

Terms and Tools

John Haffner

To say that the Bible is a literary masterpiece would be an understatement. God's inspired word contains a wonderful compilation of literary genres of every kind: history, poetry, drama, and more. Because of the variety of writing styles contained within God's word, it is helpful to know something about the different literary devices that are found within it. The following is a concise list of various literary devices employed in scripture, and also of some helpful resources that may be consulted to help in Bible study.

Christian Worker

Part One: Terms & Concepts

Allegory

Definition:

An allegory is a symbolic application of historical fact. Basically, it is an extended metaphor. It is similar to a parable but instead of dealing with theoretical history, as a parable does, it deals with real facts.

Example: Galatians 4:21-31.

Anthropomorphism

Definition:

Anthropomorphism can be understood to be the act of lending a human quality to God.

Example: Isaiah 59:1-2

Hyperbole

Definition: A hyperbole is a literary device wherein the author uses specific words and phrases that exaggerate and overemphasize the basic crux of the statement in order to produce a grander, more noticeable effect.

Example: Matthew 5:29-30.

Irony

Definition: Irony is when the speaker says one thing, but means another. Often irony is used to suggest the stark contrast of the literal meaning being put forth.

Example: Job 12:2

Metaphor

Definition: In a metaphor, one subject is implied to be another so as to draw a comparison between them.

Example: Matthew 26:26-28.

Metonymy

Definition: Metonymy in literature is the practice of substituting a name or noun with a word that is closely linked to it.

Example: Ephesians 4:20.

Parable

Definition: Parables are one of the most commonly used figures of speech in the Bible. The word comes from two Greek terms that mean, “to place alongside.” A parable is a story of comparison in which something real is used to illustrate a moral truth. Thayer famously called it “an earthly story with a heavenly meaning.”

Example: 2 Samuel 12:1-4; Matthew 13:3-9.

Personification

Definition: Personification refers to the practice of attaching human characteristics to inanimate, or non-human, beings.

Example: Numbers 16:31-32.

Prolepsis

Definition: A figure by which objects are spoken of in anticipation.

Example: Deuteronomy 34:1-5.

Proverb

Definition: A proverb is a short, concise sentence that contains a complete and valuable thought.

Example: 2 Peter 2:22; The book of Proverbs.

Simile

Definition:

Similes are one of the most commonly used literary devices. A simile is simply a comparison between two different objects using “like” or “as”.

Example: Acts 2:1-4.

Synecdoche

Definition:

A synecdoche is a literary device that uses a part of something to refer to the whole or vice versa.

Example: Acts 19:27; Acts 20:7.

Part Two: Study Tools & Resources

(Mention of a book is not an endorsement of all of its contents)

Commentary

A commentary is a series of comments, explanations, or annotations on scripture. Good commentaries are very valuable in helping us to understand passages of scripture but, because they contain man’s explanation of scripture, they should always be used with caution. There are a wide variety of good commentaries by sound brethren available, such as R.L. Whiteside’s commentary on Romans, Wayne Jackson’s commentary on the New Testament, and the Gospel Advocate New Testament commentary set.

Concordance

A concordance is an alphabetical index of the words of the Bible with a reference to each passage in which the words occur. Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible is without doubt the most well-known commentary on the market.

Dictionary

Bible dictionaries are a combination of definitions and proper names for Biblical words with verse references, which allows users to discover the meaning of words and study them in context to the specific verse or passage. Many word searches also include the original Greek and Hebrew word with meaning. There are a variety of Bible dictionaries available such as Smith's Bible Dictionary, Easton's Bible Dictionary, the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words.

Bible Atlas

A Bible atlas is a book of maps relevant to the time and events of the Bible. An atlas helps to provide a visualization of the geographic regions of the Bible lands that will provide more depth and understanding to our study. The American Bible Society Maps or Baker's Bible Atlas are just two of many that are available.

Hermeneutics

It is impossible to study the Bible effectively without understanding how to properly interpret it, so a book about proper hermeneutics is very valuable. D.R. Dungan's book *Hermeneutics* is a classic text that provides solid instruction in properly interpreting scripture.

Bible Introduction

There are a number of books available that provide introductory and background information on each Bible book. These volumes provide information about the author, date, audience, historical setting, etc. on each book of the Bible. Henry C. Thiessen's *Introduction to the New Testament*, and Norman Geisler and William Nix's *General Introduction to the Bible* are both very valuable resources.

Topical Bible

The topical Bible is a compilation of Bible subjects organized by category and scripture reference. It allows you to look up topics like love, grace, or mercy and find various passages and sub-topics related to the theme. *Nave's Topical Bible* and *The Thompson Topical Bible* are both very useful.