FIGURES OF SPEECH IN HUMAN LANGUAGE

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Biblical Hermeneutics, the science of Biblical interpretation, cannot be divorced from the study of language in general. The Bible is not simply a book from God. It is a book for men. It was written in human language by men who used the vocabulary, idiom, sentence structure, and grammar of the generations in which they wrote. Bible interpretation—and translation—must bridge the cultural and linguistic gap between the ancient world and the contemporary world. It is not enough to translate words. The ideas and thought patterns of the Biblical writers must be made relevant to modern society.

I. The Nature of Figurative Language

a. *Concrete expressions precede abstract ideas.*

In the development of language, refined or abstract meanings largely grow out of more concrete meanings (Bloomfield, *Language*, p. 429). The concrete meaning may be thought of as the "literal" meaning of a word, but that "literal" meaning may be completely forgotten in the later history of the usage of the word. Many of our prosaic expressions have a most colorful history. The sincere man is, etymologically, the man "without wax," and the unscrupulous man has no grains of sand in his shoes (to annoy him). The Kaiser of Germany and the Tsar of Russia bore titles derived from Gaius Julius Caesar, whose name also gives us our medical "caesarean" operation. Meaning in each case is determined by use, not etymology.

Our word "dollar" has colorful history. The German "taler", its antecedent, is derived from Joachimstaler, from Poachimstal (Joachim's Dale) in Bohemia, where silver was minted in the sixteenth century. St. Audrey's Fair in Britain was famous for the lace which was sold there. It gave rise to our word "tawdry," in the sense of cheap, showy, or gaudy.

The Hebrew word *paneh* means, in the first instance, face or countenance. As in the English usage of the same word, "face" can mean "surface" and it is possible to speak of "the face of the waters" (Genesis 1:2). With the preposition *Le*, "to" added, we have the concept "to the face of" which comes to mean "in front of" or "before." The concept "before" may refer to place (Gen. 23:12; Exodus 7:10), or of time. Isaiah 18:5 speaks of a time "before the harvest."

In Biblical interpretation it should be remembered that concrete meanings tend to be forgotten when abstract ideas are assigned to words. *Lipheneh*, "to the face of", becomes the word "before" and was thought of as a word in its own right. Thus we have such an expression as *milepheney*, "from before"—which, etymologically, would demand "from to the face of." Every living language develops along these lines, and Biblical languages must not be thought of as exceptions.

b. *Self conscious art expands linguistic usage.*

Such linguistic development as we have just noted is doubtless devoid, for the most part, of any conscious feeling for style. As society becomes more complex, abstract ideas must be expressed and people draw unconsciously upon the vocabulary of concrete phenomena to express the abstract. Every advancing culture, however, has a nucleus of brave souls who are willing to try new linguistic paths. A word or expression used deliberately in a different sense from that which properly belongs to it is called a trope. In the strict sense, these are the only figures of speech. Unconscious change is observable in the history of words. Tropes, however, exhibit an expansion of the existing vocabulary to meet new situations, particularly those of an emotional nature where it is felt that the existing word stock cannot give adequate expression.

When Bobby Burns says, "My love is like a red, red rose," he is seeking for words to describe the beauty of a loved one. The beauty of the rose came to his mind as the best comparison. Shakespeare used the same imagery, albeit in a less romantic moment, when he says, ". . . women are as roses, whose fair flower Being once display'd, doth fall that very hour. (*Twelfth Night*, II, 4, 1. 36). Thinking of the softness of roses, Robert Louis Stevenson remarks, "Marriage is like life in this—that it is a field of battle, and not a bed of roses." (*Vivrigibus Puerisque* I, ch. 1). Pressing the rose as a thing of beauty, Shakespeare remarks—somewhat annoyingly—"Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud." (*Sonnets* 35). In none of these quotations are we far removed from the flower, but in each of them the flower is a kind of object lesson to convey some meaning dear to the heart of the writer. It is this wider usage that leads to our figures of speech.

II. Varieties of Figure of Speech

As is true of other areas of linguistic research, figures of speech precede, and sometimes defy, attempts to classify them. Such attempts are frequently useful, however. They help us to understand and appreciate the variety inherent in human language—a variety which is also inherent in Sacred Scripture.

The simplest figure of speech is the simile, the comparison which is expressed by "like" or "as." An example of this formal comparison may be seen in Isaiah 55:10, 11: "For as the rain and the snow come down from the heavens, and thither do not return, but water the land, and cause it to bear and to sprout, and it gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater: so shall my word be which goes forth out of my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but do that which I desired, and be successful in what I sent it." Since the simile is designed to illustrate the author's meaning it usually does not present interpretation problems. The parables of the New Testament are frequently in the form of extended similes. As such they do present problems to the interpreter who must seize upon the point of comparison intended, and distinguish the vital from the incidental.

The unexpressed, or implied comparison is termed a metaphor. Jesus, in Luke 13:32, referred to Herod as "that old fox." In Matthew 5:13 he said to his disciples, "Ye are the salt of the earth." As the parable is the extended simile, so the allegory is the extended metaphor.

Isaiah 5:1-6 presents the history of God's dealings with Israel in the form of a parable. God, as an husbandman, has planted Israel, the vineyard. Instead of yielding good grapes, she yielded sour grapes. All of the husbandman's labors appear to have been in vain, as far as the results are concerned. He says that he will break down the protecting wall and allow the enemy to destroy the vineyard. The meaning of the parable is clearly given (5:7).

The same elements are used in the form of an allegory in Psalm 80:8-15. God took a vine out of Egypt. He planted it, tended it, and subsequently broke down the wall that protected it. Israel is not identified and there is no statement that the passage is allegorical. Yet there can be no doubt that such is the case. God did not take a vine from Egypt—He took His people—Israel.

The presence of allegory in the accounts of the creation and, particularly, the fall of man is the subject of debate. Most conservative writers assume that the chapters are meant to be understood historically, although they debate concerning such details as the length of the "days" of Genesis 1-2. Franz Delitzsch in his *New Commentary on Genesis* (p. 148) suggested that the account of the talking serpent in chapter three might be regarded as "history clothed in figure." Pieters rejects absolutely an allegorical view of Genesis 3, but he suggests two possible legitimate interpretations: a factual-symbolical one which accepts the entire episode as fact with

a symbolic meaning, and a purely symbolic one which accepts the underlying story as historical, while not accepting the form of portrayal as setting forth what actually occurred.

Perhaps the best known allegory in the English language is Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. There is no question that Bunyan was self-consciously writing an allegory. His names and experiences reflect the pilgrimage—not of a particular historical character, but of "Christian"—any Christian, in a sense every Christian. Allegory is a legitimate method of instruction. When the writer gives clear evidence that he is writing allegorically, the reader should not attempt to read history into it.

A problem arises, however, when sober history is allegorized. We should distinguish between true allegories (such as *Pilgrim's Progress*, or *Gulliver's Travels*) and the allegorical method of interpretation of Scripture and other literature. When sophisticated Greeks outgrew their religious literature (Homer's *Illiad* and *Odessey*, and Hesiod's *Theogany*) they resorted to allegory, declaring that the stories of the gods and goddesses were not history but allegory. When Hellenism met Judaism, particularly at Alexandria, the Old Testament was allegorized by writers such as Aristobulus and Philo. Clement of Alexandria, and Origen introduced the allegorical approach into the Christian church. Although the reformation brought a revival of historical, grammatical, critical study, allegorism continues as a basis for much Roman Catholic thought, and persists, frequently under the guise of typology, in much fundamentalist literature.

There are, of course, allegories in Scripture, and the careful exegete will seek to identify them and interpret them as they were meant to be interpreted. We object to the allegorical method of interpreting that which was meant as history. We seek a proper hermeneutic for that which is clearly allegory.

In the figure of speech known as synecdoche, a part of an object may be used for the whole, or a whole for the part. Luke 2:1 speaks of "all the world" being taxed. The meaning is, of course, the Roman world, the Roman Empire. Jephtah is said to have been buried "in the cities of Gilead" meaning one of them. (Judges 12:7).

Metonymy is the term used when some adjunct or associated idea is put for the main subject, and *vice versa*. The term "Moses and the Prophets" is used for their writings (cf. Luke 16:29). The words "kill the passover" (Exodus 12:21) speak of the slaying of the paschal lamb. When Job (34:6) says "My arrow is incurable" he is speaking of a wound inflicted by an arrow.

The term Personification is used when an inanimate object is spoken of or addressed in human terms. In Numbers 16:32 we read: "The earth opened her mouth and swallowed them (i.e., Korah. Dathan and Abiram) up." Both personification and simile are illustrated in Psalm 114:3-4: "The sea saw and fled, the Jordan was turned backward. The mountains leaped like rams; and the little hills like rams."

The intentional use of exaggeration to produce a designed effect is termed hyperbole. The Midianites and Amalekites are described in Judges 7:12 as "Lying in the valley like grasshoppers for multitude; and their camels . . . without number, as the sand by the sea side for multitude." (Judges 7:12). David speaks of Saul and Jonathan as "swifter than eagles and stronger than lions." (II Samuel 1:23). The Psalmist complains, "All night I make my bed to swim; with my tears I dissolve my couch." (6:6).

When the speaker or writer says the opposite of what he intends, we term his utterance irony. Job made eloquent use of irony when he said, "True it is that ye are the people, and with you wisdom shall die." (12:1). Elijah's taunt addressed to the Baal worshippers is in similar vein: "Cry aloud for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth and must be awaked." (I Kings 18:27).

III. Figures of Speech and Mythology

The culture of Greece and Rome has had a profound effect on the life of the west, including its thought and speech forms. It is an occasion for regret that our generation has lost contact with much classical literature. Common literary allusions make no sense to bright young moderns. The allusion to "resting in the arms of Morpheus" would be meaningless to many who would, nevertheless, have some knowledge of morphine. In the first case we have a direct allusion to, and in the second case a derivitive from the name of the Greek god of dreams. The muses—the Nymphs of ancient Greece—are almost forgotten, but we remember them in our "music" ("the are of the Muses"). Hygieia, goddess of health, has given us our word "hygiene," and Ceres, goddess of agriculture, has given us our "cereals" or grains—a word which has been further specialized in America to designate breakfast foods!

The literary allusion, the figurative speech, and the derivitive word should be carefully distinguished. Examples of each will be found in Scripture, but the careful interpreter will need to distinguish them.

The monster in the Babylonian creation epic, the *Enuma Elish* is known by the name Tiamat. At the climax of the activity described in the epic, Marduk, god of Babylon, pierces her with his sword, divides her into two parts and fashions them into heaven and earth, respectively. Many scholars see in *tehom*, "the deep" in Genesis 1:2, a reflection of this element of mythology. Alexander Heidel does not concur. He notes, "Though coming from the same root, the two words do not denote the same thing. . . . Tiamat is a mythical personality. Such significance the Old Testament *tehom* never has . . . Tehom is masculine, Tiamat feminine." Heidel points out that both Tehom and Tiamat go back to a common Semitic form.

The problem of the relationship between tehom and Tiamat is one of origins. Hypothetically there are two possibilities for the origin of the concepts. The mythology may have priority, and the word used of "the deep" may be derived from the mythology. The "deep" may have been named first, and the personification of the monster of the deep may have received the name assigned to "the deep" or an adaptation thereof. Comparisons may be made with Shemesh, either the sun or the sun god; Yareach, the moon or the moon god; Yam, the sea or the god of the sea and many more. It is certainly true that the naive mind did not distinguish between the sun and the sun god. When man looked at Shemesh he saw the sun disk and a deity whom he adored. Logically, however, the words as applied to the natural phenomena must precede the use of those words for objects of worship. The mythology describes the natural phenomena, rather than the reverse.

This does not rule out the use of mythology in Biblical vocabulary, however. The seven-headed Canaanite monster Lotan, the Biblical Leviathan is used in Scripture to personify the forces of evil which Yaweh has subdued in the past or will subdue in the future.

Psalm 74 calls to remembrance the mighty acts of Yahweh at the time of the exodus. The Psalmist addresses the Lord: "Thou didst divide the sea (Yam) by thy might, thou didst break the heads of the dragons (Tanninim) on the waters, thou didst crush the heads of Leviathan, thou didst give him as food for the creatures of the wilderness" (Psalm 74:13-14). Here the Red Sea is personified. Its waters are the enemies of God and His people. God destroyed the enemy, opened the waters of the sea, and enabled the people to pass over on dry ground. So decisive is the victory that creatures of the wilderness feed upon the remains of the defeated foe.

Afflicted Job would not curse God, but he did curse the day of his birth. In anguish he cried out, "Let those curse it who curse the day, who are skilled to rouse up Leviathan" (Job 3:8). Many ancients believed that an eclipse occurred when a

dragon swallowed the sun or the moon. If only some enchanter had aroused Leviathan, the monster himself might have obliterated the day of Job's birth, thus relieving him of his many troubles!

Isaiah makes reference to Leviathan in a prophetic passage depicting the future victory of God over his foes: "In that day Yehweh with his hard and great and strong sword will punish Leviathan the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the crooked serpent, and he will slay the dragon that is in the sea" (27:1). One of the tablets from Ras Shamra described Lotan in almost identical words: "When thou has smitten Lotan, the fleeing serpent (and) hast put to an end the crooked serpent, the mighty one with seven heads" (67:I:1). In the Ras Shamra text it is Baal rather than Yahweh who is the foe of Lotan/Leviathan. Isaiah was, of course, a strict monotheist. He did not hesitate, however, to draw upon the common stock of poetic imagery known to his generation, just as contemporary writers allude to mythology to illustrate a point without thereby expressing approval of the story or concept so adapted.

Leviathan may be used as the personification of the forces of evil, past or future. In the book of Revelation, the epitome of evil is seen in the dragon (12:9). The beast with "ten horns and seven heads" arising from the sea (13:1) is reminiscent of the seven-headed Lotan of the Ras Shamra tablets. The Seer of Patmos envisions the final victory of God as one in which a "dragon" or "beast" is destroyed as the prelude to an age of everlasting bliss.

Just as Shemesh may refer to the sun, or the sun god, so Leviathan may refer to a marine creature such as the crocodile as well as the monster of mythology. In Psalm 104:25-26 Leviathan is found sporting in the sea, a thoroughly-innocent creature. Similarly Job 41 gives a detailed description of this creature who gives evidence to the wisdom and the power of God.

CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the usage of figures of speech in human language leads us to the following conclusions:

1. Speech in general proceeds from the concrete to the abstract. Concrete expressions frequently develop abstract connotations. Usage, rather than etymology, determines the meaning of words.
2. Imaginative writers and speakers make use of similes, metaphors, and other figures of speech, some of which become standardized in linguistic usage.
3. Mythology and folk lore contribute to linguistic development. This is true of the languages which accept or appreciate the mythology, or have close relations with people who accept or appreciate it.
4. The Bible, written in human language, makes use of figures of speech of all categories.