Here are some of the more commonly used literary devices found in Scripture:

***Acrostic***

This is a device found in Old Testament poetry in which the successive units of a poem begin with the consecutive letters of the Hebrew alphabet. The units might be single lines, pairs of lines, or stanzas (as in Psalm 119).  This can only be seen in the original Hebrew text.

***Alliteration***

This is the repetition of the same initial sounds of adjacent or nearby words and is used for narrative effect.  This is a literary device that can really only be seen or heard in the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages of the Bible.  In English, an example would be “alliteration attracts attention.”

***Allusion***

This is an indirect reference to something else.  The person, thing, or event being alluded to is understood from a personal or cultural context or knowledge.

* John 8:58, “Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

Many people and events from the Bible have become allusions in the English language, such as when we refer to someone as being a “good Samaritan,” or having “the patience of Job,” or “the wisdom of Solomon,” or even having an unhealthy desire for something that is a “forbidden fruit.”

***Anthropomorphism***

This is a type of personification that ascribes human characteristics (such as human actions, emotions, or physical attributes) to God.  This projection of human characteristics onto God was done in order to make Him more understandable to us.  It is the language of appearance, of describing God in human terms.

* Genesis 6:6, “And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart.”

***Apostrophe***

This is an indirect type of personification, where the speaker addresses an inanimate object, or himself or herself, or others who cannot or do not respond to the statement or question.

* Psalm 43:5, “Why are you cast down, O my soul? And why are you disquieted within me?”
* Isaiah 44:23, “Sing, O heavens, for the Lord has done it. Shout, you lower parts of the earth, break forth into singing, you mountains, O forest, and every tree in it!”

***Assonance***

This is the repetition of the same internal sounds of adjacent or nearby words and is used for narrative effect.  This is a literary device that can really only be seen or heard in the original languages of the Bible.  In English, an example of this would be “conceive it, perceive it, believe it, achieve it.”

**Chiasmus**

This is a figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through the reversal of the lines of a poetic structure in order to make a larger point.  The two clauses display inverted parallelism.

* Isaiah 6:10, “Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed.”

***Hyperbole***

This is a use of exaggeration for emphasis or rhetorical effect.

* II Chronicles 1:15, “Also the king made silver and gold as common in Jerusalem as stones.”
* Mark 9:43, “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.  It is better for you to enter into life maimed, rather than having two hands, to go to hell, into the fire that shall never be quenched.”
* John 12:19, “The Pharisees therefore said among themselves, “You see that you are accomplishing nothing. Look, the world has gone after Him!”

***Idiom***

This is a figure of speech or an expression that is peculiar to a particular language, and in and of itself cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its component words taken separately.  Examples in English would be “to pay through the nose,” “break a leg,” and “a bee in your bonnet.”

* Matthew 23:24, “Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!”

***Imagery***

This is the use of vivid or figurative language to represent objects, actions, or ideas.

* Psalm 23:1, “The LORD is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

This imagery is reminiscent of Joseph’s dream of the sun, moon, and stars in Genesis 37:9.

***Inclusio***

Framing a poem (or narrative) by repeating words or phrases from its opening lines at its conclusion.

* Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! (Psalm 8:1a, 9)

***Merism***

This is a listing of opposite parts to signify a whole or a totality.  For example, the division of “night/day” and “darkness/noonday” in the Psalm below means “all the time.”

* Psalm 95:4. “In his hand are the depths of the earth; the heights of the mountains are his also.”

***Metaphor***

This is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two seemingly unlike things.

* James 3:6, “And the tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity.”

***Metonymy***

This is a type of metaphor in which something (either concrete or conceptual) is not identified by its own name, but by a name of something closely identified or associated with it, as in calling a business executive “a suit.”

* Leviticus 26:6, “I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I will rid the land of evil beasts, and the sword will not go through your land.”
* Revelation 1:18, “And I have the keys of Hades and of Death.”

***Paradox***

This is a statement that seems to be illogical or contradictory on the surface, but it actually conveys a deeper truth.

* Matthew 16:25, “For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.”

***Parallelism***

This is a figure of speech in which two or more clauses are related to each other through the lines of a poetic structure in order to make a larger point.

* Matthew 7:7-8, “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.”

***Personification***

This is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human objects (usually the divine, inanimate things, or abstract ideas), and is done as a rhetorical device.

* Psalm 77:16, “The waters saw You, O God; The waters saw You, they were afraid; The depths also trembled.”
* Proverbs 1:20-21, “Wisdom calls aloud outside; She raises her voice in the open squares. She cries out in the chief concourses at the openings of the gates in the city she speaks her words.”

***Simile***

This is a figure of speech in which a comparison is made between two seemingly unlike things using “like” or “as.”

* Matthew 28:3, “His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow.”

***Symbolism***

This is the use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities, giving meaning or character to something.

* Revelation 13:1, “Then I stood on the sand of the sea. And I saw a beast rising up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and on his horns ten crowns, and on his heads a blasphemous name.”

***Synecdoche***

This is a figure of speech in which: a part is used to represent the whole, or the whole for a part, or the specific for the general, or the general for the specific.

* Psalm 44:6, “For not in my bow do I trust, nor can my sword save me.”
* Ephesians 6:12, “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood.”

***Type***

This is a literary foreshadowing, where one person or thing serves as a metaphorical prefigure (type) of another that is to come later.  In the Bible, this is a person or thing (as is found in the Old Testament) prefiguring another person or thing (as is found in the New Testament).  For example, the bronze snake pole that the people looked to serves as a type, or prefiguring, of the Cross.

* Numbers 21:9, “So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he looked at the bronze serpent, he lived.”
* John 3:14-15, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”

***Wordplay***

This is the witty use of the meanings and ambiguities of words.  Biblical writers made plays on word meanings that can only be seen in the original languages.

* Matthew 16:18, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” [*Petros*, the word for “Peter,” means “a small rock, stone, or pebble”; *petra*, the word for “rock” here, means “a large rock.”]
* Philemon 1:10-11, “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.” [*Onesimus* means “profitable or useful.”]

*taken from carm.org and other sources*

Parallelism:

Synonymous- Same or similar thought in successive lines

“The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof,

the world and those who dwell therein.” (Psalm 24:1)

Antithetic- The second line balances the first with a contrasting thought

“A wise son makes a glad father,

but a foolish son is a sorrow to his mother.” (Prov. 10:1)

Synthetic- The second line completes or extends the thought of the first

“He has shown his people the power of his works,

in giving them the inheritance of the nations.” (Psalm 111:6)

“As a father shows compassion to his children,

so the LORD shows compassion to those who fear him.” (Psalm 103:13)

Lamentations (chiasm)

A. she – Zion – is desolate and devastated (1:1-11)

B. I – Zion – was betrayed and defeated: there is none to help or comfort me (1:12-22)

C. he – Yahweh – has caused this in his anger (2:1-8)

D. they – princes, maidens, nurselings, children, mothers – suffer (2:9-12)

E. you – Zion – should cry out to God (2:13-22)

F. he – Yahweh – has afflicted me (3:1-20)

**G. Yahweh’s great love (3:21-32)**

F’. he – Yahweh – afflicts humans (3:33-39)

E’. you – Yahweh – to you I cry out (3:40-66)

D’. they – princes, maidens, nurselings, children, mothers – suffer (4:1-10)

C’. he – Yahweh – has caused this in his anger (4:11-16)

B’. we – the people of Zion – were betrayed and defeated (4:17-22)

A’. we – the people of Zion – are desolate and devastated (5:1-22)

**Study Terms:**

Principles- Teachings about beliefs and actions that are valid in any period of history and any culture.

Cultural application- How the teachings of the text should be applied today in a specific culture.

General Application- What you personally should believe, think, feel, and do in order to implement the principle.

Specific Application- What you personally will do right now to apply the teachings in your current situation.