*Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction*. Jeanie C. Crain. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. pg 1-151.

This review is over the book *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* by Jeanie Crain. I will begin by providing some background on the Bible in the realm of literature, followed by a summary of the text. The summary will touch on the different chapters in the text and their key points. After the summary, I will add a personal evaluation of the text, followed by a conclusion.

When reading the Bible, it is important to note that the Bible is not merely a history book. The author states that, “like all literature, the Bible embodies and enacts universal or shared human experience rather than stating or telling about it” (vi). It is not only a sacred text, but also the “literature of a particular people” (Crain, vii). In order to read the Bible as literature, one must acquired “a familiarity with several of the tools used for reading and understanding literature generally: language and style… genre… character study, and thematic analysis” (Crain, 152). Once this familiarity has been acquired, it allows the reader to look more deeply into a text and appreciate all the layers that particular text has to offer.

Chapter one was about reading the Bible as literature as a “starting point for all other approaches to understanding its meanings” (Crain, 6). The Bible is the most widely read book in the world and is filled with history and stories of human experience. While the Bible is usually read as a religious text, it can also be read as an historical text or simply as literature. Since not everyone places religious value in the Bible, reading it as literature appeals to the broadest audience. Mainly, this chapter points out different elements of literature in the Bible. Some of the important elements are intertextuality, macro-plots, and meta-narratives. All three of these elements are a testament to the layered nature of the Bible. The author takes care to mention different approaches to reading the Bible as literature, stating that “understanding… different approaches can give us a better understanding of what our options are and of the Bible itself” (13).

Chapter two of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* was about the different ways language is used in the Bible. The elements of style, tone, and rhetorical strategy “play a significant role in… being able to read and understand the Bible” (Crain 22). Because style and tone vary by author, and many authors wrote what we know today as the Bible, the Bible is bursting with variety when it comes to these elements of literature. The majority of this chapter was an overview of popular rhetorical devices used in the Bible. Everything from personification and foreshadowing, to irony, simile, and metaphor was covered. Because of the frequent use of rhetorical devices in the Bible, “ignoring them means not using the literary tools readily available for understanding [the Bible]” (Crain, 25). Biblical genealogies and censuses are probably the only genres that do not make extensive use of rhetorical devices. Therefore, knowledge of these devices is not only useful, but also necessary.

Chapter three of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* was about the underlying structure of the Bible and how it “reveals itself in interlocking patterns of myth, metaphor, and typology richer than the descriptive language of fact and evidence” (Crain, 43). Images, metaphors, symbols, and archetypes are four interlocking elements of literature that are indispensable to the Bible. Images are often concrete objects that can be repeatedly in various ways. As different metaphors are applied to these images, they come to symbolize an assortment of abstract concepts. When all three elements of symbol, image, and metaphor are combined, archetypes are created that span the length of the Bible. Most of this chapter is spent on metaphors of the divine-human relationship, detailing how each metaphor goes “beyond the literal image, [and] represents in some way a characteristic of God” (Crain, 50). The remainder of the chapter touches on divine-human encounters and the joining of the finite and the infinite.

Chapter four of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* was about the major genres of literary works and how these genres contribute to “a set of expectations that shapes a reader’s interpretation of a text” (Crain, 65). There are many different genres within literature which “designate the literary form into which works are classified according to what they have in common” (Crain, 66). The main genres that are used throughout the Bible include poetry, prose (often in the form of a narrative), and drama. Each of these has their own unique characteristics. Prose, which is akin to regular speech, often tells a story. The author uses multiple examples to illustrate “how the Bible takes individual stories and weaves them together” (69). Drama and poetry may also tell stories, but poetry tends to take a more structured form in how it is written. Drama usually carries more thematic elements whereas plain prose could be little more than facts with some explanation.

Chapter five of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* was about sub-genres in literature. Having different genres and sub-genres is useful because it “helps readers make sense of a collection of texts they would otherwise find hard to read, difficult to understand, confusing, esoteric, and ancient” (Crain, 93). Although a person should not exclusively search for genres when reading, knowing which genre a work is from can help to increase understanding of the literature. The different sub-genres introduced by the author include parable, allegory, song, and prayer. Parable and allegory are extensions of metaphor and simile, and help with the “consideration of the complex nature of language as symbol” (Crain, 99). Song and prayer can be intertwined, but it is not necessary.

The sixth chapter of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* was about character and the different ways to identify character. Character is not merely a noun referring to a person in a story. It is also a set of qualities a person may have related to the ever-intangible mind. Characterization is a “revelation or display of a character’s habits, emotions, desires, and instincts” (Crain, 111). It is often revealed indirectly, and never revealed fully. Much like personality, character makes people unique. Since no two people have the same mind, it is obvious that no two would have the same character. That is where diverse methods of identifying character come in handy. They allow the reader to account for multiple aspects of the surrounding situation and gain a better understanding of the character being portrayed. Within this chapter, the author describes different ways to determine character such as context, actions, requests, impact, and other characters’ responses. By learning about characters in the Bible or in other literature, “we learn about ourselves – [and come] to understand our own motives, attitudes, and moral natures” (Crain, 110).

Chapter seven of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* was about themes and motifs. Themes are a very important point of literature. They serve as glue for any particular work, “and can be embedded in images, actions, and emotions” (Crain, 130). The author goes so far as to call themes the “perceptive core of a text” (130). The practice of thematic analysis allows us to draw parallels not only between one story and the next, but also across generations. Although the Bible is mostly read for its theological and religious value, by taking a literary approach to reading the Bible, readers can consider its characters “as representatives of the universal human quest to understand its nature, destiny, and place in the universe” (Crain, 132). Chapter seven reviews some of the main themes in Biblical literature including the Decalogue, covenants, God’s mercy, and God’s justice. The author brings up an interesting point about some readers being unable to reconcile the themes of mercy and justice, but leaves it open for student interpretation.

There were some chapters of *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction* I liked better than others, but overall, it was a good book. Chapter seven, with its explanation of themes, and chapter five on sub-genres were two of my favorites. I have always found distinguishing themes particularly difficult, so having a whole chapters worth of explanation was immensely helpful. I liked chapter five because it helped me narrow down broad genres into something more manageable. One thing I really appreciated about this test was the order of the chapters. The first chapter is a broad introduction that catches the interest of the reader. The second chapter immediately narrows things down, and the subsequent chapters build on the information of their predecessors. By the end of the book, the reader has been given all the basic tools necessary for evaluating the Bible as a piece of literature.

In conclusion, *Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction*, by Jeanie Crain was an appropriate book for this course. Each topic was introduced well, and covered with a sufficient amount of depth. The point of the text was to introduce the reader to reading the Bible as literature, and I believe that task was accomplished.

Works Cited

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