

Literary Devices in the Bible Podcast

1) Hyperbole

a) **Matthew 5:29–30 (ESV)** ²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell.

i) Exegesis:

- (1) This saying comes from the **Sermon on the Mount**, where Jesus addresses the root of sin—starting in the heart. The broader context deals with lust (vv. 27–28), and Jesus warns of sin's seriousness, emphasizing the **eternal consequences** of unchecked desire.
- (2) By telling disciples to gouge out an eye or cut off a hand, Jesus isn't advocating literal self-mutilation. Rather, He is using **vivid imagery** to stress the radical nature of repentance: it's better to lose something valuable than to be destroyed by sin.

ii) Why It's Hyperbole:

- (1) **No biblical character or church practice ever interpreted this literally**, not even the apostles.
- (2) Jesus elsewhere condemns **externalism** and praises heart-level purity. Physically cutting off body parts does not address the internal root of sin.

(a) **Mark 7:20–23 (ESV)** ²⁰ And he said, "What comes out of a person is what defiles him. ²¹ For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, ²² coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. ²³ All these evil things come from within, and they defile a person."

- (3) It uses **impossible or extreme action** (plucking an eye to cure lust) to make a spiritual point—**prioritize holiness** at all costs.
- (4) **Hyperbolic structure is common in rabbinic teaching**: dramatic images grab attention and drive home urgency.

iii) Interpretation:

- (1) Jesus employs hyperbole to urge decisive, radical rejection of sin. His call is spiritual and metaphorical, not surgical.

b) **Luke 14:26 (ESV)** ²⁶ "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

i) Exegesis:

- (1) Jesus is warning would-be disciples that following Him demands **ultimate allegiance**—even above family. In a cultural context where family loyalty was paramount, this statement would have been shocking. But the purpose is not to incite literal hatred.
- (2) The Greek word for "hate" (*μισέω*, *miseō*) can mean **"to love less"** or "to place in secondary position," especially in comparative contexts.

(a) **Genesis 29:30–31 (ESV)** ³⁰ So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and he loved Rachel more than Leah, and served Laban for another seven years. ³¹ When the Lord saw that Leah was hated, he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren.

ii) Why It's Hyperbole:

(1) **Parallel passages clarify it:** In **Matthew 10:37 (ESV)** ³⁷ *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*

(a) This softer wording shows the point is **relative loyalty**, not emotional hatred.

(2) Jesus elsewhere teaches love for neighbor and even enemies (Luke 6:27). Literal hate would contradict His own ethic.

(a) **Luke 6:27–28 (ESV)** ²⁷ *“But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.*

(3) This is a **rhetorical device**—a shocking overstatement to highlight that following Christ may divide families and require difficult choices.

iii) Interpretation:

(1) Jesus is using hyperbole to stress the **cost of discipleship**—allegiance to Him must surpass even the most sacred earthly ties.

c) **John 21:25 (ESV)** ²⁵ *Now there are also many other things that Jesus did. Were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written.*

i) Exegesis:

(1) John concludes his Gospel with a flourish, praising the vastness of Christ’s life and deeds. The point is not to suggest literal infinite actions, but that Jesus’ ministry was so full of significance and glory that **no written record could do it justice**.

(2) This mirrors other biblical doxologies (like Psalm 40:5) that express the **incomprehensibility of God’s works** through poetic language.

(a) **Psalm 40:5 (ESV)** ⁵ *You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts toward us; none can compare with you! I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.*

ii) Why It’s Hyperbole:

(1) **Genre clues:** This is **doxological** and concluding language, not historical reporting.

(2) It contains **exaggerated scale** (all the world’s books!) meant to express **awe**, not a literal publishing impossibility.

(a) Doxological Language

(i) **Doxological** comes from the Greek word **doxa** (δόξα), meaning *glory*, and **-logia**, meaning *saying* or *expression*. So, **doxological language** refers to **words that give glory or praise to God**.

(b) **Concluding language** refers to statements that **wrap up a section, book, or argument**. These often summarize or reflect on what came before and may include:

(i) A **summary** or final thought

(ii) A **farewell** or **closing prayer**

(iii) A **theological reflection** or encouragement

(3) Similar **Jewish idioms** appear in extra-biblical texts to convey overflowing abundance or immeasurable greatness.

iii) Interpretation:

(1) John uses hyperbole to emphasize the **boundlessness of Jesus’ life and works**. It’s a literary flourish to evoke wonder, not a quantifiable claim about physical books.

d) Conclusion on Hyperbole

i) Each of these texts uses **deliberate exaggeration**:

(1) To **capture attention**

(2) To **drive home spiritual urgency**

(3) To **elevate the importance** of Christ's person or mission

ii) **How We Know They're Hyperbole:**

- (1) **Contextual tension** with literal meaning (e.g., Jesus' teachings on love)
- (2) **Absurd or impossible literal reading** (e.g., cutting off a hand to stop lust)
- (3) **Genre and rhetorical clues** (e.g., poetic, proverbial, or prophetic style)
- (4) **Clarifying cross-references** in parallel texts

iii) Understanding these as hyperbolic guards us from misapplication and helps us grasp the **moral and theological urgency** the biblical authors wanted to convey.

2) Metaphor

a) **What Is a Metaphor?**

- i) A **metaphor** is a **direct comparison** between two **unlike things** to explain or emphasize a quality or idea.
- ii) **Definition:** A figure of speech in which one thing **is said to be** another to suggest a shared quality or function.
 - (1) **Key Features:**
 - (a) **Direct statement:** A is B ("I am the door," "You are salt").
 - (b) Used to **illustrate or intensify** a concept.
 - (c) Often found in **poetry, parables, and teachings**.

b) John 10:9 (ESV) ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.

i) **Exegesis:**

- (1) Jesus is speaking within a **shepherding metaphor** (John 10), where He portrays Himself as both the **Good Shepherd** (v. 11) and the **door** through which the sheep enter. The "door" here represents the **exclusive way to salvation and security** for God's people.
- (2) In ancient sheepfolds, the shepherd himself would often **lie in the entrance**, literally becoming the "door" between the sheep and danger.

ii) **Why It's a Metaphor:**

- (1) **Context:** The entire passage is filled with metaphorical language (sheep, thief, shepherd, pasture), not literal descriptions.
- (2) **Genre:** Jesus is teaching in **symbolic and illustrative terms**, common in His parables and discourses.
- (3) **Logical Impossibility:** Jesus is a man—not a literal, hinged, wooden structure. His audience understood this and would not have mistaken His statement as literal.
- (4) **Interpretive Consequence:** If taken literally, the statement becomes absurd or meaningless. As metaphor, it clearly communicates Jesus as the **exclusive access** to God and safety.

iii) **Conclusion:**

- (1) Jesus uses the **"door" metaphor** to express His **mediatory role** in salvation—not to describe His physical being.

c) Psalm 18:2 (ESV) ² The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.

i) **Exegesis:**

- (1) David writes this psalm as a **thanksgiving song** for God's deliverance from his enemies. He uses vivid **military and geological metaphors** to describe God's strength and protection.

- (2) Calling God his "rock" and "fortress" evokes the **safety and stability** of natural strongholds and man-made defenses—common imagery for divine refuge in ancient Hebrew poetry.

ii) Why It's a Metaphor:

- (1) **Poetic Genre:** Psalms are full of figurative language, often using **symbolic comparisons** to describe God's attributes.
- (2) **Impossibility of Literalism:** God is Spirit (John 4:24), not a literal geological object or building.
- (3) **Cultural Usage:** In ancient Israel, rocks and fortresses were literal places of safety—so these became **metaphors** for divine protection.
- (4) **Repetition** in the Psalms and other poetry (e.g., Psalm 31:3; 62:2) shows it's a conventional poetic expression.

iii) Conclusion:

- (1) David metaphorically describes God as his "rock" to communicate **God's reliability, protection, and unchanging nature**, not His material substance.

d) Matthew 5:13 (ESV) ¹³ "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet."

i) Exegesis:

- (1) In the **Sermon on the Mount**, Jesus tells His followers they are "salt" and "light." Here, "**salt of the earth**" is a metaphor for the **preserving and purifying influence** believers are to have in the world.
- (a) In the ancient world, salt had multiple uses:
- (i) **Preservation** of food (in a time before refrigeration)
 - (ii) **Flavor enhancement.**
 - (iii) **Covenantal symbol** in Hebrew culture (cf. Leviticus 2:13)
- (b) Jesus is likely invoking all these associations, calling disciples to **preserve moral truth, bring distinctiveness, and promote life** in a decaying world.

ii) Why It's a Metaphor:

- (1) **Impossible Literalism:** Humans are not literal sodium chloride.
- (2) **Parallel metaphor:** In the next verse, Jesus says "You are the light of the world"—clearly figurative as well.
- (3) **Common Jewish idiom:** "Salt" was often used symbolically in Jewish teaching to represent **wisdom, faithfulness, and covenant loyalty.**
- (4) **Contextual clues:** Jesus is speaking in **moral exhortation**, not physical description.

iii) Conclusion:

- (1) "Salt of the earth" is a **metaphor for the distinct, preserving, and impactful role** of disciples in society—not a comment on their chemical makeup.

e) How We Know These Are Metaphors:

- i) **Genre** – Poetic, parabolic, or didactic teaching often employs metaphor.
- ii) **Impossibility or absurdity of literal reading** – A literal "door" or "salt person" is nonsense.
- iii) **Consistent biblical usage** – Similar metaphors recur throughout Scripture with figurative intent.
- iv) **Contextual clarity** – Jesus and the biblical authors often shift between metaphorical language and straightforward explanation.

- v) **Audience understanding** – No early Jewish or Christian audience read these examples as literal; they recognized the **illustrative style**.

3) Symbolism

a) What Is Symbolism?

- i) **Symbolism** uses a **person, object, image, or action** to represent something **larger or more abstract** than itself.
- ii) **Definition:** A literary device where something **stands for** or **represents** a deeper, often abstract, idea.

(1) Key Features:

- (a) One thing **stands for** another (e.g., bread = Christ's body; dove = Holy Spirit).
- (b) Can be part of a **larger system of meaning** (e.g., apocalyptic symbols).
- (c) Common in **rituals, sacraments, prophecy, and narrative imagery**.

iii) How is this different from metaphor?

- (1) **Metaphor:** A rhetorical device that says one thing **is** another to create a **powerful image or association** (e.g., "The Lord is my shepherd").
- (2) **Symbolism:** Uses objects or images to **stand in for** something else, especially to **communicate theological truths** (e.g., water as a symbol of cleansing or rebirth).
- (3) **Metaphor helps us see something more clearly.**
- (4) **Symbolism helps us connect something concrete with something deeper.**

b) The Lamb – Symbol of Jesus' Sacrifice

- i) **John 1:29 (ESV)** ²⁹ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

(1) Exegesis:

- (a) John the Baptist identifies Jesus as "**the Lamb of God**," a phrase packed with **Old Testament imagery**:
- (b) It recalls the **Passover lamb** (Exodus 12), whose blood protected Israel from death.
- (c) It echoes **Isaiah 53:7**, which describes the suffering servant as "a lamb led to the slaughter."
- (d) It prefigures **Jesus' sacrificial death**, where His blood delivers believers from spiritual death.
- (e) Jesus is not literally a lamb. Rather, the lamb **symbolizes** His role as the **innocent, substitutionary sacrifice** who bears sin and brings redemption.

(2) Why It's Symbolism:

- (a) **Contextual cues:** John identifies a human being (Jesus) using an **animal title**—clearly figurative.
- (b) **Theological depth:** The lamb is a **rich theological symbol** drawn from the sacrificial system.
- (c) **Apocalyptic use:** Revelation portrays Jesus as a lamb throughout (e.g., Rev 5:6), reinforcing it as **symbolic of His mission**, not His physical appearance.

(3) Conclusion:

- (a) The lamb is a **symbol of Jesus' atoning death**, used to communicate innocence, sacrifice, and deliverance—not a literal description of form.

c) Baptismal Water – Symbol of Cleansing and New Life

- i) **Acts 22:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name.'

(1) Exegesis:

- (a) Here, Paul recounts his conversion, where Ananias urges him to be baptized. The language of “washing away sins” is drawn from the **symbolic association** of water with cleansing.
- (b) Baptism **visibly enacts** the spiritual truths of:
 - (i) **Forgiveness** (washing away guilt)
 - (ii) **New birth** (Romans 6:3–4)
 - (iii) **Union with Christ**
- (c) Water, in this case, does not literally remove sin the way soap removes dirt; it **represents** the deeper spiritual reality of **cleansing through Christ**.

ii) Why It's Symbolism:

- (1) **Biblical theology:** Only **Christ's blood** removes sin (Hebrews 9:14), not physical water.
- (2) **Ritual context:** Baptism is a **symbolic act** that signifies faith and regeneration—not a mechanical transaction.
- (3) **Figurative parallel:** In 1 Peter 3:21, Peter explicitly says “**baptism... now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience**”—clarifying it is **not literal washing**, but symbolic.
 - (a) **1 Peter 3:21 (ESV)** ²¹ Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

iii) Conclusion:

- (1) The water of baptism **symbolizes spiritual cleansing**, appealing to God's grace through faith—not literally washing sin away.

d) The Tree of Life – Symbol of Eternal Life with God

- i) **Revelation 2:7 (ESV)** ⁷ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

(1) Exegesis:

- (a) The "tree of life" first appears in **Genesis 2–3**, where it symbolizes **immortal life and divine fellowship** in Eden. In Revelation, this symbol reappears, promising restored life in **God's new creation**.
 - (i) **Revelation 22:2 (ESV)** ² through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.
- (b) This “tree” is not necessarily a literal botanical specimen, but a **representation of eternal life**, divine blessing, and restored communion with God.

ii) Why It's Symbolism:

- (1) **Apocalyptic genre:** Revelation is filled with symbols (dragons, scrolls, lampstands) that convey spiritual truths.
- (2) **Contextual theology:** The tree is associated with **eternity, healing, and paradise**, not simply food.
- (3) **Biblical motif:** “Tree of life” functions symbolically across Scripture—from Eden to Proverbs (wisdom as a tree of life) to Revelation.

iii) Conclusion:

- (1) The tree of life **symbolizes eternal life in fellowship with God**, pointing to spiritual reality, not literal horticulture.

e) How We Know These Are Symbolic

i) Contextual Clues

- (1) Symbols often appear in **poetic, prophetic, or apocalyptic** literature, where images carry theological meaning.
- (2) Literal interpretations often break down or contradict clear teaching elsewhere.

ii) Genre Awareness

- (1) Revelation, Psalms, and prophetic books use **symbol-rich language** intentionally.
- (2) Sacraments and rituals (like baptism or the Lord's Supper) use **physical actions** to point to **spiritual truths**.

iii) Theological Consistency

- (1) Symbols align with broader biblical doctrines (e.g., salvation by grace, not water).

iv) Recurring Usage

- (1) When an image (like "lamb" or "tree of life") reappears throughout Scripture in varied settings with **deeper theological meaning**, it functions as a **symbol**, not a literal object each time.

4) Conclusion

- a) At first glance, it may seem more "faithful" or "safe" to always interpret the Bible literally. However, the **best hermeneutic**—the method of interpretation that is both faithful and responsible—is not "**always literal**," but rather "**always according to the author's intended meaning**," which often includes **literary devices** like metaphor, hyperbole, and symbolism.
- b) Let's unpack why this matters and why "always literal" is not the most faithful or accurate approach.

i) The Bible Uses a Variety of Literary Genres and Devices

- (1) The Bible is not a single-genre book; it contains:
 - (a) **Narrative** (Genesis, Acts)
 - (b) **Poetry** (Psalms, Song of Songs)
 - (c) **Wisdom Literature** (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes)
 - (d) **Prophecy and Apocalyptic** (Isaiah, Revelation)
 - (e) **Parables** (taught by Jesus)
 - (f) **Letters (Epistles)** (Romans, Ephesians)
 - (2) Each of these genres uses **different kinds of language**, including:
 - (a) **Metaphor** – "I am the vine"
 - (b) **Hyperbole** – "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out"
 - (c) **Symbolism** – "Lamb of God," "Tree of life," "Salt of the earth"
 - (3) To insist on literalism across all these styles would be to **misread what the text is actually saying**.
 - (4) **Proverbs 26:4–5** gives two back-to-back opposite commands—both wise in different situations. That's not a contradiction; it's **wisdom literature** using rhetorical strategy.
 - (a) **Proverbs 26:4–5 (ESV)** ⁴ Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself. ⁵ Answer a fool according to his folly, lest he be wise in his own eyes.
- (i) **The Rhetorical Strategy: Paradox to Teach Discernment**
1. **Describing language or technique meant to persuade, emphasize, or provoke thought.**
 2. These two proverbs use a **rhetorical device called paradox**—two seemingly contradictory truths placed side by side—not to confuse, but to sharpen judgment. Together, they model a kind of **dialectical wisdom**, where the wise person must know **which principle applies in a given situation**.

- a. **Dialectical** refers to a method of reasoning or discussion that involves the **exchange of opposing ideas or perspectives**, often to arrive at a deeper truth or understanding.
- 3. Here's how the strategy works:
 - a. **Verse 4: Do not answer a fool "according to his folly"**
 - i. **Purpose:** *Avoid becoming like the fool.*
 - ii. **Implication:** Don't stoop to the fool's level. Don't imitate his irrational or mocking tone.
 - iii. **Strategy:** Avoid **mirroring foolish behavior** or engaging in pointless arguments that lower your integrity.
 - b. **Example Application:**
 - i. Don't respond to sarcasm with sarcasm. Don't argue theology with someone mocking the faith just to get a reaction.
 - c. **Verse 5: Answer a fool "according to his folly"**
 - i. **Purpose:** *Prevent him from becoming "wise in his own eyes."*
 - ii. **Implication:** Sometimes silence can be mistaken for agreement. A well-timed, wise response can **expose folly** and **protect others from being misled**.
 - iii. **Strategy:** Confront falsehood when needed, but with restraint and wisdom.
 - d. **Example Application:**
 - i. Correct a harmful lie with truth, especially if others are listening. Silence might suggest the lie is true or that wisdom has nothing to say.

4. What This Strategy Teaches:

- a. **Wisdom is situational.** There's no one-size-fits-all rule for how to deal with a fool.
- b. **Discernment is key.** Sometimes you should speak; sometimes you shouldn't. Wisdom knows the difference.
- c. **Both are true, in tension.** The tension between v. 4 and v. 5 isn't a contradiction—it's a training tool.

(ii) Rhetorical Takeaway:

- 1. This is **rhetoric for the wise**. It's designed to make the reader pause and ask:
 - a. *"What kind of fool is this? Is this the moment to speak or stay silent?"*
 - b. Rather than flattening all situations into rigid formulas, biblical wisdom literature equips us to navigate complex moral realities with **nuanced, Spirit-led judgment**.

ii) Literalism Can Lead to Misunderstanding or Even Absurdity

(1) A rigidly literal approach can distort meaning:

- (a) If Jesus is **literally a door** (John 10:9), He's made of wood and hinges.
- (b) If we must **hate our families** (Luke 14:26), it contradicts His command to love even enemies.
- (c) If God is **literally a rock** (Psalm 18:2), we reduce Him to a lump of granite.

(2) In these examples, taking the **form** literally **misses the function** of the statement: to communicate deep spiritual truths using figurative language.

iii) Jesus Himself Used Figurative Language Constantly

(1) Jesus used:

- (a) **Parables** (stories with symbolic meaning)
- (b) **Metaphors** (“I am the light of the world”)
- (c) **Hyperbole** (“Camel through the eye of a needle”)
- (2) He expected His audience to **discern** meaning, not flatten every statement into a literal fact. In fact, Jesus rebuked His disciples when they **failed to see the figurative meaning** (cf. Matthew 16:11–12).

(a) Matthew 16:11–12 (ESV) ¹¹ How is it that you fail to understand that I did not speak about bread? Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” ¹² Then they understood that he did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

- (3) To interpret Jesus literally when He is speaking metaphorically is to **misunderstand the Gospel itself**.

iv) **The Goal of Hermeneutics Is the Author’s Intended Meaning**

- (1) A sound hermeneutic is not “always literal,” but “always faithful to the **intended sense**.”
- (2) Literalism is a tool—but it becomes a problem when it ignores **literary form**.
- (3) Paul tells Timothy to “rightly divide the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15)—that requires discernment, not mechanical literalism.
 - (a) The **Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy** (a widely respected evangelical document) even affirms this:
 - (i) “Scripture is to be interpreted by **grammatical-historical exegesis**, taking account of its **literary forms and devices**.”

v) **Why Recognizing Literary Devices Matters:**

- (1) **It honors the integrity of Scripture** as a divinely inspired, beautifully written work.
- (2) **It protects us from distortion**, misapplication, and spiritual error.
- (3) **It unlocks deeper meaning**, beauty, and relevance in the biblical text.
- (4) **It reflects how Jesus and the apostles read and taught Scripture**—with sensitivity to genre, symbol, and story.

vi) **Final Thought: Faithful, Not Flat**

- (1) Literal interpretation is only “best” **when the text is meant to be taken literally**. But when the Bible speaks figuratively, we honor it best **by listening on its own terms**—through metaphor, symbol, poetry, and story.
- (2) **Faithfulness to Scripture doesn’t mean flattening it—it means rightly discerning it.**