we might be constructing a contradiction.

Further examples are noted. Bethel is mentioned in the record of Abraham's journeys before it was actually known by that name (Gen 12:8; 28:19). Judas is recorded as the betrayer of Jesus more than one year prior to the event in Matthew's narrative (Matt 10:4). Jesus speaks of the condition of those after the resurrection in the present tense: "they... are like angels."

## 17. Paradox

Paradoxes include a very broad range of word puzzles and absurdities that cannot be entirely examined in this brief presentation. For example, the statement "I never speak the truth" is a type of paradox. If the statement is true, then it must be a lie, but if it is false, then it is evidently true. This kind of paradox is not common to scripture, except that it is warned against (1 Tim 6:3-5).

Another form of paradox involves a dilemma which has no obvious explanation at first consideration. Resolution comes only by deeper contemplation. For examples, we are saved by faith, yet the kind of faith that saves is never alone. We are saved by grace yet judged by our works. God is three, yet He is one.

The literary paradox is the most common form in scripture. It is a statement of apparent contradiction yet true. Most paradoxes are easy to recognize, since the perceived inconsistency immediately demands an explanation. The power of this paradox is that it forces the hearer to think. The teachings of Jesus are nowhere more full of such paradoxes than in the beatitudes (Matt 5:1-12). Further examples are, "The first shall be last," (Matt 20:16) and "when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10). Faith is paradoxically described as possessing that which we only hope to possess and seeing that which cannot be seen (Heb 11:1).

*2 Corinthians 6:8-10 ...by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.*

## 18. Oxymoron

An oxymoron is simply a condensed literary paradox, usually consisting of only a couple of words in apparent conflict. Examples in our common speech include "old news," and "sweet sorrow." A scriptural example of oxymoron is "living sacrifice." To the Hebrew mindset, an animal offered in sacrifice typically dies. Paul gives the concept of sacrifice a new twist:

*Romans 12:1 Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.*

## 19. Idiom

An idiom is a common way of expressing thoughts by words and phrases having an understood meaning that is different from the literal meaning. The intended meaning cannot be comprehended by inspection of the words alone but also by investigation of ordinary usage. Idioms of one's own native language are difficult to detect because they are simply the way we normally put words together. English is full of idiomatic expressions; examples include "real estate," "give way," "take your time," "come up with an idea," "come down with a cold," "work out," "dead even," "level best," "of course," and "how do you do."

Idioms are often lost when translating, because they differ from language to language. For example, the way to say "good bye" in German is literally "on again to see." The same is true when the Bible is translated into English or any other language. An actual word-for-word idiom translation is difficult to follow. However, some so-called translations today are considered "thought" translations, which are essentially commentaries more than true translations. There are modern English translations available which do a very good job of bringing the original idioms of scripture into our common terminology.

A word of caution needs to be noted on making casual reference to Greek and Hebrew lexicons. Looking at word meanings alone without understanding their common usage and idiomatic forms can become a pitfall for false doctrine. For example, in Titus 1:6, "husband of one wife" is translated from the literal idiom "one woman man." Unsound teaching on elder qualifications can easily result if those not deeply

understanding Greek language begin to over-analyze this phrase. The most reliable translators have consistently rendered this in simple terms of our ordinary speech.

## 20. Paronomasia

Paronomasia is a pun: a play on words. An English example is "walk the walk and talk the talk." Here both the noun forms and verb forms of words are cleverly put together to convey the idea of doing and saying things the way they ought to be done and said.

In 2 Thessalonians 3:11, the opposing words for "work" and "busybodies" are related. Young's literal translation reveals the pun: "nothing working but over working," However, it is lost in the traditional translations.

*2 Thessalonians 3:11 For we hear that some among you are leading an undisciplined life, doing no work at all, but acting like busybodies.*

Other plays on words lost in translation are noted:

Exodus 16:15, 31 The sons of Israel named the bread which the LORD gave them "manna" (literally, what is it?). In English, it might have been "whatzit."

Romans 12:2 not thinking too highly (literally, thinking over) but having sound judgment or sobriety (literally, thinking soundly).

Philippians 3:2, 3 "mutilate" (literally, cut up) and "circumcision" (literally, cut around).

## 21. Proverb

A proverb is a convincing, concise, pointed, and elegant statement of truth. It is often constructed as a condensed parable in a single sentence. However, due to its brevity, it may have some unstated but understood limitation of applicability. A proverb hence might not be true in every case but true only typically or as a general rule.

An example proverb is "he who laughs last laughs best." In scripture, a remarkable proverb is stated by Ahab, king of Israel, to Benhadad, the challenging king of Syria.

*1 Kings 20:11 So the king of Israel answered and said, "Tell him, 'Let not the one who puts on his armor boast like the one who takes it off.' "*

The typification of truth often found in a proverb is best explained by illustration. Consider the following proverbial statements from scripture:

*Ecclesiastes 7:1 A good name is better than precious ointment, And the day of death than the day of one's birth;*

*Proverbs 22:6 Train up a child in the way he should go, And when he is old he will not depart from it.*

*Ephesians 6:2, 3 "Honor your father and mother," which is the first commandment with promise: "that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth."*

By investigation, these things are clearly true only as a rule. The terse statements are not intended to deal with every specific circumstance. To explain, the day of one's death is better only if he is prepared for judgment. Well-trained children sometimes later go astray, else Paul would not have admonished Timothy to guard himself. Furthermore, though disobedience can often result in an early death, sometimes obedient young people die and the disobedient live long. If we fail to recognize this figure of speech, we might unjustifiably claim that scripture is self-contradicting.

On the other hand, an easy argument for a false teacher is to say that some clear statement or command in scripture is only generally true, not absolutely true in every circumstance. Be careful; remember that a statement in scripture ought to be taken literally unless we are forced to take it figuratively due to the rules of context, impossibility, contradiction, absurdity, or revelation, covered in a study of hermeneutics.

The following references are utilized in the preparation and are recommended for further study:

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