

## Literary devices and figures of speech...communicating with images...

Pictures can be worth a thousand words and as literary devices, images and figures of speech, produce powerful messages that communicate with few words. There are several reasons why God chose this as a means to communicate: 1) His message becomes alive and memorable, and 2) abstract concepts become tangible and easier to understand. A figure of speech is a term that communicates something other than its literal meaning; however, it conveys literal truth. Figurative speech does not indicate “mythical” or “mystical!”

There are many types of figures of speech, and this note intends to introduce the more common types often seen in the Bible. For this example, study the two following verses: Jeremiah 9:3 and James 3:3-12. The subject is the tongue, which is the organ for taste and speech.

**Jeremiah 9:3.** Jeremiah is prophesying in Judah against the sins of the Jews through the reigns of Josiah (640-609 B.C.), Jehoahaz (609 B.C.), Jehoiakim (609-598 B.C.), Jehoachin (598-597 B.C.), and Zedekiah (597-586 B.C.).

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.

“They bend their tongue like their bow” is a **simile**; this figure of speech is a comparison using the words “like” or “as.” Qualities of the image are being conferred upon the subject, and, in this case, the majority in Judah is using their tongue as a weapon shooting lies.

**James 3:3-12.** James, the brother of Jesus, is writing to the Jewish Christians about the human tongue.

3) Now if we put the bits into the horses’ mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well.

This verse is not a figure of speech; however, there is an image where horses are *controlled* by a bit, which is known to be *small*.

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.

This verse is not a figure of speech; however, another image is presented where *great* ships, driven by *strong* winds, are *directed* by *small* rudders. A paradoxical image is created: small devices control large objects. In addition, by controlling the small device, one controls the large 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!

The term “so also” is a conjunction that connects the two images of verses 3 and 4 to the tongue. The phrase “boasts of great things” is a figure of speech; it is a **personification** in which the tongue is given a human characteristic. Following this figure of speech and the two previous images, the new image moves from control to escalating destructive loss of control!

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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.

The “tongue is a fire” is a **metaphor**. A metaphor makes a comparison and is easily identified with the verb “is,” “are,” “was,” and “were.” A **hyperbole**, “the very world of iniquity,” follows the metaphor; in this figure of speech, an exaggeration is used to emphasize, in this case, the destructiveness of the tongue. The tongue is not only small and powerful, but it is perverse! **Personification** continues to develop the evil image of the tongue; the figures of speech are “defiles the entire body” and “sets on fire the course of our life.” The final **metaphor** “is set on fire by hell,” which completes the vivid and destructive image of the tongue by comparing where the fire originated.

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.

This **metaphor**, “it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison,” makes an image transition; the tongue is now an evil entity in which there is nothing good.

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.

These two verses are not figures of speech; however, the paradoxical nature of man both blessing and cursing emphasizes the evilness of the tongue.

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.

These 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 inconsistently!

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Understanding figures of speech is very important and this short note only introduces you to the subject. Not recognizing or misidentifying a figure of speech can lead to misinterpretation of the passage. All books on hermeneutics cover this topic and examples of some fine books are located in Tools for the Trade. Here are three guidelines (of many more) from scholars on this subject that will help you stay on the path of proper exegesis:

**1. Always take the literal sense unless there is good reason otherwise.**

**2. If the literal is impossible, absurd, or immoral, take the figurative**

Example: "...the trees of the field will clap their hands (Isa 55:12)." This is an absurd statement.

**3. If the Scripture or context indicates a figurative, take the figurative**

Example: In Daniel 7, Daniel describes "four great beasts" which, in a later verse (Dan 7:17), are identified, "These great beasts,...are four kings who..." The "four great beasts" are obviously figurative speech.

### TIPS:

1. Look for comparisons with similes and metaphors. What is alike / unlike?
2. What is the apparent truth or point of the rhetorical question?
3. What is being emphasized by the hyperbole?
4. What inconsistency is being emphasized by the paradox?
5. What is the image and subject of passage?
6. Do not assume that the figure, when used in other passages, will always mean the same thing!

*"Behind every figure of speech is a literal meaning, and by means of the historical-grammatical exegesis of the text, these literal meanings are to be sought out."* Earl Radmacher