

Freshening Up Your Bible Study with Dr. Jim Coakley

Early On

Introduction

Today we can look at a book's title or "table of contents" to see what a book is all about. Since Biblical authors are good writers, they incorporated different methods of signaling to the readers what their book is all about. One of those ways that a biblical author can signal a book's theme (or themes) is to place specific content "early on" in the book that serves as a thematic introduction or thesis statement.

Early On Description

Looking closely at the content situated at the beginning of a Bible book because that "early on" information serves as a sort of "table of contents" for what will be unpacked in further detail later on in the book. This technique is a literary rhetorical device in which the author intentionally selects content to frontload at the beginning of the book which then not only serves to convey content but also double dips as a primer for content that will be further developed later on in the book.

Examples:

Genesis 4: The Cain and Abel account beautifully sets up major themes of the Pentateuch (Genesis: sibling rivalry; Exodus and Deuteronomy: "doing right"; Leviticus: sacrifices and worship; Numbers: restless wandering as a result of sin).

Isaiah: The first two chapters are a preview of the book's major themes: (rebellion, ignorance, "Holy One of Israel," foreign oppression, ethics, latter days etc.).

Ezekiel: Ezekiel's wheel vision sets up the book's major themes: 1) a book full of visions (2, 37, 40-48) 2) God's mobility (11), and 3) Glory from beginning (1) to end (40-48, esp. 43).

Psalms 1-2: Provide a perfect thematic introduction to the entire psalter and serves as a pragmatic goal for all readers: Meditate on the Scriptures (Ps 1) and Worship the King (Ps 2).

Luke: Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1:46-55 foregrounds key themes of the Gospel of Luke: Praise for God's Greatness & mercy personally and nationally.

Proverbs and Hosea are also good examples

So what's: The "early on" content has both as a rhetorical effect and a theological thematic function

- 1) It serves as a subtle way to prepare readers for later content. ("salting the oats" and "breadcrumbs" metaphor)
- 2) It identifies key themes that the Biblical author desires to address.
- 3) Readers have more confidence that they are tracking what the Biblical authors (both human and Divine) are foregrounding.