READING THE BIBLE AS LITERATURE: AN INTRODUCTION

This week’s chapter review analyzes all seven chapters of our primary text. The bibliographic information is: *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction.* Crain, Jeanie C.. United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2010. Pages 1-213.

The seven chapters of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* serve to introduce six main literary elements that lend themselves to the reading of the Bible as a unified piece of literature. These elements include: rhetorical strategy, archetypes, major genres, sub-genres, characters, and themes. Together, these elements make connections and allusions to one another which indicate that the sixty-six books of the Bible should be read in a holistic manner. Readers are often skeptical to read in this broad approach and resort to reductionism. Reductionism often leads to shortsightedness and the neglect of the deeper meaning found within connections of the Bible. Crain has written this book to display how reading in a literal *and* theological manner increases reader comprehension and appreciation of the Bible as a coalescent piece of literature.

Crain is currently a professor at Missouri Western State University where she has been teaching this course since 2000. She is the author of both *Biblical Genres: Introduction*, and *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction.* Her academic achievements include:Ph.D. English and Philosophy, Purdue University; PhD. Biblical Studies; M.A. English, Purdue University; M.S.A. Management, Georgia College and State University; B.A. English, Berry College.

The first chapter of the text summarizes the content of the book and emphasizes that reading the Bible as literature can increase reader understanding. The Bible is meant to be read in two ways – reading closely and reading in light of the entire collection. Crain introduces basic definitions and the background needed to increase understanding of the Bible by reading it as literature. The Bible is a collection of ancient literature that is grouped together to form a greater narrative, thus promoting reading the Bible as a unified piece of literature. It is to be read for spiritual meaning *and* for literal meaning. The Bible is best understood when a reader utilizes literary elements common to reading popular literature.

The second chapter of the Bible introduces style, tone, and rhetorical strategy as a way to use language. These three elements play a significant role when reading the Bible. They change reading and interpreting at face value to reading and searching for the underlying meaning. In this chapter, Crain points out that the meaning of the Bible is to be interpreted through the minute parts as well as paying attention to the meaning as a whole. The literary criticism of reductionism is introduced within this section. It is often challenging to read a section of the Bible without simplifying it into individual parts. An author’s style, tone, and strategy all serve to add weight, personality, and emphasize feelings to the words within the Bible. Style is defined as how a passage is written. Tone refers to the manner in which the author expresses attitude, and rhetorical strategy controls language to elicit a desired response from the reader. The characteristic of parataxis is a vital component when considering the additive nature within the Bible. It is used to show the linkage between micro-events. This presents the Bible as “episodes of a greater whole” (Crain 24).

The third chapter introduces image, metaphor, symbol and archetype as a way of meaning. An image involves something concrete and necessitates literal and connotative understanding. Crain says, “Metaphors and similes function much like a symbol, an image that stands for something in addition to its literal meaning” (44). Archetypes refer to repeating patterns that encapsulate human experience. These elements are interdependent and require mastery of the basic level of image in order to understand the complex element of archetype. This section emphasizes the linear progression from smaller to larger patterns. A single image contributes to the unity of the Bible from the Old Testament to the New Testament. This unity provides the major themes within the Bible that indicate a greater order. Higher thinking beyond the typical literal understanding of an object is necessary. A literary approach to reading the Bible requires a reader to understand the usage of literal *and* figurative language in connection with human experience. It is vital for a reader to allow his/her imagination to lead to spiritual discovery through these elements.

The fourth chapter introduces major genres as a way of seeing. This text serves to introduce tools necessary for literary analysis and describes how to use genre as an interpretive tool. Genre classifies works based on what they have in common. Crain introduces the three main classifications as: narratives, drama, and poetry. Narratives take individual stories and weave them together to demonstrate overarching themes called macro-plots. Drama and poetry use interconnected series of events and characterization to represent the human encounter with God. Recognizing differing forms of genre assist a reader in determining what to look for and how to organize that experience. The Bible takes stories and connects them into a greater narrative. Stories begin as discrete units with structured plots independent of the whole and then advance into the linkage of these episodes into greater wholes. This occurs either chronologically, thematically, or as clustered stories. Together, imaginative stories are based on historical events and are used to tell a profound truth of human beings as well as the human condition. Although stories can be read independently, it is important to recognize their significance as a unified set of episodes. This is required if the macro-plot is to be fully understood and appreciated.

The fifth chapter introduces sub-genres as a way of clarifying. Paying attention to the overall form and making connections between stories helps to reconstruct meaning. Sub-genres can assist in this understanding. The sub-genres that Crain focuses on include song, allegory, parable and prayer. Each genre has its own unique set of characteristics that distinguish them from one another. Genres involve conventions that guide readers and teach them to organize their understanding of the readings. Through a reader’s understanding of the overall form, the Bible becomes more meaningful. It also promotes “reading it” as opposed to “reading about it”. With a metaphorical function, sub-genres map divine action in history as well as providing explanations of how humans fit into God’s order. Allegories, parables, prayers, and songs should not be read as individual stories. They should be read in context of a greater narrative, contributing to the unity of the Bible.

The sixth chapter introduces character as a way of identifying. Arguably the easiest way to approach a piece of literature is through the characters. Characters are often easiest to relate to because they possess human-like qualities. Learning about characters enables a reader to learn about themselves through the character’s motives, attitudes, and moral stances. The Bible consists of thousands of different characters who represent a wide range of human activity. These characters are either one-dimensional (flat) or multidimensional (round). Narrators are a vital component of this chapter. Narrators are omniscient and use their characters to reveal God’s work. They depict characters with the greatest accuracy. Characters may also be revealed through their own thoughts, what other characters say about them, their symbolic acts, the context surrounding a character, as well as their impact on other characters. All characters in the Bible are interconnected through the protagonist, God. In the Bible, information about the characters is revealed progressively with supplementary details providing an interconnected background of meaning. The immediate and extended framework must be understood to appreciate the complexity of the characters’ situation and there has to be distinction between the narrator’s and the characters’ points of view.

The seventh and final chapter introduces themes and motifs as a way of unifying. This is the broadest chapter within the text. Literary and theological themes display continuities between texts and amongst the Old and New Testament. The core themes include: Divine-human relationship and human-human relationship, the oneness of God, the covenant between God and His people, and God’s love and justice. This section poses the biggest issue within the text. If a reader is unwilling to read the Bible as a whole, theme and motif are potentially worthless. There is also the opposite side of this issue. If a reader analyzes the text solely based on theme and motif, it promotes overly holistic and sweeping reading which then ignores significant details within the minute areas of the text. Understanding that the Bible is composed of unifying themes promotes reading the Bible as a whole.

After analyzing *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* in its entirety, I would recommend this book to any reader who is curious about furthering his/her knowledge of the Bible. I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book and it was organized in a clear, concise manner. The book began at basic levels of image and then expanded to the broadest element of theme. This style of writing echoed the main emphasis Crain made in each of the chapters: In order to understand the Bible in its entirety, it is vital to look and the most minute elements and then understand them in the context of a greater whole. Reading the Bible closely leads to this appreciation of the layered levels of reading and the appeal it provides to the imagination. It is imperative to understand that reading with literal analysis is meant to increase theological interpretation instead of replacing it. I thought that *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* truly achieved the goal of promoting that the Bible shares metaphorical and symbolic language common to literature found throughout the centuries.After reading this book, I would then go on to read Crain’s *Biblical Genres: Introduction* to further increase understanding of how the literary elements, such as genre, can be used to unify the Bible.

In conclusion, this text serves to introduce the literary tools of language, style, the formal structures of genre, character study, and thematic analysis. These elements explain that the Bible should be read as a unified collection as opposed to individual books. Analyzing these elements allows reading the Bible at deeper levels of study, increases insight, and explains why the Bible continues to attract more readers than any other collection of literature.