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BOOK REVIEW

Margaret Nutting Ralph, *And God Said What? An Introduction to Biblical Literary Forms*, Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2011 (revised edition). Pages: 307. ISBN 978-81- 888821-69-3

Any book, no matter how true it is, will lead us astray if we approach it with faulty assumptions, or if we draw illegitimate conclusions from the truths we find there. That is true even for the Bible. The Bible is a collection of books written in different literary forms. Ignorance of this fact leads to a misunderstanding about what a particular book in the Bible is actually saying. One must understand the various kinds of writing in the Bible in order to understand the meaning of each book. Otherwise it may lead people to a fundamentalist approach or to a literal approach in interpretation.

The book titled, *And God Said What? An Introduction to Biblical Literary Forms*, by Margaret Nutting Ralph, deals with the importance of understanding the various literary forms that appear in the Scripture. According to Ralph, one must see four levels of conversation taking place in the Scripture, viz., the level of events, of the written Scripture, of the teaching and preaching and of the personal prayer. This book basically deals with the second level, i.e., what an author is saying to an audience – the literary form in which the author is writing.

This revised edition of the book has thirteen chapters where the author gives a solid and systematic presentation on various biblical literary forms such as Myth, Legend, Debate, Fiction, Songs, Gospel, Infancy Narrative, Miracle Stories, Parables, Allegory, Letters, and Revelation and an introductory chapter on the Bible. At the very outset, the author makes it clear that “understanding the growth processes is essential to understanding the Bible” (11). She depicts the growth process of the Bible in different stages, namely, the events, the oral tradition, the written tradition, and the edited tradition, and the religious and canonical intent of traditions. Then, she moves on to two basic concepts: “inspiration” and “revelation.”

In chapter two, by examining the genre Myth in detail, Ralph tries to bring out the realities behind them. She presents the myth as a vehicle of revelation. In the next chapter, the author differentiates a legend from a myth. Depicting the Genesis stories as examples, Ralph attempts to show that the intention behind the telling and retelling of the legends is not merely to recall the past but to affect the present audience and to inspire the next generation. Explaining the problem of suffering in the Bible and dealing particularly on the Book of Job, the author presents another genre, i.e., Debate. Reflecting upon Jesus' radical statement, "Love your enemies" in the light of the Book of Jonah, Ralph attempts to show how the genre Fiction and the subgenre Didactic Fiction, with the features humour, parody, and irony, work to teach the audience a lesson that God loves other nations too, and so must we. In the chapter on Songs, the literary forms of Psalms and the cultic settings for it are explained.

Chapter seven focuses on the genre Gospel and on the process that resulted in our present canonical gospels. The growth process in different levels is briefly discussed, followed by the process of formation of the individual gospels. In the next chapter, the author rightly observes that the correct knowledge of the infancy narrative and the use of the Midrash teaching device in them help us to understand the deep-meaning of Matthew's and Luke's infancy narratives and their theological motif. The miracles of Jesus were "acts of power" which were integral parts of his mission. The correct understanding of the miracle stories of Jesus and the ability to differentiate them from other stories are very important factors in understanding the person, vision, and mission of Jesus. On Parable, the author observes that as we learn to correctly interpret parables we will grow in our understanding of the good news of the Kingdom of God. The next chapter offers a discussion on Allegory which involves various levels of meaning and there she concludes that an understanding of John's allegorical method is an indispensable tool to understand the signs that John employs to enable the readers to come to knowledge and faith in Christ (259).

Letter is a prominent literary genre in the New Testament and St. Paul is the main author. Ralph deals with various types of letters, history of the formation of this literary form, the salient features of the Pauline letters, etc. Finally, the author deals with the genre Revelation or Apocalyptic writing. For Ralph, the intention behind the use of this genre is to assure the audience that God of history is in control of the present situation so that one need not fear.

A thorough reading of this book will take the reader to a new level of understanding, which would complement different intentions behind the reading of the Bible, namely, reading to grow in knowledge, to grow in holiness, or reading just as any other literature. As the author herself observes, “the form and function of a genre affect the meaning of a text” (208) and this book renders a helping hand to grasp the real and intended meaning of biblical passages. This book is an excellent study guide to find answers to the questions resulting from the basic misunderstanding about the Bible caused by not knowing its literary forms.

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