

Literary Devices in the Scripture

This is by no means an exhaustive list of literary devices that are used in Scripture, and it does not go into literary styles (such as poetic, narrative, and apocalyptic). This document is simply to help raise awareness that literary devices do exist in the inspired Word of God, and they are there to help us to better understand what is being said, and the meaning the authors intended.

Allegory

An allegory is a story that often contains a number of objects, parts or players, which are each symbolic of real life objects, parts or players.

An example would be the prophet Nathan's story from 2 Samuel 12:

"There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveller came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveller who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him." (vv1-4)

In this allegory, the rich man represents David, the poor man Uriah, and the ewe Bathsheba.

Alliteration

This is the repetition of words starting with the same letter, and as such it rarely comes through into translations as it occurs only in the original Hebrew or Greek. Examples include Hebrews 1:1 and Psalm 122:6 (it is used a great deal in the Psalms and Micah)

Alliteration is added to attract attention to the author's announcements and accounts.

Allusion

An allusion is an indirect reference to something that the reader is expected to recognise. They may not be so obvious to us today, of course.

"A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head." (Revelation 12:1)

The woman, sun, moon, and twelve stars are a reference to Joseph's dream in Genesis 37, and therefore represent Israel.

Chiasm (Chiastic Structure)

The name comes from the Greek letter *chi* (which is shaped like the letter X). In a chiasm, a set of ideas are repeated, but in reverse order, such as, such as A-B-B¹-A¹. A corresponds with A¹ (called 'A prime') and B corresponds with B¹.

A *"The Sabbath was made*
B *for Man,*
B¹ *not Man*
A¹ *for the Sabbath."* (Mark 2:27)

The 'primes' are rarely exact repeats of the original idea, but will have a connection of some sort.

A chiasm may be as simple as a single verse, or as elaborate as a whole Psalm, parable, or even an entire book. By using this device, an author can show both progression of thought and intensification of meaning. Often there is a central, unrepeated idea, which is usually then the key point that the writer is pointing us to.

Ellipsis

An ellipsis is the omission of a word or words that then have to be added back in for the sentence to make sense. This is used to diminish those words, and by contrast emphasize others.

“He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour (his anger) forever.” (Psalm 103:9)

The words 'his anger' are implied, but they are omitted in the Hebrew. In this way the writer diminishes God's anger and emphasizes the fact that he will not harbour it.

Hyperbole (Exaggeration)

Hyperbole is the deliberate (and usually obvious) over-stating of a case in order to emphasize a point. Jesus was a master of hyperbole!

“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Mark 10:25)

“If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters – yes, even his own life – he cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:26)

“You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.” (Matthew 23:24)

Idiom

These are expressions that are understood by those using them, but which do not make sense when taken literally. For example, in English the phrase 'raining cats and dogs' is understood to mean precipitous rainfall, rather than a literally falling of animals from the sky.

Most translations do not translate idioms literally, but give the true meaning of the idiom instead.

“Adam lay with his wife” (Genesis 4:1) – literally 'knew' his wife.

“The anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel” (Judges 2:14) – literally 'the nose of the LORD was hot'

“For His mercy is great” (2 Samuel 24:14) – literally 'His womb or bowels are great'

Merism

This is where a whole thing is referred to by two or more of its parts.

“You will not fear the terror of night, nor the arrow that flies by day.” (Psalm 91:5)

Reference here to 'night' and 'day' implies there will be no cause to fear at any time.

Metaphor

A metaphor is like a simile, only it omits comparative words like 'like' or 'as', instead directly comparing one thing with another. Jesus is referred to as a lamb, a shepherd, a gate, a vine, a cornerstone, a temple, a body, and a lion. Metaphors are usually easy to spot, but are also open to misinterpretation.

“Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, 'Take and eat; this is my body.' Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, 'Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood...’” (Matthew 26:26-28)

Metonymy

This is where a word is used to convey the meaning of something else (often more complex). For example, in English we say, 'Give me a hand', where 'hand' is a metonym for the helpful work that may be accomplished by the hand and its bearer.

“Even to this day when Moses is read, a veil covers their hearts.” (2 Corinthians 3:15)

Here 'Moses' conveys the meaning of the Law, or even the whole Old Testament, and 'hearts' conveys something even more complex!

Numerology

Occasionally numbers are used in symbolic ways in Scripture, especially in prophesy and apocalyptic writings. These are a type of symbol, but it is worth bearing in mind that numbers do not always have symbolic meaning.

Numerology is limited to a few common theologically significant numbers, eg:

3	Trinity
7	Divine perfection
12	God's people
40	Testing

Parable

A parable is a short story, which may be as complex as an allegory (eg. The Parable of the Sower – Mark 4:3-8) or may be as simple as a simile (eg. The Parable of the Yeast – Matthew 13:33).

These short stories are intended to illustrate (or possibly conceal) a spiritual truth.

Paradox

A paradox is a statement that appears illogical or contradictory, but actually conveys a deep truth.

“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.”
(Matthew 16:25)

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.” (Mark 10:31)

Parallelism

Parallelism is a device that adds emphasis through repetition. There are various forms of parallelism:

Synonymous Parallelism – the same thought is repeated for emphasis

“The seas have lifted up, O LORD, the seas have lifted up their voice; the seas have lifted up their pounding waves.” (Psalm 93:3)

Antithetical Parallelism – the first thought is emphasized by contrasting it with the second

“He who ignores discipline despises himself, but whoever heeds correction gains understanding.” (Proverbs 15:32)

Synthetic Parallelism – similar thoughts are used to build up the theme

“At her feet he sank, he fell; there he lay. At her feet he sank, he fell; where he sank, there he fell – dead.” (Judges 5:27)

Personification

An impersonal object or concept is present as a person. One such example is in Proverbs 9 where Wisdom is presented as a woman.

Other forms include:

Anthropomorphism, where God is described as having human body parts, such as arms (Deuteronomy 33:27), and eyes (Psalm 34:15)

Apostrophe, where the writer addresses an impersonal object or concept as if it were a person, such as *“O death, where is your sting?”* (1 Corinthians 15:55)

Play on Words / Pun

As these are plays on Hebrew and Greek words they rarely come across in translation. Here are a couple of examples from each language:

“Terror (pahad) and pit (pahath) and snare (pah) await you, O people of the earth.” (Isaiah 24:17)

“I tell you that you are Peter (Petros), and on this rock (petra) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” (Matthew 16:18)

Such puns may be used to add emphasis or dramatic tension.

Prolepsis

This is used to refer to instances when a writer will refer to something which, in context, is in the future. It may be considered anachronistic, but it is used either out of expedience (such as referring to Philistines in Genesis 26, before the Philistines existed, because it would be easily understood) or to make a point.

“He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” (Hebrews 11:26)

In the time of Moses, both Christ and 'his reward' were future objects, but the writer uses prolepsis to make the point that, even unknowingly, Moses had faith in Jesus.

Sarcasm

Sarcasm involves a cutting humour in which the speaker will usually say one thing in order to emphasize completely the opposite.

“Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” (1 Kings 18:27)

Satire

Overlapping somewhat with sarcasm and hyperbole, satire is used to ridicule and shame people by holding up their vices and follies for others to scorn.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean.” (Matthew 23:27)

Simile

A simile is a figure of speech comparing two things used a connective such as “like” or “as”.

“As a door turns on its hinges, so a sluggard turns on his bed.” (Proverbs 26:14)

“All men are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall.” (1 Peter 1:24)

Symbol

A symbol is something that represents another thing, often an abstract concept.

There are many such symbols in Scripture, but, as with numerology, it is worth bearing in mind that the same objects etc are not symbols in every instance! Here are a few examples:

'White' may represent purity (eg. Isaiah 1:18)

'Linen' may represent righteousness (eg. Revelation 19:8)

'Crown' may represent immortality (1 Corinthians 9:25)

'Tower' may represent safety (Psalm 27:1)

'Water' may represent the Holy Spirit (John 4:14)

Type

A type is a shadow of something else, referred to as the 'antitype'. Both the type and antitype are real persons, events or other things.

Hebrews 5 tells us that Mechizedek is a 'type' of Christ

John 3 shows the snake Moses lifted up in the desert as a 'type' of Christ on the cross

1 Peter 3 talks of the Great Flood as a 'type' of baptism