



search for a meaningful, purposeful death” (p. 3). One way this is accomplished is through reading commentaries on death, particularly stories found in sacred scripture, because they are believed to be Divinely-inspired texts that contain the Truth about death.

In Chapter Two, Crouch begins the study by carefully defining the terminology used in his analysis (e.g., narrative, mortality, closure) and the method he will employ. He defines “narrative mortality” as “a measure of narrative closure placed in comparison with the view of death portrayed by that narrative” (p. 27). Measuring the degrees of closure in a text is a topic of many debates in literary circles. Crouch presents an excellent summary of the issues involved and the studies that have been undertaken, finally settling on a method that combines the cutting-edge work of Marianna Torgovnick (the “geometry” of narrative) and Helmut Bonheim (narrative modes and their affect on closure). Through critically examining the structures and content of the biblical narrative, Crouch aims to (1) measure the degree of closure the reader experiences at the end of the biblical narrative and (2) determine whether and to what degree the narrative engenders a sense of hope in the reader. By performing this kind of critical examination, Crouch intends to show why some biblical narratives point beyond the nothingness of death toward something that assures the reader that one’s life can indeed end well. In a far more radical move, Crouch also aims to challenge canonical intertextuality by showing that some texts present views that are quite different from those imposed upon them “by readers who wish to make all texts within the Bible speak in unison” (p. 40).

Chapters Three and Four are devoted to an analysis of the Gospel of John. Incorporating the insights of R. Alan Culpepper, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, Raymond Brown, and others, Crouch presents a thorough structural and literary analysis of the gospel. Chapter Three focuses on how death is characterized in John (content); Chapter Four focuses on the closing structures in the plot of the gospel (form). One important methodological issue raised in his analysis is how the plot of the plot (i.e., the rhetorical situation that gives rise to the text) changes in relation to the modern reader. Crouch maintains that the rhetorical situation of the gospel has changed because the original audience no longer exists, thus the gospel speaks differently to modern readers. No longer does it address the early Christian struggle against detractors, but speaks to the modern crisis of an immanent and literal death. Contrary to many biblical scholars, Crouch insists that this shift in audience means that John’s Gospel can only be effective if it brings closure to the modern crisis of despair; otherwise “the story simply illustrates the imaginative and creative skills of an ancient author” (p. 113). From this hermeneutical perspective, Crouch examines the closing structures in John and concludes that the content and form of the gospel work together to establish Jesus as the risen Christ who defeats death and who provides an exemplar of a “person who knows how to die” (p. 121). The Johannine Jesus thus becomes a powerful source of meaning and of hope for modern readers, both believers and unbelievers alike.

Crouch's willingness to discount the original rhetorical situation and to reject canonical intertextuality becomes problematic in Chapter Five with his analysis of the Book of Job. Crouch perceives Job as sharing the crisis of modernity, facing despair and meaninglessness in the absence of God. He argues that ultimately it is the narrative's ending, which presents the restoration and happy death of Job, that determines the degree of closure (and the degree of hope) the reader experiences. Thus for contemporary readers of Job there was a high degree of closure because the story affirms the traditional system of retributive justice (i.e., the belief in a moral God who dispenses blessings and punishments). This conclusion, however, is highly debatable, particularly if one considers the original rhetorical situation of Job and how the book interacts with the other wisdom texts in the canon.

Many biblical and literary scholars view the Book of Job as a highly subversive text, challenging the traditional notions of retributive justice that grounded Israel's wisdom tradition and that are expressed in the Books of Psalms and Proverbs. The hope generated by the text does not come from the restoration of Job, but stems from Job's repentance—an event Crouch fails to consider in any depth. In repenting, Job acknowledges the error in his traditional thinking about the moral God and lives the remainder of his life a hopeful and happy man, knowing that whatever evil befalls him is not the result of a vengeful God, but is simply the unpredictable nature of life. By viewing Job in isolation from other wisdom writings in the canon, and by placing so much emphasis on the ending of the narrative, Crouch misses the iconoclastic and self-critical aspects of Job that are central to the book's message of hope for both contemporary and modern readers.

Problems with Crouch's approach are also apparent in Chapter Six, where he explores narrative mortality in the Book of Jonah. Crouch argues that whereas John and Job demonstrate a congruency between content and form; i.e., between the descriptions of death in the text and the closure experienced by the reader, Jonah sends mixed messages. In making his case, Crouch takes an even more radical turn, rejecting and in some cases attempting to discredit traditional views of the rhetorical situation of Jonah. Biblical scholars have traditionally viewed Jonah as a book that challenges the nationalism and narrow view of God held by the post-exilic community, and that acts as a counterpoint to other prophetic books within the canon. Setting aside these exegetical and canonical considerations, Crouch opts for a reading that is largely severed from the book's original cultural and theological moorings. As a result, Jonah is no longer a book that challenges traditional beliefs about God and about whom God chooses to save (issues that are still very relevant for modern readers). Instead the story is transformed into an expression of the modern existential struggle for significance, for autonomy, and for achieving an appropriate end to a life continually frustrated by the controlling forces of Fate. But such a disconnected, disparate reading raises a critical question for all those who wish to advance studies in biblical literature. Is Crouch's interpretation the product of a methodological breakthrough or is it merely a projection of his own hermeneutical agenda?

Chapter Seven concludes the study with a summary of Crouch's findings on death and closure in biblical narratives and with proposals for further analysis. Crouch intends for his future studies to provide additional insight into how death plays within biblical narratives and the human psyche and to refine his interpretive method. In this regard, Crouch might consider adjusting his perceptions of the biblical narratives and the presuppositions he brings to the interpretive process. Clearly he views the biblical texts as isolated works that have little connection to history, to tradition, or to the canon. The down side of this approach is obvious. For even though Crouch presents many interesting and valuable insights about death and closure in biblical narratives, his lack of concern for history and tradition and for the revelatory integrity of the biblical texts leaves his work vulnerable to the charge of interpretive relativism, which ultimately compromises a promising project.