Crumb, R.

The Book of Genesis Illustrated


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The tradition of illustrating or illuminating versions of the Hebrew Bible reaches as far back as the sixth century C.E., as the Vienna Genesis attests, reached a remarkable apex in printed texts with the Doré Bible, and has continued up to the present day. Still, few recent translations of the Hebrew Bible into English that biblical scholars would put in the hands of their students have been accompanied by illustrations, with the sketches present in the Good News Bible/TEV standing as a possible and interesting exception. Biblical texts—whether those ordered by teachers for use in classrooms or those placed in chairs or pews in religious contexts—are regularly devoid of illustration. The reasons for the absence of illustration are, no doubt, varied. Some would deem any illustration to be an interpretation that prevents the reader from making her or his own interpretation of the text. Others might think that an illustration violates the aniconic tendenz in much “biblical religion.” Be that as it may, there is a burgeoning market for “illustrated Bibles,” as any casual search of Amazon or Google will soon discover. Instead of calligraphy and gilt, one may now find Bibles illustrated with photographs, even with figures constructed of Legos (The Brick Testament). So, it should come as no surprise that the book of Genesis illustrated with cartoons should appear. After all, there have been interesting presentations of biblical literature à la the medium of cartoons (e.g., C. Burstein, The Kid’s Cartoon Bible [JPS]) for many years. However, as that title indicates, most such presentations are designed for children. Not so the volume by Robert Crumb. His tome
has been created for adult readers, as the phrase “adult supervision recommended for
minors” on the cover suggests.

What, then, is The Book of Genesis Illustrated? One answer is a “graphic novel.” Others
might use the phrase “underground comic,” a genre with which Crumb has been
associated (Fritz the Cat is one of his notable characters), a form of literature that at least
some scholars claim has emerged in the past fifty years. (The Columbia University’s
Graphic Novel webpage offers an invaluable introduction to this phenomenon; see http://
www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/eguides/graphic_novels/index.html.) Though graphic novels
vary, illustrations normally are at least as important if not more important than the
printed text. In many instances, it is licit to characterize the illustrations as “cartoons,”
vexed though the definition of cartoon is. (Crumb speaks of himself as an “illustrator”
and of the art in his book as a “comic book version” of the Bible.) If one were to refer to
“classic” forms of graphic art, one should probably appeal to what Crumb has produced
as a “drawing,” as opposed to media such as etchings, lithographs, or engravings. In fact,
Crumb’s drawings in the volume under review look almost like etchings. His cross-
hatching produced with a fine pen is not unlike that produced by an etching needle that
digs in vigorously on the copper plate.

To characterize Crumb’s tome as a graphic novel would be apt for another reason.
Genesis is, indeed, a graphic book. In his drawings, Crumb does not hesitate to depict
human bodies, violence, and sexual behavior in a graphic fashion, hence the afore-
mentioned warning to minors. So, for example, the depiction of Lot and his daughters
(Gen 19) or Judah and Tamar (Gen 34) leaves little to the imagination. Blood flies when
Cain kills Abel. Some readers will, no doubt, complain about the overt depiction of sexual
activity and violence. Others will object that the presence of any illustration, overt or not,
deprives the reader from creating his or her own mental image of the scene in question, a
far different critique. But then, some readers may not spend time with the
aforementioned biblical texts, which they find distasteful. Crumb may be requiring those
readers to pay attention to what is actually written in the text, often unread parts of the
Bible.

Crumb’s volume is made up of a one-page introduction (the volume is not paginated), a
chapter-by-chapter presentation of text and illustrations (the text is usually presented in a
cartoon-like frame), and then, in the final pages, what Crumb calls a “commentary”
appears. In this commentary, again in chapter-by-chapter order (though he does not
address all of the chapters), he reports his sense of what is happening in each biblical
chapter. It is more of a summary than a commentary.
Crumb has included a translation of the entire book of Genesis in the volume. In the introduction he writes, “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 most from Robert Alter’s recent translation, *The Five Books of Moses* (2004). (Alter’s translation was published by Norton, which also published this volume.) One might have wished that Crumb had simply reproduced Alter’s translation. For example, Alter’s translation of Gen 1:1–3 runs as follows:

> When God began to create heaven and earth, and the earth then was w提示和 darkness over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters, God said, “Let there be light.”

Crumb offers:

> When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth was then without form, and void, and darkness was over the deep and God’s breath hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light”.

Though one might quibble with the almost mechanical repetition of the copula in Alter’s translation, Crumb has simply presented readers with a sentence fragment for the first two verses (this fragment accompanies the first drawing of the book [apart from an introductory map]). The temporal clause without a finite clause makes little sense.

Another example attests to Crumb’s preference for “classic,” that is, KJV-like, idioms. For Gen 1:26, Alter translates,

> And God said, “Let us make a human in our image, by our likeness, to hold sway over the fish of the sea and the fowl of the heavens and the cattle and the wild beasts and all the crawling things that crawl upon the earth.”

Crumb prefers something far more familiar:

> And God said, “Let Us make man in Our own image, after Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens, and the cattle, and over the earth, and over every crawling thing that crawls upon the earth.”

One might have hoped that the bold illustrations would have been accompanied by a bolder version of the biblical text.
Crumb is clearly interested in helping readers understand something about the Hebrew text. To this end, he occasionally offers notes concerning philology in the frames. For example, when illustrating Gen 27, he writes, “‘Rightly named Jacob’: at birth the name Ya’aqob was a play on Hebrew words meaning ‘Heel grabber.’ Here another play on Hebrew makes the name into a verb meaning ‘crooked,’ with the obvious sense of devious or deceitful dealing.” This note is obviously very similar to one that Alter provides at virtually the same point, “At birth, Jacob’s name Ya’aqob was etymologized as ‘heel-grabber’ (playing on ‘aqeb, heel). Now Esau adds another layer of etymology by making the name into a verb from ‘aqob, ‘crooked,’ with the obvious sense of devious or deceitful dealing.” Here Crumb would have done well to provide all of the information proffered by Alter.

The illustrations themselves are interesting, often compelling. The depiction of light juxtaposed with darkness—in yin and yang fashion—is as powerful in its way as is Michelangelo’s fresco in the Sistine Chapel. Joseph, while dreaming, with his eyes open conveys a clarity of vision. The expression on Dinah’s face, after Hamor tells her that he loves her, seems just right, as does Abraham embracing Isaac at the end of Gen 22. Crumb depicts nighttime and dark moments well, such as Abraham asleep (Gen 15). The destruction of Sodom is classic.

Still, there is a certain sameness, a leveling. Crumb has clearly attempted to offer a vaguely Semitic profile to the cast of characters. One might have hoped for fewer beards and ragged hair on the men and a greater variety in the formful presentation of major female characters. Crumb captures well angry and upset people (e.g., Cain, Lamech, Esau, Dinah’s brothers); less strident characters do not receive their due. God, when angry, looks a bit like an angry Charlton Heston (so Gen 20). When the emotional purport of the story is different, that is, with a level of pathos (Gen 18) or angst (Gen 20), the portraiture does not capture the subtlety. In addition, one might have hoped for a lighter touch in certain stories. Genesis 24 breathes different air than those narratives that surround it. Crumb’s visual depiction does not convey that distinction. (It may be that the cartoon idiom presents limitations at this point.)

Most biblical scholars teach courses devoted to biblical literature and, in that regard, search for ways to help students probe and perceive that literature in creative ways. To ask students to read and discuss what they see in Crumb’s The Book of Genesis Illustrated creates a different sort of discussion than would have occurred had they used only standard commentaries or classic (e.g., Masaccio, Cranach) artistic interpretations. Crumb forces one to engage all the scenes in Genesis, not just those deemed important, whether for artistic interpretation or for critical study.

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