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*Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction.* Jeanie C. Crain. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. vi-21.

Arguably one of the most influential books in the world, the Bible is a large part of American culture. In spite of its incredible distribution across our country and the world, many people view the Bible as only a religious text and nothing more. The beautiful imagery, delicate poetry, and unique character development collaborate with many other characteristics to make the Bible an important piece of literature in addition to its distinction as a religious text. The study of the Bible as a unique piece of literature is important because of its literary value and also because of the application literary analysis can have to understanding the texts. Dr. Jeanie C. Crain developed a book to introduce the average reader to the study of the Bible in a literary application by providing the common tools of literary analysis with an emphasis on close reading in context. “Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction” is an excellent book to begin a study of the Bible as literature and to gain an appreciation of it as such.

The book begins by laying a basis for literary study of the Bible. Chapter one consists of an overview of a literary approach to the Bible and an explanation of some basic background knowledge necessary for Biblical study. A literary approach to the Bible involves a holistic appreciation of the text focused on reading in context, understanding, and assessing. In this approach, the unity and coherence of the text are emphasized, while building the basis of literary analysis in the reader. Some of the literary concepts used within the Bible include intertextuality, typology, prophecy, symbolism, meta-narrative, and monomyth, which Dr. Crain examines methodically.

For the reader to properly interpret each of these concepts, it is important to gain an understanding of the culture it was written within. Dr. Crain provides a brief summary of the geography and culture. The original land of the Hebrew people, Canaan lies between the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea and the inland deserts. The land is very geographically diverse with mountains, coastal plains, rivers, valleys, and deserts. Hebrew culture, unlike the polytheistic religions in the surrounding cultures, viewed religion as clearly monotheistic.

After establishing background knowledge about literature and the Bible, the literary analysis begins with style, tone, and rhetorical strategy. Style is described as how the author arranges and organizes words as a mode of expression, while tone is the attitude and intonation the author uses. Both the style and the tone of a piece of writing make each author unique and identifiable. Authors also develop their own identity by the use of rhetorical devices to manage language and manipulate aspects of culture. Many rhetorical devices can be categorized as a comparison, an association, or an arrangement of words. The devices that are considered a form of comparison are metaphor, simile, implication, allegory, parable, vision, sign, example, image, personification, and condescension. Devices that are considered associations are metonymy, appellation, and circumlocution. Examples of the arrangement of words include omissions, parallelisms, additions, irony, double meaning, belittlement, and incongruity.

The next literary concepts examined are the figurative uses of language in image, metaphor, symbol, and archetype. Image, a concrete object or action that causes the reader to experience that which it suggests, is exemplified in the Bible by two unifying images: light and water. The image of light is used to symbolize life, spirituality, and God’s presence, while the absence of light, or darkness, represents the opposite. Water, another prevalent image, symbolizes purification, cleansing, and a source of life. Water can also symbolize a force of nature that can only be controlled by God, which is seen in the flood that wipes out almost all of earth’s inhabitants during the era of Noah.

Biblical authors consistently used metaphors to compare complex ideas to relationships that common people could understand. Most notably, metaphors were used to qualify the divine-human relationship. The major metaphors that are examined include the metaphors of king and subject; judge and litigant; husband and wife; father and child; and master and servant.

Examining archetypes is also useful for interpreting and unifying the Bible. Archetypes are defined as the recurring patterns that represent the collective elements of human experience. One of the most common archetypes is of divine encounter on a mountain. Mountains and hills are mentioned over 500 times in the Bible and represent not only physical places, but also the connection from humans on earth reaching up to deity in the sky.

Indentifying genres in literature can be useful for deciding how to interpret a specific work. By comparing works that reside within the same genre, a better understanding of each piece can be obtained. Literature is commonly grouped into genres based on the style, form, and content of the work. Dr. Crain shows how these genre groupings are also applicable to the Bible. The major genres discussed in this book are narrative, poetry, and drama. Narratives consist of episodes that link stories together. Stories contain structured plots, protagonists, and themes as well as rising, turning, and falling action. A prime example of a story narrative is the recount of Elisha replenishing the oil stores for a poor widow. An example of poetry and drama is the book of Job. This book combines moral and legal issues and aspects of comedy and tragedy as is typical for a drama. Job also contains many poetic techniques like repetition, allusion, figurative language, imagery, and formal structure.

Genres can be further broken down into sub-genres, including song, allegory, parable, and prayer. Song, which is very similar to poetry, was a large part of Israelite culture. Songs were used in celebration, in mourning, in communication with God, and after victorious battles, like the Song of Deborah. Another prominent sub-genre is allegory, which is described as a representation of an abstract idea. The presence of both literal and figurative elements creates debate about how allegory should be interpreted. Psalm 23 is an excellent example of allegory because of the use of the Lord and Shepherd to represent God’s love for his people. Parables consist of a physical circumstance that is used in comparison with a spiritual circumstance, resulting in two parallel meanings. The mustard tree is an example of a parable because of the literal meaning of a mustard tree growing and the spiritual meaning of the church. The final sub genre is prayer, which is defined as the conversation between the divine and human that is life changing. The Lord’s Prayer in the New Testament is a well-known example.

Another literary element is the use of characters. Characters are used throughout the Bible to communicate messages and represent ideas. Dr. Crain states, “As we learn about characters, we learn about ourselves – coming to understand our own motives, attitudes, and moral natures” (p.110). King Solomon is used as an example of a complex Biblical character. When studying characters there are nine aspects to examine: context, actions, responses, words, symbolic actions, requests, impact, description, and structure. It is important to question why the author discloses or leaves out specific information about characters to understand what they represent. Regardless of how much information the author gives, there is always ambiguity and therefore there will always be debate about the author’s true intent.

The final literary element discussed regarding the Bible is theme. Both literary and theological themes present a sense of unity among Biblical texts. The ten main themes discussed in “Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction” are relationship to God and with other human beings, the Shema, relationship based on promise and obligation, Noahic Covenant, Abrahamic Covenant, Mosaic Covenant, Davidic Covenant, God’s mercy, God’s justice, and the heroic quest. The Decalogue, also known as the Ten Commandments, is one of the most prominent themes in the Bible. The laws recorded in the Decalogue can be split into two categories of how to relate with God and how to relate with people. These laws appear multiple times in the Bible and many characters are forced to make choices to either uphold or break these laws.

These elements of literary analysis are used to develop a deeper understanding of Biblical texts. By identifying genres, sub-genres, and themes, the Bible can be examined as a whole rather than in fragments and pieces. Throughout the text, Dr. Crain emphasizes the importance of using these literary devices with scholarly responsibility to continually examine the literary context surrounding an excerpt as well as the historical and cultural influences.

The content of “Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction” was an excellent overview of the common tools of literary analysis. Dr. Crain included the major ideas of literary analysis by discussing archetypes, symbols, genre, characters, and theme, but also delved into an adequate amount of detail by discussing important concepts like personification, merism, and wisdom literature. This created a reasonable balance between maintaining an introductory simplicity and still identifying applicable details.

Throughout the book, the content was supported with excellent examples. Dr. Crain consistently referenced excerpts and books of the Bible, as well as important quotes. This helps to keep the reader engaged in the application of the literary concepts to the Bible itself. This forced the reader into the Bible to examine it first-hand, as opposed to simply discussing the literary concepts removed from the Biblical texts.

Organizationally, the book seems to travel from the broad classifications of style and tone to the narrow examination of images, metaphors, symbols and archetypes back out to the broad classifications of themes. The concepts seemed to build upon one another in a manner appropriate for the goal audience, readers with little literary analysis experience. On the chapter level, I found the “Preliminary Considerations” at the forefront of each chapter to be an excellent introduction and clarification of the upcoming topic. An outline provided at the beginning of each chapter also helped to categorize and summarize the material. One point of dissatisfaction was the organization of the material in the first few chapters, which was difficult for me to follow. I found myself flipping around the chapter to clarify related material that was not located in close proximity. As the chapters progressed, I found this to be less and less of an issue.

I made quite a few discoveries by reading Dr. Crain’s work. I specifically gained insight on the interpretation of the Parable of the Mustard Seed. I had never considered that a mustard tree was not intended to grow tall and large. I inaccurately brushed by that important detail that greatly changes the interpretation of the parable from a positive outlook to a representation of the unnatural and unintended. Documentary Hypothesis and the idea that the Bible was redacted by a series of editors also intrigued me. I had only heard mention of such a theory before I read this book and have been inspired to study this topic more in depth. The book as a whole gave me many more tools for interpreting and understanding the Bible from a literary perspective I had not considered before.

In conclusion, “Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction” effectively accomplished its goals. The work is accessible to basic level readers with limited experience in literary analysis. Dr. Crain discusses the main points of literary analysis, while not neglecting to provide sustenance through details. Organizationally, some of the concepts within the chapters could be relocated for a more linear reading experience, but overall the book is organized well. Overall, Dr. Crain does an excellent job of providing an introduction into the appreciation and study of the Bible as an important piece of literature.