

Figures of speech

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. We all understand this when reading any other book, and we bring that understanding to the Bible, while still reading it literally.

Modern translations, such as the NIV, use equivalent figures of speech in English to translate many biblical idioms. More literal versions, particularly the King James Version and NASB, 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.

Simile

Definition: The likening of one thing to another (usually translated using the English words "like" or "as". e.g. Eph.5:22-27

As with CHRIST AND THE CHURCH	So with HUSBANDS AND WIVES
<i>CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH and gave HIMSELF up for her...Eph. 5:25</i>	<i>HUSBANDS, LOVE your WIVES as CHRIST LOVED the CHURCH...Eph 5:25</i>

Kingdom parables e.g. Mathew Ch 13 (get the point, not pre-occupied with the details) Matt. 23:27, Rev. 1:14;

Metaphor

Definition: An implied comparison between two objects without the use of "like" or "as". It communicates an impression more by implication. In the expressions, "You *are* the salt of the earth..." (Matt. 5:13) and "You *are* the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14), our Lord Jesus is multiplying metaphors to communicate graphic truth about the role Christians are to play in affecting the world. In those early days, salt was the major means of arresting corruption in meat or fish, so the figure is not lost on those who listened to Jesus. Light, in any age, enables us to function with any degree of confidence. It dispels darkness. When we can't see, we're in trouble! The words "salt" and "light" are used as implied comparison. These metaphors speak with penetrating force, even though they are implicit in nature.

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 a 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. 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, and it was probably a very good way of getting rich people to give their money to the Church! His suspect hermeneutic was based on dodgy exegesis (well, wrong actually).

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."

Jesus was very fond of hyperbole, and used it frequently in His teaching. E.g. Luke 14:26 (hate his father and mother); Matt. 5:29 (cut out your eye or cut off your hand), Mark 4:21 (mustard seed).

If the meaning of something doesn't appear to be obvious, trying to understand if a figure of speech is being used is a good starting point. A good Bible dictionary will normally indicate when these figures of speech are being used.

Irony

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

Examples:

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)

Euphemism

Definition: The substitution of a cultured or less offensive term for a harsh one. 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.

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)

Jesus delivered up His Spirit (John 19:30) = died

Antithesis

Definition: A direct contrast in which two sets of figures are set in opposition to one another. 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.

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)

Personification

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

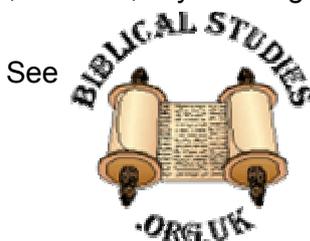
A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. (Rev. 12:1)

Apostrophe

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

"Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting." (1 Cor. 15:55)



Types of Hebraic teaching

Allusion / remez

Common in the first century, a technique known as 'remez' – a 'hint'. Can refer to some inner meaning by pointing to another passage in the Bible, as in Matt. 2:15 "Out of Egypt have I called my Son". In context, the 'son' is Israel, but Matthew is probably not just saying that Jesus' flight into Egypt and return from Egypt was 'like' that, but is pointing to the identification of Jesus with the nation of Israel, as the Messiah – an idea brought out in the 'Servant' passages of Isaiah 41-50, where Israel is the servant of Jahweh, but the Servant is also spoken of as redeeming Israel.

This is exemplified when Jesus quoted the first verse of Psa 22 on the cross ("My God, My God, why have You forsaken me?"), and possibly the last verse also ("It is finished"). The Psalm breaks out into victory half way through v21 – was He 'hinting' to His disciples that His death wasn't the end? They got the hint eventually – the Psalm is quoted in 10 different NT books, all 4 Gospels, Romans and Hebrews – the most important Messianic Psalm, e.g. writer to the Hebrews uses v.22 to identify Jesus in resurrection with us as His brethren (siblings)

So when we find an OT quotation in the NT, it pays to look it up, consider the context of the original quote, and try to work out why the NT author is pointing back to that – he may not be just giving a 'proof text', but is designed to bring the whole context of the quote into mind. It was a shorthand way of stating a whole argument. Often, it's just a few words that we wouldn't recognise as a specific quote – requires great familiarity with the Old Testament, which is what the first century hearers had, and we don't – to our great loss!

middot

In Jewish biblical interpretation, these are the principles used to spell out the meaning of biblical words or passages. The middot are used especially to determine the bearing that a passage has on a new question or situation. The first known middot were compiled by Hillel in the 1st century BC; others were compiled by Ishmael ben Elisha (c. AD 100) and Eliezer ben Yose the Galilaeen (c. AD 150). Among the best-known are the kol wa-homer ("how much more"), in which the interpreter proceeds from a minor to a major premise ('*a fortiori*' reasoning), and the gezera shawa (comparison of similar expressions or laws), in which an inference is made by analogy, joining together of biblical texts from isolated passages on the basis of a shared word

Jesus uses 'how much more' in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:30; 7:11) and during His ministry (Matt. 10:25; 12:12; Luke 11:13; 12:24, 28). Paul uses it extensively, particularly in Romans (5:9, 10, 15, 17; 1 Cor. 12:22; 2 Cor 3:9, 11; Phil. 2:12; Philemon 16) as does the writer to the Hebrews (9:14; 10:29; 12:25)

Jesus uses Gezera Shawa in Matthew 22:36-40, joining the commandment "And thou shalt love [we'āhaptâ] the Lord thy God with all thy heart" (Deuteronomy 6:5) to the lesser-quoted commandment "but thou shalt love [we'āhaptâ] thy neighbour as thyself" (Leviticus 19:18), declaring that "on these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Jesus' Gezera Shawa makes one commandment of two.

The writer to the Hebrews uses it in 3:7 - 4:11 quoting Psa 95 and referring back to Gen 2:2 (and again in 7:11 and 8:7)

Types of literature

Fulfilment/Type and Anti-type

It's good to have a Bible which identifies OT quotations. David Stern in the Jewish NT identifies 695 quotations. The NASB (Study Edition, Nelson) put them in a different type face, and many Bibles have references in the margin (e.g. NIV Study, Schofield, Thompson Chain)

Sometimes these are direct fulfilment, e.g. Micah 5:2

But sometimes NT fulfilment goes beyond a single statement and events are seen as fulfilment of OT 'types' or pictures, e.g. the Tabernacle is a marvellous picture of the whole process of redemption and worship and the Church, Passover/Firstfruits/Pentecost were fulfilled to the day and hour, the Day of Atonement is the background to the whole book of Hebrews and illustrates (mainly by contrast) how we can approach a Holy God

Prophetic

Little direct prophecy in the New Testament, as in prophesying specific events, e.g. John 21, Agabus in Acts, (the NT is about fulfilment) – the main one is that Jesus is coming back (over 300 references, including 'come' 20 times, 'parousia' 17 times, 'epiphaneia' 6 times, 4 chapters in the Gospels and the whole book of Revelation, for which see next definition) but developed into the prophetic gifting – a word from God delivered into a specific situation.

Apocalyptic

This is a style of writing that was common in the two centuries preceding Christ, and for a short while afterwards. Dealt with end-times, particularly as a battle between good and evil, light and darkness, sons of God and sons of the devil. Often written under a pseudonym – using the name of a character from the Old Testament, e.g. Enoch. The style relies heavily on allegories and pictures, visions and drama.

The Book of Revelation is classed as apocalyptic, but many scholars accept that it was actually written by John himself, not by someone else impersonating him. Not everyone agrees and it was the last book to be included in the 'canon' – the list of books accepted by the Church as being the inspired Word of God.

The Epistle of Jude and Second Peter have some apocalyptic writing (Jude even quoting one of the apocalyptic books in circulation then – the Book of Enoch, which is included in the Apocrypha found in some Bibles between the Old and New Testaments).

Poetic

Very little in New Testament. Think Psalms or prophets in the Old.

Didactic

The bulk of the New Testament. Direct teaching or stories told to inform, correct and discipline (2 Tim. 3:16)