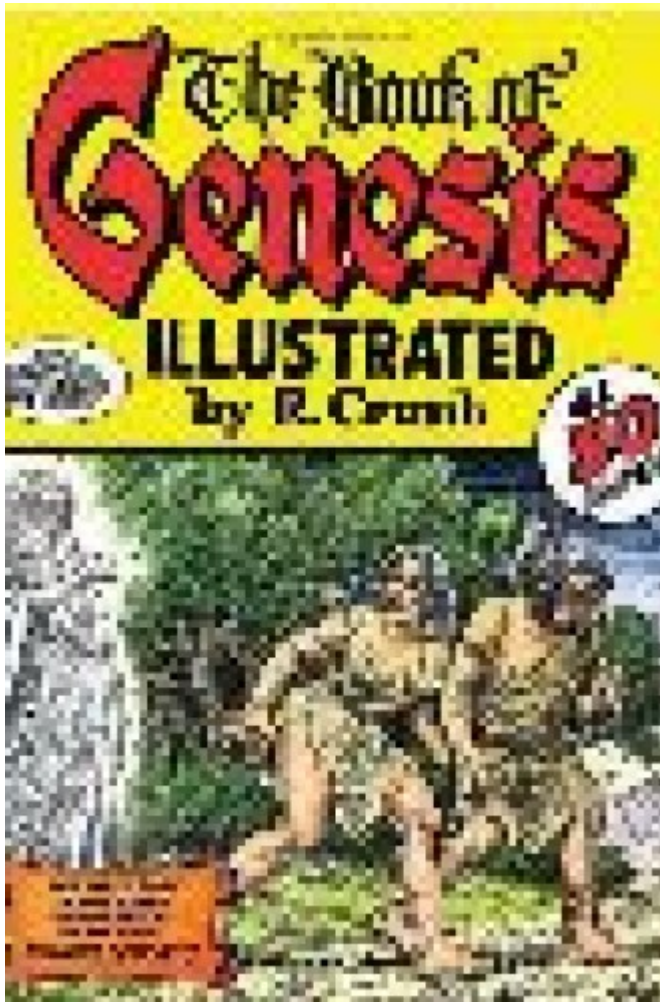


R-rated scripture

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

In Review



The Book of Genesis Illustrated

R. Crumb

Norton

Occasionally I've tried to hide what I am reading, lest someone catch me perusing a work that they think is too salacious for a minister to read. I've never done that

while reading the Bible. But then I've never before read a book of the Bible illustrated by R. Crumb, godfather of the graphic novel.

In turning his talent to producing *The Book of Genesis Illustrated*, Robert Crumb—usually credited as R. Crumb since he made a name for himself in underground newspapers of the 1960s—has found more sex and gore than even he can represent on the page, though he makes a game effort. He has tried to include every word of the text unaltered, using mostly Robert Alter's *The Five Books of Moses* with a smattering of the King James Version ("including the begots," as the back cover proclaims). There is an irony in this fidelity to the text, since Crumb emphatically does not believe that the Bible is the word of God. In fact, "the idea that people for a couple thousand years have taken this [book] so seriously seems completely insane and crazy, totally nuts. But the human race is crazy if nothing else." Believers might be forgiven for asking who is crazy—the one who lives by a text or the one who spends four years lovingly rendering a text he claims is bonkers.

All the same, Crumb has produced illustrations that will make your eyes bulge in the manner of a Crumb character. When Adam and Eve rest on the seventh day, Crumb shows them intertwined like postcoital lovers. "Naked and unashamed," they are portrayed wrestling with wide-eyed grins and a halo-like aura. The fig leaves they later sew to hide their newly discovered nakedness are so amateurish you squirm with Adam and Eve in embarrassment. When Eve hears her sentence to pain in childbirth, she weeps like one already in labor. The outlandish expressions that are part of the genre of the comic book suit the biblical text well.

Other sorts of outlandishness are not so helpful. The characters' sexuality is vividly displayed. Of course, Crumb did not invent the "he went and lay with" stuff—but he does embellish things. Crumb's Eve would make Jennifer Lopez look poorly endowed. Even the nonagenarian Sarah looks voluptuous. Every man depicted in the sexual act is as hairy as Esau.

With all the funhouse hype here, the depictions are occasionally quite conventional. God is shown as a really, really old guy, with a beard down to his ankles. The angelic figures on Jacob's ladder are just multiple representations of the same wizened old dude. The interpretations Crumb does make are satisfying. He portrays Noah as so wide-eyed that he looks like someone receiving signals from outer space. When Abraham bargains with God over the fate of Sodom, he looks like a passive-aggressive merchant, plaintively throwing his hands in the air, closing his eyes and

shrugging his shoulders to get his way. As Judah receives old Jacob's blessing, he goes from sullen to shocked so quickly that a tear appropriately graces his cheek.

The real thrill in this volume for me was simply rereading Genesis again with visual reinforcement. The details Crumb shows are striking, and most of the time he is simply illustrating things that are mentioned in the text but often passed over. Somehow the illustrations keep you from skipping over the repetitions, like the repeated instances of a patriarch erecting an altar and worshiping. The point, scripture seems to be saying, is that we should do the same and worship. To accompany the long genealogies, Crumb diligently depicts one bearded, earringed, turbaned figure after another. The point is clear: God is fulfilling his promise to multiply Israel, regardless of what Israel does. As God appears again and again to declare his promise of descendants and a blessing, the reader thinks: haven't we already done that scene? But God never tires of making that promise.

Sensationalizing the sex and violence of the Bible's first book is a banally modern move. Even so, Crumb's work manages to convey a message: God works through it all and enters into the thick of it to save us.