



Figures of Speech in the Bible

While figurative language is today considered flowery language that has less meaning and power, Christians must not diminish the force of figurative language. The Bible is full of examples. These figures are never used but to add force or weight to the truth conveyed. Therefore, while the natural man may admire the language, it is only when the Spirit has taught us the truth of what is being expressed that the full beauty of the words are appreciated.

The question then becomes, When I am reading my Bible, how do I know if this is a figure of speech or not? Whenever and wherever it is possible, the words of Scripture are to be understood literally, but when a statement appears to be contrary to our experience, fact, or other teachings of Scripture, we can reasonably expect that some figure of speech is being used.

Bullinger identifies 217 figures of speech in the Bible, explains how they are figures of speech, and gives numerous scriptural examples. Some are obvious to most of us, including simile, repetition, allegory, and rhyme. The examples below are of some lesser recognized yet powerful figures of speech included in the Bible. Because Bullinger is translating from the originals, not all Scripture references are from the KJV.

The most well-known **Acrostic** is Psalm 119, where each section begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. But Psalms 9 and 10 are also connected through an incomplete acrostic. Psalm 25 is also an incomplete acrostic. Psalm 111 and Psalm 112 are complete acrostics. In other books, each chapter of Lamentations has an acrostic structure.

Antimereia is the exchanging of parts of speech; so verbs are used as nouns, nouns as adverbs, etc. Consider Psalm 101:3: *"I hate the doing of those turning aside,"* means that he hates the ways of sinners. Or Psalm 139:14: *"I will praise thee, for I am made with fears and wonder."*

Aposiopesis, or Front-Cut, is the sudden breaking off of what is being said or written so our minds would be more impressed with what is too wonderful, or too solemn, or too awful for words. In the original, Luke 13:9 records, *"And if it bear fruit"* and ends; the translations usually add a word to complete the sentence.

Asyndeton is when a list of statements is made without the use of conjunctions, so that we would not focus on the separate statements in detail, but hasten towards the climax that emphasizes the point of the passage. Consider Mark 7:21-23: *"For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man."*

Circumlocution is when a description is used instead of a noun, thereby often using many more words than necessary. Again, this is done for particular emphasis and to enhance meaning. In 2 Chronicles 32:21, *"They that came forth of his own bowels slew him,"* means his sons killed him. In 2 Corinthians 5:1, *"our earthly house of this tabernacle"* means our body.

Condensation happens most in ascribing human attributes to God. This occurs for the relative understanding of people, and not as factual description. Throughout Scripture, God is described as having a soul (Lev. 26:11); as being a head (1 Cor. 11:3); as having a face (Ps. 17:2), eyes (2 Sam. 16:22), ears (Ezek. 8:18), nostrils (Job 4:9), mouth and lips (Isa. 11:4), a voice (Isa. 30:30), and arms (Exod. 15:16).

Countercharge is when words are repeated in reverse order for the purpose of contrasting two or more things. 2 Chron. 32:7-8: *“There be more with us, than with him; with him is an arm of flesh, but with us is the LORD our God.”*

Ellipsis refers to where there is a gap left in the sentence in order to cause the reader to dwell on the words left. At times the ellipsis is filled in our Bibles with an italicized word, but those words were intentionally left out of the original. For example in Matthew 14:19: *“He blessed, and brake, and gave the loaves to his disciples, **and the disciples to the multitude,**”* we understand it to mean that the disciples gave the loaves to the multitude, and not that Jesus gave the disciples to the multitude.

Another example of ellipsis happens when words are missing. Psalm 94:3-4: *“LORD, how long shall the wicked, how long shall the wicked triumph? How long shall they utter and speak hard things? and (how long shall) all the workers of iniquity boast themselves?”*

Enigmas are similar to proverbs, but are truths expressed in obscure or dark language, where the meaning needs to be searched for. Samson’s enigma in Judges 14 is well known: *“Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness.”*

Apostrophe is the repetition of the same word or words at the end of successive sentences. Psalm 136 is the most recognized example of this. Another remarkable example lies in the original of Deuteronomy 32:10: *“In a desert land He found him; and in the waste howling wilderness, about, he led him. He instructed him. As the apple of His eye He kept him.”*

Hendiadys is when two words are used for one idea. One of the words expresses the thing, and the other intensifies its meaning. The two words are the same parts of speech and are joined together by the conjunction “and.” Consider 1 Samuel 28:3 (*“They buried him in Ramah and his own city”*) and Jeremiah 36:27 (*“After that the king had burned the roll and the words which Baruch wrote”*).

Hyperbole is exaggeration, when more is said than is literally meant. Hyperbole heightens the instruction, but is not to be taken literally. Genesis 2:24 — *“Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife”* — does not mean that he shall no longer pay attention to his parents. Or the plague in Egypt described in Exodus 8:17 — *“All the dust of the land became lice”* — means that wherever there was dust, it became lice.

Idioms are a use of words that is peculiar to a group of people or language or culture. Sometimes a passage can only be understood properly when the idiom is understood. Common idioms include *My soul* for myself; *breaking of bread* for eating a meal together; *Open the mouth* for speaking; *Son of Man* for the Messiah; etc.

Interchange is the intentional changing of the order of words; an adjective or another word which logically belongs to one word is connected to another in the sentence to attract attention and emphasize the true meaning. For example, Genesis 29:14: *“And he abode with him a month of days”*; Job 31:27: *“My hand hath kissed my mouth.”*

Irony is also present in Scripture, where the speaker may be divine or human. For an example of divine irony, look at Genesis 3:22: *“And the LORD God said, Behold the man is become as one of us.”* Human irony happens at Mount Carmel, when Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal in 1 Kings 18:27: *“Cry aloud: for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth.”*

Meiosis is a purposeful belittling in order to magnify another. Numbers 13:33 — *“We were in our own sight as grasshoppers”* — is the meiosis of unbelief that exaggerated the size of the Anakim by lessening their own stature.

Metagoge is the repetition of the same part of speech in different inflections. Consider, *judge judgment; rejoiced with great joy; with desire have I desired; praying with all prayer; war a good warfare; I have fought the good fight.* For something less familiar, consider the following as an

example of how metagoge can emphasize completeness. 2 Kings 21:13: *“And I will wipe Jerusalem as a man wipeth a dish, wiping it and turning it upside down.”*

Metonymy happens when a certain noun is changed for another noun that it is often related to. Parents or ancestors are frequently used instead of their posterity; the writer is used instead of his writings; the soul is used instead of will or desire; mouth is used instead of command; tongue is used instead of language, etc. Where is the metonymy here? Psalm 128:2 (*“Thou shalt eat the labour of thy hands”*), Genesis 25:23 (*“Two nations are in thy womb”*).

Parallelism is the repetition of similar, synonymous, or opposite thoughts or words in parallel or successive lines. This can be positive parallelism, as in Luke 1:46-47: *“My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.”* This may also be antithetical parallelism, as in Proverbs 10:1: *“A wise son maketh a glad father, but a foolish son is the heaviness of his mother.”*

Proverbs are included in more than the book named Proverbs. A proverb is a principle of life expressed in common terms. Look in Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 16, Luke 6, John 4, and 2 Peter 2 for other proverbs.

Synecdoche occurs when a part of something is exchanged for the whole of it, or the whole for the part. This is different from metonymy because synecdoche is between ideas, and not between related nouns. Luke 3:6: *“All flesh (i.e., all people) shall see the salvation of God”*; Exodus 3:8: *“A land flowing with milk and honey.”* This helps us understand even Scriptures like John 3:16 (*“God so loved the world”*) because the world can refer to people and kindred and tongues in all parts of the world, and not just Israel.

Word-clashing occurs when a word is repeated within a sentence with different meanings. For a classic example of this, consider Jesus’ statement in Matthew 8:22: *“Follow me; and let the dead bury their dead.”* In the first use of the word “dead,” the word refers to the spiritually dead; in the later use of the word, it refers to the physically dead.

Zeugma is where one verb is connected to two subjects. Grammatically, the two subjects should properly require two different verbs, and yet in this figure of speech one verb is omitted so our attention is attracted to the passage and we discover the emphasis of the verb. For example in Luke 24:27, we read, *“And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.”* The verb “beginning” can only properly apply to Moses; He could not begin at all the prophets. And yet the figure tells us that it is not the act which we are to focus on, but the Scriptures that are the subject of the Lord’s exposition.

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