

# How to Understand the Bible

## Part 2

### *Figures of Speech*

All languages have a limited number of words to use in expressing thoughts and ideas. We have approximately 40,000 words we use to express hundreds of thousands of experiences, feelings, and thoughts. Because of this poverty of words, we begin saying the sun rises or we feel blue. This type of expression is what we call a figure of speech, which is a special way of creating a picture in the mind of the reader or listener to enhance understanding. Examples:

- SIMILE – comparing two things that resemble one another; look for "like" or "as." Examples: Ps. 1:3; Mt. 13:44-45; 23:37; 1 Pt. 2:25; 5:8
- METAPHOR – comparing one thing that represents another where the qualities of the one object apply to the other. Examples: Deut. 5:15; Ps. 19:14; 23:1; Jn. 6:48
- HYPERBOLE – a deliberate exaggeration for effect or emphasis. Examples: Deut. 1:28; Ps. 6:6; Mt. 5:29-30; 1 Thess. 5:17
- PARABLE – an extended simile; a short story about everyday things that illustrates a single truth or principle. Examples: Mt. 13:3-9; Lk. 14:31-33
- PERSONIFICATION – a non-personal or non-living thing is spoken about as though it were a person. Examples: Is. 55:12; Pr. 9:1
- TYPOLOGY – a correspondence between a person, event, or thing from the Old Testament and a person, event, or thing in the New Testament. Examples: Compare Ex. 17:1-9 with 1 Cor. 10:4; Num. 21:5-9 with Jn. 3:14; Gen. 2:2 with Heb. 4:8-10.

### Principles for Interpreting Figures of Speech

- Identify a figure by trying to take the passage literally. If it makes no sense to apply it literally, then it's probably a figure of speech.
- Let the context determine the meaning of the figure.
- Look for what is behind the figure; what is represented.
- Look for specific points of similarity and difference.
- Don't push the figure past the author's intended meaning – there's a limit to the meaning of any figure of speech.
- Look up some of the references above and identify the figures of speech.

### *Types of Bible Literature*

Since the Bible is literature, it utilizes various literary styles (called genre) to communicate God's truth. Some of these styles (or genres) are prose, poetry, prophecy, and history. Having helpful hints for interpreting the genre (literary style) of a passage/book is vital for discovering both meaning and significance of a Bible passage.

PROSE – plain speech; the basic model of biblical communication. Four types of prose:

Narration – speaks directly about people, places, things or events (e.g., Genesis)

Exposition – explanation of law, events, theology, or ethics (e.g., Deuteronomy)

Argumentation – seeks to convince the reader of a point of view (e.g., Gospel of John)

Description – paints a picture for the reader to illustrate truth (e.g., Rev. 21)

POETRY (In Proverbs) – parallelism of thought rather than sound or meter. Three types of parallelism:

Synonymous – the thought is repeated in the second line (e.g., Pr. 17:4; 20:13)

Antithetic – the second line will be contrasted to the first (e.g., Pr. 15:1, 2; 14:34)

Synthetic – the idea expressed in the first line is completed in the second (e.g., Pr. 10:22)

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In Psalms – Five categories of genre:

1. Messianic – foretells some aspect of the person or work of the Messiah (e.g., Ps. 2; 8; 22-24)
2. Devotional – speaks of the characteristics of the godly person (e.g., Psalm 1)
3. Penitential – recognizes sin; requests cleansing, and restoration of fellowship with God (e.g., Ps. 32; 51)
4. Imprecation – calls down oaths and curses on enemies (e.g., Ps. 69; 109; 139).  
Note: Imprecatory psalms are not contrary to the biblical spirit of love, grace, and forgiveness because:
  - they do not express a desire for personal revenge
  - the psalmist expects God to execute justice
  - the psalmist calls down curses on himself if deserved
  - the psalmist desires to see the holiness and justice of God maintained and defended

For NT examples of imprecation see 2 Tim. 4:14; Gal. 5:12; Rev. 6:10.

5. Nature Psalms – extols the character of God as He is revealed in nature (e.g., Ps. 19).

In the NT – various quotations of ancient poets (e.g., Acts 17:28; 1 Cor 15:33; Titus 1:12; poetry molded after OT poetry (e.g., Lk 1:46-55; 68-79; 2:14; 2:29-32; Acts 1:20; Rom 11:9-10); poetry in hymns (e.g., Eph 5:14; 1 Tim 3:16; 2 Tim 2:11-13; 1 Cor 13)

HISTORICAL NARRATIVE – a true story with a set of characters and a single plot; a non-fictional play.

Remember that the Bible is a book about God, not a book about you. He is the leading character and the One being written about and the One we are to learn about. Every other character has a supporting role in the overall story of God.

*Characteristics of historical narrative:*

The beginning, middle, and end are easily identifiable. For example, the Bible as a whole is a historical narrative. Creation and life before the Fall is the beginning, the middle is the pilgrimage of fallen humans through history, and the end is the climax of history with the return of Jesus Christ to rule the new heaven and new earth.

Each individual narrative contributes to the overall plan of God. For example, Gen. 37-50 narrates the life of Joseph, but the purpose of the narrative is not to teach us about Joseph, but to instruct us on the power of God in preserving His promise to Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:1-3; 15:18; 50:24).

Questions for interpreting historical narrative:

- Is this story given as an example and/or warning? If so, in exactly what way?
- Is this incident the norm or an exception – a principle for general guidelines for living or precedent to apply specifically?
- What limitations should be placed on its application?

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PROPHECY – "special revelations which specially called men received and by which they explained the past, elucidated the present, and disclosed the future" (Kaiser, *Back Toward the Future*, p. 42). Biblical prophecy uses symbolic imagery – some of which is explained.

SYMBOLS	EXPLANATION	REFERENCE
Head of Gold	Nebuchadnezzar	Dan. 2:37-38
Rock cut out of mountain	Kingdom of God	Dan. 2:44-45
Ten horns of 4th beast	Ten kings	Dan. 7:24
Two-horned ram	Medo-Persian kings	Dan. 8:20
Woman in bushel	Iniquity of the land	Zech. 5:6
Seven stars	Angels of the churches	Rev. 1:20
Seven lampstands	Seven churches of Asia	Rev. 1:20
Bowls of incense	Prayers of saints	Rev. 5:8
Great dragon	Satan, Devil	Rev. 12:9
Ten horns of beast	Ten kings	Rev. 17:12

If symbolic imagery is mentioned more than once, then the additional references may shed considerable light on its significance.

SYMBOLS IN REVELATION	OT REFERENCE
Tree of life (2:7; 22:2)	Gen. 2:9; 3:24
Hidden manna (2:17)	Num. 11:7-9
Iron scepter (2:27)	Psalms 2:9
Key of David (3:7)	Isaiah 22:22
Living creatures (4:7-9)	Ezekiel 1:5-14
Four horsemen (6:1-8)	Zechariah 1:8-11
Great angel (chap. 10)	Zechariah 1:11
First beast (13:1-10)	Daniel 7:2-7
Second beast (13:11-18)	Daniel 7:2-7

Principle for interpreting prophecy: Accept the clear; be cautious about the unclear.