

It Figures ...

Commentary for May 1, 2008 — Figure of Speech Examples

The article for May 2008 titled "Figures of Speech and the Holy Scripture" from an audiotape lecture by Dr. Martin from 1977 is now online. Read the "[May 1, 2008 Newsletter](#)" first. Dr. Martin's presentation will help you understand some of the issues involved in figures of speech in the Bible. Their purpose is to add force to the truth. Look at one passage below:

"Mine eyes do fail with tears, my bowels are troubled, my liver is poured upon the earth, for the destruction of the daughter of my people; because the children and the sucklings swoon in the streets of the city."

• *Lamentations 2:11*

The prophet Jeremiah is writing about his own powerful feelings of grief and emotional pain about the future desolations of Zion by the Babylonians as part of God's righteous punishment upon them. When Jeremiah saw what was coming upon the city and people of Jerusalem he became physically ill. Some of Jeremiah's statements are perfectly straightforward and understandable: those about the eyes and tears, bowels being troubled, destruction, children fainting from hunger.

One statement, however, "**my liver is poured upon the earth**," is a figure of speech because the literal meaning cannot be true. What does it mean "**poured upon the earth**"? It could indicate something quite real occurred. In other words he vomited. Perhaps Jeremiah vomited green bile produced by the liver, due to his highly emotional state. Whatever the case, the figure is clear: Jeremiah was terribly upset for his people and city.

God makes some things obscure so we will investigate further. Further research increases your familiarity with other Scriptures and expands your understanding of how God thinks and acts through His servants, all leading to Christ and His work of salvation.

Similes

A common figure of speech is that of a simile, which means a similarity of some kind between two things. In the Bible they frequently are identified by the words "like" or "as."

There is one important thing to remember: The two things being mentioned in a simile are not to be compared with each other except on the point indicated. In other words, do not carry the simile farther than the example. The difference is between a resemblance and a close identification. Let me give you some examples.

When the twins Esau and Jacob were born Esau is described as being covered with red hair:

"And the first came out red, all over like an hairy garment; and they called his name Esau."

• *Genesis 25:25*

Esau's hair was not a hairy garment, it was like a hairy garment. Such examples become more serious when we deal with Christ. For example when dealing with the subject of Melchizedek:

"Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abides a priest continually."

• *Hebrews 7:3*

This simile by itself tells us, confirmed in context, that Melchizedek (who is like the Son of God) is NOT Christ (who is the Son of God). Conversely Christ is NOT Melchizedek.

Note the comparisons of times before the flood and Christ, the Son of Man's second coming, and the days of Lot, also compared with the Son of Man's coming.

"And as it was in the days of Noe [Noah], so shall it be also in the days of the Son of man. They did eat, they drank, they married wives, they were given in marriage, until the day that Noe entered into the ark, and the flood came, and destroyed them all.

Likewise also as it was in the days of Lot; they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded; But the same day that Lot went out of Sodom it rained fire and brimstone from heaven, and destroyed them all."

• *Luke 17:26–29*

Note the simile described for events at Pentecost: **"And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them"** (Acts 2:3). The cloven tongues looked like fire, but they were not fire.

The apostle Peter compares the devil to a roaring lion. Satan the devil is not a lion, but he has the characteristics of a lion in the sense Peter indicates:

"Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walks about, seeking whom he may devour."

• *1 Peter 5:8*

I recall decades ago reading in a book by an African big game hunter. In the narrative he discussed this verse and remarked that in reality **"a roaring lion"** is less dangerous than you would expect. While a roaring lion is a hungry lion, expressing his hunger, the fact of his roaring makes his general direction and relative distance known. He becomes dangerous only when the roaring ends — and the stalking begins. A roaring lion, like the devil, tells you that danger is in the vicinity and that there is great danger if you do not take precautions as Peter recommends: **"Be sober, be vigilant ..."** The hunter in the book said that this passage exactly describes natural conditions in the wild.¹

David calls upon God to rescue him from his persecutors as described in Psalm 7:2: **"Lest he tear my soul like a lion, rending it in pieces, while there is none to deliver."** This does not mean that the persecutor was a lion, merely that the effect on David would have been compared to a lion's attack. This from a man who faced down a lion from attacking the flock (1 Samuel 17:34–37). In another psalm David compares the viciousness of his persecutors: **"Like as a lion that is greedy of his prey, and as it were a young lion lurking in secret places"** (Psalm 17:12).

How much less interesting, emphatic, and useful would Peter's and David's teachings and admonitions have been if they had made plain statements of fact without figures of speech? Identifying and understanding figures of speech will increase your insight into God's message for you in His word. I hope Dr. Martin's article will open up for you new and broader comprehension of your Bible.

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1. Lions were well known in ancient Israel, although there were probably none in New Testament times. As the article "Lion" in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1st ed, 1915) notes:

"Nearly all references to the lion are figurative. The only notices of the lion in narrative are of the lion slain by Samson (Jdg 14:5); by David (1 Sam 17:34 f); by Benaiah (2 Sam 23:20; 1 Ch 11:22); the prophet slain by a lion (1 Ki 13:24; also 1 Ki 20:36); the lions sent by the Lord among the settlers in Samaria (2 Ki 17:25); Daniel in the lions' den (Dan 6:16)."