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*Figurative language in the Bible*

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# Figurative Language in the Bible

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## FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE BIBLE

- I. Figurative language in general
- II. Figurative language is used in the Bible
- III. Why did the Lord use figurative language in the Bible?
  1. human language
  2. especially common among Semitic people
  3. fervency of the language
  4. to reveal and conceal
  5. often no other way to express these truths
- IV. Various kinds of figures used in Scripture
  1. Figures of lively presentation
    - a. Simile    b. Parable    c. Metaphor
    - d. Allegory    e. Personification    f. Apostrophe
    - g. Anthropomorphism    h. Interrogation    i. Climax
    - j. Anticlimax    k. Antithesis    l. Paradox
    - b. The Parables
      - aa. The Word parable
      - bb. Elements of the parable
      - cc. The purpose of the parable
      - dd. OT parables
      - ee. Kinds of parables
      - ff. Real or fictitious?
      - gg. Interpretation of parables
  2. Figures of Brevity
    - a. Ellipsis (Brachylogy)    b. Aposiopesis
    - c. Zeugma (syllepsis)    d. Antanacclasis
  3. Figures that soften or emphasize
    - a. Euphemism    b. Irony    c. Hyperbole
    - d. Meiosis    e. Litotes    f. Metonymy
    - g. Synecdoche

4. Other methods--related to figures of speech

- a. Fable b. Riddle c. Enigma d. Types  
 e. Symbols f. Symbolic Numbers g. Proverbs  
 h. Dreams and Visions i. Prophecy  
 j. In grammar

V. The literal or figurative interpretation of Scripture?

1. God's Word is the truth

Contra--allegorizing, pietism, rationalism,  
 modernism, Bultmann

2. The Bible is sufficient

3. The Bible is clear

- a. Every statement of the Bible has only one meaning  
 b. Scripture interprets itself  
 c. Interpret the obscure by the clear;  
 Analogy of Scripture  
 d. The analogy of faith  
 e. Point of comparison  
 f. Interpret the literal as literal  
 g. Interpret the figurative as figurative  
 h. Not false literalism

4. The Bible was written by God through men, to men, in human language to make us wise unto salvation

FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE OF THE BIBLE

I. Figurative Language in General When a word is employed in other than its primary meaning, or when it is applied to some object different from its common usage, it is called a figure of speech, figurative language, or a trope. The word "trope" is from the Greek "tropos," a turn, that is a word turned from its primary use to another meaning. No language could possibly have a separate word from every separate idea that might arise, so the same word is often used to stand for many different things. There may have been some relation between the two uses, but often in the course of time that relation is forgotten. Thus the word "board," also related to "broad" means a plank. It also is used for the table made from boards. Then it was applied to the food placed on the table and men were said to pay for their "board." By a similar association the word was applied to a group of men who gathered around a table to transact business: "the board of elders, the board of missions, the board of support." The word is also used of a deck of a vessel, hence the terms "overboard, on board, all a board." Thus words may in the course of time have two or more designations. The word "rock" may refer to a stone, or to an action, "to rock" a boat. The word "horse" may be used in the normal manner, or in the secondary or figurative, such as, "horse of another color," "horse-laugh," horsing around."

Because changes constantly take place in language, it happens frequently that words have so constantly maintained a figurative meaning that their primary meaning has long since been forgotten. So our language consists of many faded metaphors. How many realize that the word "law" denoted "that which is laid," or that the words "right" and "wrong" originally meant "straight" and "crooked." And when we use the word "sincere," who is aware that it is composed of the Latin words "sine" and "cera," "without wax," referring to honey strained from the wax-like comb?"

Figurative language results from the natural inclination of men to make comparisons, and the very words "figure" and "figurative" indicate the picture language

which helps to make our speech more intelligible and more interesting and vivid. The use of figurative language is common to all people, but is especially prevalent in poetry, in sports, among the youth, and the common people. Shakespeare speaks of mercy that "droppeth as a gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath." In the field of sports we could hardly conceive of a strictly literal explanation of a football, basketball, or baseball game. The young people, especially the school children, in grade school, high school, and college are quite adept in the use and invention of tropical figures. If we have difficulty in understanding them, we might do well to think back to our own school days and the parlance prevalent in those days. When we consult our own slang, we are soon convinced of the popular character of the figurative. I believe it was Carl Sandburg who said: "Slang is the language that takes off its coat, spits in its hands, and goes to work."

It has been said that figurative language appeals to every man and it appeals to the whole man. It addresses itself not only to the intellect but also to the will and to the emotions of men. It moves men, in the manner as well as in the substance of speaking. Life would lose much of its lustre if we could not refer to someone as our "sweetheart" or "honey," if we could not call someone a "square," or "an old goat," if we could not use expressions like "hitting the old apple," "going into orbit," or "this is for the birds."

Figures of speech occur in individual words, in phrases, sentences, and in entire stories. They may be rhetorical, by means of illustrations or comparisons, questions or exaggerations, and thus help to enliven the picture. Or they appear in grammatical form by using a word which stands for some other thought associated with it, by the omission of words or of thoughts, in order to emphasize, to arouse attention, and to focus the thought more firmly upon the memory.

II. Figurative Language is used in Scripture One of the features of God's holy Word which so appeals to us His children is the liberal use of figures of speech in the Bible. The Old

Testament brings us the imagery of the "cedar trees bowing down," "the floods clapping their hands," and "the warhorse saith ha ha among the trumpets." The psalms are such a rich source of comfort and strength for the Christian because of the pictures employed: "The Lord is my shepherd;" "There is a river the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God;" "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help;" "He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season, his leaf also shall not wither, and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

The chief source for the many figures used is God's wonderful creation. So Moses, Deborah, David, Solomon, the major and minor prophets are moved with the majesties of heaven and the natural beauties of the promised land. Our Lord Jesus also, by whom all things were made, made liberal use of illustrations from nature. In the market the sparrows which were sold for a farthing, in the upper air the birds which were fed though they did not gather into barns, the lilies of the field, the fields white unto the harvest, the tiny mustard seed, the shepherd and his sheep, the fiery splendor of the morning and evening sky all were employed to illustrate His heavenly message. Other sources were the home and the family, the church, its worship, the occupations, and the city of Jerusalem.

In the epistles of Paul almost every vestige of nature poetry disappears. "There is neither music of birds nor fragrance of flowers nor mountain majesties. Most of the illustrations of Paul are gathered from the manners and customs of men, and suggest the courtroom, the schoolroom, the synagogue, the city. When he beheld the costly buildings of Corinth and the immediately adjacent hovels of the poor he speaks of building with "gold, silver and stones," rather than with "wood, hay and stubble." Beholding the temple of Diana in Ephesus he is reminded of the far more beautiful temple of the Christian church. He lived in the atmosphere of military conquest and domination and thus uses a multitude of military metaphors in his writings. In the epistles we find frequent figures taken from the gymnastic exercises, the games, the spectators, the race course, and

the running of the race." (Hayes)

With the variety of authors, times, and customs which are revealed in the sixty-six books of Scripture we have a vast treasure of figures of speech together with all the other words of Scripture through which our Lord speaks to us. Our Lord in His Word opens wide His heart, reveals His thoughts, "thoughts of peace and not of evil," inspires the sacred writers verbally to make known His message of salvation, and in the words of Scripture even calls upon the heavens and the earth, the thorns and thistles, the eagles and the stork, the bee and the ant, the harts panting for waterbrooks, all to be witnesses to the truths He would have us hear and believe.

Imagine, if you can, a Bible, with all these omitted. How much more difficult would be our visits to the sick, our efforts to make our sermons interesting, our attempts to instruct the children, and our own private meditation in Scripture.

And we must remember as Ramm says in Protestant Bible Interpretation: "The figures of the Bible are employed not simply to please the imagination and excite the feelings, but to teach eternal verities."

III. Why is figurative language used in the Bible? Since the Holy Ghost inspired the "holy men of God," to use figurative language also, there must be very sound reasons why

He chose to do so. 1) The Holy Ghost employed human language in speaking to us. The Lord intended these words to be understood as they were heard and read. The meanings of the words employed were the commonly accepted ones. Since figurative language plays an important role in all languages, also in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in which the Bible was written, it is natural that figures of speech should be found in Scripture. Deismann calls the Bible "Ein Volksbuch."

2) Although figurative language is common to all languages and peoples, it was especially common among the Semitic people. Since most of the authors of the books of the Bible were of the people of Israel, it can easily be seen why so many

figures of speech appear. Such figures, especially parables, were employed to a great extent by the rabbis, appear frequently in the Talmud and other Jewish books, and seem to have been a favorite form of conveying moral instruction among the oriental people.

3) Since the Bible brings us the oracles of God and reveals the intense desire of the Lord that we be reconciled to Him, the Lord also uses figurative language, which is the language of fervency and zeal. The same is true when men are inspired by the Holy Spirit and speak in God's behalf or when they reveal the thoughts of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Lord.

4) Our Lord Jesus Himself told His disciples that He had a twofold purpose in the use of parables, namely, both to reveal and to conceal great truths. Matthew 13, 10-: "And the disciples came and said unto Him, Why speakest thou unto them in parables? He answered and said unto them, because it is given unto you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it is not given. For whosoever hath, to him shall be given, and he shall have more abundance; but whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken away even that he hath. Therefore speak I to them in parables, because they seeing see not, and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand. But blessed are your eyes, for they see; and your ears, for they hear. For verily I say unto you, that many prophets and righteous men have desired to see those things which ye see, and have not seen them, and to hear those things which ye hear, and have not heard them." The truths of God are mysteries to natural man. He does not and cannot know them. They must be given to men, given through revelation, through the preaching of the Gospel, by the grace of God through the Holy Spirit. The disciples have seen these truths entirely by the grace of God. And as they continued to read and think about these parables, as they also continued to come to the Lord for further instruction, the blessed truths became an increasingly greater source of treasure for them. But the Pharisees and others who rejected the grace of God, who felt they were rich and sufficient in themselves, did not see. What they spurned is now being withdrawn from them. Even these figures of speech, these parables, begin to hide it from them.

5) We must however add one more reason why the Lord in His Word speaks figuratively, simply because there is no other way to express those spiritual and heavenly truths which He so graciously has revealed to us. Thus when the Lord speaks about Himself, he may refer to His right hand, or His mighty arm; when He tells us about the preeminence of His Son, He describes Him seated at His right hand, similarly the glories of heaven are in terms of human experience: costly structures of gold, silver and precious stones, a beautiful garden, the heavenly Jerusalem.

IV. Various kinds Only in studying the figurative of figures found language in the Bible does it become apparent how many different in Scripture kinds of figures appear in Scripture.

In defining the figures employed, there is some room for a difference of opinion, since the Bible itself uses the names for the figures in the wide sense, also some figures are so closely allied that it is difficult at times to know into which category they should be placed, and it also happens in the course of time that the names for the figures change. We have chosen to divide the figures in Scripture into four groups: 1) figures of lively presentation, 2) figures of brevity, 3) figures that aim to soften or to emphasize an expression, 4) other methods of conveying truths--related to figures of speech.

1) Figures of lively presentation

a) Simile is a formal comparison between two different objects where the comparison is stated. "this is like that," or "as." Is. 60, 10, "For as the rain and snow come down from heaven..so shall my Word be." Jer. 23, 29: "Is not my word as a fire, saith Jehovah, and as a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" The tendency to crowd several similes together may be in part accounted for by the nature of Hebrew parallelism. Thus in Is. 1, 8: "The daughter of Zion is left as a cottage in a vineyard, as a lodge in a garden of cucumbers, as a besieged city." Also: Is. 29, 8; Ps. 102, 6; Song of Solomon 2, 8; Matt. 2, 28; Rom. 12, 4; Matt. 7, 24-27.

b) Parable is a sustained or an extended simile. Usually it is introduced with an expression like "The kingdom of heaven is like unto." We shall devote a longer paragraph to the discussion of the parables later in the essay. (See "b" on page 10.)

c) A Metaphor is like a simile, except that the comparison is not stated but implied. When we say, "Judah is a lion, Jenathan was an eagle, my loved one is a rose," we are not speaking literally, but only some notable quality or characteristic of these creatures is intended. Metaphor comes from the Greek metaphero, "to carry over, to transfer," namely that the sense of one word is transformed to another. In Gen. 49 Jacob's words to his sons contain many striking metaphors: v. 9 "Judah is a lion's whelp," "Dan shall be a serpent by the way," v. 17, "Naphtali is a hind let loose," v. 21. In Luke 13, 32 Jesus is speaking about Herod and says: "Go tell that fox."

A mixed metaphor results when different metaphors are confused in the same sentence: "Young man, if you have the spark of genius in you, water it," and also when literal and figurative expressions are blended in the same sentence, "Washington was the father of our country and a surveyor of ability." Some find a mixed metaphor in Eph. 3, 17, "rooted and grounded in love" first, a picture of the roots of a tree, then the solid ground on which a building rests.

e) Allegory. There seems to be a difference of opinion as to the definition of an allegory. Prof. J. Schaller in "The Book of Books" page 253 states, "The shorter parables are sometimes called allegories." Thus he calls Matt. 13, 31-52 allegories, where brief illustrations are used: "mustard seed, leaven, treasure in the field, goodly pearls," etc., while he refers to the story of the sower, because it is longer, as a parable. Matt. 13, 24-30.

However, strictly speaking, there are some definite differences between the parable and the allegory. A parable, like a simile, is usually introduced with the words "is like unto." The allegory has no such introduction, even as the metaphor. The parable uses words

in their literal sense: "A sower went forth to sow his seed," but the allegory uses words in their figurative sense: "I am the true vine," "I am the light of the world." Another difference usually noted is that the parable will have to be explained, while the allegory carries much of the explanation within itself. Jesus had to interpret the parable of the sower, but as we hear the words: "I am the vine, ye are the branches," much of the meaning becomes clear.

Examples of allegories are: I Cor. 3, 10-15: "I have laid the foundation and another buildeth thereupon. For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ." Eph. 2, 20-22: "And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone. In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord."

I Cor. 5, 6-8: "Know ye not that a little leaven leaveneth the whole lump?" Eph. 6, 11-17: "Put on the whole armor of God....breastplate, feet shod, shield, helmet, and sword." Also John 10, 1-16: "the door of the sheep" and "the shepherd."

The word allegory is used only once in Scripture in Gal. 4, 21-31, the form "allegoroumena," where Paul makes Hagar and Sarah illustrate the old and new covenants. Many also, as Prof. J. Schaller, call the entire book of the "Song of Solomon" an allegory, using the picture of the intimate relation between the bridegroom and the bride to show the relation between Christ and the Church.

e) Personification is sometimes called a modified metaphor, and also has the more technical term Prosopopoeia, from the Greek, prosepon, "face," and poieo, "to make," means to give personal form or character to an object. We speak of "a raging storm," also the poem by Elizabeth Akers Allen: "Backward, turn backward, O time, in thy flight, Make me a child again just for tonight." Numbers 16, 32: "And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up." Matt. 6, 34: "Take therefore no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself." Ps. 114, 3-4

"The sea saw it, and fled, Jordan was driven back, the mountains skipped like rams and the little hills like lambs." Also Jer. 47, 6; Is. 40, 12.

f) Apostrophe is a figure closely allied to personification. The name is derived from the Greek apo and strepho, "to turn away from," and denotes especially the turning of a speaker away from his immediate hearers and addressing an absent or imaginary person or thing. Lord Byron wrote an apostrophe to the ocean "Roll on, thou deep and dark blue ocean, roll!" In Ps. 114, 5: "What ailed thee, O thou sea, that thou fleddest? thou Jordan that thou wast driven back." David laments over the death of his son, 2 Sam. 18, 33 "My son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom." Also the apostrophe to the fallen king of Babylon, Is. 14, 12: "How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning!"

g) Anthropomorphism As an adaptation to our finite mind the Bible sometimes speaks of God as though He were human, having arm, hand, finger, face, and having thoughts and emotions similar to ours. Ex. 6, 6; Eph. 1, 20; Luke 11, 20; Numbers 6, 24-26. In Gen. 6, 5-6 "It repented the Lord." Gen. 9, 16 "That I may remember." Gen. 11, 5 "The Lord came down to see the city."

h) Interrogation Often a question is the strongest possible way of expressing a truth. A negative interrogation affirms, and a positive denies. Heb. 1, 14 "Are they not all ministering spirits?" Also the words of Paul: "Am I not an apostle? Am I not free?" In Romans 8, 33 "Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect?" 34: "Who is he that condemneth? 35: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" And the words of Cain, "Am I my brother's keeper?" The rhetorical question is a question asked for oratorical effect, to which no answer is expected, such as Pilate's question, "What is truth?" Also, Heb. 2, 3.

i) Climax really means "ladder" and is a figure in which the meaning rises in a series of images, each of which exceeds the one before it in dignity, splendor, or force. Julius Caesar "Veni, vidi, vici"--"I came, I saw, I conquered." Also Rom. 5, 3-5: "Tribulation



worketh patience, patience experience, experience hope, and hope maketh not ashamed."

j) Anticlimax is opposed to climax, and opposes the climactic effect which the climax sought to achieve. I Kings 15, 23: "The rest of all the acts of Asa, and all his might, and all that he did, and the cities which he built, are they not written in the book of the Chronicles of the Kings of Judah? Nevertheless in the time of his old age he was diseased in his feet." After the account of the mighty acts of the king, comes the anticlimax: but he had sore feet.

k) Antithesis - sets contrasting phrases opposite each other for emphasis, a contrast by parallelism of words or ideas. As Shakespeare said: "Look like the innocent flower, but be a serpent under it." Also the proverb "Forewarned, forearmed." John 3,30: "He must increase, but I must decrease." Many examples of antithesis are found in Hebrew poetry, especially in the psalms, as part of Hebrew parallelism. Ps. 1, 6: "For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous, but the way of the ungodly shall perish."

l) Paradox is a self-contradictory statement, a statement which seems absurd, obviously untrue, yet upon closer examination will be seen to be well-founded. Paul has an excellent example in 2 Cor. 6, 9-10: "As unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things." In Eph. 1, 23 Paul brings another tremendous paradox: "Which is His body, the fulness of Him that filleth all in all." He fills all that exists, in every possible way, yet the Church so filled by Christ is its own Filler's fulness.

b. The Parables Among the figurative forms of scriptural speech the parable has a notable preeminence. This is true first of all because of their number. Some find fifty-three parables in the Bible, although there is some difference of opinion as to what should be classed as a parable and what

should not. But the parables are especially important because our Lord Jesus chose this method by which he set forth so many revelations of His heavenly kingdom.

aa. The word "parable" is from the Greek, *parabole*, from the verb *paraballe*, "to put one thing by the side of another," and contains the thought, for the sake of comparison. In the New Testament the word *parabole* is used loosely--in the wide sense, also to designate proverbs (Luke 4, 23 Physician, heal thyself), also types and symbols (Heb. 9, 9; 11, 19), but strictly speaking the parable belongs to a style of figurative speech which constitutes a class of its own. It is like a simile except that the simile consists of a word or a phrase, while the parable is composed of a complete story. It differs from an allegory, which is an extended metaphor, and which is not introduced with a phrase "is like." A parable also uses words in their literal sense: "the sheep, the leaven, the sons." A parable therefore has to be explained, while the allegory usually carries much of the explanation within itself. The parable differs from the fairy tale which delights in the impossible and unreal, from the fable which introduces animals, plants, and things, as speaking and acting like human beings; from the myth which is a creation of popular folklore. Like the riddle or enigma it may serve to conceal a truth but its narrative style differentiates it clearly from such figures. It also differs from the proverb which is more terse and pointed. The parable therefore stands apart by itself as a mode and style of figurative speech.

bb. Elements of the Parable Every parable has certain essential elements which must be noted:

- a) the occasion and scope of the story--when was it told, why, under what circumstances, and for what purpose.
- b) the narrative itself--it is an earthly story about farming, marriage, kings, household affairs, etc.
- c) the spiritual or heavenly truth or truths Jesus wishes to emphasize.



cc. The purpose of the parable "It was the aim of our Lord to bring his hearers into close touch with the heavenly truths of the Gospel. Because of its story-form the parable opens up to the simple-minded the gate of understanding and yet the advanced Christian student finds ample food for reflection in the lines of thought suggested by the story" (J. Schaller). But there was another side to the matter. Jesus also used the parable as a means of concealing the saving truth; the unbelievers were to hear and see without understanding, as a judgment of God upon the people, who resisted the message of the Lord in unbelief. Trench: "Parables are compared with the pillar of cloud and fire which gave light to the Israelites, but was a cloud of darkness to the Egyptians."

dd. OT parables Usually when we speak of parables we consider those which our Lord Jesus spoke and which are recorded in the first three Gospels. However, the OT does contain a few parables also. Nathan used the parable of the ewe lamb to bring David to repentance 2 Sam. 12, 1-14. In 2 Sam. 14, 4-7 we find the parable of the wise woman of Tekoah, and in I Kings 20, 38 the parable of the wounded prophet.

33. Kinds of parables The parables have been divided into various groups by Bible scholars. Davis in a "Dictionary of the Bible" speaks of three groups:

- a) To illustrate the nature of the kingdom of heaven (sower, tares, treasure),
- b) To illustrate the kingdom of heaven in the individual life (Good Samaritan, rich man and the barns, prodigal son, rich man and Lazarus),
- c) To point to the judgment and the consummation of the kingdom (wedding garment, ten virgins, five talents).

One of the most interesting groupings of the NT parables that I have discovered is mentioned by Prof. Blume in his paper "What do we mean when we say: "So Says the Word of God," which is currently appearing in the Quartalschrift, January and April, 1959. He divides the parables according to the degree to which details of the story are taken over into the interpretation,

although he does allow for a difference of opinion among interpreters as to which parables he wishes to include under each type.

The whole matter depends upon the answer to the question: "How many of the details in the parables are to be taken as significant?" The answers given by various interpreters run from one extreme to the other. Some emphasize only the one central truth and ignore all details, while others aim at running out the interpretation into the minutest detail. Our Lord Himself interpreted for us the first two parables, namely of the Sower and the Tares, and thus furnished us with the key for the interpretation of all. Trench gives the following observation in "The Parables of our Lord" page 37: "It must be confessed that no absolute rule can be laid down beforehand to guide the expositor how far he shall proceed. In treating the parables of Christ the expositor must proceed on the presumption that there is import in every single point, and only desist from seeking it when either it does not result without forcing, or when we can clearly show that this or that circumstance was merely added for the sake of giving intuitiveness to the narrative;" again: "It will help us in this matter if, before we attempt to explain the particular parts, we obtain a firm grasp of the central truth which the parable would set forth, and distinguish it in the mind as sharply and accurately as we can from all cognate truths which border upon it." Page 38.

We may thus speak of three types of parables:

- 1) Parables in which the small details are not to be taken over into the interpretation, but merely serve to embellish the narrative. Thus in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10, 30-35, where the fact the traveler was stripped, the oil, the wine, merely serve to enliven the picture; also the parable of the Mustard Seed, Matt. 13: the birds building their nests in the tree. Also in the parable of the ten virgins, Matt. 25, 1-13, and the details that they slept, and trimmed their lamps.

2) Parables in which many of the details are important and should be interpreted. In the parable of the wicked husbandmen, Matt. 21, 33-44, "the servants" and "the son," also the parables of the talents and pounds Matt. 25, 14 ff, Luke 19, 12 ff, "Enter into the joy of your Lord," and "outer darkness," should be interpreted; also the Sower, the Tares, which Jesus interpreted for His disciples and showed how these details were in close harmony with the main thought and should be interpreted. Even here however not every detail is interpreted. Thus in the parable of the Tares, Jesus attached no special meaning to the men who slept, nor to the sleeping, nor to the springing up of the blades of wheat, nor to the servants of the householder, and the questions they asked, Matt. 13, 24 ff.

3) Parables which include details independent of the rest of the story and which however play a very important role in the correct understanding of the parable. Examples of this type are The Rich Man and Lazarus Luke 16, 19ff and the point, "They have Moses and the prophets"...also the story of the prodigal son, Luke 15, 11 ff, in which the outside feature is the story of the elder brother. Another such story is the story of the wedding banquet, Matt. 22, 2-14, namely the man without a wedding garment.

ff. Parables real or fictitious? Are the parables real stories, taken from actual life, or are they fictitious? Some years ago I had a long discussion with a very well informed and consecrated layman who insisted that all parables are actual stories which actually occurred. He based most of his arguments on the fact that the parables begin with words such as "Behold a sower went forth to sow," Matt. 13, 3, and "A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho;" so it must be true, since the Bible is the truth. However we counter with the argument that the parables are usually introduced with such words as "another parable put he forth unto them," Matt. 13, 23. We must distinguish between actual statements of fact and illustrations.

Of course we do not deny that some of the parables may have been taken from actual occurrences. Some

think that the story of the Good Samaritan actually happened and that may be true. But how much is real and how much is fictitious no one can determine with the information at hand.

However, it should also be borne in mind that one of the main purposes of God was to reveal truths which otherwise would not be as clear to us. Thus the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, where all the laborers received a penny regardless of the numbers of hours they worked, might offend us, until we realize this is a parable which shows us how different is the kingdom of God from the doings of men. So also the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Many problems present themselves if we try to make this an actual occurrence: the fingers, the tongue, the fact that the former rich man could look into heaven, etc; also in the parables of the lost sheep and lost coin, the invitation to his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him, is something that would at least be very unusual in actual life.

gg. Interpretation of Parables Since we shall devote another paragraph in the essay to the discussion of the interpretation of all figures of speech, we shall now concern ourselves chiefly with certain rules in the interpretation of parables as such.

Although no specific rules can be given which will apply to every case, there are certain principles which will guide us in their interpretation.

1) What is the occasion and scope of the parable? As we study the context we find many clues to the meaning of the parable. Sometimes the Lord Himself gives us this information as Matt. 22, 14 marriage supper "many are called but few are chosen." The ten virgins, Matt. 25, 13, "Watch therefore for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of Man cometh." The Good Samaritan: "Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbor unto him that fell among the thieves?" Sometimes by the inspired writers. Luke 15, 1. 2: lost sheep, lost coin. The Pharisees and the scribes murmured saying, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." Sometimes they precede the parable,

Luke 18, 9, "He spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others" -- Pharisees and the publican in the temple. At other times they follow, Luke 16, 9: "Make to yourselves friends of the Mammon of unrighteousness." At times a parable is furnished with these helps both at its opening and its close, as in the story of the unmerciful servant, which is suggested by the question which Peter asks Matt. 18, 21: "How oft shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? till seven times?" and wound up by the application which the Lord himself makes, v. 35: "So likewise shall My heavenly Father do also unto you if ye from your hearts forgive not everyone his brother their trespasses." Also Matt. 20, 1-15 and Luke 12, 16-20 in which Jesus begins and finishes with the same saying. Jesus himself interprets the two parables--of the sower and of the tares, Matt. 13. In other cases the Lord simply speaks the parable leaving it to the hearer to discover the proper key: Luke 6, 41 and Matt. 13, 44-46; "the mote and the beam," "the treasure and the pearls."

2) The narrative itself. Since the parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, it is important that we determine the exact nature and details of the customs and practices of that day, that we know something about the raising of sheep, the money used at that time, the methods of farming, also the history and geography revealed in the story.

3) What is the one central truth the Lord is emphasizing? and distinguish it from all the other related truths which border upon it. In other words that we find the point of comparison.

4) Be careful of the doctrinal use of parables. Parables teach doctrine, but they should not be made the first sources and seats of doctrine. Doctrines which are taught in the clear literal words of Scripture may be illustrated and further confirmed by parables, but we should not foist meanings upon the parable that were never intended, as the Catholics do in the parable of the unmerciful servant, where they quote the words "Till he should pay all that was due" as an argument for purgatory.

2) The second kind of figure found in Scripture are the figures of brevity:

a. Ellipsis, where essential words are purposely omitted but where the omission makes the expression all the more forceful. The commonest is the ellipsis of the copula, as in Matt. 5, 3 "Blessed..the poor in spirit," the copula "eisin" is omitted; also Acts 21, 16 "also certain of the disciples," the "certain"..times..is omitted..also I Cor. 6, 13 "meats for the belly." This is also called brachylogy--conciseness of expression; literally, a short word. Some find a difference between ellipsis and brachylogy, in that brachylogy omits entire thoughts or phrases for emphasis, as I John 5, 9, "If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater."

b. Aposiopesis...to be silent, a sudden breaking off. Ex. 32, 32: "If thou wilt forgive, and if not, blot me I pray thee out of thy book;" Luke 19, 42: "If thou hadst known, even thou at least in this thy day the things that belong unto thy peace;" Gen. 3, 22: "And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us to know good and evil, and now lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat and live forever--Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden."

c. Zeugma or syllepsis is defined as a word used to fulfill two functions, applying properly to one person or thing and improperly to another, or it uses the same word, first literally, then figuratively. In I Cor. 3, 2 Paul says in the Greek text, "I have given you to drink of milk and not of solid food." The figure is not apparent in the KJV where it is translated "I have fed." Also Luke 1, 64: "And his mouth was opened and his tongue"--the KJV supplies "his tongue was loosed."

Examples from secular literature are: "He fought with fury and a big blackjack," or "In his lectures he leaned heavily upon his desk and stale jokes" or as Alexander Pope wrote about Queen Anne:

"Hail, thou, great Anna, whom three realms obey,  
Dost sometimes counsel take, and sometimes tea."  
Also the one often quoted: "I am under the impression that it is raining and my umbrella."

d. Antanaclasis--Related to Zeugma is antanaclasis, "a bending back or breaking;" using the same word but in a different meaning, often to refute an opponent: "Learn some craft, that you may live without craft." In Rom. 6, 23 "The wages of sin is death". Also Rom. 3, 27: "Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? of works? Nay, but by the law of faith."

3) Thirdly, there are figures that aim to soften or to emphasize an expression.

a. Euphemism uses a mild for a harsher expression. Acts 7, 6 "fell asleep" for dying, and other similar words.

b) Irony says one thing but means the opposite, as in the speech of Antony in Julius Caesar "For Brutus is an honorable man."

In I Kings 18, 27 we hear Elijah speaking to the Baal worshippers: "Elijah mocked them and said, 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." Job 12, 1 "No doubt but ye are people, and wisdom shall die with you, but I have understanding as well as you, yea who knoweth not such things as these?" Also Paul in I Cor. 4, 8: "Now ye are full, now ye are rich, ye have reigned as kings without us, and I would to God ye did reign, that we also might reign with you." Matt. 23, 29: "Woe unto you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because ye build the tombs of the prophets and garnish the sepulchres of the righteous."

c) Hyperbole is a rhetorical figure which consists in exaggeration, magnifying an object beyond reality, with no intention to deceive, but for the purpose of emphasis, from hyperballo: "to throw over or beyond." Judges 7, 12: "And the Midianites and the Amalekites and all the children of the east lay along in the valley like grasshoppers of multitude, and their camels were without number, as the sand by the sea shore for multitude." Ps. 6, 6: "All night make I my bed to swim, I water my couch with my tears." John 21, 25: "And there are also many other things which Jesus did,

the which, if they should be written every one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written." In Ps. 145, 12 and similar passages "forever and ever," where "forever" already expresses the thought intended, but "ever" is added for emphasis. We think of the expression used at times, "forever and a day;" also Hymn No. 31, v.5 by Joseph Addison: "But, oh! eternity's too short To utter all Thy praise."

d) Meiosis is an understatement, the opposite of hyperbole, from meion, smaller. I Cor. 2, 4: "Not with enticing words of man's wisdom," where Paul apparently has in mind the wisdom of the orators of Corinth and Athens.

e) A form of meiosis is Litotes where the opposite is stated of what is meant and then a negative is placed before it. St. Paul tells us that he was a "citizen of no mean city" meaning "a great city." "I praise you not," meaning, "I blame you." Acts 1, 5: "not many days hence." Acts 14, 28: "no little time," (Chronon ouk oligon), meaning "a long time."

f) One of the more common figures of speech and also one of the most difficult, because it includes so much, is metonymy. Metonymy consists in substituting one idea for another closely allied to it. The cause is used for the effect. Thus "the pen is mightier than the sword," the pen is employed for that which is written by the pen. Luke 16, 29: "They have Moses and the prophets." "Moses and the prophets" are used for the writings of which they were the authors. Deut. 17, 6: "At the mouth of two witnesses." "Mouth" is used for the words spoken by the mouth.

Sometimes the effect is used for the cause: Gen. 3, 19, "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread."

Another use of this figure occurs when some associated idea is put for the main subject. Gen. 42, 28: "Ye shall bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to the grave." Ex. 12, 21: "Kill the passover," where he evidently uses the word "passover" for the paschal lamb.

Sometimes the sign for the thing signified--"The Chair," for the presiding officer; "Shakespeare for the words of Shakespeare; "the press" for the newspaper; "Washington" for the Federal government; "bottle" for strong drink. Matt. 16, 19: "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Gen. 49, 10: "The sceptre shall not depart from Judah."

Also the container for the thing contained. In the Lord's Supper, "the cup" for the contents of the cup. Luke 22, 20: "This cup is the New Testament in my blood." In Ps. 23 "Thou preparest a table before me." Also the abstract for the concrete. "Circumcision" for the Jews, "uncircumcision" for the Gentiles.

g) Synecdoche is another kind of trope quite similar to metonymy, in fact the distinction hardly exists anymore. Synecdoche is that figure by which part is put for the whole or the whole for a part: a "sail" for the ship, a "wheel" for the bicycle. Luke 2, 1: "All the world" for the Roman empire. Acts 27, 37: "Two hundred three score and sixteen souls," souls, for the whole man or person. "Day" is used for a long period of time, the singular of "stork, turtle, crane, and swallow" in Jer. 8, 7 is used for the whole class to which each belongs. Also in the fourth petition "Give us this day our daily bread."

#### 4. Other methods of conveying truths--related to figures of speech

Besides the more common figures of speech listed above, there are also other methods of conveying ideas and impressing truths which are related to figures of speech.

a. Fable Although the Bible contains no fairy tales, which delight in the impossible and unreal, there are some who find at least two fables in the Bible. A fable is an instructive tale, introducing animals, plants, and lifeless objects as thinking, speaking, and acting like human beings. Those who insist that the fable has no proper place in Scripture, agree with Trench who maintains, "The purpose of Scripture excludes it." It is also true that whenever the Bible uses the word

"fable" as it does five times, viz. I Tim. 1, 4; 4, 7; 2 Tim. 4, 4; Titus 1, 14; 2 Peter 1, 16; it is always couched in a warning to us not to give heed to them.

Others counter with the argument that, although these are found in Scripture, yet they are not spoken by God directly, but by men, also that the spirit and aim of the fable accords with irony and sarcasm, which do occur in the Bible, also that some of the proverbs are abbreviated fables. Prov. 6, 6; 30, 15.

The first so-called fable is found in Judges 9, 7-20, where the trees are represented as going forth to choose a king. The olive tree, fig tree, and vine are asked to rule, but they decline. Then the bramble is invited to rule over them, which does not decline, but in biting irony invites all the trees to take refuge under its shadow.....all to refer to the weakness of King Abimelech. In 2 Kings 14, 9 the thistle spoke to the cedar, "Give thy daughter to my son to wife."

Many of the better Bible authorities prefer to call these "parables" as Koehler does in "A Summary of Christian Doctrine." As someone stated it: "If these were written by Aesop, we would call them fables. Since they are in the Bible, we call them parables."

b. Riddle. The riddle differs from the fable in being designed to puzzle and perplex the hearer. The Hebrew word for riddle ( תִּבְרָן ) means "to twist" or "tie a knot." The Queen of Sheba journeyed to Solomon's court to test him with riddles (I Kings 10, 1), "hard questions" in the KJV. In Judges 14, 14 we hear Samson's riddle: "Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness," and in v. 18 the answer "What is sweeter than honey? And what is stronger than a lion?"

In mythology we read the celebrated riddle of the sphinx: "What animal goes on four feet in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in the evening?" The answer is "man," solved by Oedipus.

c. Enigma. The difference between the riddle and enigma is that the riddle deals with earthly things to

test our ingenuity or shrewdness, while the enigma serves to enhance and conceal some deep and sacred thought. The word "enigma" occurs only once in Scripture, I Cor. 13, 12: "Now we see through a glass darkly (in enigma)." The words of Jesus to Nicodemus might be called an enigma, "Except a man be born again" John 3,3; also His words to the woman of Samaria, "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst," John 4, 14; also the words of the risen Savior concerning John: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee?" John 21, 22.

d. Type With the word "type" we refer to that figure in which one object is made to represent another, and in Scripture these are especially used in relation to the coming of the Savior. Types and symbols are often called "acted parables." The type always prefigures something in the future. What it thus prefigures is called the antitype. For this reason types are called "prophetic symbols."

There are typical persons: Adam was a type of Christ, Rom. 5, 14; Elijah of John the Baptist; Abraham a type of believers justified by faith, Rom. 3, 28. Typical institutions: The sacrifice of lambs pointed to the Lamb of God, I Pet. 1, 19. Typical offices: The prophets pointed to Christ our Prophet, Deut. 18, 15; the priests and high-priests, of the Great High Priest, Heb. 4, 14; 9, 12, Melchizedek. Typical events: the flood, exodus, sojourn in the wilderness, manna, water from the rock, the lifting up of the brazen serpent, Jonah. Typical actions: Hosia marrying a wife of whoredom, Hosea 1; Zechariah making crowns of silver and gold for the head of Joshua, Zech. 6, 9-15; Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac.

e. Symbols. A symbol differs from the type in that a symbol is an object which illustrates another by indicating certain qualities or marks of features of the other. Thus the olive branch is a symbol of peace, the horn of power. While a type always had its fulfillment in the future, a symbol has in itself no special reference to time. The twelve cakes of showbread symbolized the twelve tribes of Israel. The offering of incense was an expressive symbol of prayers of the saints. Ps. 141, 2; Rev. 5, 8; 8, 3-4.

f. Symbolic Numbers When we read Scriptures we cannot help observing the symbolical use of numbers. There may be room for differences of opinion in interpreting them but the following interpretation has received widespread acceptance.

3 is usually interpreted as the number of the Triune God; The Aaronic blessing: "The Lord" is used three times; also the "Holy, holy, holy" in Isaiah 6, 3; the reference to "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" in the Apostolic blessing.

4 is the number of the world: "four winds of heaven," Jer. 49, 36; "the four corners of the earth," Ezek. 7, 2; Rev. 20, 8, possibly corresponding with the four points of the compass N E W S.

7 Seven being the sum of three plus four may be supposed to symbolize the union between God and the world, and may be called the sacred number of the covenant between God and His people: 7 days of the week, 7 days of the Passover, 7 churches in Revelation, seven stars, seven seals, seven trumpets.

10 with its multiples may signify abundance or perfection or completeness: 10 commandments, 10 virgins, 10 coins, also the dimensions of the tabernacle, the temple, and of heaven.

12 with its multiples is the number of the church: 12 tribes of Israel, 12 apostles, the 24 elders (the old and new testament) at the throne of God, 12 stones in the breastplate, 12 cakes of showbread, 12 x 12,000, Rev. 7, 4-8; the New Jerusalem has 12 gates.

3½ is the broken 7, thus may mean confusion and trouble. Since 7 is the symbol of the covenant, 3½ may refer to a broken covenant.

40 is often used in connection with punishment or trial: 40 days of rain, Gen. 7, 4. 12. 17; 40 years in the wilderness; the 40 days in which Moses, Elijah, and Jesus fasted.



6 is one less than 7, thus always falling short of that sacred number. Perhaps this is the explanation of the number 666. Rev. 13; 18.

In regard to the symbolical names, colors, and metals we find references to them in Scripture, but the information is rather meager, and it seems best to proceed very carefully in their interpretation.

g. Proverbs are described as short, pithy sayings, in which a wise counsel, a moral lesson is expressed in memorable form. The Biblical proverbs are not confined to the book which bears that title, but also appear in the book of Ecclesiastes, and in almost every other book of the Bible. Proverbs may contain many different figures of speech; for example, Prov. 5, 15-18 is an allegory: "Let thy fountains be dispersed abroad." In Prov. 1, 20; 8, 1; 9, 1, Wisdom is personified, "Wisdom crieth without." Eccl. 9, 13-18, is a combination of parable and proverb. In Luke 4, 23 Jesus speaks what we call a proverb: "Physician, heal thyself," but Luke calls it a parable.

Many proverbs of course are literal statements: "A child is known by his doings," 20, 11. "The rich and poor meet together, the Lord is the maker of them all," 22, 2.

In interpreting the proverbs we must determine which figure of speech is employed, if any, and whether it is written in the form of parallelism, so that the purpose of the author and of the Lord be served: Prov. 1, 2-4, "to know wisdom and instruction, to perceive the words of understanding.

h. Dreams and Visions. Our Lord chose to reveal His will to the prophets of old in various ways, at times by direct inspiration, at other times through dreams and visions. We think of the dreams of Abimelech, Gen. 20, 3-7; Jacob at Bethel, Gen. 28, 12; Laban in Mt. Gilead, Gen. 31, 24; Joseph saw the sheaves and the heavenly bodies, Gen. 37, 5-10; the butler and baker, Gen. 40, 5-19; Pharaoh, Gen. 41, 1-32; Solomon, 1 Kings 3, 5; 9, 2; Nebuchadnezzar, Dan. 2 and 4; Daniel, Dan. 7, 1. In the New Testament, Joseph's dream, Matt. 1, 20; 2, 13, 19; the wise men, Matt. 2, 12; the dream of Pilate's wife, Matt. 27, 19.

Whenever the Lord chose to use dreams to reveal His will, He also provided ample explanation, so that there might be no doubt of His message. Very likely the Lord chose this method of revelation, as in the case of Pharaoh, because this was the best way to impress these truths upon him, and the fact that the dreams were double showed that this was firmly established by the Lord and would certainly be fulfilled. In these dreams the Lord not only brought the information concerning the years of plenty and drouth to Pharaoh, but also employed them to raise Joseph to power, to bring Jacob and his family to Egypt, to offer God's grace to Pharaoh, and thus to fulfill his promises to His people.

This, however, does not mean that God still today uses dreams and visions, nor, as far as we know, that our dreams have any special importance. In fact, God warns against trusting in dreams. Jer. 23, 28: "The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream, and he that hath My word, let him speak My word faithfully, What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord."

At other times the Lord sent visions, during which those who received them were in a state of ecstasy without however losing consciousness. Thus Isaiah was called in a vision, ch. 6; Ezekiel received visions concerning the future spread of the Gospel, ch. 1, and concerning the future glory of God's kingdom, ch. 20-28. In a vision Daniel beheld the four great world monarchies which were to be followed by the kingdom of Christ, ch. 7, 8, 10, 11; also Paul in 2 Cor. 12, 1-4 beheld a vision of Paradise. And on the island of Patmos John experienced the entire vision record in the Book of Revelation on a single "Lord's Day." Ch. 1, v. 10.

i. Prophecy. In order to interpret the many prophecies in the Bible, we must remember that the prophets speaking by inspiration used almost all varieties of figurative speech, of types, and symbols. At times the Lord merely foretold the future, as in 1 Sam. 10, 3-6, where in clear words Samuel told Saul of the particular events that would befall him. In other prophecies rebukes, admonition, and warnings were embodied.



In the many prophecies which tell of the coming of the Savior, such as Gen. 3, 15, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; Moses, David, the psalms and the books of the prophets, we see how the Lord so beautifully revealed His plans for the world, until they found their complete fulfillment when Christ appeared. Although the prophets had to study their own prophecies in order to recognize the meaning, we today can clearly see the fulfillment of the messianic prophecies.

The Bible records some false interpretations of prophecies as a warning to us to proceed carefully, viz., that the Messiah would be an earthly king, that John the Baptist was the Prophet Elijah returned to the earth, that the end of the world was at hand, and those who confused the first and second coming of Christ. Similar interpretations appear today. Nahum 2, 4, "The chariots shall rage in the streets, they shall jostle one against another in the broad ways, they shall seem like torches, they shall run like the lightnings" has been accepted by some as a prediction of our modern cars and highways. During World War II there were those who forced their interpretation upon the words of Scripture, I Sam. 8, 11, "He will take your sons," as though it foretold our military draft; Is. 3, 18 "take..their round tires" to predict the tire rationing.

It is true that some prophecies of Scripture have never been fulfilled, but these were conditional prophecies with the condition either expressed or implied: 2 Kings 20, 1-7, Isaiah's words to King Hezekiah: "Set thine house in order, for thou shalt die, and not live;" also Jenah 3, 4, 10, "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown."

As we seek to interpret the prophecies found in the Book of Revelation and other prophetic books, which are now being fulfilled, or will still be fulfilled in the future, we at times find great difficulty in ascertaining the full meaning. Here again we might do well to remember Luther's remarks that we should accord the Holy Spirit the honor of knowing more than we do, and imitate the pastor who said that he frequently read a portion of Revelation before ascending the pulpit on Sunday morning, without knowing the full interpretation,

but as he read he found such comfort in knowing that we have a Savior wiser and stronger than we are. At the same time this does not rule out studying these books and passages, applying sound rules of interpretation, studying the author, the scope and plan of the book, the usage of words and symbols, and making use of parallel passages which apply.

j. In addition to the figures mentioned in the previous pages, there are also others which however are apparent chiefly in the Greek and Hebrew and belong to a study of grammar: Parallelism in Hebrew poetry; chiasm, inverted parallelism, Philemon 5; paranomasia, repetition of the same word stem, kakous kako, Matt. 21, 41; limoi kai loimoi, Luke 21, 11; alliteration "bed and board; Rom. 11, 29.30 phthonou phonou, Annomination, where sense and sound are alike--Petros and petra Pleonasm - repetition, Col. 2, 13, Mark 7, 25, Phil. 1, 23. Hyperbaton - where the word seems to be in the wrong place, I Cor. 14, 7; Pun - a play on words. Some find an example in Philemon 11 "which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me." (Onesimus means "profitable"). However Lenski and others find no pun in this passage.

V. The literal or the figurative interpretation of Scripture? Since it is established that our Lord uses figurative as well as literal language in Scripture, it is essential that we definitely determine when He is speaking literally and when figuratively. First we must define the word "literal." This word may be used in different ways. Thus Prof. Blume, "We must always take the Bible in its literal sense. This means that we take the Bible as the words demand that it be taken. It is part of the literal understanding of Scriptures that we recognize and correctly interpret the figures of speech in it." The word literal also means "as opposed to figurative," and it is in this sense that I would like to use it.

In our everyday conversation and reading we usually understand one another. However as differences in age, occupation, language, time and environment appear, we may have to inquire into the interpretation.

When the Speaker is the Lord God Himself, when that book is the Bible, when the message is God's plan of salvation for the sinner, then it is absolutely essential that I listen carefully and let Him explain His words which are "spirit and life," and which, as He promises, can alone make me "wise unto salvation."

The literal meaning of words and sentences is the normal approach in all languages. This does not rule out figures of speech, but even these figures depend for their very existence on the literal meanings. The fact that a lion is a symbol of strength is based on literal lions who are literally strong. When the Lord tells us, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" or that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world, this must be taken literally because there is no indication of any figurative meaning. However when the Lord calls Himself a "vine," it should be apparent at once, that this is used in the secondary meaning or the figurative.

Our Lord Himself in His word gives us certain principles which will determine for us when a passage or word must be interpreted literally or figuratively.

1. God's Word is the truth. God is the truth, John 1, 17; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ, 14, 6. I am the way, the truth and the life. It is also God's will that we know the truth, I Tim. 2, 4 "Who will have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." No one can tell us what God wants us to believe and do but God Himself. "The things of God knoweth no man but the Spirit of God," I Cor. 2, 9-11. The Bible is God's own book which not only contains but which is in all its parts the Word of God. Heb. 1, 1. 2; I Thess. 2, 13; 2 Pet. 1, 21; 2 Tim. 3, 16. Both the literal and figurative words are the truth of God. The verbal inspiration of the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit guided men into truth and away from error.

Those who reject the verbal inspiration of Scripture will easily fall into the error of interpreting Scripture falsely.

We might recall the ancient and medieval approach to the words of the Bible by allegorizing the text. Thus the four rivers in Eden were supposed to refer to prudence, temperance, courage, and justice. Rahab's scarlet thread is said to indicate the redemption. Thus Ambrose, 374-397 AD, sees in Noah's ark a representation of the human body. The four kings of the East, Gen. 14, 1, denote the allurements of the flesh and the world; the five kings, v. 8, are the five senses.

In the New Testament the ass that was tied on Palm Sunday represents mankind as bound in sin, and the loosing of the same is the redemption of Christ. Thus the word became putty in the hands of each interpreter.

Here a warning is in place that we also do not resort to allegorizing, that we do not allegorize physical into spiritual blindness, the leprosy of the body into the leprosy of sin, the words of Jesus on the cross "I thirst" into spiritual thirst. The same danger presents itself in the interpretation of parables, when we take some minor detail and emphasize this at the expense of the point of comparison, and thus do violence to the intended meaning.

When the age of Pietism arrived, all rules of grammar and the common meaning and usage of the words were discarded, and the internal inner light of the spirit was considered the only guide in interpretation. In other words, they appealed to their emotions rather than to the plain words of Scripture. The cry of the day was "Deeds, not creeds." When Luther was asked "Do you feel saved?" he replied that he often did not feel saved, but that he knew that he was saved because of the clear words of Scripture.

Rationalism also discards the Bible as the divine source of saving knowledge and strips it of its divine authority. Men sought to solve all problems by means of man's power of reason. When Arthur Brisbane commented on the words of Jesus to the malefactor: "Today thou shalt be with Me in paradise," he rejected these words and said: "If the soul would travel at the speed of radio rays, which in less than one second pass around the globe seven times, it would take 300,000,000 years

to reach the limits of the universe." A few years ago Ripley in his "Believe it or not" column "proved" that heaven has long since been filled to capacity, and there is no room for anyone else.

The Roman Catholic church has a coldly rationalistic theology. For instance Bellarmine wrote: "Man is able to obey the law perfectly, otherwise God would be a tyrant." Also, "Mary must be conceived without sin, because God would not let the body in which His Son would dwell to have a stain of sin."

And of course the Reformed have followed the pattern of Calvin who maintained: "The Lord did not institute anything which is out of harmony with our reason." Thus they maintain that it is impossible for Christ, who is present locally in heaven, to give his body and blood sacramentally, because "it is impossible for the human body to be present in more than one place at the same time; it also disrupts the Holy Trinity and is against human reason."

In a recent conversation with a Church of Christ pastor in regard to baptism, the writer had a first-hand illustration how some Reformed interpret the Bible in keeping with their rationalistic views. Although he insisted that his church accepts the Bible as the truth, while "the Lutherans have only the Gatechism," he revealed the following: In Matt. 28, 19 "all nations" simply means "all nationalities," namely, the Jews, the Romans, etc. and of course, only the adults. The same is true, according to him, in Romans 3 "all have sinned" means the "nationalities" only, not the individuals. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh" refers only to the natural birth. "Of such is the kingdom of God" means that children are by nature members of Christ's kingdom. In his interpretation of Psalm 51, 5, "Behold I was shapen in iniquity, and in sindid my mother conceive me," he showed to what lengths they will go to reject the doctrine of original sin. He said: "In order to understand this passage, you must read Deut. 23, 2; Gen. 38, 24-30; Matt. 1, 1-3 in that order. Deut. 23, 2: "A bastard shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord, even to the tenth generation shall he not enter into the congregation of

the Lord." In Gen. 38, 24-30 we read that Tamar had twins, born illegitimately, Pharez and Zarah. And in Matthew 1, 1-3, we hear that David was a tenth generation descendant of these illegitimate children. Thus, according to the Church of Christ pastor, David alone was conceived in sin, because this stigma of being a descendant of an illegitimate child, rested upon him.

Related to Rationalism is what has variously been called Accomodation, Naturalism, Modernism, or Demythologizing. These maintain that the Bible teachings of the miracles, the sacrifice of Christ, the resurrection, the judgment, are an accomodation to the superstitious notions and prejudices of the times.

The latest advocate of this school is Dr. Rudolf Bultmann, a professor of modern Reformed theology at Marburg, Germany, who invented the word "demythologizing." He believes that the accounts of Jesus' miracles are nothing but myths, fables, or fairy stories. They never actually happened but were told to signify something, and that we should learn lessons from its figurative tales. He says: "The language of the Bible and of dogmatic tradition is tied to an ancient, outdated world picture. It is utterly incomprehensible to modern man, whose habits of thinking and speaking have been molded by science." He also refers to "naive biblicism" and rejects the thought that doctrines can be derived from the literal words of the Bible.

Similar opinions were expressed in a 48-page booklet by Konradin Aller, which discredits Benjamin Franklin as the first extensive user of electricity and credits knowledge of explosives to the ancients. This is based upon the proposition that Moses was not a Jew but an illegitimate child of the Egyptian Pharoah's daughter, and that Egyptian knowledge of that time included the sciences of electricity and blasting. "Moses carried this knowledge into the desert, where the dry current conducting air was best suited for the practice of it," Aller says, adding, "The real reason why Moses never entered the promised land, but kept the Jews in the desert for forty years, was his realization that he could not perform his electric tricks, which seemed like miracles to the Jews, in the more humid air of the

land of Canaan." He calls the episode of the burning bush an "electric phenomenon common in desert regions." The ark, according to Aller's version, was nothing more sacred than a form of Leyden jar. And, Aller continues, when Moses had grown to be an old man of 120 years, he found an easy way out of life by simply blowing himself to pieces. That is the Aller explanation of why Deut. 34, 8 observes: "But no man knoweth of his sepulchre unto this day." Aller concludes with this remark about the capture of Jericho: "Joshua took a whole week to lay his mines and meanwhile distracted the attention of the beleaguered by having the mystic ark of the covenant carried around the city daily."

In an article in the Northwestern Lutheran, September 12, 1937 "An Analysis of some typical attempts to strip the Bible of the Miraculous" by Pastor Im. P. Frey, a certain Dr. George M. Lamsa is quoted to show his belief that much that is miraculous in the Bible can be explained in a natural way. Thus he adds another attempt to discredit the story of Jonah, with the version that Jonah simply told someone he was "in a big fish," which was a common expression of that day, to be in a dilemma, to be "in an awful jam." Dr. Lamsa also had answers to other miracles: Lazarus did not die but merely fell into a swoon, Jesus did not feed the 5000 miraculously, but they brought their own loaves of bread; Jesus did not walk on the water, but along the shore.

Since we by the grace of God know that the Bible is the truth, we will not listen to our imagination, to our emotions, to reason, or to anything or anyone who rejects the authority of Scripture.

2) Since the Bible is the Word of truth in all its parts, it is also sufficient. The Bible brings us "All the counsel of God" Acts 20, 27. It is sufficient to make us "wise unto salvation," 2 Tim. 3, 15. The rich man was told that his brothers had "Moses and the prophets," Luke 16, 29; they needed nothing more. Our Lord also forbids additions, subtractions, and alterations, by an individual or a group, Deut. 4, 2; Prov. 30, 6; Gal. 1, 8; Matt. 23, 8-10. Also no new revelations are to be expected, as the Quakers and Latter Day Saints

aver. Neither may reason, either natural or illumined, add to the revealed word, I Cor. 4, 4; I Cor. 1, 20, 21; Gal. 6, 5; Luke 16, 29; or tradition, or modern development of doctrine.

The Catholic church calls the Bible "a dead letter calling for a divine interpreter. It is obscure and hard to understand and is open to many false interpretations. Moreover a number of revealed truths have been handed by divine tradition only." Thus they admit that their doctrine that Mary was not subject to the sin of Adam is not taught in Scripture but "may be inferred from two passages if understood in the light of Catholic tradition: Gen. 3, 15, Luke 1, 28." Also, "the Assumption of Mary may not be proved from the Bible but rests on solid theological principles." Thus they find in the councils and tradition an authority superior to the inspired Scriptures because they reject those passages which speak of the sufficiency of Holy Writ. So also the enthusiasts, who are not satisfied with what has been clearly revealed but let their imagination run rampant, especially as they consult the Book of Revelation and other highly figurative portions of the Bible.

3) The Bible is clear The Lord refers to His Word as a light, Ps. 119, 105; 2 Pet. 1, 19. It can make wise the simple, Ps. 19, 7, and even children can know the scriptures and become wise unto salvation. This does not mean that it will be clear to everyone; Acts 8, 31. "Understandest thou what thou readest? How can I except some man should guide me?" Nor does it mean that natural man can understand it: "Neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned," I Cor. 2, 14. We also know that the Bible contains some things hard to be understood, 2 Peter 3, 16, but this is not due to God but to our lack of knowledge of the language, or the conditions, or of the subject treated.

a. From these and other passages the important rule of interpretation must stand: Every statement of the Bible has only one meaning intended by the Holy Ghost. This opposes the allegorizers who maintained that all words of Scripture have a fourfold sense: the literal, moral, allegorical,

and mystical. Thus Jerusalem was interpreted to mean the city, a pure conscience, the church militant, and the church triumphant. When God speaks literally, He wants to be understood literally; when figuratively, He want us to receive it as a figure of speech.

- b. This also means that God's Word, when allowed to speak for itself, will be its own best interpreter. We follow this rule in our daily conversation, and it should certainly hold true when God speaks to us. It is not our business to sit in judgment on what the Lord tells us, accepting what agrees, and rejecting what does not agree with our personal views. The Bible also gives us many examples of the interpretation of dreams, visions, types, symbols, and parables, so that those eternal truths which God has revealed become clear to us.
- c. We must interpret those passages that are obscure and figurative by those that are clear and contain no figures. Peter informs us that there "are some things hard to be understood," 2 Peter 3, 16. In some of the prophetic books as Daniel, Ezekiel, Revelation, we cannot with absolute certainty determine the meaning of the highly figurative language. We dare not draw from the parables some new doctrines not otherwise revealed. Gerhard remarks: "What is obscurely expressed in one passage is more clearly explained in others." And Luther says: "There is no clearer book upon earth than is Holy Writ. It is indeed true that some passages in Scripture are obscure, but in these you find nothing but what is found in other places and in clear and plain passages." And even though we know that many doctrines of Scripture are unintelligible to human reason, such as the doctrines of the incarnation of Christ, Holy Trinity, personal union of two natures of Christ, still these are set forth in words so intelligible that every person of normal intelligence who understands human speech can receive them into his mind and through the supernatural operation of the Holy Ghost can apprehend them also spiritually.

The Catholic church has denied this and needs only a vague reference to fire to find here a passage that to them refers to purgatory; so also their other false teachings: Peter's popedom, prayers for the dead, etc.

The enthusiasts maintain Scripture must be expounded by means of the inner light and base many of their false teachings on the highly figurative books of Prophecy, especially Revelation.

Thus we observe the principle which the fathers called "The Analogy of Scripture" interpreting the unclear by the clear.

- d. This method of interpretation will also rule out anything which conflicts with the analogy of faith, which refers to the total of the revealed passages which speak about a certain doctrine of Scripture. When we study the parable of the laborers in the vineyard and hear of the wages paid and received, we dare not draw the conclusion that we can earn our way to heaven, which conflicts with clear doctrines of the Bible.
- e. The purpose of figurative language is to illuminate a relationship or a state in one domain by means of a comparable relationship in another. Thus we are asked in scripture to "hate father and mother" to "put on the whole armor of God," "to turn the other cheek." Since the figure never completely coincides with the thing to be clarified, it is of the utmost importance to note the point of comparison. Here again we must seek to understand the speaker as he intends to be understood, and this is so important in Scripture where our Lord is revealing His heavenly and eternal truths. In many of the figures employed it is quite simple to ascertain the point the speaker is trying to make, but in others, as in some of the parables, we must study the context very carefully to determine the meaning intended.

In this connection one must also bear in mind that figurative language in the Bible is not so stereotyped that one figure always stands for one and the same thing. In I Pet. 5, 8 the devil is compared with a "roaring lion," and in Rev. 5, 5, our Lord Jesus is called "The Lion of the tribe of Judah." In Ps. 22, 13, the people under the cross are described as "a ravening and a roaring lion." Also in Hosea 7, 11, the silliness of the dove is the point of comparison, and in Matt. 10, 16, the simplicity of guilelessness of the dove is stressed.

How important it is to find the point of comparison we see also in the parable of the hidden treasure. A man finds a treasure in a field which belongs to someone else. It is at least morally questionable if not absolutely unrighteous for him to keep back from the owner the presence of the treasure. But this is not the point of the story at all, but only his earnestness in securing the treasure, his fixed purpose to make it at all costs and all hazards his own.

- f. Interpret the literal as literal. Because our Lord assures us of the clarity of Scripture it follows that He wants us to understand His words literally, unless He clearly indicates that He is using figurative language.

Thus when our Lord makes reference to the Old Testament narratives He accepted them as authentic, and as historically true. When He speaks of creation, the flood, Abraham, Lot, and Jonah, He tells us that these actually happened. Matt. 19, 4: "He which made them at the beginning made them male and female." Matt. 24, 37: But as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be; also ff. John 8, 56: "Your Father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." Luke 17, 32: "Remember Lot's wife." Matt. 12, 40: "For as Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly."

In a book Answers of the Roman Catholic Church to some questions about the Catholic religion we read:

"We are free to reject the literal interpretation of Joshua 10, 12, namely the sun standing still. Two theories are mentioned by Jesuit theologians, first when the hailstones brought darkness, Joshua merely ordered the sun and moon to reappear; or it may mean that Joshua may have merely expressed an ardent desire that he might gain the victory before the sun sink on the horizon."

"Catholics are free also to reject the story of Jonah as literal history. When Christ argued with the Jews He may have used the grounds they acknowledged without raising the question of the historicity of Jonah."

Luther wrote the following against those who rejected the story of creation as literal: "When Moses writes that God made heaven and earth and all that is in them in six days, you are to accept that it was six days and not to find an explanation that six days were one day. If you cannot understand how it could have been six days, or that the ax head could float, or that Jonah was swallowed by a fish, then accord to the Holy Spirit the honor that He is more learned than you."

It is true that the Apostle Paul did refer to the story of Sarah and Hagar and calls it an allegory, but he is speaking by inspiration, and is merely recording what God told him to write. This does not give us the right to allegorize other literal events, unless this is definitely indicated in Scripture.

The modernists especially have been guilty of treating the literal words figuratively because they do not accept the Word of God as verbally inspired. The suffering and death of Christ has been called a mere figure of speech; the burning bush is supposed to refer to the Mother of the Lord; those who were possessed by the devil merely show us that there is evil in the world, and the casting out signifies that good will triumph over evil. Also that Gen. 3, 15 merely denotes the enmity between serpents and man, that this is fulfilled whenever a snake bites a man, or when a man crushes the head of a snake.



Zwingli spoke of the figure of speech "Alloiosis." When he read passages like "God is man" or "This man is God," or "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things?" Luke 24, 28, he declared that the term "Christ" referred only to his human nature, since, as he said, it is a mere figure of speech if the suffering and death of Christ are ascribed to His divine nature. The Reformed also interpret Christ's descent into hell figuratively...referring to His suffering.

In the Lord's Supper the Reformed interpret some of the words of institution figuratively, because they cannot with their reason comprehend how they can be understood in their literal sense. When Zwingli, at Marburg, declared that "God does not propose to our belief things which we cannot comprehend," Melancthon makes this indignant note: "Such foolish words fell from him, when in fact the Christian doctrines present many articles more incomprehensible and more sublime (than that article of the true presence); as, for example, that God was made man, that this person Christ, who is true God, died." Although they are agreed that there must be a figurative interpretation of the words of institution, still there are about twenty different versions of their interpretation. Carlstadt insisted that Jesus pointed to His body and said, "This is My body." Schwenkfeld changed it to read "My body is this." Oecolampadius interpreted the word "body" metaphorically. Zwingli referred to a presence to our memory (signifies, is a sign of), and Calvin said that the bread represented the body of Christ.

When we consider the words "Take, eat, this is My Body" we note that the Reformed agree that the first three words should be taken literally--literal taking, a literal eating. The word "this" does not refer to all bread, but to "this" that has been consecrated, set aside, that is to be received, and must be interpreted literally. Some of the Reformed insist that the word "is" must be taken figuratively, quoting passages such as John 15, 5: "I am the vine." However the figure here is not in the word "is" but in the word "vine." In no language can "is" ever be interpreted as a figure of speech. When we point to a statue of Washington and say "This is Washington" then the figure is in the word

"this," not in "is." Chas. P. Krauth in the "Conservative Reformation" shows how it would lead to absurdity if the word "is" would be interpreted to mean "is a sign of." If this were true, then we would have to change the words, "This is My Body," to read "This is a sign of My Body." But again you find the word "is," so again you would have to change it to read "This is a sign, is a sign of My Body." But now you have two words "is," and so--ad absurdum.

It is true that the word "body" may be used figuratively and is so employed in Scripture, Eph. 1, 22-23, "which is His body." However here in the Lord's Supper it is definitely stated which body this is, "which is given for you."

In I Cor. 10, 16, which Luther calls a "thunderbolt" upon the heads of the errorists in regard to the Lord's Supper, we hear that the unworthy communicant is guilty of the body. Since the unworthy communicant cannot receive the body spiritually, because he has no faith, he must receive it orally, it must be present. From I Cor. 10, 16, we also learn that there could be no communion between the bread and the body if the body were not truly present. Another proof for the true presence is given in the fact that in the Old Covenant also real blood was present, the blood of the lambs, so also this must hold true in the New Covenant. Also that this is Christ's testament, in which we receive real not imaginary gifts.

The Lutheran Church is accused of inconsistency in interpreting the words "This is My Body" literally, but interprets the word "cup" figuratively, "This cup is the New Testament in My Blood, which is shed for you," Luke 22, 20. However this is not a parallel, because the word "cup" is the figure called metonymy, the container for the thing contained, which is a grammatical figure of speech. The Reformed interpret the word "body" as a metaphor, a rhetorical figure. The charge of inconsistency would be true only if we interpreted "cup" as a metaphor, namely as a sign of, a symbol of, or representing the blood of Christ, as the Reformed do.



The Lutherans are also criticized for using the words "in, with, and under" because they are not found in Scripture. Luther gave this answer: "If the Bible would say "in, with and under" then the fanatics would say, 'See, Christ does not say, 'This is My Body;' if He would say this, then we would believe."

g. Interpret the figurative as figurative.

When the Lord chooses to speak figuratively, He clearly shows that He wants us to understand it as a figure of speech. In John 6 He says, "I am the bread of life;" He shows that this use of the word "bread" differs from the bread which He used to feed the five thousand, and from the manna with which Moses fed the people of Israel. He warns them, v. 27: "Labor not for the meat which perisheth but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life." And when the Lord spoke of the Pharisees in Matt. 7,2: "Do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets," we note that Jesus did not mean to say that they actually blew a literal trumpet, but merely that they were advertising or showing off their good works. In the account of the washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus did not institute a Sacrament, did not say "This do" as He did in the Lord's Supper, but is speaking figuratively to encourage them to follow His example of love and humility.

h. Not false literalism or letterism. This is the coldly mechanical approach to Scripture which disregards the intended meaning. There are those who interpret Ps. 136, 6: "To Him that stretched out the earth above the waters," to prove that the world is flat. And in Is. 11, 12, "The four corners of the earth" that the earth are the Lord's" that the world actually stands on literal pillars. Other examples of such false literalism are: Those who actually cut off their hands, and pluck out their eyes, Matt. 5, 29, 30, actually play with poisonous serpents. The Quaker who would not take off his hat before the king because he said, the three men in the fiery furnace had been there "with their hosen and hats on," Dan. 3, 21. The Memmonites insist on the literalistic interpretation of I Cor. 5, 9-11 and with- world is a cube. I Sam. 2, 8, "For the pillars of the

draw from all others; the Anabaptists who felt it was wrong to own private property, for the Lord asks us to "forsake all and follow Him." Luke 14, 33. The Dunkers who will not bear arms because Jesus says, Matt. 5, 39: "Blessed are the peacemakers;" those who still wash one another's feet, who insist the Lord's Supper must always be observed in the evening, the Quakers and Memmonites who refuse to swear an oath, because Jesus said: "Swear not at all."

4) The Bible is God's inerrant Word written by men, to men, and in human language.

a. The very heart of our faith is that God is speaking to us in the Bible, speaks sufficiently, and speaks clearly. However, we must also remember that the Lord spoke through the holy men of God--men who lived long ago, in a certain land, under certain conditions, and had a definite goal in their writings. It is up to us in interpreting Scripture to bridge the gap between our minds and the minds of the Biblical writers. It will help us in interpreting the figures of speech to know whether Moses, David, Isaiah, or some NT writer is recording these words. When did the author live? In what country? Under what circumstances? What purpose is he trying to achieve with this book?

b. It is also necessary to determine as much as we can, to whom this book and the words are addressed. Matthew wrote his gospel to the Jews, Luke addressed his to Theophilus, Paul of course had many and varied addressees. Thus we will also try to bridge the culture gap. We must transport ourselves to Palestine, to Greece, to Rome, to Egypt, and then try to understand their customs, manners, economic systems, military systems. We should know something about the geography and history of the land and the people since the figures of speech are taken from the home life, the church life, the occupations, and the geographical structure, of these peoples and lands of long ago.

c. Our Lord also speaks to us in human language. However since this was done in Hebrew, Aramaic and

Greek, it of course is necessary to have some knowledge of these languages in order to understand what the Lord did say. We must study the words employed, their etymology, the context, the syntax, and of course make use of parallel passages which apply. And whenever the Lord uses figurative language we should recognize the figures--whether it is a simile or metaphor, a parable or allegory, whether it is hyperbole, irony, paradox, or metonymy--and interpret them as intended by the Lord.

d. Finally, all the words of Scripture are recorded to make us wise unto salvation, and this also includes the figurative language. If we approach God's Word and recognize it as the truth of God, that He has revealed everything that we need to know, that His words are clear, and that He is speaking in human language, through men, and to men, and pray that He will guide us into all truth, we can be sure that He will hear and will answer our prayer.

We all have reason to give thanks to God for the example of Martin Luther, who is called the father of Protestant interpretation. Luther tells how he sat before the open Bible and simply allowed God to address him face to face. Luther also put it this way: "Take Christ out of the Scripture and what more is there to find in it. Scripture must be interpreted to mean nothing else but that man is nothing. Christ is all. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and manger in which Christ lies. Simple and small are the swaddling clothes, but dear is the treasure, Christ, that lies in them." Vol. VIII, page 236.

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