

# JESUS' USE OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE

Including Notes from *The Method and Message of Jesus/ Teaching* by Robert H. Stein

Jesus is identified as a “teacher” forty-five times in the Gospels and with the similar Aramaic term, “Rabbi” another fourteen. He was a master teacher, who captured the attention of his audience, and spoke with an evident authority. People loved to listen to him, in part because the exciting manner of his teaching. Jesus evidently prepared his teaching, putting it into literary forms using the metaphorical, exaggerating, impressionistic language of a culture that loved to tell stories. This helped his listeners remember easily what he taught. It is evident that Jesus thought his hearers were capable of understanding figurative language and he expected them to do so, and that the Gospel writers thought and expected the same of their readers. This however is not always easy. Jesus said that he spoke in parables (and by implication, other figures of speech as well) so that the disciples could understand, but that his meanings would be masked from others. That Jesus, God’s Son, taught using such a variety of figures of speech – should indicate to us that we must be aware of their use through all the Bible.

The two most common figures of speech are the *simile* and the *metaphor*.

## Simile

A simile is an explicit comparison between two things that are essentially unlike each other and that are introduced by a connective such as “like” or “as” or by a verb such as “seems.” (A parable is essentially a simile; that is, when a simile is expanded into a story it becomes a parable.)

**Examples** “I am sending you out like sheep among wolves.” (Matt. 10:16),

“For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” (Matt. 12:40)

“As weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age.” (Matt. 13:40)

“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.” (Matt. 13:43)

“For as lightning that comes from the east is visible even in the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” (Matt. 24:27)

“...and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.” (Matt. 25:32-33)

## Metaphor

Like a simile, a metaphor is a comparison between two essentially unlike things. In a simile the comparison is explicit (“The eye is like a lamp for the body”). In a metaphor the comparison is implicit (“The eye is the lamp of the body”). Extended metaphors are Allegories.

**Examples:** “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world...” (Matt. 5:14-16)

“The eye is the lamp of the body...” (Matt. 6:22)

“Do not give dogs what is sacred...” (Matt. 7:6)

“Watch out for false prophets...inwardly they are ferocious wolves.” (Matt. 7:15)

“The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few...” (Matt. 9:37-38)

“Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.” (Matt. 10:6)

“...I did not come to bring peace, but a sword.” (Matt. 10:34)

“What did you go out to the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind?” (Matt. 11:7)

“You brood of vipers...” (Matt. 12:34)

## Poetry

In the Gospels, there are numerous examples of Semitic poetic forms in the saying of Jesus. This is seen not in its rhyme, but in its rhythmic balance i.e. “Parallelism.” There are five kinds of Parallelism in Semitic poetry: *Synonymous*, *Antithetical*, *Synthetic*, *Step* or *Climatic*; and *Chiasmic*. All of these are used in the Gospels.

## Proverb

Much of Jesus’ teaching also stands in continuity with “wisdom” material on the Old Testament, both in content and form. Nowhere is this more evident than in Jesus’ frequent use of proverbs.

### Examples

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matt. 6:21) “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matt. 6:34) “No one can serve two masters...You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matt. 6:24)

“Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” (Matt. 6:27)

“For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” (Matt. 7:2) “...let the dead bury their own dead.” (Matt. 8:22)

“A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master.” (Matt. 10:24)

“...But wisdom is proved right by her actions.” (Matt. 11:19)

“...If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.” (Matt. 15:14)

“Wherever there is a carcass, there the vultures will gather.” (Matt. 24:28)

“For all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (Matt. 26:52)

## Overstatement and Hyperbole

Overstatement and hyperbole have in common the use of exaggeration: intentionally overstating a truth in such a way that the resulting exaggeration forcefully drives home the point. The two may be distinguished by the degree of exaggeration involved. **Overstatement** pertains to sayings that could be understood (although incorrectly) as literal in application and portrayal. In **hyperbole** the extreme exaggeration makes such a literal fulfillment or portrayal impossible.

- Examples: Matt. 5:27-29, 38-42, Matt. 19:23-24, Matt. 23:23-24

## Puns

A pun is a play on words in which either (1) homonyms (like-sounding words) suggest two or more different meanings or (2) the same word may have two different meanings. Jesus’ Puns are not really evident in the Greek – but translations of this teaching back into Aramaic, the language Jesus used, reveal some interesting word plays.

**Examples : Matthew 23:23-34** In the Aramaic there is a clear play on words. Jesus’ use of the term “camel” (Why not some other large object?) is due to the fact that in Aramaic “camel” (*gamlā*) and “gnat” (*galma*) both look and sound alike. “...you strain out a *galma* but swallow a *gamlā*!”

**Matthew 16:18** The play on words is evident in Greek, where the terms *petros* and *petra* are used for “Peter” and “rock.” The play on words is even more pronounced in Aramaic, since the same term *kepha* served as both the proper name and the word for rock.

**John 3:8** In Aramaic the word for “wind” and the word for “Spirit” are the same: *ruha*. Also in Greek *pneuma* can mean “wind” or “Spirit.” “The *ruha* blows where it wills, and you hear the sound of it...so it is with everyone who is born of the *ruha*.”

## Paradox

A paradox is a statement that may appear to be self-contradictory, absurd, or at variance with common sense. For Christians who have accepted the values and beliefs of Jesus some statements of Jesus may not seem as paradoxical as they were to Jesus' original audience.

**Examples:** "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 10:39)

"...Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he." (Matt. 11:11)

"Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave." (Matt. 20:26-27)

"For everyone who has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him." (Matt. 25:29)

## A Fortiori ("If...how much more...")

A Fortiori is a type of argument in which the conclusion follows with even greater logical necessity than the already accepted fact or conclusion previously given. That is, granted the first fact or conclusion, the subsequent conclusion is more certain.

**Examples** Matt. 6:28-30; Matt. 7:9-11; Matt. 10:28-31

## The Use of Questions

Several centuries before Jesus, Socrates made famous the use of questions as a method of teaching. Jesus knew the merits of this "Socratic method" and frequently employed questions in his teaching.

**Examples:** Matt. 16:13-16; Matt. 17:25

Frequently, Jesus made use of questions as a **rhetorical device**. By using a rhetorical question Jesus intended to produce a rhetorical effect rather than draw out a verbal response.

**Example:** "Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles?" (Matt. 7:16)

Other times, Jesus made use of **counter-questions** in polemical contexts or as a response to a hostile attitude or question from his audience. In such cases, he expected a verbal or at least a mental response to his question.

**Example:** Matt. 12: 27-29

## Irony

Irony is the subtle use of contrast between what is actually stated and what is more or less wryly suggested. Frequently there is present a feigned sense of ignorance. When such a contrast becomes crude or heavy handed and as a result loses much of its cleverness it becomes **sarcasm**. A statement or expression is ironic when its intended meaning is the opposite of the literal meaning of the statement.

**Examples:** Luke 7:35 (cf Jn 10:32); Matt 16:2-3; Luke 12:16-20; Matt 11:16-19, 22:1-10, 23:29-35.

**Some Other Figures of Speech found the New Testament include:** *Metonymy* a figure of speech which exchanges the name of one thing for that of another on account of some relation between them. ( Luke 16:29, Luke 2:30, 1 Cor. 11:26, Rom 9: 13). *Synecdoche*, is a figure of speech in which anything less or anything more is put for the precise object meant. (Luke 2:1, Acts 27:37, Mark 16:15, Rom. 1:16) *Personification*, is a figure that clothes inanimate objects with the attributes of things animate. (Isa. 55:12; *Paronomasia*, a play upon words, a figure in which a word is repeated with a variation in the sense. (Matt. 8:22) and *Anthropomorphism*, is a figure which ascribes human features or elements of the human form to God. (1 Pet. 3:12).