

The Bible as a Graphic Novel

When the Word Becomes (Affecting) Image

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Scholar and bestselling author Timothy Beal, in his 2011 *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book*, describes an unexpected airplane encounter with the Bible:

A twenty-something woman sitting next to me on a plane thumbs distractedly through a fashion-and-lifestyle magazine ... called *Becoming*. On the cover is a Jennifer Aniston look-alike in designer casuals ... Cover lines surround her in bright green and blue type on a purple background: “13 STORIES OF SURVIVAL; THE MUST-HAVE for your wardrobe; LOVE: WHAT IS IT? And How to Find it.” ... There are columns about how to lose weight, how to balance work and play, how to find and keep the right man ... But then I notice other, not-so-standard elements: boxed features and callouts and columns about “Bible Women” and “Bible Stuff to Know,” and longer articles with titles like “Matthew,” “Romans,” and “Revelation” ... What my roommate is perusing is not just any magazine, or not exactly a magazine. It’s a Bible magazine—a “Biblezine,” one of a growing line of niche-marketed Bibles in magazine form published by Thomas Nelson. (2011, 41-42).

Recently, I was contacted by a reporter from my city's newspaper who was writing a story about decorated Bibles. She was interested in a current Bible marketed with colouring pages—the complex type designed for adults, a Bible marketed to be “written back” into, to be illuminated. I thought again of Beal's review of the multitude of Bible products lining the shelves of bookstores across the country. Always a best-seller, the Bible now markets itself to an increasing array of niche markets, and with increasingly interesting graphics. On the one hand, we find Bibles with integrated study notes and devotional matter, normally marketed to specific groups: parents, children, men, women, academics, and (with Oxford's *Jewish Annotated New Testament*) even across the borders of religious communities themselves. As Beal's opening example depicts, we also find Bibles that merge biblical narrative and graphic image(s). The Bible is appearing more and more not only on the Internet and as Biblezines, but also in cinematic and comic book formats. When the Bible is merged with, or translated into, these different graphic and visual media, the images associated with biblical texts function as commentary and interpretation, and also to embed affect. Images that are striking, arousing, disgusting, enraging, frightening, or confusing translate those affects directly into the biblical text that accompanies them. The visual Bible is thus an enlarged Bible.

Religious book publishing bloomed in the twentieth century, offering an array of literary genres: fiction, devotional literature, “life guide” self-help books (on diet, home stewardship, etc.), religious history, doctrine, biographies, biblical commentaries, and more. Despite frequent laments about the displacement of the Bible in our culture and broad biblical illiteracy, the Bible seems to be doing as well as really any book could in our modern publishing context. Clearly, if the Bible isn’t being read, it isn’t because no one can find a copy.

The Bible business has burgeoned into one of the biggest and fastest-growing fields of publishing, selling many thousands of different Bibles in every imaginable form for many hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Within this brave new world of Christian consumerism, it’s getting harder and harder to tell the difference between spreading the word and selling it. (Beal 2011, 20-1)

The Religion sections of general-reader book stores, such as Barnes and Noble (when one can still find them), are often the scale of History or Biography (two of America’s other great non-fiction reading passions) and focus upon Bibles and Bible study guides. As Beal notes, “[T]he flagship consumer product, the heart of the industry, remains this cultural icon of the Bible. Shaped by nineteenth-century Puritanic Biblicism, refined by early-twentieth-century fundamentalism, and repackaged, again and again, by neo-evangelicalism” (2011, 21). Beal continues:

In today’s consumer culture, we are what we buy, wear, and carry. We identify ourselves by our patters of consumer choices, by the market niches we buy into. It’s gone beyond that post-Cartesian proof of existence, “I shop, therefore I am.” Today it’s closer to “I shop for what I am.” The culture industry makes and markets identities. I want to be outdoorsy, so I buy a lot of Gore-Tex ... My big New Year’s resolution might be to become an organized person. So the first thing I do is go to the home store and buy a bunch of plastic boxes ... I want to be “in the Word” ... So what do I do? Buy a Bible. (35).

The Bible remains literarily prominent, but something fundamental *is* changing about the way people package and read—and expect to read—it. The Bible is becoming both a popular consumer item and also a very visual book.

Contemporary scholarship has explored several genres of graphic representation of the Bible, and there is an increasing body of literature examining the Bible’s appearance in comic-book format, which is appropriate given the number of occasions when the Bible makes serious cross-over into the graphic novel genre. One engaging, and perhaps paradigmatic, Bible-comic is Robert Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* (Crumb 2009). Crumb’s work is famous for its graphic sexuality, its crude and distinct use of line and shading to create “weight,” and its generally visceral content. Crumb’s script is the complete, unabridged text of Genesis. Reviews (and Crumb’s own description of the work) stress that he has followed the text with absolute fidelity, omitting and adding nothing.

In this essay, I will interrogate Crumb’s claims as I explore how he “translates” the biblical text into a new medium. I would like to concentrate on two particular (sets of) questions, all assuming a model of Cultural Studies informed by the work of

Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, and others (esp. Hoggart 1958; Hall 1977, 1980, 1981; see also During 1993), and informed by Gramsci and Althusser (esp. Gramsci 1985; Althusser, 1969; Althusser and Balibar 1968). First, I would like to examine how Crumb's images both create and reflect popular notions of gender, ethnicity, and cultural alterity/subalterity; I will concentrate here upon his depictions of women. Second, I am interested in exploring how Crumb's images intersect, perpetuate and, at times, challenge what Robert Alter has called the "reticence" of biblical narrative. These two questions, fore-grounded by the study of how Crumb "translates" biblical text into a new genre, demonstrate the reality of a form of "epicriticism" always-already present in the engagement of biblical text by its readers. Finally, as I conclude, I'd like to at least indicate a new direction for reading the Bible and/as graphic image: the implications of the affective force of illustration juxtaposed alongside the reticent, unadorned biblical text.

Graphic Novels, Graphic Bibles

Graphic novels are emerging from adolescent-oriented, consumable, thoughtless pulp into a mature, critical, and literate genre of writing. Illustrated narrative is a very old art form, arguably one of the first visual arts (depending upon the interpretation of ancient cave paintings). Graphic illustration of literary and sacred texts was standard through most of western history, introducing literature to the illiterate. By the twentieth century, comic art was expanded to original themes, but was regarded as children's literature, most likely because of its resonance to readers with limited literacy. In the 1950s, several adult series were launched focused largely on science fiction. In the late 1960s and 1970s, comic art began to expand into original literature aimed at adults.¹

Biblical scholarship on graphic novels has been limited until relatively recently.² This increase comes, in part, with a growing number of serious adaptations of the Bible into graphic novel/comic book format³ and other works that gloss (offer midrash on?) biblical characters (such as Brown 2016; Thompson 2003; Gauld 2015). With the rise of Cultural Studies approaches in literature in English departments, a development concurrent with the change in graphic literature to adult audiences, comic books became legitimate fodder for literary critics in the 1980s. This criticism expanded through the 1990s. Early biblical criticism on graphic and illustrated art began in the 1990s with a rise in cultural criticism, particularly film (see e.g. Freedman 2011; Meskin 2011; cf. Cook 2012).

¹ For brief history of comics and scholarly turn toward graphic literature, see Freedman 2011.

² Note for example, Clark (2010); Balinisteanu (2012); Locke (2012); Parham (2005); Oropeza (2005); Price (2012); Lewis and Kraemer (2010); Ross (2013); Frakes (2013). On illustrated Bibles, see Pavlac (1993); Yang (2011); Beal (2010); Dupertuis (2012). On comics as aspects of Christian (often evangelical) general pop culture and evangelistic tools, particularly the (infamous) Chick Tracts, see Haines 1982; Carmody (2008); Metz (1981); Clark (2009); Philips (2012).

³ One thinks, for example, of not only Crumb, but also of Chester Brown's serialized adaptation of the gospels of Mark and Matthew in the pulp magazines *Yummy Fur* and *Underwater*, and Brandon Powell Smith's *The Brick Bible* (2011).

Comic books and graphic novels, by definition, use visual art to communicate alongside written text. Graphic novels/comic books communicate their content via dual “texts.” The written narrative must be regarded alongside visual images which are subject to many of the same theoretical approaches applicable to art criticism and film critique (Meskin 2011). To “interpret” a comic book requires the unification of literary criticism (examining such things as plot, the narrative voice, characters, settings) and art criticism (art history, visual references, form, shape, color, line, shadow, expression, etc.), both of which can also be examined through a variety of ideological and methodological lenses (feminist critique, postcolonialism, social-scientific critiques, post-structuralism, etc. See Freedman 2011; Meskin 2011).

In 2009, Robert Crumb published his much anticipated graphic rendition of Genesis. The relative disinterest among biblical scholars⁴ does not coincide with the extreme interest this volume awoke among fans of graphic and illustrated novels in general and Robert Crumb, in particular.⁵ Crumb's long career as an illustrator is itself colored by his own remarkable biography.⁶ Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Crumb's most successful commercial (and, many might argue, artistic) collaboration was with the comic writer Harvey Pekar, particularly in Pekar's critically acclaimed series *American Splendor* (for a representative anthology, see Pekar 2003). *American Splendor* was an autobiographical review of the life of Pekar with particular focus on his at times down-at-heels life as a civil servant in Cincinnati, infatuated with collecting rare-press jazz records (Pekar was also a notable jazz critic), negotiating a series of ordinary romantic and personal relationships, struggling financially, and his constant quest for a broader audience for his literary work. Pekar's style included direct address to the reader and heavy narration. Pekar is, in many ways, an “everyman intellectual,” an autodidact widely read in political theory and philosophy, art criticism, serious literature, and history.⁷

Crumb's other work is, at times, sporadic and notable for major themes of graphic sexuality and crude humour. Crumb self-describes as a “sex addict,” quite frank about his numerous adulterous affairs (many producing children), his near obsessive masturbation, and his near-constant sexual fantasy; Crumb is also remarkably self-aware of how these impulses toward sexual expression arise from complex and confusing responses to various levels of dysfunction and social mis-adjustment and various forms of abuse arising from within his family of origin, particularly surrounding his mother. He is an avowed atheist and regards his own Jewish identity with significant nuance and open secularity.

⁴ Most reviews or notice were of the type of Byasse (2010) and Anderson (2010)—both rather popular and brief in their treatment. Both also play upon the theme of “graphic” bibles and “R-Rating.” More substantial is Pauley (2011) and Petersen (2010, 120, 125-6), though the latter reading is brief.

⁵ For a sampling of the popular excitement note the major reviews of Johnson (2009); Hajdu (2009); Liscombe (2009); Colton (2009); Mouly (2009); Baker (2009); Spitznagel (2009).

⁶ An excellent review of Crumb's life is available in the 1994 documentary *Crumb* (dir. Terry Zigoff; Sony Pictures).

⁷ Defining himself as an “illustrator,” Crumb is also famous for his iconic images “keep on truckin’” and Fritz the cat, each produced in the 1960s.

Crumb's artistic style is distinctive. His illustration tends toward basic form, in some ways remarkably simple. His image framing is often rather basic and tends toward the cinematic. His use of line, however, immediately begins to add visual interest. He uses heavy line and deep shading and shadow to create stark images that lift from the page. In addition, his work is often heavily detailed. He has a particularly precise eye for architectural and landscape detail; much of his work draws from photographs or real-life figures. When drawing human figures, Crumb focuses upon facial lines and hair, drawing out visceral and at times crude representations. Their faces are lined and worn, yet highly expressive—particularly in his representation of eyes—and readily communicate anger, surprise, or joy capturing the exact nuance of expression to illustrate a character's inner thoughts and feelings.

Crumb's work has been exhibited in major galleries and has garnered significant critical attention; He is one of the few illustrators of graphic literature and comics who has “crossed over” into the main-stream art world; in many ways, his work is responsible for drawing both critical attention to comic books as a literary genre and for inspiring other graphic artists to move in their work from simple illustration of children's literature to the production of stand-alone, adult-oriented comic books as a new genre of serious literary production.

Robert Crumb on Genesis

Despite the famous adage, in this case, the cover of *The Book of Genesis Illustrated by Robert Crumb* certainly suggests the work's contents.⁸ The central image is that of God (an old man with flowing hair and beard and white clothes) casting Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden. A Rubenesque and rather busty Eve is looking back tearfully as she clasps the hand of her husband, sullen and carrying a farming tool. They are dressed in animal hides which barely cover their bodies. They step from lush grasses bestrewn with flowers and shaded by trees onto an arid, rock-strewn path with distant and rugged looking mountains beyond. They are surrounded by flies. The image suggests a turning from, a loss of innocence, a fitting allegory for a cartoon depiction of Genesis which will both de-centre a nostalgia over the purity found in biblical text even as it distorts a child-like innocence inherent in comic art. This is not a work for children. Indeed, the cover asserts as much. Noting that “All 50 chapters” will be covered in a work that is “the first book of the Bible graphically depicted,” we learn that “graphic” is something of a double-entendre; we are assured that in this comic there will be “Nothing Left Out!” while also warned that “Adult Supervision Recommended for Minors.” Would that every Bible bore such cautions. The rear cover stresses the comprehensiveness of the work, surveying the stories included (all the major stories of Genesis), assuring us also of comprehensive treatment of “all the ‘begots’” and the “table of nations” and depicting God, again, surrounded by the images of the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the Matriarchs (Sarah, Rachel,

⁸ In many ways, *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* is a very difficult book to reference or cite. It does not contain verse designations for the various chapters of Genesis. It also does not have page numbers of any type.

and Rebekah – though not Leah), Joseph and Pharaoh, Noah, Adam and Eve, and the Serpent.

Crumb's preface lays out his agenda and approach in language that borders upon the confessional and will awaken, for some of us, memories of academic honour codes or oaths:

I, R. Crumb, the illustrator of this book, have, to the best of my ability, faithfully reproduced every word of the original text, which I derived from several sources, including the King James Version, but mostly from Robert Alter's recent translation, *The Five Books of Moses*. (2004, preface)

Quickly appended to this declaration of textual fidelity is Crumb's admission that “I ventured to do a little interpretation of my own, if I thought the words could be made clearer, but I refrained from indulging too often in such ‘creativity’, and sometimes let it stand in its convoluted vagueness rather than monkey around with such a venerable text” (ibid.). Antiquity and the inherent quality of the narrative, not divine inspiration or biblical authority, is the source of Crumb's respect for Genesis. He notes that:

Every other comic book version of the Bible ... contains passages of completely made-up narrative and dialogue, in an attempt to streamline and “modernize” the old scriptures, and still, these various comic book Bibles all claim to adhere to the belief that the Bible is 'the word of God,' or 'inspired by God,' whereas I, ironically, do NOT believe the Bible is the 'word of God.' I believe it is the words of men (ibid.).

Crumb goes on to lay out a process of biblical composition, codification, and redaction, reaching its final form (at least of the Torah) during the Exilic and Persian eras; this is entirely resonant with the arguments of historical-critical scholars. Crumb indicates he used personal assistance with Hebrew phrases and spellings and based many of his images on photos of modern Bedouins from Morocco. Crumb clearly did additional reading in scholarly and rabbinic commentary, though he does not use much annotation. The conclusion of his book contains a brief chapter-by-chapter commentary (omitting chapters 4, 5, 7, 14, 15, 18, 22, and 33-7). He cites Robert Alter in the preface (and in notes to chapter 24) and Savina Tuebal (*Sarah the Priestess* 1984, in his notes to chapters 12, 21 and 31).⁹ Crumb references the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Ennuma Elish*, and Lilith traditions in his notes to chapters 3 and 8, though he does not name them. He cites “the Midrash” to substantiate the point that Terah (Abraham's father) was a seller of idols (see chapter 11), and he also alludes to traditions of “crossroad” deities in his notes on chapter 32. Crumb is also aware of Wellhausen's source critical arguments (particularly on the varied creation accounts, see chapter 2), archaeological and literary data on ancient Hebrew polytheism (chapters 6, 31), and nineteenth century racial and ethnic interpretations of various genealogies (chapters 9, 10, and 11) He does not include a bibliography.

⁹ He is probably also referring to Tuebal's (1984) work in his notes on Genesis 13, 16, 17, 24-6 and 38.

Several of Crumb's images and series of images merit review and reveal elements of biblical text potentially overlooked by general reading. A general survey of his images from the prologue of Genesis 1-11 demonstrates this point. The transition between the two creation accounts in Gen. 1:1-2:4 and 2:4b-3:24 is stark and clear; the exuberance and innocence of the sexual expression of the first couple is delicately drawn. Crumb's depiction of the serpent clarifies the aetiology of the serpent's curse in Genesis 3. His sensitive rendering of facial expression as the primal couple consume the forbidden fruit is sublime. His depiction of the cherubim reflects general ancient near eastern iconography. Crumb depicts the murder of Abel in chapter four with a brutality that matches the sparseness inherent in the biblical text. His review of the generations in chapter five organizes this material in blocks that help readers understand that, according to the biblical text, Noah was alive at the time of Adam's death (a similar effect is achieved in chapter 11 when one realizes that the biblical narrative, again, allows for a brief overlap in the life-span of Noah and Abram). The Nephilim in chapter six draws on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*; a scene that seems to depict Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying Humbaba illustrates Gen. 6:5. The worship of Moloch with its reputed human sacrifice, is depicted in chapter 6, as is the tradition of Abram's father, Terah, as a seller of idols in chapter 11. The variations of the flood narratives are slightly obscured, though the transition of expression in chapter 9, as God makes a new covenant, are remarkable. Chapters 10 and 11 are a tour-de-force of Crumb's visual research into ancient near eastern art, iconography and language (he even captures accurately Accadian and Babylonian cuneiform and Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs. He returns to the hieroglyphs in chapters 42 and 44 as a script for Joseph speaking in Egyptian). Crumb is graphic in his depiction of Noah's drunkenness, Abram's sexuality with Hagar and Sarah, the destruction of Sodom, Lot's sexual encounters with his daughters, Jacob and his wives Leah and Rachel, Onan, and Judah and Tamar. All these stories, normally skipped in children's versions of Genesis, clearly speak to Crumb's intent to "graphically depict" the entire, exact text of Genesis. The juxtaposition, sometimes startling, of comic book art and graphic sexuality (a collision as discomfiting as Art Spiegelman's retelling of the Holocaust with cartoon cats and mice in his multivolume *Maus*) communicates more clearly than any essay could how earthy, sexual, and graphic the biblical text can be. Genesis and its stories are beloved in synagogue and church and are frequently taught to children. Crumb's illustrations force a reflection on just how "child friendly" these stories actually are.

Savina Teubal (1984) argues that Genesis—indeed, the whole of the Torah—was an edited compendium of ancient "Hebrew" literature which was, by design, suppressing an earlier strata of myth and literature that reveals an epoch of matriarchic society and the primacy of female deities. Teubal argues that this transformation from matriarchy to patriarchy and its attendant shifts in religion occurred, at various times, across the entire ancient Near East. Crumb is clearly taken with this thesis. Though he may well have done reading in addition to Alter and Teubal (and, indeed, I think he did), much of his data on ancient Near Eastern mythology, ritual, and biblical source criticism could easily be mediated via these two

sources, alone. The absence of specific argument or additional citation suggest this is the case.

Though Crumb keeps any direct engagement with Teubal confined to the endnotes, his images are certainly influenced by a strong feminist eye. Biblical text is notoriously androcentric, and Crumb is certainly loyal to his text. Yet women as drawn by Crumb often display characteristically strong features, convicted expressions and powerful activity. Crumb also opts to include women, silent, as observers in male-oriented scenes in ways that make them active participants in the drama of the frame. Unlike the biblical text, women appear (though, one must admit, often silently) on nearly every page of text. This is not to say, however, that Crumb's treatment is unambivalently feminist. Crumb frequently depicts women—often nude—as victims of violence and even human sacrifice. His female characters are uniformly sexualized with exaggerated breasts, prominent buttocks, and often exposing significant flesh (particularly plunging neck lines and bared thighs). In a sense, this is very much in keeping with traditional depictions of women in graphic literature—a literature that, despite its recent turns toward “adult” audiences and literary nuance—still tends to preserve a somewhat adolescent infatuation with the idealized female body (Balinisteanu 2012).

For Crumb, women figures are central and women characters become much more vivid. Yet their strength is predicated upon their sexuality and, one presumes, their ability to procreate. In many ways, this latter, inspired in Crumb by Teubal, resonates with the actual text of Genesis where women are most notable for their fertility and most powerful via their sexuality as they inhabit a text fecund with creation and earthiness. Popular culture both reflects and constructs popular ideas and conventions;¹⁰ Crumb's Genesis both reflects and produces scholarly “meanings” and interpretation, but his images are also deeply affecting. In ways similar to the way lighting, cinematography, or music contribute to the power of film, the mood and mode of his illustration carries a “meaning” that interacts freely with the biblical text. The end effect is both an interpretive commentary and a structural affect that shape the way readers experience Genesis.

“Translation” of Word into Image

In a broad review on the significance of illustration and adaptation of biblical texts, David Petersen asks:

Are artists “illustrating” the Bible text, or is there a more profound interpretation at work? Or are they using biblical literature as an occasion to make a point about some issue that does not inhere in the biblical text? Put simply, what do artists “do” with a biblical text? (Petersen 2010, 121).

The depiction of biblical texts is a form of interpretation of biblical texts. Characters are drawn with expressions indicating feelings and inner dialogue. The ascription of

¹⁰ This idea is fundamental in Birmingham School approaches to Cultural Studies. See Exum and Moore (1998) for defense. For examination and examples related to religion, Bible and comics, see Balinisteanu (2012); Wertham (1954); Clark (2009).

these feelings is often an interpretive move. The location of characters “in frame” for various scenes shapes the way a scene is understood, which is a form of interpretation. At times Crumb’s images explicitly interpret; his scene of a “frisky” encounter between Isaac and Rebecca set in King Melech’s garden resolves a famous textual and lexical chestnut in Genesis 26.

Despite real concerns about over-application (see Clark 2010), many techniques from film theory can be applied to the interpretation of graphic novels and comic art. One perennial problem in adaptation of a literary work to graphic medium (normally film) is the limitation of scale and the effectiveness of expression. Novels, simply put, tend to wander. Contemporary novels often reveal the inner thoughts and ideas of characters. Novels have complex plots with inter-related sub-plots which advance the thesis of the work or add nuance to its arguments. Film cannot capture these nuances. Without the rather wooden device of voice-over, film cannot easily narrate a character’s inner thoughts. This inner dialog and emotion must be communicated via the gestalt of the film’s soundtrack, the actor’s expression, the “mood” of lighting and sets, the actor’s behaviour, and more.

Crumb faces similar limitations in illustrating a literary work. Narration and some inner dialogue can be articulated via floating text boxes typical for comic art, but Crumb must articulate many elements of meaning by alternate means.¹¹ He may communicate via framing, background, expression, character inclusion and position, and more. Each of these elements are interpretive actions, arising from interpretive decisions made by Crumb as he “translates” the text of Genesis into a graphic novel format. In essence, then, in his “illustration” of Genesis, Crumb is creating an entirely new literary work which is the juxtaposition of the text of Genesis and his illustration-interpretation. Crumb’s work reveals that there is no way to simply illustrate biblical text or to produce a graphic novel of Genesis that is “just” Genesis. Every attempt is the production of a new work.

One significant moment of this intersection, again to borrow from film criticism, is Crumb’s use of perspective, shot-plotting, and framing as means of constructing the viewer’s gaze. A good example of this is Crumb’s depiction of the women of Genesis. Crumb uses his liberty as illustrator to include women in many frames, even when the women are silent. In giving them expression, he also gives them voice. Yet Crumb’s drawings are highly sexualized. Women, again and again, are naked. They thrust their (very rounded) buttocks toward the reader/viewer or kneel before male characters. All the female characters have large breasts. Their clothing often reveals their bodies, particularly their breasts. The gaze in this text is a highly sexualized, highly masculine eye. Influenced by Teubal, Crumb incorporates women in ways that resonate with her thesis. Dominant and powerful women are exposed, but are exposed in ways that cannot fail to note the potential and power in female reproduction and motherhood. Crumb’s images perform a celebration-but-sublimation of Teubal in much the same way that Teubal argues Genesis itself

¹¹ An issue not specific to his own project. See Carmody (2008) and Mundhenk (2002).

sublimates-but-depends-upon ancient pre-biblical matriarchies. In his own survey and review of Crumb, David L. Petersen suggests:

Crumb's *The Book of Genesis*, though deploying a contemporary artistic idiom—the comic—forces the reader to engage the entire biblical text. The reader must confront all the scenes in Genesis, not just those deemed important, whether for artistic interpretation or for critical study. Further, Crumb has done his best to place the text in its ancient context, both by offering a vaguely Semitic profile to his cast of characters and by introducing what he takes to be the scenery of the ancient Near East ... [The] reader is receiving “one more” commentary. Only with Crumb's *The Book of Genesis* does one actually confront biblical text. (2010, 126)

“Illustration” as well as “graphic” take on dual meanings when discussing Crumb's work. The text is displayed in its full, exposed sense. Like many of its female characters, the words of Genesis—even the curious, the diseased, the private words—are stripped, exposed, subject to gaze; Genesis under Crumb's hand is laid out for examination—scandalous, entertaining, or clinical. It is brutal in its nakedness—a nakedness effected by illustration. The reader of *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* is, indeed, receiving, simultaneously, text and commentary. The commentary, arising from the juxtaposition of Crumb's illustration and the language of Genesis, inhere (to use Petersen's word) and integrate commentary and text in a way analogous to the relationship between genome and epigenome (to the way an organism's behaviour determines which-and-how genes manifest or are even “turned on” or “off.” In other words, the way that behaviour and “reception” re-write genetic code): Crumb's illustrations, the accrual of centuries of scholarship and tradition, activate or suppress elements of text. This dynamic is particularly vibrant in Genesis, a work of literature whose very (genetic?) structure creates reader-commentators.

The Reticence of Biblical Image

Crumb's collaboration with Robert Alter is as fertile at awakening insight as his use of Tuebel. The literary critic Robert Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative*) has done extensive analysis of biblical literature as literature. One component he has brought centrally to the attention of critics is what he calls the “reticence of biblical literature.” He works, for example, with the *Aqedah* (the famous story of the offering of Isaac by Abraham in Genesis 22), noting how much the inner reaction, emotion, and feeling of all the characters is suppressed, in part, by the text. We are not told what people “think” or “feel.” We, as readers, must construct this by our engagement with, and interpretation of, the dramatic action of the text. The horror of the narrative, matched with this reticence, builds deep ambivalence and tension in the reader. Eric Auerbach has done similar work with Homer, writing about the reunion scene between Odysseus and Penelope. Noting the scene, again, does not have an omniscient narrator who reveals inner thoughts and emotion (these must, again, be discovered by the reader's interaction with the dramatic narrative), Auerbach describes the scene, somewhat famously, as one “fraught with background.” In general, ancient literature doesn't

reveal much about feeling, inner thought, or character motivation; character depth is constructed solely by narrative and drama and interaction. This, in general, heightens the complexity of characterization and reader investment.

Crumb's "illustration" of Genesis, as a "translation" of the text of Genesis into the genre of graphic novel, in many ways augments the reticent text. The absence of direct access to the inner lives or motives of characters is compensated, in part, by the visual nature of the work. Like film or theatre, Crumb can construct scenes or guide the viewer-reader's gaze in ways that express and create affect. Even as he is bound by a reticent narrator, Crumb's illustration is not only interpretation of Genesis, but the translation of Genesis into a new genre. In some ways, the reticence of biblical narrative is matched by the reticence of graphic narration. Crumb's *Genesis Illustrated* is a juxtaposition of biblical text, film, and graphic literature—all of which struggle with articulation of inner emotion; focus upon narration and depiction as means of communication of inner self. The result of this union, however, is highly provocative and evocative of meaning. On the one hand, the evocative power of the reticent text is curtailed by the provision, by Crumb, of visual cues which restrict potential interpretations. Yet, on the other hand, Crumb's illustrations serve as an illumination of the manuscript, filling in some reticence but also producing other

Conclusion

Tim Beal notes an interesting parallel between the growth—the "bloom"—of Bible publishing and plant reproduction. Fruit tree production tends to decline as a tree ages. In the tree's last years, however, there is a sudden bloom of both flowers and fruits. It is not uncommon to see dramatic increases in production and productivity in the final two or three seasons of a flowering plant. Far from being a sign of renewed vigor, these bumper crops are actually "Distress Crops." A plant, shortly before dying, will devote the last of its resources to fruit production (in an effort to perpetuate itself). Beal suggests that one might argue the sudden rapid growth in Bible production is harbinger of the end of a certain view and status of the Bible. The Bible, in the "Twilight of print culture" certainly seems to be less the common text it once was. One cannot assume the type of biblical literacy once considered normal. Certainly, print culture is shifting, and may well be in decline. But, one asks fairly, are books? Is the Bible?

Beal is not the only one to look at reproductive biology as a metaphor for the spread of Bibles. In his 1996 article, Hugh Pyper considers the Bible as a "selfish meme." His essay draws from the genetics work by Richard Dawkins, who famously refocuses the process of reproduction and life from the level of organism to the level of DNA. Complex organisms do not use DNA to reproduce, Dawkins argues, so much as DNA has managed to construct complex organisms as the machinery for their own perpetuation. Genes are "selfish"; they create life (and urges within life forms) as a means of their own survival. Pyper takes this idea and considers the Bible, asking if the Bible is actually a document that has created religious and cultural systems in order to perpetuate itself. Somewhat tongue-in-cheek, he wonders if Bibles have independent agency. Certainly, the question has limits. But it also awakens real

thought on whether or not Bibles in Judaism, Christianity, and scholarly and cultural biblicism, the Bible as a text-system, has (for lack of a better word) an autonomous power.

We can certainly note (with some amusement) the irony in using Darwin (or Dawkins, for that matter) to speak to the spread of evangelicalism's Bible. But we might also do more. Putting our two ideas together, perhaps the recent proliferation of Bibles, and *illustrated* Bibles particularly, is not a distress crop, but a mutation: the rise of a new species to see that the Bible continues. Beal nicely notes the traumas of the present moment toward print: film, digitalization, and Internet are changing the way we understand "texts" and their authority. When animals encounter new environments, they often die. But they also change. Faced with fundamental environmental changes, argues Beal, the Bible is initiating a distress crop in order to see that something within it survives. But in rapid reproduction, one encounters the chance, always, for mutation and change. Following Pyper, perhaps these suddenly "new" Bibles are the Bible's attempt to persist, to find a way, to find the correct strategy, the right DNA strand, to survive. We can't escape noticing that this moment is not just the blossoming of digital technologies; it is also a moment for the sudden, stratospheric ascension of late capitalism. So, given the changes imposed upon the Bible by digitization and late capitalism, mediated by Althusser's views on the real "agency" of systems, but also of things, maybe the current moment is the Bible acting out its own preservation in our climate of global, total capitalism. In our present moment of cinema and Internet, spare text alone no longer has the affective force required for its own preservation. What is needed is a new fusion of graphic and textual which can compress an array of affective signals and messages, interpretations and ideas, into a single frame.

Crumb offers his work as an illustration, without addition, of the Genesis text. Criticism of graphic novels must critically address the literary aspects of the novel, but must also be attuned to the way that images collaborate with the narrative in order to create the aggregate "meaning" of the final composite product. Crumb's illustration of Genesis is an interpretation, a "translation" of the book of Genesis into an entirely new genre. This translation brings with it an always-already alteration of the text of Genesis. There is no way to illustrate a text without, simultaneously, interpreting it.

One example of this principle on Crumb's work can be seen in his presentation of female characters. Relying on Teubal, Crumb's illustrations presume a textual history behind Genesis that charts the rise-and-fall-and-eventual suppression of women's religion and matriarchy. As a result, his images frequently foreground women. Yet his images just as frequently sexualize women. Crumb's images implicitly re-perform the process of textual transmission and alteration that he sees behind Genesis. The result is an altogether new work, a re-written Genesis, that sparks renewed attention to textual and graphic resonances as new and fecund, affective species, ripe for interpretation.

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