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The Bible as Literature

December 12th, 2012

Jeanie C. Crain, *The Bible as Literature: A Way of Understanding,* Polity Press, 2012. Pg’s1-148

In *Reading the Bible as Literature: A Way of Understanding*, Jeanie C. Crain highlights the importance of appreciating the bible not only for its value as a religious text, but also as a unique collection of some of the world’s oldest literary works. She also suggests that one should realize the importance of reading the Bible as literature without denying its value as a religious work. According to the text, the “Bible” refers to the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. However, the Bible’s current form bears little resemblance to its original form as a collection of rough Hebrew manuscripts that featured no punctuation marks, or spaces between words. Regardless of its age, the bible continues to be one of the most influential pieces of literature in the world, with over one-hundred million copies sold annually throughout the world.

As a whole, the Bible reveals a loose chronology and overarching meta-narrative that tells the stories of the creation of the earth, Israel as God’s chosen people, Jesus as the messiah, and the rise of the church, with the New Testament reinterpreting the Old Testament. Crain begins her book by highlighting the tendency of the New Testament writers to echo material found in the Old Testament. These echoes have given rise to a reading strategy called typology, or the explanation of characters and events in the Old Testament in terms of the New Testament. In other words, the use of typology helps one to understand and analyze the entire bible as a unified story that presents Jesus as a fulfillment of Old Testament ideas such as the Davidic Covenant.

Crain suggests that it is important to analyze the Bible through a literary approach because it invites the reader to pay attention to its story, themes, characters and their points-of-view, and settings, while also helping the reader question the origin, preservation, transmission, and message of biblical texts. A popular method of analyzing the Bible is through Biblical criticism such as textual criticism and redaction criticism. Biblical criticism is just one literary approach that can assist readers in understanding the complexity involved in reading and interpreting the bible, and can help one deny the idea that only one correct literary interpretation exists.

In the second chapter, Crain introduces rhetorical devices commonly used in the Bible such as style, tone, and strategy that play a significant role in the presentation of the Bible as a whole piece of work. These devices serve as a way of directing language to achieve certain effects. While largely based in concrete images, the bible also uses literary devices such as idioms, irony, foreshadowing, personification, idioms, parables, and allegories liberally. Due to the inclusion of rhetoric devices, readers of the bible depend upon expert translators to construct accurate translations of biblical scriptures, with each translation slightly differing from the other. Literal Bible translations such as the King James Version tend to translate figurative language word for word, while other translations substitute words through the use of synonyms.

In chapter three, Crain highlights a crucial difference in reading the bible as literature and reading it for religious purposes. She argues that literature, unlike religion, neither affirms nor denies the reality of the vision. While it is crucial for the reader to determine what reality throughout the Bible truly is, it is also crucial to properly understand Biblical text, the metaphorical image-making capacity of the imagination, and the context through which the Bible is presented. Two of the most well-known examples of metaphorical images in the bible are light and water. Throughout the Bible, light serves as a source of life, goodness, and a symbol of God, while water serves as a cosmic force of light that can only be controlled by God, a source of life, and a cleansing agent. The Bible also uses metaphors to define divine-human relationships, with the most common examples being the relationship between king and subject, judge and litigant, husband and wife, father and child, and master and servant. These relationships provide examples of how the relationships between humans can be metaphorically applied to the relationship between humans and God.

Crain then introduces the major genres into which literary works are grouped, and explains how a literary genre, once recognized, contributes a set of expectations that shape the interpretation of a text such as the Bible. She defines genres as a method of seeing the world and arranging its content. Genres deal with conventions that guide readers into a text and help them to understand what to look for and how to organize their experience of reading. Crain also introduces key elements of story evidenced in the bible, and explores how the Bible takes individual stores and weaves them together, forming an even greater narrative that can be described as having its own beginning, middle, and end. A story normally consists of an exposition, complication or rising action, crisis or climax, falling action, and resolution, features displayed by the two creation stories in Genesis. The first creation story features the six days of creation, the expulsion of Eden, and the murder of Able by Cain, while the second story centers on Noah and the story of the great flood and the covenant between God and Noah. Crain makes it clear that understanding the presence of the elements of story is not only crucial to reading the Bible as literature, but as understanding it as both a literary and religious work.

In the fifth chapter, Crain highlights the different examples of biblical dialogue such as hymns, songs, poems, allegories, and parables. Both the Old and New Testament contain many examples of allegories and parables that use analogy and make comparisons between two events or ideas. Through the use of these methods, the writers of the Bible effectively express abstract or spiritual meanings in concrete forms. In order to fully appreciate the Bible, one must consider what the speaker is truly attempting to convey through the use of parables or allegories and the contextual evidence surrounding the ideas. Crain insists that if one does not understand the use of these methods to draw comparisons between ideas or events and instead reads the Bible literally as fact, the complex nature of symbolic biblical language is lost. Another important method of dialogue used frequently in the bible is prayer. Prayer can be described as meaningful dialogue between humans and the divine that exists as a continuum between conversation and formalized address. One of the most widespread and influential examples of prayer is the Lord’s Prayer in the New Testament, a prayer that is present throughout Christianity worldwide. It is evident that Crain presents these examples of specialized dialogue in the Bible in order to highlight the important role that understanding metaphorical language and contextual evidence serves in the understanding of the Bible as a complete literary work.

Chapter six introduces the thousands of characters in the bible, and highlights their representation of a wide range of human activity. Biblical characters appear as both one-dimensional and multidimensional, and remain fragmented and contradictory, regardless their attempts to concisely characterize themselves. They often, change, grow, and/or develop and almost always face choices that contribute to their development. Examples of dynamic, round biblical characters include King Solomon, who was exalted for his devotion to God and justice, yet begins to become corrupt and ultimately falls from power and loses his kingdom. While the majority of the characters featured in the Bible follow the theme of change or development due to choices, God serves as a static character that, for the most part, remains the same throughout the Bible. While acts of God such as Israel’s exile to the desert sometimes puzzle his people, it is clear that the writers of the Bible suggest that God always has the well-being of his people in mind. The use of complex characters in the bible highlights the various methods that the Bible’s narrators and writers used to convey messages or ideas.

Crain introduces chapter seven by emphasizing that while one cannot be expected to reduce the understanding of a bible to a specific set of themes, one should understand that literary and theological themes contribute continuities among the test and between the two collections of scripture and offer a framework for examining the bible as a whole. Similar to themes, motifs consist of recurrent patterns of characters, events, patterns, and concepts or ideas, and are generally understood to be more concrete than themes. Together, themes and motifs provide an intricate network of ideas and patterns that function in providing unity and coherence in the Bible. Some of the most prevalent examples of motifs in the Bible are mercy, law, and justice, which emerge early in the Bible through the Mosaic Covenant or the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments provide a set of rules by which one should live, leading the bible to be read not only as a religious text, but as a manual of moral instruction. The motifs of mercy and justice have not only influenced the way God is viewed by his people in the Bible, but have also influenced the way he is perceived by the writers of the Bible.

The Old Testament perceives God in two different ways: an early model, in which God functions concretely as having a body and behaving in ways similar to other finite beings, and the model that appears throughout Judaism and Christianity, which attributes the abstract qualities of omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence to and invisible and abstract God. Crain also introduces the importance of the perception of God in his relationships with human beings. When described as an omnipresent being, God often forms covenants with his people, such as the covenant with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the covenant formed through the crucifixion of Jesus. As a whole, the Bible is structured around six covenants that serve as methods of mediation between God and his people. Chapter seven serves as an effective close to the book, expressing the importance of human-divine relationships, and God’s interactions with biblical characters. Crain makes it clear that one must either trust that God’s actions cannot be understood, or dismiss the idea of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient God. As a whole, *The Bible as Literature: A Way of Understanding* was very informative and, if read thoroughly, can influence the way the Bible is read and can help one to understand its role not only as a religious text, but as a complex literary work.