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Hon 395-40: Reading the Bible as Literature

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Preliminary considerations that establish the foundation for understanding the Bible as a piece of literature are definitions, form, and translation. The Bible is defined as the commonly anthologized thirty-nine books of the Old Testament and the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The form of today’s Bible is not the same as it was originally. There has been gradual change in the text over time. There are many differences in different translations of the Bible.

One important element in the Bible is intertextuality, which is the referencing of earlier parts of the Bible to add to the meaning of later parts. Macro-plots and meta-narratives are two other elements found in the Bible. Macro-plots are layers of stories that function as one. Meta-narratives are an explanation for everything that happens in a society. Symbolic and metaphorical language can be found in the Bible. The element of human experience can also be found throughout the Bible.

Style is how something is written, to the mode of expression, or the author’s choice and arrangement of words and phrases into sentences and paragraphs. The Bible has been translated by people who know the original Hebrew and Greek languages. We have to rely upon these people to give us an accurate translation. The translations are all slightly different. Since the Bible was written by many authors and there are many translations, the style of the book is greatly impacted. The manner in which the author expresses attitude or tone can also be impacted. Understanding the tone and style of a book is a key point to correctly interpreting the story. The author used these to help the reader get a better idea better inform or persuade the reader. The author also uses many rhetorical devices to do this. Most are used to show comparison and association. Some of the rhetorical devices used in the Bible are appellation, variance, irony, simile, metaphor, zoomorphism, anthropomorphism, synecdoche, merism, quotations, allusion, foreshadowing, rhetorical questions, amplification, euphemism, repetition, recursion, inclusion, chiasm, signs, and visions. Many of these devices also help to build unity and coherence between the books of the Bible.

An image is a concrete thing or action and requires the reader to experience literally and connotatively what the image evokes. Symbols and archetypes are both types of images. A symbol is an image that stands for something other than its original meaning. An archetype is a recurring image or pattern representing the universal elements of human experience. These images may mean more than just their literal meaning. Light, water, darkness, and fire are master images found throughout the Bible. These master images serve as links between the Jewish Bible and Christian Bible, between creation and new creation, between physical and spiritual reality, and between the real and ideal. Light symbolizes life, goodness, truth, God, the messiah, and church. Darkness, Light, and fire are used to represent God’s absence and presence. Water has three meanings: a cosmic force of life that can only be controlled by God, a source of life; and as a cleansing agent.

Many metaphors exist for relationships between humans and God. They are king and the subject, judge and litigant, husband and wife, the father and the child, and master and the servant. Mountains and hills are also used as an image throughout the Bible. Individuals have encounters with God on mountaintops. Mountains can present a theme of redemption. The importance of the mountains is to establish law and sacrifice. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is also very important in the Bible. The cross is an image that represents suffering, commitment, self-denial and the bridging of the gap between humanity and God. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ was for all our sins so we could be forgiven for them. Blood is also an image that deals with crucifixion. It is viewed as a source of life in the Bible. Trees symbolize a lot in the Bible. Trees are already known for their beauty, but they also have an important significance. Trees symbolize strength, power, glory, wealth, and honor. The tree of life can be found in Genesis and Revelation, but they have different meanings in each. In Genesis, the tree of life represents life and immortality. Revelation uses the tree of life to connect the creation of the world to the re-created world that is to come later.

Genre means, type, sort, or kind and designates the literary form into which works are classified according to what they have in common, either in their formal structures or in their treatment of subject matter, or both. Since many different types of genres of literature exist throughout the Bible, it is considered a model for literary genres. Once the genre is known, it helps the reader to understand how they should interpret the text. Genres give the reader a way of viewing the world.

A fictional story is made up, but can tell the truth of human experience. The narrator tells the story to the readers. The point of view is the perspective through which the story is being told. Some genres include poetry, drama, epic, narrative, and prose. A prose that presents chronological or sequenced events to tell a story in a particular way is called narrative.

The parts of a narrative are plot, protagonist, dialogue, and problem/resolution. The narrative contains episodes. Episodes are phrases and steps grouped into a complete story. These episodes are all linked together to chains of other stories to make one bigger story. Narratives also can be made into episodes that can be linked with others. Type-scenes are scenes and episodes that occur often in the Bible. These repeating scenes and episodes give the bible unity and help to connect all the books of the Bible. A parody is a method of criticism that makes use of another creative work. There are also episodes in the New Testament that are to episodes in the Old Testament. Myth is a genre embodying a people’s perception of its realities: cosmology, cultural values, social structure and customs, internal and external political relationships, and religious rituals and beliefs.

Attacks on genre criticism include saying the genres are objective, and are they only for a certain time and setting, and also questioning if genres should be viewed as extrinsic or intrinsic. The Documentary Hypothesis states that the first five books of the Old Testament were written by a series of editors from four literary traditions known as J (Yahwistic or Jerusalem source), E (Elohost or Ephraimitic), P (Priestly), and D (Deuteronomic). The Two Source Hypothesis was proposed in 1855, and states that Mark was first written and Matthew and Luke use it as a source.

Myth is a genre embodying a people’s perception of its realities: cosmology, cultural values, social structure and customs, internal and external political relationships, and religious rituals and beliefs. The first chapters of Genesis are primeval history. It brings together the genres of fable, legend, and myth. Genesis contains many stories. The next section of Genesis is patriarchal tales.

Job is a book in the Bible that has many literary genres within it. It tells moral issues and legal issues, such as duties and rights. It provides answers using poetry and prose through drama. It sometimes is said to be comedy and sometimes tragedy. It belongs to the wisdom tradition. Its prologue and epilogue are considered folktales. It contains aphorisms, parable, hymns, laments, and legal disputation. The book addresses the mystery of God and human’s imperfect knowledge of him.

The Bible also includes subgenres. One of these is song. The Bible contains many examples of words that are meant to be sung, such as hymns. The Bible contains many examples of words that are meant to be sung, such as hymns. Translations of the Bible usually inset poetry from the surrounding prose. The three main parts of poetry in the bible are stanza, parallelism, and imagery. Stanza is the grouping of regular, rhymed, recurrent units. Parallelism is the matching structure of lines within a couplet.

The Bible uses allusion to connect biblical texts across tradition. The song of Moses, Miriam, and Deborah are considered victory hymns, where they are celebrating victory with chanting and singing. Psalms and Proverbs are also considered to be wisdom literature. There are also allegories in the Bible. An allegory is elaborate analogy in which the narrative intends elements and events to be interpreted in a corresponding other meaning.

An allegory can be defined as a continuation of a metaphor. Bible also uses parables. A parable uses narrative to show relationships between things. A parable is a story using the familiar to illustrate a religious, ethical, or moral point. A parable continues simile. Prayer is also an important genre in the Bible. Prayer is dialogue between humankind and the divine. Since prayer has characteristics that other genres lack, it can be its own genre.

Characters play a huge role in literature. The Bible is full of many various characters that represent a wide range of human activity. Characterization is “revelation or display of a character’s habits, emotions, desires, and instincts. God is a central character in the Bible The narrator is very important. They are the one who is telling the story.

All the characteristics are unique and they all must be interpreted by the reader. Interpreting and understanding the character is very important in comprehending the story itself. It is important to know why the narrator is presenting material in certain ways to uncover their motives and feelings toward the character. The bible shows characters in action and shows them develop and grow. The Bible also gives non-humans characteristics to make them represent human beings. All of the characters in the Bible are very complex and should be studied to learn their impacts on Judaism and Christianity. Many ways to identify characters exist. The first is through context, their actions, other character’s reaction to them, their words, symbolic actions, requests they make to others, and also by impact and structure.

The Christian standard for “true greatness” is definitely Jesus. He is the model for everything that is great and good. The book says he does this by “making himself subservient to the Father, assuming the role of servant, and surrendering his life in supreme sacrifice of others.”

Theme, which is an organizing idea that holds together a work and unifies its meanings, is one anthology that the Bible and all literature can be organized into. Theme emerges from the genre the composition is. A motif is similar to theme. A motif consists of recurrent patterns in themes characters, events, situation, verbal patterns, and concepts. Motifs are more commonly thought of as concrete and themes more abstract. Motifs set expectations in the minds of readers and writers. The motifs in the Bible help the reader read the Bible as a complex of parts and help to create coherence. The Shema (named for the first word “Hear”), according to the book, calls attention to a sovereign and unique God to whom Israel must be loyal, to whom it most devote mind, will, and vital being. The Shema serves as a confession of faith in God for Israel.

Themes in the Bible include the relationship to God and with other human beings, relationship based on promise and obligation, God’s mercy and God’s justice, and the heroic quest. The Bible achieves a sense of unity and coherence through its themes and motifs.

**Evaluation**

The purpose of this book was to teach of the different parts of literature in the Bible and to show the reader how to read the Bible as a piece of literature. This book teaches about style, characters, genres, themes, motifs, and much more. Since I have mainly viewed to Bible as just a religious book and not so much just literature, I have never put so much thought into all the literary aspects of the Bible. This book has given me the opportunity to look deeper into the Bible study it one of the world’s greatest piece of literature. This book achieved the goal very well. The book goes into great detail over many of the important parts that are vital to helping the reader understand the Bible as literature. There were always great examples given to reinforce the meanings behind many of the different literary aspect discussed in this book. Some of my favorite examples were those discussing the divine-human relationships and the ways a character can reveal themselves to the reader. I really enjoyed the last chapter on theme and I felt it did a good job of tying up the book and bringing everything together.

The questions and exercises at the end of each chapter helped me to put the things I had just learned into context. Most of the questions did require outside research. These questions opened up the door for me to go out on my own and expand on the concepts in the book. Throughout reading this book I have learned more not only about the Bible but about literature itself than I ever could have imagined. In the past I have read things and completely missed the theme or genre. This makes me as the reader not get the full impact of the text and that is a very unfortunate thing to do, especially when reading the Bible. This book will help me in the future to read the Bible and other pieces of literature and understand them the way they are supposed to be read.