

Style of Literature

How to Study the Bible
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I. Prose

- A. History
- B. Biographical Sketches
- C. Up Close & Personal
- D. Letters

II. Poetry

- The language of feeling

- 1) I walked along the beach today, I strolled across the sand.
- 2) See the software writer organizing zeros and ones. Another game to fill our time.

III. Wisdom Literature

(Proverbs)

IV. Apocalyptic (code... encrypted)

V. Special Categories

- A. Parables
- B. Allegories
- C. Anthropomorphism
- D. Idioms

In the literature of the Bible also we can find figures of speech that are to be taken symbolically, not literally. Of course, this problem arises: how do we know when to take the Bible literally and when to consider the language symbolic? Here are some guidelines:

1. Is the literal interpretation absurd? Jesus said, "I am the door." (John 10:7); but it would be ridiculous to think of him as a block of wood with hinges and a knob.
2. Would a literal interpretation contradict other teachings? Jesus advised cutting off a hand (Matthew 5:30). Taken literally, that would violate other teachings about caring for our bodies and resisting temptation. (1 Corinthians 6:18-20; 10:13).
3. Does the immediate context (verses surrounding) tell us what the interpretation should be? When Jesus spoke about destroying the temple, the text tells us that He was referring to his body (John 2:18-21).
4. Does the Bible interpret the symbol elsewhere? Many of the symbols in the book of Revelation are explained in the book itself. The seven gold lamp stands (Revelation 1:12) are churches (1:20). The woman (17:3) is a city (17:5). The waters (17:1) are peoples (17:5). The seven heads (17:3) are hills or mountains (17:9).
5. Interpret God's Word literally unless you have a clear reason to take it symbolically. The most important thing to ask is this: what point is this picturesque speech trying to communicate to us?

Following are examples of figures of speech that are found in the Bible. See if you can decide what truth God is communicating in each.

1. *Two things are compared.*
 - a. God is our rock (Psalm 42:9)
 - b. A man will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water (Psalm 1:3)
 - c. The earthly tent we dwell in (2 Corinthians 5:1)
 - d. His heart is hard as a stone (Job 41:24)
 - e. Stiff-necked (Acts 7:51)
 - f. Faith as a mustard seed (Matthew 17:20)
 - g. Like a dew to Israel (Hosea 14:5)
 - h. I am a worm (Psalm 22:6)
 - i. The devil is like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8)
2. *A thing is given personal characteristics.*
 - a. Let the many islands be glad (Psalm 97:1)
 - b. Let the mountains sing together for joy (Psalm 98:8)
3. *Part of a person's body is used for the whole person.*
 - a. You will bring my gray hair down to Sheol in sorrow (Genesis 42:38)
 - b. The government will rest on his shoulders (Isaiah 9:6).

4. *Something is exaggerated for emphasis.*
 - a. My eyes shed streams of water (Psalm 119:136)
 - b. Would that those who are troubling you would even mutilate themselves (Galatians 5:12)

5. *Numbers are used as symbols. (In a context where symbols are consistently used, certain numbers have symbolic meanings).*
 - a. one – unity
 - b. three – divine (Father , Son, Holy Spirit)
 - c. four – earthly (four corners, four walls)
 - d. ten – complete, full (derived from fingers)
 - e. seven – perfect, complete (derived from adding 3 and 4, divine and earthly)
 - f. twelve – organized religion (from 12 patriarchs and 12 apostles)
 - g. a thousand – period of time stretching over all generations.
 - h. three and a half – incomplete, a short time (half 7)
 - i. six – failure, sin (one short of seven)
 - j. 666 – sin personified

It isn't always easy to tell whether a number is to be taken literally or figuratively; but if the context contains much symbolic language; the chances are that the number is symbolic also

Parables. Jesus used many parables in His teaching. Through those earthly stories He communicated eternal truths. The parable was a simple window through which Jesus enabled people to see the truth.

When seeking to understand and apply the parables, we must be careful to not get so involved in every crack and crevice of the frame that we miss seeing through the pane to the truth. Usually a parable was told for one application, which was made very clear. Do not try to make something out of every minute detail in the parable unless Jesus explained what the various details meant.

Generally, you should let the context of the parable tell you the point that is being made. Often the main point was highlighted at the end of the parable. When several parables were told in a row without any intervening events, Jesus was developing a pattern of thought.

What was the meaning of Jesus' parable of the good Samaritan? (Luke 10:25-37). We must read the context carefully and notice how Jesus ended the parable. Jesus was answering the question of a lawyer: "Who is my neighbor?" Through the parable, He taught that a neighbor shows mercy on one who is in need and that the lawyer should live in the same way. This was made clear in the conversation at the end of the parable.

Luke 15 records three parables Jesus told in a row. We must notice the context (15:1, 2) and then determine the thought pattern that is expressed. What do the first two parables have in common that the last one does not? Notice how Jesus ended the three parables (verse 32). What one truth was He communicating?

Here is a list of parables that will be helpful for you to study. Remember to note the context, search for the pattern of thought, and notice how the parable ends (often the key to application).

- A series of parables – Matthew 21:28 – 22:14
- The Sower – Mark 4:3-8 (see 14-20)
- Husbandman – Mark 4:26-29
- Mustard Seed – Mark 4:3—32
- Wicked Husbandmen – Mark 12:1-11
- Fig Tree – Mark 13:28, 29

Doorkeeper – Mark 13:33-37
Children – Matthew 11:16-19
Tares and Wheat – Matthew 13:24-30 (see 36-43)
Leaven – Matthew 13:33
Treasure – Matthew 13:44
Pearl – Matthew 13:44, 45
Net – Matthew 13:47-50
Unmerciful Servant – Matthew 18:23-35
Trusted Servant – Matthew 24:45-51
Ten Virgins – Matthew 25:1-13
Talents – Matthew 25:14-30

For an excellent treatment of parables, read *Cracking the Code* by LeRoy Lawson (Standard Publishing).

Conclusion

Jesus was very adept at illustrating truths. He wanted His hearers to understand. He left Heaven, put on flesh, became a servant of mankind, and lived among men as a man to communicate God's truth. He not only spoke it, He demonstrated it.

He did not go to all that trouble to leave us with an incomprehensible mess of words. He did not come to say, "You will never be able to understand God's Word." No, He came to say, "You can understand it, and it will be a blessing to you." God has spoken to everyone, no matter what his status or education. "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."