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Book Review 1  
*Reading the Bible as Literature: an Introduction*

Dr. Jeanie Crain’s *Reading the Bible as Literature: an Introduction* is a chapter book that breaks down the different literary components of the Bible and helps readers understand the Bible as a piece of literature. Traditionally the Bible is used for religious purposes and often isn’t even regarded for the literary masterpiece that it is. By breaking down these different building blocks of literature and applying them to the Bible, Dr. Crain helps her reader see the beauty and enjoyment one can receive by reading the Bible as literature rather than just as a religious text. Each chapter discusses one literary tool in depth and cites several examples from the Bible of its use.

The first chapter is an introductory chapter and is appropriately titled, “Reading the Bible as Literature: A Way of Understanding.” It gives some preliminary considerations when reading the Bible as a piece of literature and also provides definitions that will be key to understanding the rest of the book. The chapter looks at different translations of the Bible, which is important to consider when you are selecting a Bible because some are more literal than others. This chapter discusses prophecy, and the language of the Bible, it also gives a broad overview of narratives and mythology. Then the chapter goes into the impact the Bible has had on other pieces of literature.

The second chapter, entitled, “Style, Tone, and Rhetorical Strategy: A Way of Using Language” illustrates the different impacts these things have on how we read the Bible. Dr. Crain explains that style refers to *how* something is written, the author’s choice of arrangement, the mode of expression, how the author organizes their thoughts. Tone refers to the mood or emotion, and the author’s attitude. For example the tone can be serious, solemn, humorous, romantic, or ironic. Dr. Crain defines rhetorical strategies as, “The use of devices that provide additional force, more life, intensified feeling, and greater emphasis to the manifold forms, words, and sentences in the Bible.” In chapter 2 the author discusses comparison and association because rhetorical devices occur so frequently in the Bible. Some rhetorical devices include: simile, metaphor, personification, metonymy, synecdoche, anthropomorphism, zoomorphism, merism, oxymoron, allusions, irony, etc. Dr. Crain provides wonderful definitions that are easy to understand and cites several examples of these devices use throughout the Bible.

Moving on to the third chapter, “Image, Metaphor, Symbol, and Archetype: A Way of Meaning” breaks down some of the topics discussed in the previous chapter and expands on them. First, Dr. Crain starts by defining a symbol, image, and archetype. She explains the difference between these three literary tools. The author talks about some common unifying images throughout the Bible, such as: light, darkness, fire, and water. Then the chapter goes in-depth into five metaphors of the Divine-human relationship. Dr. Crain recognizes these metaphors to be that of King and Subject, Judge and Litigant, Husband and Wife, Father and Child, and finally Master and Servant. Within each of these listings is a detailed explanation with Bible verses cited as reference points. At the end of this chapter the author points out to the reader some Biblical encounters of the Divine and human.

Chapter four begins looking at genres. “Major Genres: A Way of Seeing” is the appropriate title for this part of the book because only major genres are discussed. Minor, sub-genres, comes later. The first step in analyzing the major genres of the Bible is to list and explain what those genres are. Dr. Crain says that drama, lyric, and epic are generally the major genres discussed but those categories can be broadened to include poetry and prose. There is some criticism when it comes to genres and Dr. Crain explains to us some critiques before moving into a section on narratives in the Bible. The Bible is full of narratives. There are stories with structured plots, developing characters, and linking episodes (even between the Old Testament and the New Testament). The Bible also has a great deal of drama and poetry. The Old Testament contains much of this in the books of Job, Psalms, and Proverbs. Dr. Crain illustrates how the Bible uses these genres to organize thoughts and convey stories. She lists many Biblical references for each section and explains how they apply to this literary concept.

As stated above, chapter five is about sub-genres and how they can be used to clarify and map. Some of the common and more familiar sub-genres of the Bible include: song, allegory, parable and prayer. This chapter is rather short compared to some of the other chapters in the book *Reading the Bible as Literature: an Introduction.* Instead of covering a bunch of material, Dr. Crain just takes an in-depth look at how these sub-genres are used in the Bible and the role they play within the larger genres.

Chapter 6, “Character: A Way of Identifying” was one of my favorite chapters. As you might have guessed, this chapter is all about the characters of the Bible. We find that like many pieces of literature, the Bible has both one-dimensional and multidimensional characters. Narrators are even used to tell stories in the Bible, providing a better insight into the actions, thoughts, and feelings of the characters. It’s important to understand how to identify these characters. There are several different ways a reader can identify the characters in the Bible. They can do this through context, through actions (real or symbolic), through other characters responses, or through the words they say and requests they make. Readers can also look at the impact the character makes, or the description of the character given by other characters or by the narrator, and finally readers can use the structure of the story to identify the character. Being able to identify characters and relate to them is extremely important when reading a piece of literature because it is what allows the reader to build connections with the text and find meaning in it. As usual, under each of those categories Dr. Crain provides Biblical examples that the reader can look up and verify. This helps build an understanding of how to use these techniques to identify characters and better understand the narrative.

Finally, we come to chapter seven which is titled “Themes and Motifs: A Way of Unifying”. This chapter attempts to unify all that we’ve learned from the previous chapters to help us see the Bible as a whole piece of literature rather than just different genres and stories all thrown together. The Bible is one unified piece of literature, and is unified by the common themes and motifs found throughout. This chapter, like all the chapters before it, starts out with definitions so the reader clearly understands the topics being discussed. Next comes the major themes in the Bible. The author starts this section by examining the theme of the relationship of man to God and with other human beings. This section focuses mainly on the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments as they are more commonly known, since these list out God’s expectations for how human beings are supposed to act. Then there is the theme of Shema, which means “hear”. This refers to God’s call for Israel to hear His word and see that He is the one true God. It points out the sovereignty of God which is a major theme of the Bible. The next theme discussed is that of covenants. God makes several covenants throughout the Bible and the effect of those covenants are still felt today. There is the Abrahamic Covenant which resulted in the nation of Israel, the Mosaic Covenant which led the Israelites into Canaan, the land they still occupy today, and the Davidic Covenant which led to the birth of Jesus Christ. God’s mercy is another theme constantly found throughout the Bible. Dr. Crain lists several verse that illustrate God’s mercy and explains why she considers it to be a major theme of the Bible. Finally, the chapter looks at the Heroic Quest as a theme of the Bible and follows several Biblical heroes on their quest to follow God.

Overall I felt the book was well put together. Each chapter examined a specific topic and was able to expand on that and fully illustrate the application of that literary tool in regards to the Bible as a piece of literature. I liked that Dr. Crain used so many Bible references as examples to illustrate her points. I feel that without those references the book would have lost a lot of its power. I had never really thought of reading the Bible as a piece of literature until I read *Reading the Bible as Literature: an Introduction,* but now I have a different outlook. Reading the Bible as literature doesn’t mean you can’t still read it for its religious value. Instead, you learn to recognize the literary properties present while reading for religion. Now when I read my Bible, in addition to learning about God and developing a relationship with Him, I am able to recognize the plot of stories and follow the characters life. I connect with them the same way I connect with characters from other books and as a result I take more away from that reading than I did before. The book is well organized and deals with specific issues, moving into broader topics. It is well written and easy to follow. The questions at the end of each chapter help the reader go more in-depth and think harder about what they have learned.