

FIGURES OF SPEECH USED IN THE BIBLE: EXPLAINED AND ILLUSTRATED,
By E. W. Bullinger, D.D.

How is it that ye do not understand
Then understood they." Matt.-. Xvi. II, 12,

LONDON:
MESSRS. EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE, -GREAT NEW STREET, E.C,
New York :
MESSRS. E. & J. B. YOUNG & CO.,
Cooper Union, Fourth Avenue.

INTRODUCTION.

JEHOVAH has been pleased to give us the revelation of His mind and will in words. It is therefore absolutely necessary that we should understand not merely the meanings of the words themselves, but also the laws which govern their usage and combinations.

All language is governed by law ; but, in order to increase the power of a word, or the force of an expression, these laws are designedly departed from, and words and sentences are thrown into, and used in, new forms, or figures.

The ancient Greeks reduced these new and peculiar forms to science, and gave names to more than two hundred of them.

The Romans carried forward this science : but with the decline of learning in the Middle Ages, it practically died out. A few writers have since then occasionally touched upon it briefly, and have given a few trivial examples : but the knowledge of this ancient science is so completely forgotten, that its very name today is used in a different sense and with almost an opposite meaning.

These manifold forms which words and sentences assume were called by the Greeks *Schema* (σχημα) and by the Romans, *Figura*. Both words have the same meaning, viz., a *shape* or *figure*. When we speak of a person as being " a figure " we mean one who is dressed in some peculiar style, and out of the ordinary manner. The Greek word *Schema* is found in 1 Cor. vii. 31, "The fashion of this world passeth away" ; Phil. ii. 8, " being found in fashion as a man." The Latin word *Figura* is from the verb *ingere*, to form, and has passed into the English language in the words figure, transfigure, configuration, effigy, feint, feign, etc., etc.

We use the word *figure* now in various senses. Its primitive meaning applies to any marks, lines, or outlines, which make a form or shape. Arithmetical figures are certain marks or forms which represent numbers (1, 2, 3, etc.). All secondary and derived meanings of the word " figure " retain this primitive meaning.

Applied to words, a figure denotes some form which a word or sentence takes, different from its ordinary and natural form. This is always for the purpose of giving additional force, more life, intensified feeling, and greater emphasis. Whereas to-day "*Figurative language*" is ignorantly

spoken of as though it made less of the meaning, and deprived the words of their power and force. A passage of God's Word is quoted; and it is met with the cry, "Oh, that is figurative" — implying that its meaning is weakened, or that it has quite a different meaning, or that it has no meaning at all. But the very opposite is the case. For an unusual form (*figura*) is never used except to add force to the truth conveyed, emphasis to the statement of it, and depth to the meaning of it. When we apply this science then to God's words and to Divine truths, we see at once that no branch of Bible study can be more important, or offer greater promise of substantial reward.

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This is the most important point of all. For it is not by fleshly wisdom that the "words which the Holy Ghost teacheth " are to be understood. The natural man cannot understand the Word of God. It is foolishness unto him. A man may admire a sun-dial, he may marvel at its use, and appreciate the cleverness of its design; he may be interested in its carved-work, or wonder at the mosaics or other beauties which adorn its structure : but, if he holds a lamp in his hand or any other light emanating from himself or from this world, he can make it any hour he pleases, and he will never be able to tell the time of day. Nothing but the light from God's sun in the Heavens can tell him that. So it is with the Word of God. The natural man may admire its structure, or be interested in its statements ; he may study its geography, its history, yea, even its prophecy ; but none of these things will reveal to him his relation to time and eternity. Nothing but the light that cometh from Heaven. Nothing but the Sun of Righteousness can tell him that. It may be said of the Bible, therefore, as it is of the New Jerusalem—" The Lamb is the light thereof." The Holy Spirit's work in this world is to lead to Christ, to glorify Christ. The Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit ; and the same Spirit that inspired the words in the Book must inspire its truths in our hearts, for they can and must be " Spiritually discerned " (1 Cor. ii. 1-16).

On this foundation, then, we have prosecuted this work. And on these lines we have sought to carry it out.

We are dealing with the words " which the Holy Ghost teacheth." All His works are perfect. " The words of the Lord are pure words " ; human words, indeed, words pertaining to this world, but purified as silver is refined in a furnace. Therefore we must study every word, and in so doing we shall soon learn to say with Jeremiah (xv. 16), " Thy WORDS were found, and I did eat them ; and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart . . ."

It is clear, therefore, that no branch of Bible study can be more important : and yet we may truly say that there is no branch of it which has been so utterly neglected.

*John Vilant Macbeth (Professor of Rhetoric, etc., in the University of West Virginia) has said : — " There is no even tolerably good treatise on Figures existing at present in our language—Is there in any other tongue ? There is no consecutive discussion of them of more than a few pages; the examples brought forward by all others being trivial in the extreme and threadbare ; while the main conception of what constitutes the chief class of figures is altogether narrow, erroneous, and unphilosophical. Writers generally, even the ablest, are wholly in the dark as to the precise distinction between a trope and a metonymy ; and very few even of literary men have so much as heard of Hypocatastasis or Implication, one of the most important of figures, and one, too, that is constantly shedding its light upon us".

** The Might and Mirth of Literature, by John Walker Vilant Macbeth, Professor of Rhetoric, etc., in the University of West Virginia, New York, 1875, page xxxviii. This work was published simultaneously in London, but the edition had to be sent back to New York, owing to the fact that there was no demand for it!*

Solomon Glassius (1593-1656), a converted Jew, and a distinguished theologian, in Germany, two centuries and a half ago, published (in 1625) his important work *Philologia Sacra*, in which he includes an important treatise on Sacred Rhetoric. This is by far the fullest account of Biblical Figures ever published. But this work is written in Latin, and has never been translated into any language.

Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) published in 1682 his *Troposchemalogia : or, a Key to open the Scripture Metaphors and Types*. He does not hesitate to avail himself largely of Glassius's work, though he barely acknowledges it, or the extent to which he is indebted to it. There is much that is good and true and useful, with much that is fanciful, in Keach's volumes.

John Albert Bengel (1687-1752) is the only commentator who has ever taken Figures of Language seriously into account as a key to the interpretation and elucidation of the Scriptures. It is this fact which gives his commentary on the New Testament (which he calls a *Gnomon*) such great value, and imparts such excellence to it, making it unique among commentaries.

M. John Alb. Burk has drawn up an explanatory Index of over 100 of these "technical terms" occurring in Bengel's Commentary, and a Translation of it, by Canon Fausset, is added to T. and T. Clark's English Edition of Bengel, to serve as a key to that work.

Beyond this there is but little. Dr. McGill, in his *Lectures on Rhetoric and Criticism*, Glasgow, 1838, devotes one chapter to the subject of Figurative language, and describes about sixteen Figures.

Alexander Carson in a *Treatise on the Figures of Speech*,* classifies and names about forty-three figures.

* *Bound up in a Vol., with An Examination of the Principles of Biblical Interpretation, New York, 1855.*

Archdeacon Farrar in *A brief Greek Syntax*, London, 1867, has one chapter on Figures, and describes a few, illustrating them from the classics.

Horne's *Introduction to the Bible* devotes one chapter out of his four volumes to "Figurative Language," but confines himself to describing only ten Figures.

There are one or two small works of more recent date. *The Rhetorical Speaker and Poetical Class-book*, by R. T. Linnington, 1844. He describes some 35 Figures, but uses them only as a study for rhetorical effect, and illustrates them from general literature for purposes of recitation.

The S.P.C.K. also published, in 1849, a course of lectures on the Figurative Language of the Holy Scriptures, delivered in the Parish Church of Nayland in Suffolk in 1786.

Thus we are justified in saying that Bible students can find no complete work on the subject of Figurative Language in its relation to the Bible.

There are several small works on Rhetoric, But Rhetoric is an adaptation of Figurative Language for the purposes of elocution; and, treatises on Rhetoric hardly come within the scope of our present object.

Translators and commentators, as a rule, have entirely ignored the subject ; while by some it has been derided. There is great need, therefore, for a work which shall deal exhaustively with the great subject of Figurative Language; and, if possible, reduce the Figures to some kind of system (which has never yet been completely done either by the Ancients or Moderns), and apply them to the elucidation of the Word of God. The gems and pearls which will be strung together will be exquisite, because they are Divine ; but the thread, though human, will be of no mean value. The mode of treatment is new and comprehensive. It is new ; for never before has Figurative Language been taken as a subject of Bible study : it is comprehensive, for it embraces the facts and truths which He at the foundation of the Christian faith, and the principles which are the essence of Protestant truth.

It is moreover a difficult study for the general reader. For, besides the difficulty which naturally arises from the absence of any standard works upon the subject, there are three other difficulties of no mean magnitude which have doubtless tended much to deter students from taking up the subject, even where there may have been a desire to study it.

The first difficulty is their nomenclature. All the names of these figures are either in Greek or Latin. This difficulty can be, to a great extent, cleared away by a simple explanation, and by sub-

stituting an English equivalent, which we have here attempted.

The second difficulty is their number. We have catalogued over 200 distinct figures, several of them with from 30 to 40 varieties. Many figures have duplicate names which brings up the total number of names to more than 500.

John Holmes, in his *Rhetoric made easy* (1755), gives a list of 250.

J. Vilant Macbeth, (in his work already referred to), deals with 220, which he illustrates only from English and American literature.

While G. W. Hervey's *System of Christian Rhetoric* (1873) defines 256 with 467 names.

The third difficulty is the utter absence of any classification. These figures do not seem to have ever been arranged in any satisfactory order. If the Greeks did this work, no record of it seems to have come down to us.

The three great Divisions into which they usually fall are :

I. Figures of Etymology: which are departures from the ordinary spelling of words. These consist of some 18 Figures, such as
Aphæ'esis, front-cut, 'ghast for aghast, 'fore for before, etc.
Syn'cope, mid-cut., e'er for ever, o'er for over.
Apoc'ope, end-cut, Lucrece for Lucretia, etc., etc.

II. Figures of Syntax or Grammar: which are alterations of the ordinary meaning of words.

III. Figures of Rhetoric : which are deviations from the ordinary application of words.

With the first of these, we are not now concerned, as it has nothing to do with our present work.

It is only with the Figures of Syntax and Rhetoric that we have to deal.

These have been sometimes mixed together, and then divided into two classes : —

I. Figures that affect words.

II. Figures that affect thought.

But this is a very imperfect arrangement ; and, as Dr. Blair says, " Is of no great use ; as nothing can be built upon it in practice, neither is it always clear."

Another arrangement is (1) figures that are the \-es,\At oi feeling, and (2) those that are the result of imagination. But this also is defective and inadequate.

In the absence of any known authoritative arrangement of the Figures, we have grouped them in this work under three great natural divisions : —

I. Figures which depend for their peculiarity on any Omission: in which something is omitted in the words themselves or in the sense conveyed by them (Elliptical Figures).

II. Figures which depend on any Addition, by Repetition of words or sense (Pleonastic Figures) : and

III. Figures which depend on Change, or Alteration in the usage, order, or application of words.

We have fully set out this arrangement in a Summary of Classification, and, in an Analytical Table of Contents ; where, for the first time, will be seen a complete classified list of Figures, with English equivalents, brief definitions, and alternative names.

A figure is, as we have before said, a departure from the natural and fixed laws of Grammar or Syntax ; but it is a departure not arising from ignorance or accident. Figures are not mere mistakes of Grammar; on the contrary, they are legitimate departures from law, for a special purpose. They are permitted variations with a particular object. Therefore they are limited as to their number, and can be ascertained, named, and described.

No one is at liberty to exercise any arbitrary power in their use. All that art can do is to ascertain the laws to which nature has subjected them. There is no room for private opinion, neither can speculation concerning them have any authority.

It is not open to any one to say of this or that word or sentence, " This is a figure," according to his own fancy, or to suit his own purpose. We are dealing with a science whose laws and their workings are known. If a word or words be a figure, then that figure can be named, and described. It is used for a definite purpose and with a specific object. Man may use figures in ignorance, without any particular object. But when the Holy Spirit takes up human words and uses a figure (or peculiar form), it is for a special purpose, and that purpose must be observed and have due weight given to it.

Many misunderstood and perverted passages are difficult, only because we have not known the Lord's design in the difficulty.

Thomas Boys has well said (Commentary, 1 Pet. iii.), " There is much in the Holy Scriptures, which we find it hard to understand : nay, much that we seem to understand so fully as to imagine that we have discovered in it some difficulty or inconsistency. Yet the truth is, that passages of this kind are often the very parts of the Bible in which the greatest instruction is to be found: and, more than this, the instruction is to be obtained in the contemplation of the very difficulties by which at first we are startled. This is the intention of these apparent inconsistencies. The expressions are used, in order that we may mark them, dwell upon them, and draw instruction out of them. Things are put to us in a strange way, because, if they were put in a more ordinary way, we should not notice them."

This is true, not only of mere difficulties as such, but especially of all Figures: i.e., of all new and unwonted forms of words and speech: and our design in this work is that we should learn to notice them and gain the instruction they were intended to give us.

The Word of God may, in one respect, be compared to the earth. All things necessary to life and sustenance may be obtained by scratching the surface of the earth : but there are treasures of beauty and wealth to be obtained by digging deeper into it. So it is with the Bible. * ' All things necessary to life and godliness " lie upon its surface for the humblest saint ; but, beneath that surface are " great spoils " which are found only by those who seek after them as for ** hid treasure."

THE PLAN OF THE WORK IS AS FOLLOWS :

1. To give in its proper order and place each one of two hundred and seventeen figures of speech, by name.
2. Then to give the proper pronunciation of its name.
3. Then its etymology, showing why the name was given to it, and what is its meaning.
4. And, after this, a number of passages of Scripture, in full, where the figure is used, ranging from two or three instances, to some hundreds under each figure, accompanied by a full explanation. These special passages amount, in all, to nearly eight thousand.

We repeat, and it must be borne in mind, that all these many forms are employed only to set forth the truth with greater vigour, and with a far greater meaning : and this, for the express purpose of indicating to us what is emphatic ; and to call and attract our attention, so that it may be directed to, and fixed upon, the special truth which is to be conveyed to us.

Not every Figure is of equal importance, nor is every passage of equal interest. But we advise all students of this great subject to go patiently forward, assuring them that from time to time they will be amply rewarded ; and often when least expected.

THE USE OF THE WORK.

This work may be used either for the direct study of this important subject ; or it may be used simply as a constant companion to the Bible, and as a work of reference.

A copious index of Texts and Passages illustrated has been compiled for this purpose ; and will be found, with six other Indexes, and five Appendixes, at the end of the volume.

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25 Connaught Street,
London.
November, 1899.