

## Literary Devices and Figures of Speech (Jer 9:3; Jas 3:3-12)

The Holy Spirit is a literary artist, and in many places of the Bible, He uses literary devices and figures of speech. But this can make Bible study difficult, because you have to understand the imagery to understand what God is telling you.

Pictures can be worth a thousand words and images and figures of speech produce powerful messages that communicate with few words. There are several reasons why God communicates in this manner:

- 1) His message becomes alive and memorable, and
- 2) abstract concepts become tangible and easier to understand. A figure of speech communicates something other than its literal meaning; however, it conveys literal truth.

When you take the time to work out the figures of speech, you can learn a lot about yourself and God and become a better person.

There are many types of figures of speech. Two examples are presented here about the human tongue using the more common types of figurative language often seen in the Bible. To make the Bible easier to study, the verses of the passages have been separated and parts have been highlighted to help with your observation. Separating the text into bite size chunks is a good technique to use when encountering a challenging passage.

Jeremiah 9:3 (NASB)

3) **"They bend their tongue like their bow;** Lies and not truth prevail in the land; For they proceed from evil to evil, And they do not know Me," declares the LORD.

When you see "their bow" what image do you see here? What do you think immediately comes to mind for the people of 600 B.C.?

James 3:3-12 (NASB)

3) Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 4) Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

Can you take these two verses literally? Is this figurative speech or does this make sense literally? While these two verses are not figures of speech, what is James saying?

5) **So also** the tongue is a small part of the body, **and yet it boasts of great things.** See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

What does the conjunction "so also" tell you?

What image do you see in the figure of speech “yet it boasts of great things.”

Did you notice a new image, “a forest set aflame by such a small fire,” presented after the personification? What is James telling us?

6) And **the tongue is a fire**, the **very world of iniquity**; the tongue is set among our members as that which **defiles the entire body**, and **sets on fire the course of our life**, and **is set on fire by hell**.

Is the phrase “the tongue is a fire” a figure of speech?

Is your tongue “the very world of iniquity?” Is this a good representation? What effect does this have on James’ portrayal of the tongue?

Can you guess what figure of speech are the phrases “sets on fire the course of life” and “is set on fire by hell?”

7) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8) But no one can tame the tongue; **it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison**.

Do you recognize this figure of speech? What does the comparison tell you?

9) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10) from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. 11) **Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?** 12) **Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs?** Nor can salt water produce fresh.

What kind of questions are these?

The Teacher Note for this lesson is at:  
<http://Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/25Curriculum/Class6-8/print/Bible.Herm.FigSpeech.6-8.pdf>

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**Teacher Notes**

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There are many types of figures of speech. Two examples are presented here about the human tongue using the more common types of figurative language often seen in the Bible. To make the Bible easier to study, the verses of the passages have been separated and parts have been highlighted to help with your observation. Separating the text into bite size chunks is a good technique to use when encountering a challenging passage.

For those who desire to know more, there are ten types of figures of speech: personification, metaphor, simile, alliteration, onomatopoeia, hyperbole, euphemism, irony, anaphora, and apostrophe. As a literary device, each type of figure provides the author a method of communicating with a certain rhetorical strategy.

Jeremiah 9:3 (NASB)

3) **"They bend their tongue like their bow**; Lies and not truth prevail in the land; For they proceed from evil to evil, And they do not know Me," declares the LORD.

When you see "their bow" what image do you see here? What do you think immediately comes to mind for the people of 600 B.C.?

"They bend their tongue like their bow" is a **simile**. Similes make comparisons by using the words "like" or "as." The author is presenting the image of the bow and conferring its qualities to the subject of comparison – "their tongue."

Through this imagery, the prophet Jeremiah is stating that the people of Judah use their tongue like an archer bending a bow to shoot lies.

James 3:3-12 (NASB)

3) Now if we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. 4) Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires.

Can you take these two verses literally? Is this figurative speech or does this make sense literally? While these two verses are not figures of speech, what is James saying?

The picture that James presents is a) horses controlled by a small bit, and b) ships controlled by a small rudder. These small objects control much larger objects. Intuitively, whoever controls the small object of control, controls the larger object.

5) **So also** the tongue is a small part of the body, **and yet it boasts of great things**. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

What does the conjunction “so also” tell you?

James uses "so also" to connect the two images of verses 3 and 4 to the tongue.

What image do you see in the figure of speech “yet it boasts of great things.”

The phrase "boasts of great things" is a figure of speech; it is a **personification** in which the tongue is given a human characteristic.

Did you notice a new image, “a forest set aflame by such a small fire,” presented after the personification of the tongue? What is James telling us?

The repetition of “great” seen in “boasts of great things” and “how great a forest is set aflame” associates the danger of boasting. The new image portrays the tongue from controlling a person to an escalating destructive loss of control!

6) And **the tongue is a fire**, the **very world of iniquity**; the tongue is set among our members as that which **defiles the entire body**, and **sets on fire the course of our life**, and **is set on fire by hell**.

Is the phrase “the tongue is a fire” a figure of speech?

Yes! This phrase is a metaphor, because an image is used to make a comparison using the verb "is," "are," "was," or "were."

Is your tongue “the very world of iniquity?” Is this a good representation? What effect does this have on James’ portrayal of the tongue?

The phrase “the very world of iniquity” is called a hyperbole. This figure of speech is an exaggeration that is used to emphasize something; in this case, the destructiveness of the tongue. The tongue is not only small and powerful, but it is perverse!

Can you guess what figure of speech are the phrases “defiles the entire body,” “sets on fire the course of life” and “is set on fire by hell?”

The phrases “defiles the entire body” and “sets on fire the course of life” personify the tongue with human actions, and they continue to develop the evil image of the tongue by tarnishing / corrupting a person and creating a reputation that can last a long time.

The last figure of speech, "is set on fire by hell," personifies hell and completes the vivid and destructive image of the tongue by indicating its evil cause and potential destination.

7) For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. 8) But no one can tame the tongue; **it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison**.

Do you recognize this figure of speech? What does the comparison tell you?

“It is a restless evil and full of poison” is a metaphor. James portrays the tongue as an evil entity and indicates that we cannot control what we say.

9) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; 10) from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. 11) **Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?** 12) **Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs?** Nor can salt water produce fresh.

What kind of question are these?

The paradoxical nature of man both blessing and cursing emphasizes the evilness of the tongue.

The last two verses are examples of rhetorical questions: "Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water?" and "Can a fig tree produce olives or a vine produce figs?"

This form of figurative speech is not a question that asks for an answer; instead, it emphasizes the obvious and apparent truth or point. The tongue should not be used for evil.