

Figures of Speech in the Bible

[From Lesson #114 of Basic Exegesis of the Bible]

The Bible is filled with figures of speech, and this is just a sampling of the various types; it is, in no way, an exhaustive listing.

The Bible is filled with idioms, figures of speech, literary devices and literary structure, an understanding of which helps to flesh out the actual meaning of the text. What follows are a few examples.

Examples of Figures of Speech in the Bible

Term	Definition	Example Text and Commentary
Acrostic	The repetition of successive letters the same letter at the beginning of a series of word, clauses or verses.	Many psalms are acrostic (or a mixture of acrostic and some sort of corresponding organization): Psalm 25 34 37 111 119. Obviously, this is hidden in the original text and may be simply a mnemonic device. David, for instance, may be in a war, and yet, begins formulating a psalm in his mind; so he organizes the psalm in such a way as to be able to remember it. The complex structure of some psalms is quite amazing.

Sometimes an acrostic is used to hide the name of Y^ehowah (YHWH). God's name, *Y^ehowah*, does not occur in the book of Esther except in acrostic form (Esther 1:20 4:14 5:13 7:7). The sense is, God is working in the background to preserve the Jews, but they do not personally recognize Him; they do not know Who He is. Esther is a book known by almost all religious Jews and by very few Christians. Personally, I think in the end times, many Jews will be brought to Jesus Christ through the book of Esther. He is the God Who has been with them all of this time, and yet, they refused to recognize Him.

To get the effect of an acrostic, John 3:16, by happy coincidence, can be set up as an acrostic:

God so love the world that He gave His
Only begotten
Son, so that whoever believes in Him should not
Perish but have
Everlasting
Life.

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Alliteration	Repetition of the same letter or syllable in successive words.	In many ways and in various ways of old, God spoke to the fathers in the prophets; in these last days He spoke to us in the Son (Heb. 1:1–2a). Since we are dealing with a translation, alliterations are often hidden in the text. A portion of this text reads πολυμερῶς καὶ πολίτροπως πάλαι, which is done to grab our attention.
Asyndeton	The conjunction <i>and</i> is left out to move the action along or to reach a dramatic climax.	“But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you.” (Luke 14:13–14). Both the Hebrew and the Greek tend to use conjunctions between a series of things.
Chiasmus Format; or Introverted Correspondence	Where the first subject of the one series of members corresponds with the last subject of the second	The organization of Gen. 6–8 that we already studied: http://kukis.org/Basicexegesis/Genesis1_100.htm#Lesson%2080:%20Genesis%206%E2%80%938%20and%208:1a%20The%20Organization%20of%20Genesis%206%E2%80%938
Often the key to understanding most psalms is determining the literary structure of the psalm first. Many of them have a very complex structure (this is an area of Scripture which has not been fully explored, even to this day).		
Ellipsis	The omission of a word or short phrase easily understood in context.	Matt. 11:18a “For John came neither eating nor drinking.” John had to eat and drink; he was a normal human being in that regard. What is left out is “declining invitations to eat with others.” In other words, John the Baptizer had set himself apart from normal human function and social life, as the herald of the King, to serve the King only. Ellipsis can be used to indicate great emotion, e.g., excitement or anger.

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<p>There is an interesting type of ellipsis¹ which is found in the story of the rich young ruler: And behold, a man came up to Him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And He said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." He said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You will not murder, you will not commit adultery, you will not steal, you will not bear false witness, [these are commandments 6, 7, 8, and 9 in order; so we would expect Jesus then to go to commandment #10, "You will not covet; but He does not; this man is rich so he does not desire anything which someone else has] honor your father and mother [Jesus suddenly goes back to commandment #5, which is the commandment this man continually violates], and, you will love your neighbor as yourself [this is a principle which this man continually violates]." The young man said to Him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you would be complete [according to the Law], go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." (Matt. 19:16–21). Jesus, without actually saying it, identifies where this man is deficient with respect to the Law (as are we all).</p>		
<p>Epanalepsis, or Resumption</p>	<p>A thought, argument or list is begun; then author goes off on a tangent; and then comes back to resume the thought.</p>	<p>Eph. 3:1a, 14a: For this cause, I, Paul...for this cause, I bow my knees... Paul goes back, 13 verses later, and picks up his original train of thought.</p> <p>Heb. 6:1a, 6a: Because of this, having left the discourse of the beginning of Christ, let us be borne on to full growth, not laying down again a foundation of repentance...and having fallen away, it is impossible for them again to renew to repentance... Not only does the author of Hebrews resume at this point, but there is also ellipsis involved, where the list of vv. 1b–2 is not repeated, but implied.</p>
<p>Epanadiplosis, or Encircling</p>	<p>Beginning and ending a sentence or passage with the same word or phrase, to indicate a completion of some sort (a complete thought, for instance).</p>	<p>"And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything." (Gen. 9:3b).</p> <p>The tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, engraved on the tablets (Ex. 32:16).</p>

¹ I don't know that I have seen this specifically classified.

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Term	Definition	Example Text and Commentary
Erotesis, or, Interrogating	The asking of questions, not for information or to get an answer.	Gen. 13:9a: [Abram is speaking to Lot] “Is not the whole land before you?” Abram is not interested in getting Lot’s input on this. He is not really asking Lot a question here. Psalm 35:10 All my bones shall say, “O LORD, who is like You, delivering the poor from him who is too strong for him, the poor and needy from him who robs him?” The psalmist is not expecting an answer from above, saying, “No one is like Me.” That answer is implied by the question.
<p>Such questions may be asked as a positive or negative affirmation; as an affirmative negation, to demonstrate something; to express wonder and admiration, rapture, wishes, refusals or denials, doubts; as an admonition, expostulation, prohibition or dissuasion; to indicate pity and commiseration, disparagement, reproach, lamentation, indignation, an absurdity or impossibility. You may recall that the scribes and pharisees asked Jesus questions all of the time, but never with the intent of eliciting information, but, instead, to trip Him up.</p>		
Homœoteuton, or Like Endings	The ends of several words are the same. This is done in order to draw attention to what is being said.	This is hidden in the original language. Mark 12:30b reads, “This is the first commandment...” In the Greek, that is αὕτη πρώτη ἐντολή.

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Term	Definition	Example Text and Commentary
<p>Hyperbole, or Exaggeration</p>	<p>When more is said than is literally meant. Many people have gone astray at this point, when they do not understand when a person is speaking in hyperbole.</p>	<p>Matt. 5:29 “And if your right eye offends you, pluck it out and throw it from you. For it is profitable for you that one of your members should perish, and not that your whole body should be thrown into hell.” Jesus is not really suggesting that we pluck out our own eyes in order to get into heaven.</p> <p>On another occasion, Jesus told a rich man to sell all that he had and to give that to the poor (Luke 18:18–25). If you think that, by selling all of his stuff, this rich man would have been saved and eligible for heaven, then you missed the entire point of that passage. Deut. 1:28 is another example of hyperbole.</p> <p>For if a woman is not veiled, let her also be shorn (1Cor. 11:6a). In no way was Paul calling for all women to have their hair cut off. .</p>
<p>Inclusio, or Bracketing</p>	<p>A literary framing device in which the same word or phrase stands at the beginning and the end of a section. Sometimes called bracketing.</p>	<p>And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of Jehovah...So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to Jehovah (Gen. 13:3–4, 16). Here, the chapter is framed in such a way as to indicate that Abram is both in God’s geographical will and in His directive will.</p>
<p>Meiosis, or a Belittling</p>	<p>A belittling of one thing to magnify another.</p>	<p>Gen. 18:27 Abraham answered and said, “Behold, I have undertaken to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes.”</p>

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Term	Definition	Example Text and Commentary
Metaphor	A declaration that one thing is (or represents) another	<p>Matt. 26:26 Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is My body." To almost anyone who reads this, they do not think that the bread which Jesus broke into pieces was His literal body. It is only a cult-type organization which would suggest that eating unleavened bread and drinking unfermented grape juice in a ceremony is actually consuming Christ's real body and blood.</p>
Polysyndeton, or Many <i>and</i>'s	The conjunction <i>and</i> is repeated, sometimes to move the action along and sometimes to place emphasis upon each portion of a list.	<p>Daniel spoke and said, "<u>I saw</u> in my vision by night, and, behold, the four winds of the sky broke forth on the great sea. Four great animals came up from the sea, diverse one from another. The first was like a lion, and had eagle's wings: <u>I saw</u> until the wings of it were plucked, and it was lifted up from the earth, and made to stand on two feet as a man; and a man's heart was given to it. Behold, another animal, a second, like a bear; and it was raised up on one side, and three ribs were in its mouth between its teeth: and they said thus to it, Arise, devour much flesh. <u>After this I saw</u>, and, behold, another, like a leopard, which had on its back four wings of a bird; the animal had also four heads; and dominion was given to it. <u>After this I saw</u> in the night-visions, and, behold, a fourth animal, awesome and powerful, and strong exceedingly; and it had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet: and it was diverse from all the animals that were before it; and it had ten horns." (Daniel 7:2-7). Each portion of what Daniel said was important. At the end, this becomes more intense with the increase of the number of <i>and</i>'s. You will notice that there is also a repetition of <i>I saw</i> and <i>after this I saw</i>.</p>

Sometimes the many *and*'s are used, along with repetition and other clues to indicate a wonderful structure. The following example comes from Rev. 13:

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Term	Definition	Example Text and Commentary
v. 1	The vision (And I saw...)	
v. 1	The first beast (the Antichrist)	
v. 1	His origin	
v. 1–2	His description	
v. 2	His power derived from the dragon.	
v. 3–8	His deeds	
		The Spirit calls out: “Let him hear.”
		The lesson: “Here is patience and faith.”
v. 11	The vision (And I saw...)	
v. 11	The second beast (the False Prophet)	
v. 11	His origin	
v. 11	His description	
v. 12	His authority derived from the Beast.	
v. 12–17	His deeds	
		The lesson: “Here is wisdom.”
		The Spirit calls out: “Let him discern...”

The Bible is *filled* with chapters and sections and passages set up in a variety of structures, many of which depend, in one way or another, on the various figures of speech found in the Bible.

Quotation	The citation of a well-known saying without quoting the author's name.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where the sense originally intended is preserved, though the words may vary (Matthew 26:31). 2. Where the original sense is modified in the quotation or reference (Matt. 12:40). 3. Where the sense is quite different from that which was first intended (Matt. 2:15). 4. Where the words are from the Hebrew or from the Septuagint (Luke 4:18). 5. Where the words are varied by omission, addition, or transposition (1Cor. 2:9). 6. Where the words are changed by a reading, or an inference, or in number, person, mood, or tense. (Matthew 4:7). 7. Where two or more citations are amalgamated (Matthew 21:13). 8. Where Quotations are from books other than the Bible (Acts 17:28).
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<p>When we quote someone or some piece of literature, it can be for a variety of reasons. I may quote a person because of their expertise in a particular matter, so that their words give greater weight to a position I am taking (for instance, I may quote C. I. Scofield or R. B. Thieme, Jr. or Norman Geisler). Or, one may quote the words of another to illustrate what a fool that person is. Or, one might quote a person in order to reveal that person's true philosophy or values (this was done repeatedly in some mediums about candidate Barack Obama; he would say something which was unscripted, and this quotation would be repeated many times to indicate his true opinion of some particular issue).</p>		
<p>Furthermore, the way that we quote that person or piece of literature may or may not be significant. Sometimes when I quote Scripture, I will leave off the beginning preposition or conjunction, as it is irrelevant to the point I am making. Or, I will replace a pronoun with the name of the person to whom the pronoun refers, as the contextual verses are irrelevant to the point I am making.</p>		
<p>Writers of Scripture also include many quotations, and such quotations are done for a variety of reasons and in a variety of ways.</p>		
<p>Repetition</p>	<p>The repetition of a set of words or phrases in order to call attention to these words or to be emphatic.</p>	<p>“And, behold, I, even I, will bring a flood of waters upon the earth.” (Gen. 6:17). God's directive hand in this matter is emphasized.</p> <p>And the waters prevailed exceedingly... (Gen. 7:19a). In the Hebrew, <i>exceedingly</i> is a repetition of the word <i>greatly</i>.</p> <p>David's repetition of the name of Absalom indicates great sadness in his soul in 2Sam. 18:33.</p>
<p>Names are occasionally repeated: when God is speaking to man: Abraham, Abraham (Gen. 22:11); Jacob, Jacob (Gen. 46:2); Moses, Moses (Ex. 3:4); Samuel, Samuel (1Sam. 3:10); Martha, Martha (Luke 10:41); Simon, Simon (Luke 22:31); Saul, Saul (Acts 9:4); and in other circumstances: Lord, Lord (Matt. 7:21–22 Luke 6:46 12:25); Jerusalem, Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37 Luke 13:34); Eloi, Eloi (Mark 15:34 Matt. 27:46 Psalm 22:1).</p>		
<p>Syllogismus, or Omission of the Conclusion</p>	<p>A conclusion is implied, but not stated.</p>	<p>“Even the hairs of your head are all numbered.” (Matt. 10:30). This indicates that God is both omniscient and a God Who knows everything about you in particular.</p>

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Term	Definition	Example Text and Commentary
Zeugma	A general term describing when one part of speech (most often the main verb, but sometimes a noun) governs two or more other parts of a sentence (often in a series).	May the Lord cut off all flattering lips and [may the Lord cut off] every boastful tongue (Psalm 12:3). What is in the brackets was added; the subject and verb are both applied to 2 parts of the sentence.

In most of these examples, it is easy to read through the passage and understand the meaning meant by the figure of speech, without stopping to realize that you are not really taking this passage literally. At the same time, this does not give license to “spiritualize” the meaning of everything found in the Bible (assigning it some goofy meaning which is at odds with the Scripture itself). This simply means that, when we study the Bible, we look to understand it in the same way a person of that era would have understood it. After Jesus taught that looking upon a woman with lust is adultery, His disciples did not start plucking out their eyes.

Similarly, every person who spoke to Jesus was not required to sell all that he had and follow Jesus. The example of the Roman soldier stands out here. He came to Jesus and asked to have his servant healed, and when Jesus was about to set off for his house to do this, he told Jesus, “**Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed..**” (Mark 8:8). Jesus did not tell this man to put down his sword, forsake his family and follow Him; Jesus said, “**Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith.**” (Mark 8:10b).

I have only given a handful of examples of the hundreds of figures of speech which are found in the Bible.

There are many times when you may be confused by a passage, and the key to that passage is a figure of speech. Below is a list of references, but none of them allow a search by passage (as does Bullinger’s book).

Most of these were taken from:

<http://www.tentmaker.org/bullinger.htm>

<http://www.therain.org/appendixes/app6.html>

<http://rhetoric.byu.edu/figures/groupings/by%20author/bullinger.htm>

<http://www.davidcox.com.mx/library/B/Bullinger%20-%20Figures%20of%20Speech%20used%20in%20the%20Bible.pdf>

The latter two primarily use illustrations from secular literature.

Other sources:

http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/article_idioms.html

<http://www.truthortradition.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=160>