Figures of Speech

One of the most enlightening aspects of language is the study of figurative expressions.

Milton Terry introduces us to this subject with keen insight:

> The natural operations of the human mind prompt men to trace analogies and make comparisons. Pleasing emotions are excited and the imagination is gratified by the use of metaphors and similes. Were we to suppose a language sufficiently copious in words to express all possible conceptions, the human mind would still require us to compare and contrast our concepts, and such a procedure would soon necessitate a variety of figures of speech. So much of our knowledge is acquired through the senses, that all our abstract ideas and our spiritual language have a material base. "It is not too much to say," observes Max Muller, "that the whole dictionary of ancient religion is made up of metaphors. With us these metaphors are all forgotten. We speak of *spirit* without thinking of *breath,* of *heaven* without thinking of *sky,* of *pardon* without thinking of a *release,* of *revelation* without thinking of a *veil.* But in ancient language every one of these words, nay, every word that does not refer to sensuous objects, is still in a chrysalis stage, half material and half spiritual, and rising and falling in its character according to the capacities of its speakers and hearers." (1)

What potent possibilities, then, lie in concepts conveyed by figurative language! So, moving to specifics, let's explore the various figures of speech. I'll list some of them, along with illustrations of their use on the following pages.

Figures of Speech

SIMILE (*similis* = like)	A formal comparison using *"as …so"* or "like" to express resemblance. *"Even so,* husbands should love their own wives *as* their own bodies..." (Eph. 5:28).
METAPHOR (*Meta + phero* = a carrying over)	An implied comparison, a word applied to something it is not, to suggest a resemblance. *"Benjamin is a* ravenous wolf..." (Gen. 49:27).
IRONY (*Eiron* = a dissembling speaker)	The speaker or writer says the very opposite of what he intends to convey."...*you are the people and wisdom will die with you"* (Job 12:1).
METONYMY (*Mesa +* onoma = a change of name)	One word is used in place of another to portray some actual relationship between the things signified.*"Kill the* Passover..." *(Exod .* 12:21 KJV) where the paschal lamb is meant.
HYPERBOLE (*Huper + bole* = a throwing beyond)	Intentional exaggeration for the purpose of emphasis, or a magnifying beyond reality. *"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away..."* (Matt. 5:29).
PERSONIFICATION (To make like a person)	Inanimate objects are spoken of as persons, as if they had life. *"The sea looked and fled …"* (Ps. 114:3, 4).
APOSTROPHE (*apo + strepho* = to turn from)	Turning from the immediate hearers to address an absent or imaginary person or thing. *"Ah, sword of the Lord! How long till you are quiet?"* (Jer. 47:6).
SYNECDOCHE (*sun + ekdechomai* to receive from and associate with)	Where the whole is put for a part, or a part for the whole, an individual for a class and vice-versa. *"And we were in all 276 souls …"* in Acts 27:37, where *soul* is used for the whole person.

As with CHRIST AND THE CHURCH	So with HUSBANDS AND WIVES
CHRIST LOVED THE CHURCH and gave HIMSELF up for her ...Eph. 5:25	*HUSBANDS, LOVE your WIVES as CHRIST LOVED the CHURCH* ...Eph 5:25
"*THAT he might sanctify her*" (Eph. 5:26) i.e. that we might be put to the intended use for which he created us: a) as an expression of his own *LIFE* and *CHARACTER*. b) to fulfill our calling, enjoy our God-given ministries. c) and much more (you add the rest.)	THAT the husband might sanctify his wife. i.e. that she might SHARE HIS LIFE, be his helper, etc. a) expressing her own personality and life in Christ. b) employing her gifts in a spiritual ministry. c) be the *ruler* of the *home,* in all that means to her husband and children.
"THAT he might present the church to himself in splendor" (Eph. 5:27) i.e. that he might enjoy the benefits stemming from his unselfish love--in enjoying his Bride. And lead us on to the fulfillment of our manhood and womanhood by his love.	THAT the husband might seek his wife's fulfillment, and enjoy her. i.e. that he may enjoy the beauty and glory of her fulfilled womanhood, as he undertakes the responsibility of his headship--leading her with the leadership of love to ultimate fulfillment.
"THAT she might be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27). i.e. that his work in us may go on to completion, that we may be wholly his.	THAT the husband be faithful, hanging in there. i.e. that his commitment may be steadfast and permanent, in spite of problems.
"Having cleansed her by he wash ing *of water with the word"* (Eph. 5:26) Based on *COMMUNICATION* which his loving heart initiates--to keep us close, mutually enjoying our love relationship.	Husbands are to keep communication channels open, remembering that *LOVE finds a way to COMMUNICATE, and it's his initiative* if he is going to love as CHRIST LOVED.

Metaphor

By contrast, a metaphor is not so straightforward. 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 determinative 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.

as spectacles to the world, as fools. Then he uses irony again, "We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute" (1 Cor. 4:10). Can you imagine how the Corinthian Christians must have felt the shame of their misplaced value systems, how this pointed word of sarcasm must have punctured their swollen pride in men? Would that we should review *our* value systems, today, and discover the only ground of boasting--the Lord Jesus and his life in us.

Metonymy

Then there's metonymy (a change of name). Speaking to the Pharisees concerning Herod, Christ says "Go and tell that *fox ..." (Luke* 13:32) end with one word he characterized that politically crafty king. And, "The way of the fool is right in his own eyes..." (Prov. 12:15) where *eyes* represents the way he sees things, or his mental perspective. And, "...*the tongue* of the wise brings healing" (Prov. 12:18) in which *tongue* stands for what the wise one says, his words of wisdom.

In the New Testament, "Then went out to him Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan..." (Matt. 3:5) in which it is obvious that *people,* not places, are meant in the mention of these various regions. Then, we look at "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor. 10:21). Here *cup* and *table* are used for what they contain and what they offer. Again, in Romans 3:30 *the circumcision is* used to represent the Jewish people, while *uncircumcision* refers to the Gentiles.

I'm sure from these examples you can see how commonly metonymy is used in the Bible. We use the same figure today when we call a person "a tiger" or "a kitten."

Hyperbole

Painting a picture larger than life by intentional exaggeration beyond reality is a common feature of our own speech, so hyperbole (a *throwing beyond)* should be thoroughly familiar to us.

In the anguish of his torment Job indulges in this kind of language. More graphically than any other form of speech it expresses the awfulness of his feeling of affliction.

> And now my soul is poured out within me;
>
>> days of affliction have taken hold of me.
>
> The night racks my bones,
>
>> and the pain that gnaws me takes no rest.
>
> With violence it seizes my garment;
>
>> it binds me about like the collar of my tunic.
>
> God has cast me into the mire,
>
>> and I have become like dust and ashes.
>
> I cry to thee and thou cost not answer me;
>
>> I stand, and thou cost not heed me.
>
> Thou hast turned cruel to me;
>
>> with the might of thy hand thou cost persecute me.

> Thou liftest me up on the wind, thou makest me ride on it,
>
>> and thou tossest me about in the roar of the storm.
>
> Yea, I know that thou wilt bring me to death,
>
>> and to the house appointed for all living (Job30:1-23).

Certainly we get the keen sense of his utter despair from this highly expressive, but extravagant, language.

The apostle John in the New Testament uses hyperbolic language in this statement: "But there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25). If we considered Christ's eternal existence, perhaps this statement could be taken literally, but if we limit it to the deeds of the Lord

Jesus in his humanity (which I believe is what John has in mind) then it is clearly a use of hyperbole.

Personification

Referring to inanimate objects as if they possessed life and personality is especially evident in the language of imagination and feeling. In Numbers 16:32, "...the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up..." speaks of Korah and his men. Here the earth is personified as having a mouth to devour these men.

The Lord Jesus uses personification in, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!" (Matt. 23:37). The city of Jerusalem is here personified. Our Lord's concern was for its people, yet he addresses the city as if it were they.

Again, our Lord personifies *tomorrow* in these words: "Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself" (Matt. 6:34). Here *tomorrow is* invested with characteristics of human personality, as being beset with anxious cares.

Apostrophe

This is a strange but graphic figure which sounds as if the speaker were talking to himself in a sort of externalized soliloquy. For instance, David says to his dead son, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" (2 Sam. 18:33). What a moving expression of David's grief this is; no other mode of expression could be quite so expressive in this instance.

Then there is the use of this figure in which the kings of earth address a fallen city, "Alas! alas! thou great city, thou mighty city, Babylon! In one hour has thy judgment come!" (Rev. 18:10).

This figure of speech seems best adapted to the expression of deep emotion. As such, it readily grabs our attention and draws out our interest.

Synechdoche

Here's one most of us never heard of, but which we frequently use in everyday speech. We say, "This is his hour" when we don't really mean an hour just sixty minutes long. We mean this is his time of glory, or suffering, or whatever we associate with his current experience. We have substituted a part for the whole. In scripture it occurs in such passages as this: in Judges 12:7 we are told Jephthah was buried "in the cities of Gilead" (Hebrew) though actually only one of those cities is meant; in Luke 2:1 "all the world" is used to mean the world of the Roman Empire, in Deuteronomy 32:41 "if I whet the lightning of my sword" the word *lightning is* used for the flashing edge of the gleaming blade.

Perhaps now we have seen enough of the prevalence and expressive value of figures of speech to help us

appreciate the color and realism they lend to the language of the Bible. Also, interpretively, our review should take some of the mystery out of our encounters with these forms, in studying the Bible.

References:

1. Milton S. Terry, *Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), p. 244.

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