

Basic Bible Interpretation: Special Topics in Bible Interpretation

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Introduction

- The special topics in Bible interpretation all center around the use of *figurative language* in the Scriptures. Figurative language involves "the representation of one concept in terms of another because the nature of the two things compared allows such an analogy to be drawn. Nearly all figures of speech come out of the life of the speaker or writer who uses them. This means that the student who understands the background of the writer will better understand his figurative language. Most writers, for example, use comparison to explain the unfamiliar by that which is already familiar to the reader."¹
- These figures of speech are very common in all language, and they are used to express things in interesting ways. It is important to remember that even when figurative "*picture talk*" is used, it is always intended to express a literal truth. Even though figurative language is widely used, it can present a dilemma to the Bible interpreter. "*Picture-talk* is one of the greatest problems of interpretation. To treat figurative language as if it were literal, and to treat literal language as if it were figurative, constitute two of the greatest hindrances to understanding the meaning of the Bible."²

Reasons for Figurative Language

- Figurative language is often used to speak about abstract concepts in terms of concrete things. All human speech contains this type of language because it is intrinsic to the way people communicate.

Very often when we are talking about something which is not perceptible by the five senses, we use words which in one of their meanings refer to things or actions that are. When a man says that he grasps an argument he is using a verb (*grasp*) which literally means to take something in the hand but he is certainly not thinking that his mind has hands or that an argument can be seized. To avoid the word *grasp* he may change the form of the expression and say, "I see your point," but he does not mean that a pointed object has appeared in his visual field. Everyone is familiar with this linguistic phenomenon and the grammarians call it metaphor. But it is a serious mistake to think that metaphor is an optional thing which poets and authors may put into their work as a decoration and plain speakers can do without. The truth is that if we are going to talk at all about things which are not perceived by the senses, we are forced to use language metaphorically. There is no other way of talking. Anyone who talks about things that cannot be seen, or touched, or heard, or the like, must inevitably talk *as if they could* be seen or touched or heard.³

Some topics can only be discussed using this type of language. For example, almost all of the Bible language used to describe God involves metaphor because that is the only way that finite creatures can speak about the Infinite Creator.

- Figurative language is sometimes used to emphasize a point, make a vivid impression, or attract attention. A colorful figure of speech typically causes a response of surprise and immediate interest for the listener or reader. When told that King Herod wanted to kill him, Jesus could have said, "Go and tell the king..." Instead Jesus said, "Go and tell that fox..." (Luke 13:32). This startling expression certainly would have captured the attention of everyone who heard it.

- Figurative language can motivate people to take action. Instead of saying, "I am waiting for you to respond," Jesus told the church at Laodicea, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me" (Rev 3:20). This figure of speech would have evoked a powerful emotional response in the culture of that time.
- Figurative language may aid the memory. Most figures of speech create lasting impressions, and many are absolutely unforgettable. The Pharisees would never forget Jesus' description of them as "whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones" (Matt 23:27).
- Figurative language adds color and vividness for illustrating or clarifying a point. A figure of speech graphically presents truth without using complicated descriptions. King David spoke volumes about his relationship with God when he said, "The Lord is my shepherd" (Psalm 23:1). All that a shepherd is and does could be applied to God's watchful care over him by using a single, concise phrase.
- Figurative language also can be used to obscure the meaning for all but an intended audience. In rare cases the intention of a Bible figure or riddle is to hide the meaning, as one would do by communicating in code. Jesus explained to His disciples why He often spoke in parables: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand" (Luke 8:10). Matt 13:34-35 explains that "All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: 'I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.'" In this case, it was part of the eternal plan of God that only the chosen few would be able to understand Jesus' words during His earthly ministry.

General Guidelines for Interpreting Figurative Language

- The purpose of studying figurative language in the Bible is to understand the meaning intended by the author of that passage.

Christ told us that we are the *salt of the earth*, and we are not free to choose our own preference as to what comparison was intended. We must search diligently to discern what comparison he intended. I once heard a fascinating sermon in which many characteristics of salt were used in analogy to exhort Christians toward more appropriate behavior.

1. Salt was used as a preservative, so the presence of Christians in the world will keep it from moral decay.
2. Salt enhances flavor, so Christians are to add a flavor of godliness to a tasteless society.
3. In the Old Testament there was a salt covenant and a salt offering, indicating that God is a covenant God who keeps His promises. In the same way, Christians are to keep their promises and demonstrate through their lives that God is faithful.
4. Salt was not to remain isolated in a container but was meant to be sprinkled around. Likewise, Christians should not remain in monasteries isolated from society, but should distribute themselves around in order to have an impact on their world.
5. Salt has an impact out of proportion to its size. In the same way, a small minority of Christians can impact a large portion of their world.

Is it legitimate to make all of those points of comparison with the assurance that Jesus had all of that in mind when He said, "You are the salt of the earth"? No, for the first task of the interpreter is to discern what the author had in mind by way of comparison, not what our own experience or our own ingenuity may devise. The guideline is this: the intent of the author must control our understanding of his meaning.⁴

- Bible language should be understood in its normal, ordinary, or literal sense unless there is a convincing reason for considering it otherwise:

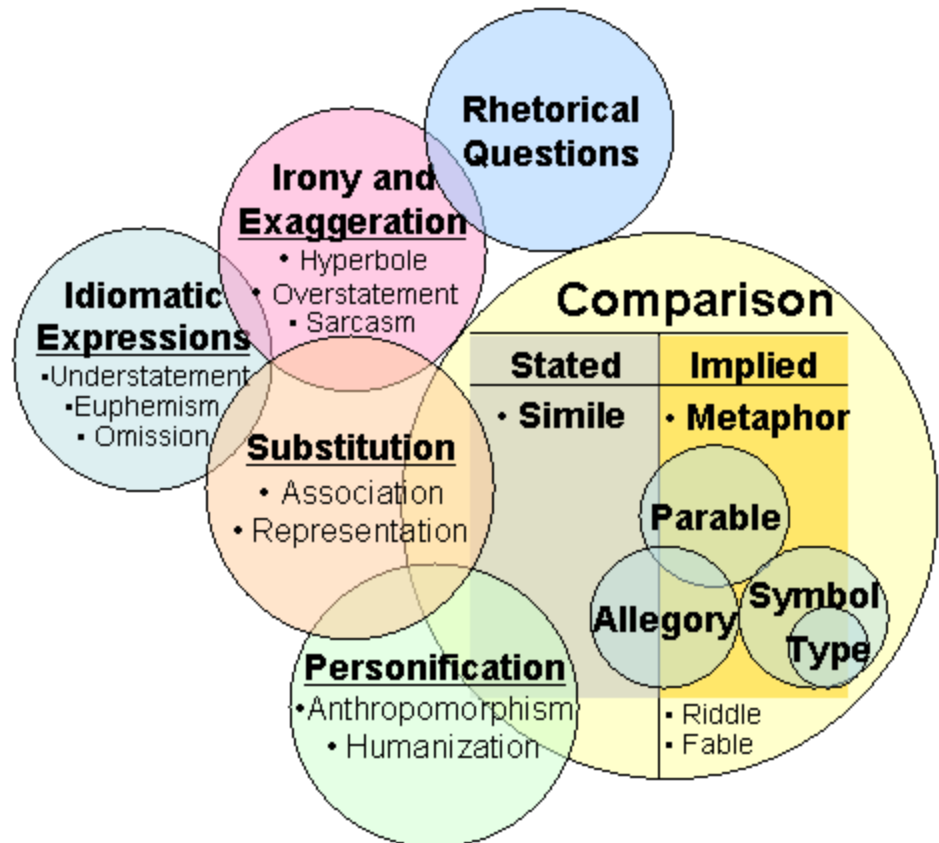
- If a statement would be absurd, irrational, or impossible if taken literally then the author is probably using a figure of speech. Examples of this would include trees clapping their hands (Isaiah 55:12) or a person being referred to as a dog (Phil 3:2), a door (John 10:7), or a lamb (John 1:36).
- If an inanimate object is used to describe a living thing, then the statement may be considered to be figurative. For example, Jesus described Himself by saying He is the bread of life (John 6:35) and the light of the world (John 8:12). In a similar way, when life and activity are attributed to inanimate objects, these statements can also be considered to be figurative expressions.
- If a statement would lead to an immoral action, then the figurative sense is probably intended. Eating the flesh and drinking the blood of Jesus (John 6:53-58) would be an act of cannibalism, so this passage should be interpreted as a figure of speech. Also, if a passage runs counter to the statement of another clear passage of Scripture, it is legitimate to question whether that passage can be taken literally. For example, hating your "father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters" (Luke 14:26) is contrary to the teaching of both the Old and New Testaments, so the interpreter must view this as a figurative expression. (See the related passage in Matt 10:37 for a clear interpretation.)
- Often the context of a passage will point out whether a figure of speech is intended. In many cases, the figurative passage is followed by a clear interpretation. For example, those who are "asleep" (1 Thess 4:13-15) are later described as those who have actually died (1 Thess 4:16). Also, the word "sword" must be understood figuratively in Eph 6:17, (1) because of the prepositional phrase "of the Spirit" and (2) because of the subsequent explanation: "which is the Word of God."
- The background and setting of the author and the original readers must control our understanding of what is literal or figurative language, rather than relying on our own background, setting, perceptions, or presuppositions. "The appropriateness of a particular figure is not for us to evaluate. Rather, we must evaluate the language in terms of what the author intended."⁵

Figurative speech, as already discussed, is a picturesque, out-of-the-ordinary way of presenting literal facts that might otherwise be stated in a normal, plain, ordinary way. Saying that "the argument does not hold water" is an unusual way of saying the more ordinary sentence, "The argument is weak." Both sentences convey a literal fact. One conveys it in a figurative fashion, the other in a nonfigurative way. In other words, as Radmacher put it, "Behind every figure of speech is a literal meaning, and by means of the historical-grammatical exegesis of the text, these literal meanings are to be sought out." Any figure of speech depends on ordinary-literal language. When Peter wrote, "The devil prowls around like a roaring lion" (1 Peter 5:8), the legitimacy of that figurative comparison is based on our understanding of something about actual lions. The same is true of types, symbols, parables, allegories, and fables.⁶

Identifying Types of Figurative Language

- Figures of Comparison. This is the most common type of figurative language in the Bible, and it typically expresses a similarity between two things that are otherwise dissimilar.

In examining figures of comparison, remember that ordinarily only one point of comparison is intended. The comparisons are limited, and the reader is not permitted to improvise or decide what point of comparison he likes best or finds compatible with his doctrinal structure. If we are not careful, the Scriptures will no longer be an independent authority, sitting in judgment on our ideas, but rather we interpreters will become the authorities, building unsound doctrine on misapprehension of a figurative biblical expression.⁷



- Figures of Substitution. This involves having one thing represent another or stand in place of another thing. In figures of substitution sometimes part of a thing will be spoken of as if it were the whole thing, or the whole may stand for only a part.
- Figures of Personification. This involves taking a characteristic of a person and attributing it to a non-personal object, or attributing a human characteristic to God.
- Figures of Exaggeration or Irony. This involves saying more than is literally required, or saying the opposite of what is literally meant.
- Rhetorical Questions. This involves asking questions without expecting an answer. This forces the reader to think about the answer and consider its implications for affirming a specific truth.
- Idiomatic Expressions. An idiom is an expression that cannot be understood simply from the meanings of the individual words of which it is composed. Usually it is unique to a particular group of people, and in order to understand the intended meaning we must bridge the gap between ourselves and that group.

Principles for Interpreting Figurative Language

1. Determine whether figurative language is being used. Use the general guidelines above to determine whether a passage contains a figure of speech. It would violate the principle to *authorial intent* to interpret a figurative passage literally, or to interpret a literal passage figuratively. Sometimes a normal statement is wrongly taken as a figure of speech; for example, when John wrote that 144,000 will be sealed with 12,000 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel (Rev 7:4-8), there is no compelling reason to understand this statement figuratively.
2. Determine what the figure of speech (image) is referring to (referent). For example, Isaiah 8:7 says, "Therefore the Lord is about to bring against them the mighty floodwaters of the River." How are we to determine whether these floodwaters are literal or figurative? This is a figurative expression because the very next phrase gives the referent: "the mighty king of Assyria with all his pomp." The *floodwaters* are the image and the *king of Assyria* is the referent. "Sometimes the image is stated, but the nonimage or referent, though not given explicitly, is suggested by the

context. In Luke 5:34 the *bridegroom* is not said to be Jesus, but the meaning is implicit since Jesus said in the next verse that the bridegroom would be taken from them. *The guests of the bridegroom* are not specified, though they are most likely Jesus' disciples who are eating and drinking, much like bridegroom guests."⁸

3. Determine the specific point of comparison that is being made between the *image* and the *referent*. For example, Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we, like sheep, have gone astray." The image is *sheep*, the referent is *human beings*, and the specific point of comparison is the tendency of sheep to *stray* off on their own, just as human beings stray away from their Shepherd and Creator. Not every aspect of sheep is part of this figurative comparison - only their tendency to stray is being emphasized.
4. Determine the specific meaning that was intended by the biblical author when he used a particular figure of speech in a specific context. Treat each figure of speech individually according to its specific context, and do not assume that a particular figure always means the same thing throughout the Bible. For example, in Hosea 6:4 the figure of "dew" is used to describe the transience of Judah's loyalty to God, but in Hosea 14:5 the figure of "dew" describes the Lord's blessing on them.

Interpreting Biblical Prophecy

- Bible prophecy is a special topic because it often makes use of figurative language, and because there are special time elements involved in the prophet's message. The two aspects of biblical prophecy have sometimes been called *foretelling* and *forthtelling* because there is a future predictive element as well as a message of exhortation, reproof, correction, or instruction to a specific people living at a specific time in history. To correctly interpret biblical prophecy, "We need an approach that will read nothing into prophecy that is not there, that will make clear all that the prophet said or wrote to his own people, and that will make the correctly interpreted message of the prophet relevant to our own times."⁹
- Prophecy does have a predictive element, but we must never forget that biblical prophecy was spoken into a specific historical situation with the intention of motivating a particular group of people to action in their own day. The *foretelling* of the future was included to show that God is working out His plan in history and is moving forward according to His own timetable. God's future actions were meant to influence what the readers or listeners were doing at the time they heard the message. In light of His future activity, they were meant to live differently from those who ignore God. "To lose sight of the original hearers and to focus our attention on what may tickle the fancy of the curious-minded in the present day is to lose sight of the very reason for the message. This results in a tragic distortion of the purpose behind the prophecy."¹⁰
- The primary guideline for interpreting biblical prophecy is to view the passage in its normal, simple, direct, ordinary meaning unless there is a convincing reason to do otherwise. Just as with any other Bible language, we should understand predictive passages literally unless there are specific reasons for viewing them in some figurative sense. "Of course figurative and symbolic language is used extensively in prophetic passages, but this does not mean that all prophecy is figurative or symbolic. We should begin with the assumption that the words are to be taken in their normal sense unless a figure of speech or symbol is indicated. Deeper and mystical senses should not be sought."¹¹

For example, when Isaiah described life during the Millennial Kingdom he said that many people would live well beyond 100 years of age (Isaiah 65:20), and that they will "build houses and inhabit them; they will also plant vineyards and eat their fruit" (Isaiah 65:21). There is nothing in this text that suggests that it should be taken figuratively, but it should be interpreted in its normal, ordinary meaning as it describes what life will be like in that glorious future time.

- Regarding the future time elements of prophecy, we must understand that God did not give his prophets unlimited vision. They were given a limited or "foreshortened" perspective on future events, much like an artist has when viewing the peaks of the Rocky Mountains from a distance. For example, many of the prophets saw the two *comings* of Christ as if they were two distant

mountain peaks which appeared to be in close proximity, even though there were long unseen "valleys" of time between them (see Isaiah [9:6-7](#)). Looking back from our perspective in history, however, we can clearly see this "valley" of time between the first and second coming of Christ.