Kelsey Samenus

*Reading the Bible as Literature*. Jeanie C. Crain. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010.

In *Reading the Bible as Literature,* Jeanie C. Crain explores the Bible as literature. By examining style, rhetorical devices, genres, sub-genres, characters, and themes, Crain successfully unites the 66 individual books of the Bible collectively as one piece of literature. This book review will focus on each of the items previously mentioned, because I believe they are most helpful in understanding how to read the Bible as literature. An important statement that Crain makes is to “read apart from context” (Crain 91). She has provided us with the tools to do just that – I feel as though I am now able to read the Bible more closely and appreciate it as the “world’s greatest literature” (6).

The Bible “presents itself as a whole, creating in its readers a sense of its style” (23). Style is the author’s intended arranging of words and phrases in their writing. Style can also be defined as how literary work is written. Each author of the Bible and authors of each book in the Bible have a different style, a different mode of expression. As Crain states, “If any book requires special attention to style when translated, then surely, it is the Bible” (24). It is so important to be aware of the unique styles of the authors in order to have more informed reading and understanding of the Bible as a whole.

Comparison and association in the Bible serve to connect something to a joint purpose and help readers to understand how certain ideas are linked. Rhetorical devices are most important in understanding how certain ideas are linked. “Rhetorical devices give additional force, more life, intensified feeling, and greater emphasis to what we read” (26). Similes and metaphors work to help the reader connect similar ideas. The only difference is that similes use “like” or “as,” while metaphors have an implied comparison, normally using “is.” A few examples of similes are: “Do not fret because of those who are evil…for like the grass they will soon wither” from Psalm 37:1-2, “At this my body is racked with pain, pangs seize me, like those of a woman in labor” from Isaiah 21:3, “A king’s rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass” and “…a quarrelsome wife is like the constant dripping of a leaky roof” from Proverbs 19:12 -13, and “…Your wealth and all your treasures I will give away as plunder” from Jeremiah 17: 3. Examples of metaphors include: “A fortune made by a lying tongue is a fleeting vapor and a deadly snare” from Proverbs 21:6, “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life” from Proverbs 11:30, “Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool” from Isaiah 66:1, and “[God’s wrath] is a sword for slaughter” from Ezekiel 21:14, and “The teaching of the wise is a fountain of life” from Proverbs 13:14. An example of allegory (a type of comparison) is in Psalm 145. This psalm is written by David as form of worship to God. It represents a greater purpose, that God’s grace and mercy are unfathomable. An example of metonymy (a form of association) is in Isaiah 27:7, “Israel will bud and blossom,” the “bud and blossom” representing that Israel will prosper. An example of image in the Bible is the mentioning of sheep. Sheep connect metaphorically to humans; we are the sheep who must be lead by a shepherd. As humans, we are placed below God (he is “an infinitely bigger other” (45)). We recognize our place in the universe, because we accept that God is our shepherd, that we must follow him in order to be granted salvation. An example of sheep as an image in the Bible is Luke 15:3-7, which refers to lost sheep (sinners) being found by their shepherd (Jesus). An example of a metaphor is from Psalm 91:4, “He will cover you with His feathers, and under His wings you will find refuge.” In this verse, we are granted protection by God’s “wings and feathers,” just like a mother bird takes care of her chick. An example of a simile is from Proverbs 25:26, “…like a muddied spring or a polluted fountain is a righteous man who gives way before the wicked.” This simile compares a decent man that has given in to the ways of the wicked leading to a tainted body of water. This simile also relates to the master image of water in the Bible. An example of motif is the importance of gaining wisdom to obtain the benefits of the righteous. Proverbs 4 says “Get wisdom; get insight,” “I have taught you the way of wisdom; I have led you in the paths of uprightness,” and “the path of righteousness is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day.” Proverbs 10 says “On the lips of him who has understanding, wisdom is found,” “the wage of the righteous leads to life,” and “the desire of the righteous will be granted.” An example of symbol is John 8:12 when Jesus states, “I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won’t have to walk in darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.” In this verse, Jesus is referencing to himself as light, but also referencing that following him will lead to salvation. Lastly, an example of archetype is the relationship between father and son. God and Jesus Christ are represented as father and son, as well as Abraham and Isaac. God and Abraham have only one begotten son; their sons would sacrifice their lives for God. Knowing these terms allows for a more detailed understanding of the Bible. Studying these rhetorical devices in-depth has improved my understanding of the literature of the Bible.

Crain states that “The Bible has been regarded as a model for literary genres, its overriding form being that of an anthology made up of diverse genres” (66). The three main familiar genres are prose (narrative), drama, and poetry. Crain emphasizes that the definitions of the major genres are only a starting point for understanding them; multiple genres can be concealed in a text. I participated in a Bible study this summer studying Titus, so I decided to research genres of Titus. I discovered that multiple genres, as Crain said, occur often. A couple genres of Titus are letter (Paul is writing to Titus) or pastoral epistle and reformation of the community.

Crain focuses the study of sub-genres in the Bible into four sub genres, song, allegory, parable, and prayer. Sub-genres help the reader relate to a collection of text by allow the reader to “[recognize] the diverse types of literature in the Bible” (93). I decided to focus my research of sub-genres on the study of parables. Parables “make explicit use of analogy to show a similarity between two things, to demonstrate a common denominator between two unlike concepts, characters, events, or objects” (Crain 103). Parables, unlike allegories, are more brief and realistic and are continuations of similes. For example, the characteristics of parable found in the tares are revealed in Matthew 13:24-30. Planting wheat and weeds can be interpreted literally. In parables, two meanings must be constructed in parallel action; the physical sphere, the planting of wheat and the planting of weeds, is compared to a spiritual counterpart, the renewal of life in the kingdom of heaven or the burning in hell. A parable must contain a figurative object, which in this case, the wheat and weeds are compared to heaven and hell, and a figurative action, which seems to be living a life based on God or Satan. The figurative meaning of the object and action is that, here on Earth, live moral and righteous people of the Lord, as well as people who don’t follow the commandments of God, who are tainted by Satan. Both types of people live and grow together, but on judgment day, the followers of the Lord will be granted salvation in heaven, while the followers of Satan will burn in hell. There are many other sub-genres in the Bible, but Crain provides the reader with a great start.

The Bible contains thousands of different characters, each unique. Characters must be interpreted, every detail studied closely. Characters in the Bible are presented with a “cryptic conciseness” (111), described without embellishment and in little detail, but every detail provided is of the utmost importance. Characters can either be one-dimensional (characters that seem to lack learning or growth and can normally be summarized by one characteristic) or multi-dimensional (characters that are more like real people, learning as they grow, gaining many characteristics along the way). The details (morals, actions, emotions) about characters are discovered through the narrator; narrators provide the greatest certainty about characters. Even with the information given by the narrator, the characters in the Bible will remain unresolved – readers will always have to draw their own inferences and come up with their own interpretations. An example of an interpretation that I made about a character in the Bible is about David. David, a seemingly arrogant young man, decides to battle Goliath, an experienced warrior. Goliath says that David has defied God, but David is shown to be truly faithful to God when he says the words “The Lord who rescued me from the paw of the lion and the paw of the bear will rescue me from the hand of this Philistine.”

Themes and motifs help connect the Bible as a whole, by providing a set of expectations for the reader. For me, themes and motifs made the Bible seem more relatable. God’s mercy and justice are two major themes that Crain reveals. I believe these themes complement each other. God mercifully blessed us with salvation, sacrificing his only son to save us from our sins. Therefore, “for great is [God’s] love, higher than the heavens” (Psalm 108:4). Yet, as Crain says, “love becomes synonymous with fearing, obeying, and serving God” (143). We must fear God’s justice, as a misbehaving child fears a reprimanding by their father. Themes create overarching meanings that connect the Bible together as a whole.

“…Literature makes a special use of language to arrest, preserve, and allow readers to experience life in all its varied forms” (26). This quote represents the importance of using “literary tools readily available for understanding [the Bible]” (25), because as readers, we can apply each of the uses of language to our human experiences. I am noticing more and more ways that the Bible is a whole work of literature, rather than 66 individual books. After reading *Reading the Bible as Literature*, I feel as though I am equipped with the necessary tools to understand and appreciate the Bible as a form of literature.