

R. Crumb's *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*:  
Biblical Narrative and the Impact of Illustration

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### Abstract

An artist known for his sexually charged, grotesque art joins with the sacred text of the Bible's *Genesis* in R. Crumb's *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*. An academic approach to the graphic novel recognizes the depth of meaning the art develops through the story. The intriguing facial expressions within Crumb's book call into question the motives of the active participants within the narrative of Noah and the infamous floating zoo. Deviant from a Christian view of the Bible, Crumb disputes the honor of Scripture and perpetuates his typical social satire though he uses a biblical text. Reflecting upon a traditional Christian understanding, Crumb's audience reflect upon rounded, emotional characters who balance between an experience of God's justice and His grace.

### R. Crumb's *Genesis*:

#### Understanding the Biblical Narrative and the Impact of Illustration

#### **Introduction**

Referencing the name *R. Crumb* unnerves and unsettles most readers familiar with his pieces, as his creativity often overtly reveals psychological sexual desires and erotica. Though Robert Crumb has artistically revolutionized the comic book industry, he “exploit[s] the power and flexibility of the cartoon mode” and morphs friendly caricatures and cartoons “abstract experimental pieces and trenchant social satire” (Witek 34). His images are brutally honest and revealing. Many comic aficionados consider Crumb “[a] resolutely counter-cultural cartoonist and writer” with “a jaundiced view of America, popular trends, sexual mores, and—frequently—himself” (*Contemporary Authors Online* n.pag.). Resulting from his crass history, Christians who know of Crumb are apprehensive at best when approaching his graphics. Crumb's typical product is in no way holy. Instead it is generally pornographic and socially satirical.<sup>1</sup> Yet his engagement of *Genesis* is masterful—“astonishingly intricate and beautifully illustrated” according to the product listing on his personal website (Crumb, “Books” n.pag.). His interaction with the Bible stands out significantly from the rest of his creations, retaining a clear storyline throughout without comical sexual innuendo or even Crumb's trademark cartoon mode style of comics.

Concerning specifically his connection with the book of Genesis, Crumb deviates from his traditional racy constructions and lends what he considers “a straight illustration job” (“Comments” n.pag.). *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* methodically expounds the words of the *Genesis* manuscript in visual form. Though most people who are familiar

with Crumb expect adult humor and grotesque imagery, they will be surprised when they read *Illustrated Genesis*.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, *Genesis* will appeal to a broader audience than typical graphic novels and comic books and will reach even the more traditional, religiously conservative Christians through the mainstream graphic novel industry's reception of it. Underground comics and their creators usually have a smaller, non-mainstream reception, but *Illustrated Genesis*, with its religious connections and anticipated controversial visuals, is more popular and accepted.

While the novel deserves an erudite response, Christian audiences—especially those who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible as the Word of God—have fallen short of any academic examination of this endeavor.<sup>3</sup> Many Christian scholars frame Crumb's contribution alongside his other products, automatically assuming the sexual graphics which permeate this piece are satirizing the Bible, and that Crumb's goal here is actually reproaching the Scripture. Several who have made statements depreciating his designs admit to not having seen them at all, and if they have, only small segments. Several Christian leaders who have critiqued *Illustrated Genesis* quickly condemn it as a belittling and cartooning of the Word of God. Albert Mohler very nearly regards Crumb's conjectures “a poisonous chronicle of the human religious imagination” (n.pag.) and exerts that the images ought to reflect their New Testament fulfillment in Christ's atonement for sin. Yet Genesis, apart from the New Testament, is not solely a salvation story. John Shore quotes Bob Leudke—a Christian comic book illustrator—in an article, where he remarks that the Christian rejection of Crumb's narration mirrors the struggle between creative expression and social expectation as he recalls, “the Christian marketplace and media love a good ‘come to Jesus story,’ and they just didn't get one

here” (“Anwer” n.pag.). If a form of artistic substitution refers to salvation without purposefully connecting the allusion to Christ, Christians may instantly evaluate the piece as ignoring Christ’s death and resurrection. However, this abrupt of an allusion is not mandated by any form of poetic license, as designed imitations often express an emotional connection, not statements of fact. Crumb uses such poetic freedoms in his craft, forming his own visual reenactments, which cannot be so easily discounted.

Secular groups often embrace Crumb’s contribution to sacred literature, scoffing at any Christian trepidation. A few emphasize the benefit of visuals to the scene, arguing Crumb’s models mirror the original testament’s actual wording and character development within Genesis alone, claiming “[Crumb’s art] builds upon [the Scripture], enhances it, brings it to life; it gives us a wonderfully engaging way to learn, remember, and appreciate one of the most dense, complex, and important books in the Bible” (Shore, “Monumental” n.pag.). In the postmodern age, most of American society respects unique lifestyles, regardless of their morality or godliness; however, some reference to standards ought to be upheld in order to have coexistent peace within the community. Even so, in literature, canonical judgments must be made that reflect values and sensitivity. This absolutely positive response to the illustrations, like a complete spurning of the images, ought to be tempered with prudence. An analysis of the images in Crumb’s work reveals deeper emotional and psychological meaning within his work. His use of close-ups and careful framing in his often crude drawings may suggest an intrinsic rejection of the original *Genesis*.

Although secular audiences approve of Crumb’s ostentatious presentations, a balanced acceptance of his talent is prudent as caution creates patience in reading.

Several scholars cautiously examine Crumb's craft as elegant yet imperfect. Robert Alter, who developed the translation Crumb chose to use in his graphic novel, notes the tradition of "interpreting Genesis," within the holy writings themselves like Esther, Daniel, the prophets, and the Midrash. Alter understands the difficulty in making the translation judgments Crumb makes within his images. However, Alter implies that as a non-religious person, Crumb has emotional limitations that diminish its power. He contends that Crumb's products often reduce the powerful mystery inherent in words alone. Granted, Old Testament passages of the Bible may be difficult to fathom, despite a clear translation or even a thorough reading of the narrative. Nonetheless, adding images to accentuate or enact the action in the original words may modify the audience's impression of the literature.

Though either completely rejecting or embracing Crumb's offering, biblical scholars ought to study *Illustrated Genesis* with contemplative scrutiny of his craft and the connotations it takes on with textual analysis in order to grasp the textual meaning and its connotations. A combined study of the word meaning and the illustration that accompanies may reveal an emotional duality in Crumb's perception that would remain unseen otherwise. A worldview that scrutinizes both the original statements and visual renderings is foundational, benefitting an individual's faith, while producing a judgment standard for Crumb's portrayal of the whole through his illustrations. Although many scholars may immediately accept Crumb's figures as postulations, a watchful consideration of the composition and the choices Crumb made in such an investigation are expedient, as well as a constant comprehension of God's laws and the importance of ambiguity within a statement. His work neglects the nature of God by elevating certain

attributes over others and minimizing the quality of grace.

### **Definition of Terms**

Theological scholarship and literary theory combine to unveil the emotional tension within Crumb's creative integration of his replicas and God's Word. The term *Christian* within this context does not insist the passage to directly address God or His principles; rather, it must utilize and support concepts that reflect principles that align with the commandments and Jesus' example of His own life and the influence of the Holy Spirit throughout the Old and New Testaments. When representing key literary devices such as motifs, themes, plot structures, or symbols likewise portrayed within scripture, a piece of writing can correlate with godly instruction, and be Christian, as long as it reflects pious principles in the same manner as the holy books do.

The perfect, sinless God of the Old and New Testaments establishes *morality*, an objective definition of good and evil, specified inside biblical doctrine only, which does not change with social rules. God commands certain actions to be done deliberately, such as loving God and honoring father and mother, and forbids other acts and feelings like murder and adultery.<sup>4</sup> When a personality within a myth does not adhere to God's laws completely, he or she is flawed and sinful. Sinning means failing to keep all of the commandments given by God, which leads to death (Gen. 2.16; Rom. 3.23). God's commands disparage severe and—seemingly—menial interactions with Himself and other interpersonal relationships. God demands to be the only deity honored, served, and glorified by man, first above all other gods, family, and possessions. He created man to rest in Him and remember what He has done, and to honor the authorities He has placed within government and families. God also commands interpersonal relationships to honor



Him as well, loving others as God loves His people. When acting in a selfless, loving way, people will not kill without a cause, commit adultery, steal, lust, or lie. Sin, within such a context, cannot remain unpunished forever; God would be acting against His holy nature if He allowed immorality to continue on earth without reciprocal discipline.

Punishment for sin is *justice* according to God's commands. In Genesis, God establishes the sacrificial system of a blood offering, written in the story of Adam and Eve, later affirmed in Noah's. Apart from the New Testament, God's mercy and grace are limited by the law and by God's reprobation of sinners. When communities reproach one another, they are breaking His commandments. God personally requires repentance for disobedience to His law, and a just payment for sin. C.S. Lewis explains God's judgment of sin: "The 'just' judge, then, is primarily he who rights a wrong in a civil case justly.... Christians cry to God for mercy instead of justice; [the Jews] cried to God for justice instead of injustice. The Divine Judge is the defender, the rescuer" (12). As developed in Crumb's representation of the Noah narration, God condemns sin and blesses those acting righteously, vindicating their goodness while condemning those who fall short. However, Crumb's account minimizes sin upon the earth during Noah's lifetime. Nevertheless, the biblical concept of sin, with its direct link to death, is severe.

The concept of *literature* is a conflicted topic many scholars attempt to explain, though rarely completely or perfectly. Intelligent men disagree on many levels of this argument, so much so that it may feel almost dangerous to delve into defining this word. Certain writings ought to be classified as better quality than others, for some communicates its own beauty and meaning in a way that is clearly more complex or elevated than others. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren profess that "[m]en ought to value

literature for being what it is; they ought to evaluate it in terms and in degrees of its literary value,” expecting a work of literature to have purity, organization, function, and yet to be free from propaganda (238-9). They celebrate aesthetics of the imagination within the work to be the chief stylistic locus, expecting a work of literature to “turn the attention away from what is contemplated or enjoyed to fix it upon the reactions, emotional vibrations, of the self, even the private, generalized self” (249). True literature has the capacity to entertain and delight, while also providing meaningful language. Figurative language, tone, rhythm, and meaning should all flow together in a brilliant expression of imagination (Brooks 15); these relationships, recognized, procure a literary audience with a more complex recognition of the world and society. Critical audiences ought to study these complexities of literature, not to ignore the author or the audience (25), but to transcend the constraints of finite life and time, and conceive the seemingly infinite nature of a mortal experience, and the place of people within their world. Through a literary study of Crumb's *Illustrated Genesis*, the elevated language of Genesis can be praised and revered; literary audiences can critically perceive both the beauty of the original Genesis, as well as the integration of the visual aids to the text.

### **Discussion of Structure**

A consideration of the framing of the character of God and the emotional connotations the illustrations enhance, studied alongside the structure of the narrative, should reflect a straightforward detailing of the story's design within an encompassing meta-narrative of the whole Scripture. The structure of the flood narrative accommodates a constructive investigation of Crumb's rendering of the volume and the underlying biblical meaning of God's judgment over the earth through a world-wide flood. A focus

on only the judgment of God displays a harshness of God in condemning the earth and ruthlessly killing multitudes. This examination does not clearly perceive the latter half of the tale, with its prominence of forgiveness. However, scrutinizing the structure of the narrative another way, with God's covenant with Noah and his sons as the locus of the narrative, God's primary attributes are mercy and love as He seeks to preserve justice and godliness on the earth. Like a father chastising his children, God cannot allow the rampantly sinful hedonism to continue. An analysis that balances any extremes of God's personality outputs a network that illuminates every segment of the story. The structure delineates how God creates and upholds His covenant of mercy with Noah and the rest of mankind. God is an emotional being just as humans experience complex feelings. Within the narrative of Noah, God is simultaneously the just Judge and Justifier; neither of these attributes dominates God's personality over the other.

The central thematic elements in the flood narrative are dual in nature, displaying God as full of wrath and justice, yet also loving and merciful; therefore, determining the purpose of God's judgment within the narrative is necessary to discerning God's disposition within this specific story. Bruce Waltke provides a structure of the flood narrative in his commentary on Genesis. He divides the flood from the formation of the covenant, and these into twelve frames that describe the various steps Noah took in the process of preserving the human race (122). Waltke's arrangement of the flood narrative highlights the ancient structural pattern of the chiasm—a story that is reflected upon itself in its subject, situation; one that builds a crisis and then actively undoes or revokes the previous action. In a chiasmic pattern, God warns Noah of the flood, then the floods ascend. The crux of the narrative is God remembering Noah and saving him from the

flood waters. The story reverses its previous actions as the floods descend, concluding with God speaking with Noah again, another warning, but in a positive manner as God forms a covenant promise with Noah, blessing him and those who obey God's laws. The chiasmic structure centers upon God's faithfulness to His covenantal promise with Noah, when God remembers Noah (125). Focusing on the chiasmic structure of this narrative emphasizes the importance of God's involvement with Noah's personal life. God cares for Noah emotionally and physically. The chiasm highlights God's enduring covenant, celebrating God's protection of Noah rather than the judgment of sin.

The background and exposition of the volume are interwoven throughout the beginning of the narrative, showing men stealing women from their homes out of the lust of their bodies and the pageant of mass murder being brutally carried out by both men and women, insinuating that all races had become "perpetually evil." Criticizing Crumb's image for this scene, Robert Alter fears that one image alone provides only a rudimentary sketch of the great wickedness it describes. He explains, "The image concretizes, and thereby constrains, our imagination" (n.pag.), proposing that an image may diminish, rather than enhance the Scripture. The background and exposition are combined in this narrative, unveiling both the state of the world at the time—background—and God's response to the rampant sin—exposition. The in-set of the close-up Crumb illustrated for this scene connects the audience with God psychologically. By framing the wickedness of these people in the foreground of the larger image, Crumb has created a world in which sin is utterly rampant. God is not distant from this world, but recognizes how blatantly evil sin has become on earth. However, God's response to the sin is one of surprised anger, not one of mourning over man's decision to turn away from

God's commands. The wording of the original tells of God having remorse for what mankind has done, that He regrets forming humanity with such vile capabilities, yet Crumb's visual suggests that God's regret manifests in anger, not sorrow. This section continues, and includes God's statement of condemnation upon mankind along with His favor of Noah, focusing on God's wrath, while also including God's relationship with Noah, elevating His mercy and grace by contrasting God's wrath with His love. Including God's judgment in the exposition advertises God's justice, yet tempers God's wrath as He simultaneously finds favor with Noah. In the illustrations with both God and Noah in the frame, God still has a severe and solemn expression on His face, never of a positive emotional attribute. Even when acting in a loving paternal role, God is frowning and has dark, deeply-set eyes. The beginning of the narrative closes with a reflection on the background, restating the corruption of the world, and then transitions to God's conversation and warning to Noah of the impending flood.

God reinforces His covenantal promise with mankind by sparing Noah from the catastrophic flood, providing a way of escape for mankind to be saved from death. Continuing with the narrative structure, the crisis arises in a positive form as God calls Noah separate from the rest of men, and promises to form a covenant with Noah and his generations. God warns Noah of the coming judgment and provides a way of escape for Noah and his family. In the illustrations, Noah is visibly shocked by God's statements, even as God promises to establish His covenant with Noah and his children. Noah obeys God, and builds the ark as God commanded. In the illustrations, as Noah learns of God's plan to flood the earth, his face is lit with surprise and confusion, not exactly the face that reflects Noah's personal relationship with God, claiming "Noah walked with God" (Gen.

6.9). Noah's expressions are characterized by surprise: his eyes are wide with shock in nearly every frame. Of the thirty frames including a depiction of Noah's facial expression, only five of them do not have eyes widened enough to see the complete cornea circle. This consistency of disbelieving countenance repeats the notion that Noah is unintelligent or senile as God tries to communicate His plan with the man. Perhaps Noah would be shocked by God's statement of judgment for the sin in the world; however, a man who walks with God would more than likely be aware of the justice God demands and the importance of sanctification of humanity and all of creation. Through God's provision, life on earth continues while wickedness is destroyed. God unmask both His justice in punishing evil and His grace in providing a way of escape for Noah and his family and the animals as well.

Personal biases against God's holy nature may emerge subtly throughout Crumb's art, which ought to be confronted with a scripturally sound recognition of the temperament of God. Crumb's visual character development is incredibly flat, as he limits the individuals performing within his frames to expressing singular emotions repetitiously instead of creating well-rounded, more emotively complex actors. God unveils two of His emotional attributes here in the verses preceding the flood, both His mercy and justice simultaneously, not only wrath as Crumb's model of God captures. The flood was a necessary, just punishment for sin; God is not a rash judge toward mankind. God cannot permit the wickedness of man, sin, to remain unpunished. His nature requires justice to be served for the sinner and the righteous. However, He does not judge promiscuously, but faithfully according to His promises. His quality of righteous judgment cannot allow sin to rampantly disobey His laws on the earth; simultaneously,

when a righteous person is living holy in the midst of wickedness, the righteous must be blessed beyond what those who are living in sin are receiving from God. Noah receives the grace of God as a direct result of his righteousness and obedience to God. He is not thoughtlessly drifting without purpose as the forms most often propose. Crumb's use of close-ups of God and Noah's faces prioritizes their emotional and mental status, their psychological reasoning behind their actions and reactions. The significant difference between the formation and shading of the eyes of these two characters draws the two apart from each other. The contrast between God's narrow, darkened eyes compared to Noah's wide, bright eyes dramatizes the psychological distance between them. They are mentally distinguished from one another, one harsh and unyielding, the other confused and wavering. God, because of His nature, blesses Noah with His grace, and punishes those who are sinning. As Arthur Pink details in his commentary, *Gleanings in Genesis*, the wrath of God was not impatient or unmerciful as it may originally seem or as is conveyed through Crumb's images. As Pink affirms, the world was completely saturated with sin, and if left unpunished by God, would lead to even greater depravity and wickedness (80). R. Crumb's depiction of sin emphasizes the mass slaughtering of the populace, which is certainly a sin that God punished; however, other sections imply that the world was more corrupt than a few individuals acting wickedly. Yet in the midst of this perverted culture, "Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord" (Gen. 6.8). Noah communes with God, establishing "an oasis in the midst of the dreary desert, an oasis which the grace of God had prepared, and on which His eyes dwelt" (Pink 81). This doctrinal interpretation of Noah's established relationship with God celebrates Noah in his righteous living and treasured status as beloved of God, commending Noah. God is an

advocate for Noah, not acquiescing to Noah's desire to continue living. God sees Noah as valuable and worthy.

The rising action of the story details Noah building the ark and the gathering of the animals into it. God affirms His covenant with Noah by guiding him in building the ark and gathering the animals and the necessary food for Noah and the animals. Though the graphics are less than one-to-one for each verse, Crumb's illustration exhibits Noah's interaction with the animals in a much more realistic approach than the traditional children's story. Noah recognizes the power the animals have on the ark; he seems almost intimidated by the pair of gorillas that march onto the boat. He is framed tightly inside the frame which is overflowing with large beasts. The pane suggests a world overrun with unwanted animals. Noah's facial expression is similar to when God first told him of the coming flood: near hysteria. His raised eyebrows and open mouth add to his wide eyes, all pointing to Noah's dumbfounded astonishment. Despite the negatively connoted images relating Noah with the animals, Noah's care is a refuge and haven for the animals.<sup>5</sup> Although several of the pictures emulate his trepidation in living with the animals, Noah is not a fearful prison guard who nervously watches for animal rampages. He is the deliverer, rescuing the animals from certain death, and presiding over them. Likewise, God is the paternal keeper who promises safety for Noah and the animals, providing a way for them to continue life on the earth.

The climax of the story begins when God shuts Noah and his family into the ark, and includes the world-wide flood that erases all other life on the planet. God closes the door of the ark, and the possibility for salvation is revoked from all other life on the earth. The images depicting the climax of the story depict God literally closing the door of the



ark behind Noah, his family, and the animals inside the ark. The water covers the whole earth, including every mountain. One specific, graphic image exposes the death the flood caused: the left populace and animals float on the surface of the water, one man caught in a death grip by another's hands. This powerful depiction of the flood reminds Crumb's audience of the massive amount of death that the flood caused, sparing no one, man, woman, or animal. As the man caught by another is the focus of the image, his expression of shock significantly heightens the intensity of this moment. Interestingly, rather than the man's face being at the center of the image, the two men's hands fill the center of the frame; the grasping hands stretch out for a secure horizon, but find no salvation. This visual is tragic, revealing with clarity the lament of death across the world at this time. Hopeless, all these people left outside of the ark died miserably.

Although Crumb's art emphasizes the anguish felt by those afflicted by God's judgment, justice for the wicked is a source of joy throughout much of the Old Testament. Though Crumb's illustrations reflect the more savage sins like rape and murder, sin includes every action that misplaces the glory due to God. The goodness and righteousness of God's judgment is primarily mentioned in the psalms of David. C.S. Lewis discusses the imprecatory prayers of David, emphasizing the grace God bestows, but also the beauty of His judgment in obtaining justice for the unjustly oppressed. David often records his desire for God to judge the wicked; Lewis frames this desire within a Jewish, rather than Christian, point-of-view in order to link these violent petitions to their context, therefore providing a clear understanding of David's request of God. According to Lewis, justice is the supplication of souls throughout the Old Testament. Lewis juxtaposes Christianity with Judaism in order to reveal diversity of the faiths in the desire

for acquittal. He delineates: “the Christian pictures the [court] case to be tried as a criminal case with himself in the dock; the Jew pictures it as a civil case with himself as the plaintiff. The one hopes for acquittal, or rather for pardon; the other hopes for a resounding triumph with heavy damages” (10). Lewis explains the different viewpoints of imprecatory prayers seeking the Lord’s vengeance against wicked hordes or unrighteous actions. Though in a contemporary Western worldview, David’s imprecatory prayers seem excessively violent or evil, a Jewish worldview identify these prayers as holy and good, for the speaker earnestly desires God’s righteousness to thrive above the injustice that hinder the righteous from prospering. Crumb seems to frame *Genesis* with a mostly American mindset, using sins that are seen as worse, or more serious than minor sins. His exhibition displays sins worthy of severe punishment—murder and human sacrificing—but ignores the idolatry and other sins seen as less important in contemporary society. Regardless, the historical connections that Lewis makes reflect the devotion to justice on the earth. If every person’s thoughts were continually evil, as the Word says, much more than these two murders were occurring.

The narrative shifts to the falling action as the flood recedes. Interestingly, the largest sections of this narrative fall at the close; Crumb created more frames in the latter half of the story than the beginning, detailing the exit from the ark through the sending out of the raven and the dove. The image of the exodus from the ark is an obviously important frame, integral to the narrative. The animals spill out of the ark, not neatly two by two like a children’s story, but as a furious mass, full of movement throughout the scene. As this frame fills over half the page, it is clearly a focus of Crumb’s. This dramatic exodus could be historical, or the animals may have left the ark in a calm order.

This display suggests that the passengers anxiously escaped the animals' path, as they scramble to a high point away from the animals. Crumb's poetic license in this instance neutrally impacts the clarity of the remarks. The actual wording ignores the activity of the animals leaving the ark, only testifying of their exodus. The relationship between men and beasts is precarious throughout the drawings, but may be misleading from the reality.

The denouement, or the conclusion of the flood narrative, spectates on Noah's sacrifice to God and the symbols of the fulfillment of God's covenant involving the preservation of the human race. God forgives the sin of mankind and promises not to "curse the ground on man's account," but furthers His laws toward man, requiring that "whoever spills the blood of man, by man shall HIS blood be spilled, for in the image of GOD He made mankind!" (Crumb, *Genesis* n.p.), reflecting upon the state of the world before the flood and the reason God judged sin with the flood. Again, God's expression is fierce and riled at the mention of sin. God is framed completely separated from Noah and his sons, with the gutter between the two frames accentuating the gulf between man and God. God's eyes are shaded all around, but starkly peering out at the men, scorning sin in a relentless correction of wrong. Noah and his sons have disparate variation in their emotional response to God's chastising within the covenant. Noah is forefront in the frame, seeming to shield his sons from a direct reception of God's admonition. Though he is first to receive God's words, he appears tired and puzzled, far less shocked or depressed than others within the same frame.

The establishment of the covenant and the symbol of the rainbow complete the story, concluding the narrative. The covenant is vital to the entire story, and provides insight into God's interaction with mankind in a melancholic manner that mourns the

consequences of sin, yet celebrates the grace of God in sparing life and providing a way to be unified with God once again after an individual has committed sin. Through animal sacrifice, God's wrath against sin is appeased, but He expects the sinner to repent and sin no more, like Jesus later commanded those whom He forgave in the New Testament (John 8.11). The sacrifice Noah offers as a sin offering echoes the original ordered by God after Adam and Eve sinned, alluded to in Genesis 3.21, venerated in Abel's sacrifice (Gen. 4.4), and specified within the law (Lev. 4.35), for "without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins" (Heb. 9.22). For sins to be forgiven, God demands a blood sacrifice—like Noah offers—completed in Christ's death on the cross. Crumb seems to cheapen the importance of sacrifice in his commentary respecting sacrifice in Genesis, conflating biblical atonement with pagan animal sacrifices as well. As one article references, Crumb links "the smell of the meat" with God's decision to never flood the earth again (Salkin n.pag.), yet the author fails to comprehend the importance of the blood from the sacrifice as a fulfillment of God's requisition of death for sins. Severing the animal sacrifice from its meaningful place in the process of atonement, the creation of unity and peace between a sinful person and the sinless God, absolutely lessens the significance of the act. Noah's story becomes more consequential and substantial in connection to the greater meta-narrative of the entire Bible, as the complete atonement of the individual is fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ in the New Testament.

### **Allusions to Christ**

In Crumb's *Illustrated Genesis*, Noah functions as tool that God uses to preserve all animal life, but the illustrations that Crumb created often allude to a stupidity or

confusion belonging to Noah rather than patient and sacrificial; he is as a holy archetype, though an imperfect one. As Noah functions as a type of Christ, his actions in building the ark and the performance of a blood sacrifice are more clearly understood. He is the man whom God chooses to represent the race in a rebirth of the world; for Christians, Noah reflects the future antitype of Jesus Christ within the New Testament, the culmination of salvation for all life on earth. As Romans 5.12 condemns all people—“Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned”—Christ (and Noah as a type of Christ) redeems mankind. Noah symbolizes the atonement that the future antitype would bring: salvation that would culminate with Christ's payment for sins. Like Christ, Noah took on the whole labor of atonement for the future of mankind: enduring suffering, living uprightly, and committing an offering to the Lord (Pink 98-102). Later, God forms an eternal covenant with Noah that included all the future offspring. Like Noah, the future antitype, Jesus Christ “that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,” (Heb. 13.20) completed the salvation of all inhabitants of Earth. As Arthur Pink analyzes, the grace shown in the preservation of Noah is the same security Christians experience through Christ's death and resurrection. Though all Earth's inhabitants are utterly depraved and devastated without God's intervention, mankind continually abandons God's protection, “[t]hus, at this early period in human history God was revealing the great principle by which redemption should afterwards be effected by His Son, namely that of representation, the one acting for the many, the many receiving blessings through the one” (112). Christ and Noah both took on the punishment for sins committed by others, not themselves, and stood as a holy offering before the Lord in their

actions. All nations in Adam, including those alive in Noah's time and throughout history "had forfeited the 'blessing' of God and his position as lord of creation, but grace restores and reinstates him" (111). Christ's atonement for the multitudes fulfils the same act that Noah completed, paying the penalty for every sin rather than escaping judgment Himself in the act of salvation. Many verses (primarily Rom. 6.23) allude to the payment stipulated by God for sin—death. The people alive in Noah's time had to die in order to pay for their sins. Through Christ, however, the payment for sin has already been transferred. The grace God manifest in Noah as in Christ is completely undeserved but absolutely needed for mortals to be once again at peace with the Creator. How beautiful a story to display the shattered, splintered pieces of reality, to yet include a loving God who redeems it all, providing His own payment, His own sacrifice for someone else, though He could destroy it all, and justly.

Though Noah is completely man and not part of a deity, studying the similarities between Noah and Christ is valuable as God's grace and mercy for all humanity is foreshadowed within the story of Noah. Crumb's renderings lack any allusions or symbolic images that echo Noah's symbolism of Christ, disconnecting each of these stories from one another, portraying only the actual script provided by the Genesis manuscripts, completely lacking any synthesis or analysis of personality or significance covenantal promises and their recipients have throughout all generations. Crumb's storytelling segments each narrative in a way that separates communities, not connects them. The connections between other narratives reveal an underlying meta-narrative that celebrates the possibility for salvation from the evil that exists on this world. In the flood narrative, the sin nature is still present in Noah's nature though he was a godly man;

therefore, of necessity he performs a blood sacrifice for sin when he exits the ark. As one writer expressed, the characters of Crumb's graphics display "human failure... to have a physical self is to sin" (O'Donnell 26), emphasizing the connection between the curse of Adam and the need for salvation from sin. Noah's story transcends its historical formation, relating the severity of acting against a law of love and kindness. A God-given morality of selfless goodness charges individuals to live righteously, which obeys all of Western civilization's expectations, and presses even farther to being a model citizen and neighbor. Obeying the orders of God denies the selfish emotions in human nature, reversing the wickedness of natural man and transforming a violent culture into one of peace.

Additionally, Crumb's dexterity may come short in his perception of violence in Noah's time. The author only provides two visuals of sins happening during Noah's lifetime, both violent massacres. These sins are condemned by God certainly, yet sin was more rampant during this time. Henry Morris compiles the sins other passages define as the sins being committed during Noah's life time, which includes much more than Crumb's illustration determines, mainly: uniformitarianism, rejection of doctrine, disregard for God, blasphemy, hedonism, gluttony, violence, materialism, technological advances, corruption in society, homosexuality, illicit sex, promiscuity, Satanism, and other general depravity (174-5), providing chapter and verse references for each of these sins. If the artist had included other sins, especially the more mundane sins of self-gratification, the judgment of God poured out on all people would seem much more deserved. God does not punish the righteous with the wicked (Gen. 18.25; Pro. 11.21), but an American understanding of wickedness is insubstantial and weakened through the

emphasis of tolerance within society. God is not a tolerant judge; He recognizes the suffering that sin brings to lives, and spurns those who create such pain for others. Indicating that the entire world is being destroyed for the sake of the few rulers who are killers, Crumb cheapens the grace that God showers upon Noah and the earth. Arthur Pink imparts valuable insight on the importance of God's grace given to Noah: "It was the grace of God and not the graces of Noah which preserved him from a watery grave.... it is here this precious word 'grace' is seen for the first time in God's Word! It was when the sin of the creature had reached its climax that Grace was exercised and displayed... it is nothing within man which calls forth the bestowment of Divine favors" (82), emphasizing both the inception of grace within the meta-narrative, and the blessing of it originating within God rather than with an origin of man's repentance. God seeks to make a way for the nations to remain on earth as He preserves Noah and his family rather than creating a new generational line. God continues the original Adamic lineage, simultaneously keeping His first covenantal promise to Adam and Eve and their offspring that He will save the world from the sin that began with the original two humans of the creation myth the flood myth is a continuation of. Noah is a manifestation of this promise, functioning as the one man who preserved the nations. Crumb neglects this Adamic covenant that God made, and nearly severs any ties between the generations apart from simplistic illustrations that list lineages rather than simulate the covenantal connections. He functions within this section as the one man who preserved all people.

### **Problems for Christian Readers**

Although this major production of Crumb is based on the Holy Word, much of his other handiwork is far from godly, forcing a Christian audience to wonder whether any of



his material should be evaluated by an audience that is taught to avoid the appearance of evil and is given clear laws regarding how to live. Some Christians may unknowingly use *Illustrated Genesis* without any speculation of the author or the subtle implications some images make over other possibilities that the words may allow through certain ambiguities of language. Crumb himself questioned the use of his illustrations by Christians. As he describes, fundamentalists “being receptive [toward *Illustrated Genesis*] as a tool for evangelizing [seems contradictory] because, for one thing, there are panels... showing people having sex” (Crumb, Interview n.pag.). A novel produced by a man so comfortable with pornographic images and rampant wickedness may skew his ideas in a direction that departs from the original purpose of the Bible. Several artisan choices Crumb makes for *Genesis* define certain ambiguities, erasing the broad spectrum of the original words, but also providing additional approaches that eliminate inherent vagueness. Cleanth Brooks, a New Critical theorist broaches the connection between an author and his subject in his book *Community, Religion, and Literature*, recognizing that the writer’s intent has consequences though the narrative may have its own direction, or “an inner drive toward its own proper fulfillment.... These intentions that have evidential value for interpreting the work are those that are actually achieved in the work itself” (6). The author may have an idealized goal for his content, some amount of which will be present within his writing—or in the case of Crumb, within the composition. Here is where a recognition of Christian principles becomes essential for a study of Crumb’s effect within a Christian worldview. The illustrations presented by Crumb may have psychological connections to himself; therefore, a figuring of the text that leans toward fully understanding of the scenes in Genesis allows Christian and academics of all

backgrounds to remember the importance of thinking critically of all literature. Crumb stated in an interview with Megan Sweas in *U.S. Catholic*, that the verses became absurd to him as he was illustrating. Recognizing his place in the “agnostic, hippy-era” may afford a foundation for Christians to think critically about his interaction with Genesis. Simply accepting an announcement as truth or containing truth removes the internalization of the subject matter and of learning a plethora of valuable truths or applications of the statement, while also recognizing the inherent beauty and aesthetic qualities of the presentation.

Apart from a Christian worldview, the illustrations and commentary that Crumb provides emphasize a matriarchal lineage over the patriarchal lineage. The focus on matriarchy devalues the covenant that God makes with Noah, Abraham, and their descendants. Crumb presents a matriarchal line which celebrates a pagan religion, arguing that the wives of the traditionally accepted patriarchal line are the high priestesses of this religion.<sup>6</sup> He uses several situations the patriarchs find themselves in along with the barrenness of the wives as proofs for this suggestion. Throughout the appendix written by R. Crumb, the author advocates a matriarchal lineage over the traditionally understood patriarchy of Abraham's descendants, focusing on the scholarship of Savina Tubal, which emphasizes the role of high priestess and “the ‘sacred marriage’ in which a powerful man who wanted to be given a position of leadership had to be ‘invited’ into the bedchamber of the high priestess, ‘the guardian of the grain stores,’ and he had to meet her approval” (Crumb, “Comments” n.pag.). Other scholars have deliberated the potential for a matriarchy led by Sarah as well (Frye 69; O'Donnell 26), advancing a falling away from the traditional, patriarchal expressions of the scripture

to an inclination toward the paganism that was rampant during this time. Crumb agrees with Tubal's research, advocating that Sarah is the first in this priestess role, Rebekah following her, and notes that the matriarchy begins to fail as both Leah and Rachel struggle against one another in order to attain the role of high priestess over the other. According to a Christian worldview, patriarchy is a major key for the entire Word as a whole unit; God's covenantal promises always link to the male representative of the family, and addresses wives and children through that male authority. Crumb's emphasis on matriarchy undermines the covenant God perpetually makes with mankind, as He reinforces the same promise made in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve—that a Savior would be born to undo the curse rooted in sin. This Messianic covenantal promise is the main point of Christian doctrine, and is repeated throughout the Old and New Testaments.<sup>7</sup> God promises to give a perfect sacrifice to atone for all sins, and this Son would come through the patriarchal line of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David.

The integration of this narrative with illustrations can be dangerous, as visuals can free the meaning of the written language to exposit covalent meanings of the account's possibilities, often in an indiscrete manner. As the authority himself describes, making all the decisions regarding textual analysis and choosing one meaning to convey over others is dangerous. In an interview with Neal Conan, Crumb explains his choice to keep the entirety of the original wording. He forced himself to keep every word of the original wording because, as he states: "if you start leaving stuff out, then you're playing God.... I just didn't want to do that. I wanted to show... what's actually written there and illustrate it in the best possible way.... I had to do a lot of background reading to [know] what the

text was really saying because often the text was very vague, very terse,... open to interpretation” (n.pag.). Crumb took every attempt to remain faithful to the *Genesis* of the Old Testament, yet may still slant in a direction Crumb is intending to convey through the spiritual expressions. Part of the author's intent or personal belief may be portrayed through the author's illustrations of the innuendo.

An unqualified acceptance of *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* is incredibly dangerous and unwise, for the secular implications placed upon the Bible in the hands of those who do not believe its ineffability will not regard the words as holy and reverent. The production and continuation of the Word alone deserves respect from its audience, an honor that Crumb may have overlooked in his interaction with the text. Reading his product from a biblical worldview helps to adapt his interpretations into manageable reflections on the subtle changes his additions make upon the manuscript. Clayton Whitt, writing for a humanist journal, claims that Crumb's attempted consistency between the biblical terminology and his illustrations negatively reflect the original document of *Genesis*. He speculates that “Crumb's plain honesty and straightforward depiction of what he finds in Genesis reflects most poorly on Christianity, and it makes the reader rightly wonder why so many assert that such a text is material to the moral development of contemporary people” (42). Ignoring the standard of reverence traditional provided for the Bible does allow a more derisive response to the stories, as Whitt proudly performs. Yet Crumb's pictures solidify even the most grotesque situations within the book, fully describing both the beauty of grace and the depravity of sin simultaneously. His artistic freedom with the text alters the original perception of the writings, liberating the audience just as the illustrator has been freed. Although Christian scholars have deemed Crumb's

illustrations beneficial for recognizing and enjoying the repetition of idioms as well as highlighting subtleties that are otherwise “passed over” (Byassee 11), the illustrations add a concrete permanence to the style that quickens the pace of the story narrative, while heightening the connections between the story and the reality of the audience. As Gary Anderson explains, the illustrations erase some of the inherent ambiguity of the diction alone, as Crumb many times throughout his graphic novel makes judgments regarding said ambiguities in order to create specific illustrations for the vocabulary, resolving or defining meaning rather than leave the rhetoric unclear or mysterious (n.pag.). Christians are able to recognize the beauty of how “God works through it all and enters into the thick of it to save” (Byassee 11), yet this message is conveyed because of the inerrancy of Scripture, despite Crumb’s rendering. The book of Genesis has been meditated for thousands of years without illustrations, and his rendition has only accompanied *Genesis* for a few years. Critically distinguishing the whole graphic novel and the interaction between visual image and ancient writ reinforces God’s sovereignty in creation and celebrates the continual action of God on society’s behalf.

### **Conclusion**

Though the original *Genesis* celebrates God’s judgment of sin alongside His incomprehensible grace given to mankind, the authorial interaction with the biblical literature dulls the beautiful connection between God and Noah through Crumb’s opinion. Crumb’s literature reflects the “narrative potency and raw beauty” of the original writings, yet lacks “a sense of the sacred. What *Genesis* demonstrates in dramatic terms are beliefs in an orderly universe and the godlike nature of man. Crumb, a fearless anarchist and proud cynic, clearly believes in other things, and to hold those beliefs... is

his prerogative. Crumb, brilliantly, shows us the man in God, but not the God in man” (Hajdu 17). Crumb’s abasement of God’s constitution as a scornful, harsh, and angry old man ignores the holiness that is primary in God’s nature. God cannot bear to interact with unpunished sin, and must remain set apart from all sin. God is not simply “the oldest man... with the longest beard,” as Crumb described his characterization of God (Crumb, Interview n.pag.), but is holy and pure from man, requiring just payment for man’s disobedience. Along with much of contemporary literature, the *Illustrated Genesis* circumvents spiritual righteousness and goodness. Flannery O’Connor likewise judges the distance from holiness within contemporary literature: “In twentieth-century fiction it increasingly happens that a meaningless, absurd world impinges upon the sacred consciousness of author or character; author and character seldom go out to explore and penetrate a world in which the sacred is reflected” (161). Crumb’s imagination circumvents the importance of God’s spiritual holiness in relation to Noah or the rest of humanity, but elevates God’s wrath and punishment for sin. Crumb’s depiction of God debases God rather than lift Him up, lacking in God’s glorification by man.

R. Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis Illustrated* brings life to the sometimes mundane and familiar with insightful visuals that mirror the original language of the first book of the Bible. Although the additions in this book can be helpful to the audience, true literary scholars should read the work recognizing that the artwork is at some point separated from the original text. Christians ought to recall that Crumb’s work is fallible and not inspired by God, though according to their faith, the words are. Likewise, the manifestation of emotion and the fragmented way Crumb creates the narrative structure detracts from the original word. Through the deterioration of the character of Noah within

the flood narrative, as well as the simplification of God's emotional expressions, Crumb additionally fragments the meta-narrative that spans the entirety of God's Word.

## Notes

1. *Fritz the Cat*, *Weirdo*, *Mr. Natural*, *Dirty Laundry* and others. See [rcrumb.com](http://rcrumb.com) and [crumbproducts.com](http://crumbproducts.com) for a detailed product listing.
2. Although the full title of Crumb's work is *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*, he and other scholars familiar with his products use the shortened title *Illustrated Genesis* interchangeably.
3. Mike Judge of the *Christian Institute*, quoted in Ben Leach's article in *The Telegraph*; Jason Byassee from *The Christian Century*; several other Christian leaders are anonymously quoted in John Shore's articles
4. Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5 detail more complete listings of the law.
5. Noah's role in saving the animals is significantly different from the interpretation suggested in the 2014 film *Noah* starring Russell Crowe, which presents man as the poison of the natural world and animals completely innocent of any evil.
6. Feminist roles and criticism are significantly lacking in graphic novel literature. Jennifer Stuller's study of Lois Lane reveals a lack of feminist conscience in comic books. She created a test involving inter-female dialogue in comic book literature which would be useful in a further study of Crumb's *Genesis*.
7. Messianic prophecies appear throughout the Bible: Gen. 12, 17, 21, 22, 49; Ex. 12; Num. 24; Deut. 18; 2 Sam. 7; Ps. 2, 8, 16, 22, 24, 34, 35, 41, 45, 68, 69, 109, 110; Is. 6, 7, 11, 40, 53, 61, 78; Jer. 31; Dan. 2; Hos. 11; Mic. 5; Zech. 9, 11, 12; Mal. 4; Matt. 1, 2, 3, 4, 11, 21, 22, 26, 27, 28; Mark 11, 14, 15, 16; Luke 1, 2, 3, 22, 23, 24; John 1, 7, 15, 19, 20; Acts 2, 3; Rom. 1, 5, 9; Gal. 4; Heb. 1, 5, 7.



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