

The Figure of Speech Synecdoche as used in the Bible

The ability to communicate by words is one thing that sets apart mankind from all other creatures. God is the Author of language, and no one has ever used language as precisely as God does in the Bible, including His use of figures of speech. When most people say, “a figure of speech,” they are speaking in general terms of something that is not true to fact. However, genuine “figures of speech” are legitimate grammatical and lexical forms that add emphasis and feeling to what we say and write. Recognizing and properly interpreting the figures of speech in the Bible has many advantages. We can understand the true meaning of Scripture and be able to more fully enjoy the richness of the Word of God. It is important that we become at least somewhat familiar with the figures of speech in Scripture, of which there are more than 200 varieties. [1]

The figure we are going to cover in this article is Synecdoche (pronounced sin-ek-de-key). It is an exchange by which the whole of something is put for only a part, or vice versa, or a genus is put for a species or vice versa. Anyone studying Synecdoche will soon see its similarity to the figure of speech Metonymy, and Bullinger describes it this way:

[Synecdoche is] a figure by which one word receives something from another which is internally associated with it by the connection of two ideas: as when a part of a thing is put by a kind of Metonymy for the whole of it, or the whole for a part. The difference between Metonymy and Synecdoche lies in this: that in Metonymy, the exchange is made between two related nouns; while in Synecdoche the exchange is made between two associated ideas. [2]

Synecdoche is one of those figures of speech that we use every day, but are not taught to be aware of it. There are hundreds of examples of Synecdoche in the Bible, and Bullinger has 44 pages of examples. There are a large number of specific categories of Synecdoche, but the general idea is easy to understand. For this article, we will generalize the concepts into the whole for the part and the part for the whole, to give the basic idea of the figure. For a

more exacting study, the reader should refer to Bullinger's wonderful work on the subject.

Jeremiah 26:9b (ESV) [3]

...And all the people gathered around Jeremiah in the house of the LORD.

Not "everyone" did, as is clear from the context, but a large number did. The Synecdoche adds a powerful punch to the verse, as we come face to face with the large number of people who rejected God, and Jeremiah His prophet.

Matthew 3:5 (ESV)

Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him [John the Baptist]...

Not "all" the people were going, but a large number were. The Synecdoche gives us a feel for the large numbers of people that responded to John the Baptist.

2 Kings 8:9a (ESV)

So Hazael went to meet him [Elisha], and took a present with him, all kinds of goods of Damascus, forty camel loads...

The Hebrew text reads that Hazael took "every good thing of Damascus" to Elisha, which, of course, is impossible. This is a Synecdoche, the whole for a part. Hazael took every kind of good thing. This is an example of the English versions, such as the ESV above, interpreting the verse for us rather than just translating it. That can be helpful to the beginning reader, but it does not give the English reader the chance to see the Synecdoche.

Acts 10:12 (YLT) [4]

In which [in the sheet let down from heaven for Peter to see] were all the four-footed beasts of the earth, and the wild beasts, and the creeping things, and the fowls of the heaven...

Not every single animal, bird and insect was in the sheet, but the majority of the kinds of animals were represented. The Synecdoche helps us understand

why Peter was recoiled instinctively from all these creatures and said, “Surely not, Lord!” Even the average American, who has no problem eating some of the creatures in the sheet, would have recoiled at the sight. This verse, like the example immediately above, has the Synecdoche translated out of almost all English versions.

James 2:15a (KJV)

If a brother or sister be naked...

“Naked” is put by Synecdoche for “scantily clothed.” This is a common Synecdoche in the Bible, compare John 21:7, for example, where Peter is said in the Greek to be “naked,” but he would not have worked that way, especially since fishing boats on the Sea of Galilee can easily be seen from shore. Similarly, Isaiah was almost certainly not “naked,” (Isa. 20:2) but he had on his inner tunic such as a mourner or even a prisoner of war would have. Many versions have replaced “naked” with “scantily clothed” or some other phrase, translating the Synecdoche out of the version.

Psalm 1:1a (ESV)

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked...

In this verse, and hundreds of others in the Bible, the specific word, “man,” which is put for the whole of “mankind,” both men and women. In the culture of the Bible, women were understood to be included. In biblical times this was not considered an affront to women, although it often is today.

Psalm 44:6a (NASB) [5]

For I will not trust in my bow...

“Bow” is put by Synecdoche for all weapons. The point is David will not trust his weapons, he will trust Yahweh, his God. God’s use of the Synecdoche packs an important punch. If the verse had said, “I will not trust in my human resources, such as weapons,” we readers are left with no clear picture in our minds. However, by saying “bow,” we can all picture David holding a bow but not trusting it to deliver him.

Genesis 3:19a (ESV)

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground...

“Bread” is put for all the foods man will eat. Bread was such a staple in biblical times that “bread” is used as the general term for food dozens of times in the Bible, and the phrase, “break bread” meant much more than that, it meant to eat a meal.

Exodus 21:6b (ESV)

...And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever.

Not literally “forever,” but through his lifetime. There are many figurative uses of time in the Bible. Besides Synecdoche, words indicating periods of time were often exaggerated (the figure of speech Hyperbole) in the biblical culture, as they are today. Furthermore, some “time” words had more than one meaning. Not being able to discern from the scope of Scripture what is eternal from what is of limited time has caused much doctrinal confusion among Christians.

Ephesians 6:12a (ESV)

For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood...

In this case, “flesh and blood” means “people.” The verse could have been written in a simple literal way, using “people” instead of “flesh and blood,” but the use of the Synecdoche more powerfully contrasts people with demons, who are not flesh and blood.

Endnotes

1. E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI, reprinted 1968).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 613.

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4. Scripture quotations marked (YLT) are taken from Young's Literal Translation, by Robert Young, 1898.

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See:

Figures of Speech Used in the Bible: Explained and Illustrated

By E.W. Bullinger