Reading The Bible As Literature: An Introduction. Jeanie C. Crain. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010. 213 pp.

Jeanie C. Crain wrote Reading The Bible As Literature: An Introduction to help the reader better understand the Bible as a literary text. That is, one that increases the meaning of language in a way to analyze the text on a deeper level. To quote the author: “this book, in introducing the Bible as literature, pays attention to what a text is saying and how it says it.” To me this is an interesting approach, as I have always viewed the Bible and been exposed to the Bible on a strictly religious level. The Bible has been studied extensively and by many people throughout the world for many years. I am fairly confident, though, that most of this has been with the same intentions as my previous studying; primarily as a religious and spiritual enrichment. Additionally, I agree with the author that literature “deepens and enriches our lives, and it has the potential for making us into better people.” I think that this could be especially true with the Bible as literature, as it is ultimately meant to help people live better lives which are more meaningful and God-centered.

The first chapter begins with some basic definitions used when referencing the Bible. First and foremost, the author states that “the ‘Bible’ includes the authoritative Jewish and Christian canons and consists not of original manuscripts but ‘copies of copies of copes’ of texts.” Different denominations have adopted and use slightly different books and orders for their Bible. The most commonly used term for “Bible” includes the Old Testament with thirty nine books and the New Testament which has twenty seven books. But it represents “a single story: the past and the future.” Something I was not aware of and learned in this chapter was that the Bible is composed of “four broad periods: the Patriarchs, Settlement in the land of Canaan, the Monarchy, and Post-Exile and Intertestamental/New Testament.”

Chapter two focuses on style, tone, and rhetorical strategy for further analysis of the Bible. The definitions of these rhetorical devices are presented to make the reader aware that these do exist in the Bible and will help in understanding this piece of literature. The Bible must be analyzed in two very different ways. It must be dissected and exposed in every minute part but also on the opposite spectrum; as one whole story, despite its many very different parts, authors, and time periods. Recognizing these rhetorical devices while studying the Bible “can lead to more informed reading and understanding of its content.” This is likely a common goal when reading any literary work, so it makes sense that we should study these rhetorical devices to better understand the Bible as well.

The third chapter discusses image metaphor, symbol, and archetype. These literary elements overlap and weave together to create the connected literature of the Bible. An image helps the reader to picture what is literally happening. A metaphor is a comparison, using figurative language. A simile is a direct comparison which uses the words “like” or “as”. Motif involves a pattern of related events that unfolds. A symbol is something that represents something else; it provides greater meaning. Archetype is described as a “universal pattern in image or symbol (mountain top, city), plot motif (crime and punishment), and character type (jealous sibling),” as Crain states.

In chapter four Crain discusses “the major genres (the types and categories) into which literary works are grouped according to form, technique/style, or subject matter/content.” After readers know and recognize the genres they have expectations and they contribute to how the reader interprets the text. More than half of the Old Testament and at least half of the New Testament are made up of prose and narrative. The many definitions relating to genre often overlap and are interconnected, especially in the Bible. “The Bible has been regarded as a model for literary genres, its overriding form being that of an anthology made up of diverse genres,” Crain notes. The most familiar genres that the majority of readers will likely notice are prose, poetry, and drama. In both the Old and New Testament, one can also find evidence of historical facts as well as theological ideas and necessary morals for believers to live by.

Chapter five focuses on sub-genres as a way of clarifying and mapping a piece of literature. In the beginning of the chapter the author notes that “Biblical writing, however, cannot be strictly defined as expressive: it always mixes faith, what people believe, and face, what actually existed or happened.” This rings so true for me. Sometimes when I am reading the Bible I actually notice that I tend to get wrapped up in one aspect or the other. At times I find myself focusing more on the facts regarding what happened, trying to figure out exactly what occurred in the story and to who and when. At other times I find myself focusing on what I feel is the underlying meaning, or the lesson that I am supposed to be learning. I can imagine that the best way for the reader to approach this issue could be to read a passage using one approach first and then reading the passage again trying to use the opposite approach. Then, finally trying to mesh the two and really analyze what the author was truly hoping and intending the reader to understand and learn. It seems to me that there are so many layering elements to literature in general, and especially in the Bible. Furthermore, as the author states there are many intermingled genres in the Bible which would add to the complexity and deepening layers in nearly every story of the Bible.

In chapter six the focus is on characters and how they are used for identifying in different aspects of literature. In my opinion, the characters are quite possibly the most important part of a story. If I can relate to and understand a character, I will feel more connected to the story and want to continue reading. I enjoy being able to put myself in the characters’ position and trying to determine how they feel. For me, some of the best pieces of literature that I have read are ones where at the end I wish the story were not over, so that I could know what happens in the characters’ lives next. The characters are like the heart of a story and often one of the only constant things throughout the story, keeping everything connected.

Finally, in the seventh chapter, Crain looks at themes and motifs as a way of unifying in literature. The author begins by stating that “literary and theological themes contribute continuities among the texts and between the two collections and offer a framework for examining the Bible as a whole.” I think it makes definite sense that having a common theme throughout a literary work would make it easier to follow and understand. A common theme in the Bible would be God’s love and His desires for His people. However, I also feel that there are some parts of the Bible that do not seem to fit with this theme.

My personal experience related to the subject had previously been basic exposure to the Bible. I knew the basic plots of most of the major stories. However, I had never really taken a literary approach to reading the Bible. This book increased my interest in taking this type of approach, which I think was also probably a goal of the book. The Bible is some of our oldest literature. It only makes sense that we should study this to see where we came from. Not just in a religious context, but in a literary context. I think the book was interesting. I know, personally, it heightened my senses, so to speak. I feel that when I read the Bible I will now be much more likely to pick out some of these rhetorical devices and I feel this will help me with my understanding of what I am reading.

Whenever we, as students studying literature, can become more aware of literary concepts, we can improve our comprehension and understanding. Having to relate all of these elements together can be problematic for the reader. There are so many pieces of the puzzle to put together in order to best understand the Bible as a whole. I think that most common readers of the Bible would not be able to make most of the connections in order to completely understand all of the elements. Crain suggests “that the literature as it exists must be understood not only in relation to itself, but in relation to the whole.” This is especially true with linking episodes. Having prior knowledge of a story that relates to a current story being read can help the reader to better understand the current passage. One “characteristic of biblical writing is its density of allusion and its remarkableness for activating one text with another,” to quote Crain. Therefore, it definitely seems that one can always continue to keep learning from the Bible, both in a religious context and a literary context.

There are also many other sub-genres and underlying themes within the Bible, which continues to prove that the Bible and many other pieces of literature are extremely complex and deserve to be looked at on a deeper level. All in all, the characters in a story are a critical and important aspect of any literary work, and especially in the Bible. There are many ways to identify and recognize the characters in order to understand and relate to them. To quote Crain, “characters in the Bible evidence a great deal of complexity in their humanity and deserve careful, attentive scrutiny.” Although this is true in any literary work, the Bible has a great stake in the characters. They are representative of God’s plan and His desires. He uses the characters to lead His people and inspire them to do His will. They are kind of like an example and He wants others to see what they have done. I think there is a lot to learn from the characters we read about in literature and especially those in the Bible.

“Literature, unlike religion, generally neither affirms nor denies the reality of the vision,” Crain states. To me, this means that there are often a lot of things in literature that are kind of open to personal interpretation. Images, metaphors, symbols, and archetypes used in literature guide the reader to understand the writing in the way the author intended. But then again, everyone will likely interpret and understand these literary tools in different ways. Crain also notes that “although extremely literal, rooted in concrete human experience, the Bible always stands for something in addition to the literal; it is laden with symbolic meaning”, meaning that different readers could, and likely do, interpret and understand differently. I think this is partly what makes reading and studying literature so valuable.

I feel that through reading this book I have gained a better understanding of how to study many types of literature, in a broad sense, but particularly the Bible in a literary sense, which I had not done much previously. I learned how and when to take a little different approach to my reading of the Bible. There are many aspects of literature that can be found in the Bible that are also found in other literary works. I gained a better understanding of many aspects of the Bible, including specific stories and parts as well as their greater significance. I expanded my knowledge of the Bible by reading more closely and becoming more aware of some of the nuances and interconnectedness of the literature. Ultimately, I learned that there is always more to look at and analyze in order to better understand what I am reading. This is true for nearly every piece of literature, but especially with the Bible.

I think that overall Reading the Bible as Literature: An Introduction set the reader up to be more successful in reading the Bible as a piece of literature, which it is, even though I think this fact is sometimes overlooked, especially in a religious setting. I think it could also make the reader more comfortable with some of the terminology and more confident in their approach to reading the Bible. The author provided helpful definitions and background information. Some possibilities presented would be becoming more familiar with the Bible, learning what to look for in evaluation, and how to approach reading the Bible in order to better analyze what one is reading. Also, to have the reader think about what they are reading in the Bible on a deeper level and create greater meaning, as is the goal with all literature.