

Bible Literary Techniques
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Acrostic

This is a device found in Old Testament poetry in which the successive units of a poem begin with the consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The units might be single lines, pairs of lines, or stanzas (as in Psalms 34, Lamentations 3 (3verses), Psalm 119). This can only be seen in the original Hebrew text.

Alliteration

This is the repetition of the same initial sounds of adjacent or nearby words, and is used for narrative effect. This is a literary device that can really only be seen or heard in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages of the Bible. In English, an example would be “alliteration attracts attention.”

Allusion

This is an indirect reference to something else. The person, thing, or event being alluded to is understood from a personal or cultural context or knowledge.

- [John 8:58](#), "Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

Many people and events from the Bible have become allusions in the English language, such as when we refer to someone as being a “good Samaritan,” or having “the patience of Job,” or “the wisdom of Solomon,” or even having an unhealthy desire for something that is a “forbidden fruit.”

Anthropomorphism

This is a type of personification that ascribes human characteristics (such as human actions, emotions, or physical attributes) to God. This projection of human characteristics onto God was done in order to make Him more understandable to us. It is the language of appearance, of describing God in human terms.

- [Genesis 6:6](#), "And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart."

Apostrophe

This is an indirect type of personification, where the speaker addresses an inanimate object, or himself or herself, or others who cannot or do not respond to the statement or question.

- [Psalm 43:5](#), "Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?"
- [Isaiah 44:23](#), "Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it. Shout, you lower parts of the earth, break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it!"

Assonance

This is the repetition of the same internal sounds of adjacent or nearby words, and is used for narrative effect. This is a literary device that can really only be seen or heard in the original languages of the Bible. In English, an example of this would be "conceive it, perceive it, believe it, achieve it."

Chiasmus

This is a figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through the reversal of the lines of a poetic structure in order to make a larger point. The two clauses display inverted parallelism.

- [Isaiah 6:10](#), "Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed."

Hyperbole

This is a use of exaggeration for emphasis or rhetorical effect.

- [II Chronicles 1:15](#), "Also the king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones."
- [Mark 9:43](#), "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched."
- [John 12:19](#), "The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, "You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!"

Idiom

This is a figure of speech or an expression that is peculiar to a particular language, and in and of itself cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its component words taken separately. Examples in English would be "to pay through the nose," "break a leg," and "a bee in your bonnet."

- [Matthew 23:24](#), "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!"

Imagery

This is the use of vivid or figurative language to represent objects, actions, or ideas.

- [Revelation 12:1](#), "Now a great sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a garland of twelve stars."

This imagery is reminiscent of Joseph's dream of the sun, moon, and stars in [Genesis 37:9](#).

Merism

This is a listing of opposite parts to signify a whole or a totality. For example, the division of "night/day" and "darkness/noonday" in the Psalm below means "all the time."

- [Psalm 91:5-6](#), "You shall not be afraid of the terror by night, nor of the arrow that flies by day, nor of the pestilence that walks in darkness, nor of the destruction that lays waste at noonday."

Metaphor

This is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two seemingly unlike things.

- [James 3:6](#), "And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity."

Metonymy

This is a type of metaphor in which something (either concrete or conceptual) is not identified by its own name, but by a name of something closely identified or associated with it, as in calling a business executive "a suit."

- [Leviticus 26:6](#), "I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I will rid the land of evil beasts, and the sword will not go through your land."
- [Revelation 1:18](#), "And I have the keys of Hades and of Death."

Paradox

This is a statement that seems to be illogical or contradictory on the surface, but in actually conveys a deeper truth.

- [Matthew 16:25](#), "For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it."

Parallelism

This is a figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through the lines of a poetic structure in order to make a larger point.

- [Matthew 7:7-8](#), "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."

Personification

This is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human objects (usually the divine, inanimate things, or abstract ideas), and is done as a rhetorical device.

- [Psalm 77:16](#), "The waters saw You, O God; The waters saw You, they were afraid; The depths also trembled."
- [Proverbs 1:20-21](#), "Wisdom calls aloud outside; She raises her voice in the open squares. She cries out in the chief concourses at the openings of the gates in the city she speaks her words."

Simile

This is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two seemingly unlike things using "like" or "as."

- [Matthew 28:3](#), "His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow."

Symbolism

This is the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities, giving meaning or character to something.

- [Revelation 13:1](#), "Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name."

Synecdoche

This is a figure of speech in which: a part is used to represent the whole, or the whole for a part, or the specific for the general, or the general for the specific.

- [II Kings 8:9](#), "So Hazael went to meet him and took a present with him, of every good thing of Damascus, forty camel-loads."
- [Ephesians 6:12](#), "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood."

Type

This is a literary foreshadowing, where one person or thing serves as a metaphorical prefigure (type) of another that is to come later. In the Bible, this is a person or thing (as is found in the Old Testament) prefiguring another person or thing (as is found in the New Testament). For example, the bronze snake pole that the people looked to serves as a type, or prefiguring, of the Cross.

- [Numbers 21:9](#), "So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived."

- [John 3:14-15](#), "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life."

Wordplay

This is the witty use of the meanings and ambiguities of words. Biblical writers made plays on word meanings that can only be seen in the original languages.

- [Matthew 16:18](#), "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." [*Petros*, the word for "Peter," means "a small rock, stone, or pebble"; *petra*, the word for "rock" here, means "a large rock."]
- [Philemon 1:10-11](#), "I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me." [*Onesimus* means "profitable or useful."]