

SPECIAL PRINCIPLES OF INTERPRETATION CONTINUED

OTHER FIGURES OF SPEECH

1. Rhetorical question. A rhetorical question is not a direct question. A direct question expects an answer. A rhetorical question is used to make a point. Rhetorical questions are used to make arguments convincing. God asked Abraham, "Is there anything too hard for the Lord" (Genesis 18:14). That is a rhetorical question. He did not expect Abraham to answer directly, but to think about it. Paul asked rhetorical questions in Romans 6:1-3. "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" "Do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death?" He wasn't expecting a direct answer. He was wanting his readers to question themselves. Paul goes on to answer them in his teaching, but he asked the questions to set up his arguments and to get his readers' attention.
2. Hyperbole. This is an intentional exaggeration for emphasis. When we say, "I told you a million times," that is an example of hyperbole. The psalmist used hyperbole when he said, "My eyes shed streams of tears" (Psalm 119:136). Rivers were not literally flowing from his eyes, but he was expressing his grief in an emphatic way.
3. Irony. This figure of speech says the opposite of what it means. It is used for emphasis. When irony is spoken, the speaker's tone of voice reveals it. Since we cannot hear the tone of voice in the Bible, we must be sure it is in fact irony. Irony is a form of sarcasm. Study the context carefully before determining that irony is being used. King David's wife Michal said sarcastically, "How the king of Israel has distinguished himself today, going around half-naked in full view of the slave girls of his servants as any vulgar fellow would" (II Samuel 6:20 NIV). She actually meant the opposite, that he had made a fool out of himself or was an embarrassment. When you are uncertain if something is said in irony, consider it in a straightforward way and see if it makes sense. If it doesn't then assume it is irony.

There are many other figures of speech used in the Bible, but these are some of the most common ones. Figures of speech add color and emphasis to language. God's Word is all the more fascinating when we understand how writers used figures of speech when they wrote.

SYMBOLS

A symbol is something that represents something else. It is assigned a meaning for the purpose of depicting certain qualities. A symbol does not have its symbolic meaning because of what it is in itself. The meaning is assigned to it. A person would not normally associate a symbol with that which it symbolizes. The way a person dresses can be symbolic of his attitude toward life. The Bible uses many symbols. Symbols can be used either to reveal truth or hide it. They hide truth from those who do not understand the symbolic meaning and see only the natural meaning. The Bible does not always identify its symbols but leaves it to the reader to recognize them. The same object may symbolize more than one thing. For instance, water speaks of both cleansing and destruction. Fire speaks of cleansing and judgment. We should always consider the context, and we should not assume that the meaning of a symbol in a passage would be the same in all.

Tomorrow we will mention symbols which are found in the Bible and guidelines for interpreting symbols.