

Basic Hermeneutics: "Figurative Language"

Figurative language is used throughout the Bible. Figurative means "representing by a figure or resemblance... expressing one thing in terms normally denoting another with which it may be regarded as analogous."¹ Frank Ewert presents the subject of figurative language. He says, "Some Bible readers are unsettled by the whole idea of finding biblical figures of speech, such as metaphors or similes."² He also says, "Failure to observe figurative language has led to tragic consequences in the history of the church."³ The interpreter should familiarize himself with the usage of this type of language. A few examples are given below:

Similes. A simile is defined as "a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as..."⁴

Examples...

Another parable spake he unto them; The kingdom of heaven is like unto leaven, which a woman took, and hid in three measures of meal, till the whole was leavened. (Matt. 13:33)

Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field. (Matt. 13:44)

Metaphors. A metaphor is defined as "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them..."⁵

Examples...

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh *is* grass, and all the goodliness thereof *is* as the flower of the field: (Isa. 40:6)

For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. (Jer. 1:18)

¹ Merriam-Webster

² Ewert, David. *How to Understand the Bible*. Waterloo, Ontario, Scottdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 2000, 70.

³ Ewert, 70.

⁴ Merriam-Webster

⁵ Merriam-Webster

Metonymy. Metonymy is defined as "a figure of speech consistency of the use of the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated..."⁶

Example...

Ewert states the following "In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham tells the rich man in Hades that his brothers have 'Moses and the prophets.' Abraham knows that both Moses and the prophets were long gone. What he meant was that they had Scriptures from Moses and the prophets (Luke 16:29; cf. 24:44)."⁷

Personification. Personification is defined as "attribution of personal qualities; *especially*: representation of a thing or abstraction as a person or by the human form..."⁸

Example...

"Love is personified in 1 Corinthians 13: fifteen verbs tell us what love does or does not do."⁹

Euphemisms. Euphemism is defined as "the substitution of an agreeable or inoffensive expression for one that may offend or suggest something unpleasant..."¹⁰

Irony. Irony is defined as "the use of words to express something other than and especially the opposite of the literal meaning..."¹¹

Synecdoche. Synecdoche is defined as "a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (such as *fifty sail* for *fifty ships*), the whole for a part (such as *society* for *high society*), the species for the genus (such as *cutthroat* for *assassin*), the genus for the species (such as a *creature* for *a man*), or the name of material for the thing made (such as *boards* for *stage*)."¹²

Ewert says that "It is almost impossible to converse meaningfully without using figures of speech."¹³

⁶ Merriam-Webster

⁷ Ewert, 77.

⁸ Merriam-Webster

⁹ Ewert, 78.

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster

¹¹ Merriam-Webster

¹² Merriam-Webster

¹³ Ewert, 84.