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Review Essay

Zanne Domoney-Lyttle: *The Bible and Comics: Women, Power and Representation in Graphic Narratives*. Scriptural Traces: Critical Perspectives on the Reception and Influence of the Bible. London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark (2024)

Assaf Gamzou and Ken Koltun-Fromm, eds.: *Comics and Sacred Texts: Reimagining Religion and Graphic Narratives*. Oxford, MS: University Press of Mississippi (2018)

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It is inspiring to see that the small yet unique field of study that examines the reception of sacred texts in comics and graphic narratives continues to flourish and present us with thoroughly engaging and enriching, high quality volumes, such as the two reviewed here. In recent decades, the "visual turn" in literature and culture more generally has progressively seen an exponential growth in the production of comics and graphic novels that move beyond the pervasive superhero genre and deal with a far broader range of material including religious topics and the sacred texts of many religions.

It has long been the case that, despite the immense popularity of these multimodal media, the academy, certainly religious and biblical studies, has largely maintained an elitist position, apart from a few creative outliers who recognized the cultural value and significance of these products and pioneered research in this area. Both of these volumes acknowledge the unfortunate prejudice that still prevails in certain quarters and

continues to snobbishly look down its nose at these often immensely creative word-image artefacts as somehow "lowbrow" in cultural terms, failing entirely to perceive the profundity of meaning being generated here in these remediations of the sacred texts.

"Remediation" is a key term used throughout her volume by biblical scholar Zanne Domoney-Lyttle. A term seemingly coined by J. David Bolter and Richard A. Grusin (and the title of their book), it refers to "the appropriation of the content of one medium into another, usually in terms of new media (e.g. digital photography) retelling something originally found in an old medium (e.g. a painting)" (8). What we are examining here is the remediation of the ancient biblical texts into the new media format of the contemporary comic book (Domoney-Lyttle, 8). "Visible remediation refers to pieces of an old medium becoming part of, or inserted into, a new medium so that it remains visible even though it now belongs to a new adaptation" (8).

Over the course of the first two chapters, Domoney-Lyttle makes the case for comics as a medium that now requires a far greater degree of serious engagement from reception history biblical scholars. One topical argument well-presented throughout is that this form of illustrated biblical text opens "new interpretative spaces for minorities communities to find representation and expression in the pages of the Bible" and thereby "demonstrates the unique position of subcultural products and their subsequent ability to counter or subvert authoritative, oft-exclusionary texts" (3).

Domoney-Lyttle focuses her study on a number of key works including the quintessential *Book of Genesis, Illustrated by R. Crumb* (2009), which, as expected receives attention in the second volume considered here too. Crumb's *Genesis* is a key text against which many other Bible comics are compared and contrasted, initially at least, in relation to different categories of interest and concern, be they fidelity to the text, design and sequential coherence, graphic style, characterization and so forth, largely due to its popularity and renown in the sphere. Good-quality reproductions of whole pages of the comics in focus are featured throughout both volumes.

Domoney-Lyttle has done a service to those interested in researching comic book Bibles by clearly laying out the issues at stake in the reception of the ancient biblical text into these remediated graphic forms. Far beyond the initial and predictable questions of "translation" across media, that prickly semiotic and hermeneutical nugget of how "accurate" a visual rendition of a verbal text can ever be, especially when that

verbal text is the Bible, is examined comprehensively. Accuracy is deeply entwined with authority and the author has delved deep into these questions and offered interesting perspectives and ideas to be further considered and debated.

Following this, Domoney-Lyttle's persuasive monograph features four case studies, each of which deals with a particular biblical narrative featuring one or many significant female characters and compares their treatment in two different comic Bibles. The first considers the matriarch Sarah, and the Egyptian slave Hagar, through the aforementioned work of R. Crumb in his *Genesis Illustrated* (2009), and in the *Illustrated Genesis in Hebrew* (2018), by Timothy McNinch and Keith Neely. This chapter illustrates how cultural retellings can confront dominant patriarchal agendas by leveraging the unique form and function of biblical comics. By emphasizing the narrative power of images and placing illustrations in dialogue with the text they depict, readers gain a deeper understanding of how text-image narratives both engage with and challenge original biblical stories, reflecting the ancient words of the Bible while addressing contemporary cultural issues.

The second case study examines manga Bibles through the two notable examples of Siku's *The Manga Bible: From Genesis to Revelation* (2007) and OnePeace Books' *The Bible: A Japanese Manga Rendition* (2012). This chapter provides a visual analysis of Genesis 39:1–20 (the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife), highlighting how these works reframe the narrative through manga's distinct visual style while resonating with traditional biblical interpretations. The manga style and format, relying on dramatic moments, heightened emotion, and favouring action over detail, intensifies Potiphar's wife as a one-dimensional seductress and again tends to reinforce Joseph as the story's hero.

The third case study explores what the author refers to as "playful" comic book Bibles, using an intersectional approach of creativity, humour, and playfulness. Focusing on *The Comic Torah* by Aaron Freeman and Sharon Rosenzweig (2010) and Elbe Spurling's *The Brick Bible: A New Spin on the Old Testament* (2011), this chapter examines their depictions of Rebekah in Genesis 25:21–26. Through vibrant and humorous text-image renderings, these works challenge traditional interpretations, showing that comic adaptations can honoir the biblical text's essence while expanding the story's inclusivity and questioning restrictive or exclusionary readings.

The final case study examines satirical or subversive comic book Bibles, focusing on Eve and the Fall in Genesis 3. Works like Donald Rooum's

depictions of Eve in *Outrageous Tales from the Old Testament* intentionally satirize biblical narratives, using humour and critique to challenge authoritative readings, and thereby making it more accessible to secular audiences. This chapter explores how comic book Bibles invite secular and non-religious communities to engage with the Bible as a literary work, while noting that satire can also reinforce the Bible's authority, depending on the reader's perspective.

The case studies in this book highlight key areas of interest: how adherence to the original text influences comic book adaptations, how maintaining the authority of sacred scripture is often essential to sanctioning cultural Bibles, and how playful or subversive approaches to biblical texts can strip these adaptations of authority, ultimately invalidating biblical narratives when presented in comic book form.

I am very partial to comic book Bibles, however, some of the author's arguments I did find perhaps overgenerously uncritical towards the comics. The statement that "it is less likely that the creators of comic book Bibles will fail to engage with difficult stories" (134), for example, seems contradictory when set against earlier acknowledgements that the comic medium on the whole relishes deliberately depicting violence and sexual violence against women. This is nit-picking obviously as, on the whole, this is an original and valuable contribution to the field and highlights with great clarity the core issues at stake when considering comic book Bibles as receptions of the biblical text.

The second contribution I consider here is an edited volume that originates out of initial conversations that happened at a conference held at Princeton University in April 2015: *Frames: Jewish Culture and the Comic Book*, which in turn sparked a further symposium on *Sacred Texts and Comics* at Haverford College in May 2016, hosted by Ken Koltun-Fromm, one of the volume's editors. Co-editor Assaf Gamzou curated an exhibition to accompany the conference panels and papers at this event. The four-part structure of this volume follows these thematic areas, namely 1: Seeing the Sacred in Comics; 2: Reimagining Sacred Texts through Comics; 3: Transfigured Comic Selves, Monsters, and the Body; and 4: The Everyday Sacred in Comics. Other than part 3 which has three chapters, the other parts all have four chapters making up fifteen strikingly diverse and high-quality chapters in total from different contributors across the volume. The editors' introduction itself makes a thorough case for the value of comics and graphic narratives as valuable avenues for critical encounter with sacred stories and retellings of venerated narratives. Indeed, they position this collection as providing a range of perspectives in rethinking

and relearning how we see the sacred and thereby helping us "to recalibrate our seeing [of] the sacred" and in turn teaching us to see the sacred anew (xii–xiii). This collection of essays, featuring notable scholars in the field, positions itself as an advance on the earlier pioneering work of Grant Morrison, Karline McLain, A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, Samantha Baskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman – and some of these scholars contribute chapters here too. Indeed, the editors proudly claim: "We have altogether abandoned the once apologetic stance toward comic books and instead critically engage comics as vital and reflective texts about religious experience" (xiv).

The chapters in part 1 suggest it is possible to find sacred revelations beyond traditional boundaries. The sacred emerges in unexpected places and media, challenging us to encounter divine presence in new forms. For anyone, like me, with a mild obsession with typography and the semiotic qualities of letterforms, the first two essays are an absolute pleasure, examining as they do how Arabic and Hebrew scripts function as sacred media through graphic narratives. Craig Thompson's best-selling masterpiece *Habibi* is the focus of the first chapter (Backus and Koltun-Fromm) and devotes itself to opening up the exquisite drawings of the Arabic letters and verbal text and revealing how they are intricately involved in telling the story visually, as well as verbally, most especially in relation to issues of embodiment and identity. The second chapter (Handelman) is a beautiful meditation on the thoroughly distinct Hebrew letterforms, their lines, curves, points and negative spaces; how letters contain one another and create a dance of meaning-making on the page, having profound narrative qualities embedded in their very shape.

The third and fourth essays focus on the sacred potential within language itself. Tina Hochman's essay considers the well-known *The Rabbi's Cat*, and *Tina's Mouth: An Existential Diary*. These two depictions – God as a word and the kiss as revelation – reveal the sacred's resistance to direct visual representation. The divine is found within the dynamic interaction of image and text, where sacredness unfolds through a blend of visual expectation, intellectual projection, and literal description. A. David Lewis names this as "fictoscriptures" – the intradiegetic sacred text that animates the fictional world of the comic (57). Here he reverses the conventional question and asks how the religious ideas implicit in the comics influence the fate and belief of the readers and receivers.

Together, these four chapters argue for recognizing the sacred in script, language, imagery, and fiction, suggesting that the sacred takes on a visual form – a shape and presence that can be as revealing in a Hebrew letter

as in fictional narratives. By viewing the sacred as a graphic narrative, we can expand our understanding of how it appears in rituals, literature, and sacred texts.

Part 2 leans into the idea that comics revision the sacred in significant ways not dissimilar to but beyond the older form of the verbal Jewish midrash or Muslim hadith. The editors write:

> comics move us to *revision* the sacred within those traditional texts. This should be read as both a reimagining and a revisioning. In other words, the biblical text looks different to us now that we see it in comic form. This visual appropriation of the sacred is really a thoughtful reworking of sacred scripture. Where a painting might present a pictorial representation of sacred moments or religious characters, a comic weds image to text in order to rework the narrative itself. (75)

In the first chapter of this section, Karline McLain discusses the reception of the Hindu epic Ramayana, and within that the role of the female character of Sita in the comic book form. Offering an overview of the dynamic and multifocal tradition of telling and retelling the heroic narrative of Ramayana scripture, she considers how contemporary female authors and artists are using the medium of the comic book to challenge Rama's idealism and, controversially, resituate Sita within that, thereby "raising critical questions about religious and cultural definitions of the sacred" (96).

Elizabeth Rae Coody in her clever essay suggests that Mark's gospel is particularly well suited to visual storytelling as a plot-driven narrative: "it works well with imagining comics as a form and method of exegesis" (99). She applies the dynamism of the inherent suspension evident in comics – particularly the lower right-hand corner and subsequent page turn reveal as the reader turns over the page to find out what happened next – to the ending of Mark. She writes: "the revelation is not on the verso (page), but in the gutter. What revelation there is lives only in the reader" (110). The following chapters in this section, by Ranen Omer-Sherman and Scott S. Elliott respectively, look at the powerful retelling of the David and Goliath narrative through the sensitive work of Tom Gauld's *Goliath,* and the representation of sex in *The Action Bible* and *Genesis Illustrated.*

Part 3 of this volume deals with embodiment and liminality through the comic medium's visual realization of liminal characters who occupy "the edges of cultural norms and expectations" (151). Grotesque physiognomy, whether overly muscular strongman superhero, cyborg, or monster, explore issues of identity and the limits of human possibility in one way

or another – and thereby, the limits of the sacred. The section opens with an excellent essay from Samantha Langsdale in which she explores the character of Jean Grey, the portrayal of her sexuality and lack of agency, and the inherent misogyny underlying the Dark Phoenix Saga. The working of the medieval women mystics, and their contemporary commentators, into this discussion gives it an added layer of depth that makes it a particularly fascinating theological study.

In chapter 10 Jeffrey Richey brings us to Japan and an anthropological perspective on the contemporary spiritual crisis underway in Japanese culture, which he suggests is characterized by loneliness, isolation, and disconnectedness. Taking the ancient Daoist vocation of the *onmyoji*, "a Chinese-derived term that literally means 'master of yin and yang' ... a binary whole, expressive of the universe at rest and at play, receptive and active, hidden and revealed" (175), he considers how selected manga and *anime* visualize this character and how this role has been adopted by female readers especially. The motifs tied to *onmyoji* – such as duality, complementarity, transgressive hybridity, and the transformation of the foreign into the indigenous – intersect with themes seen in young Japanese women who cosplay as these characters, including dangerous power, intentional anachronism, and constructed tradition. This convergence allows ancient traditions to resonate afresh with modern audiences.

Samantha Baskind brings us the comic *Yossel: April. 19, 1943,* created by Joe Kubert, the title referencing the best-known Jewish revolt during the Holocaust, when a small band of Jewish partisans in the Warsaw Ghetto rose up against the Nazis. The style of the comic is sketchy black and white pencil drawings—almost as if a drawn diary by the protagonist. As Baskind notes, "body language throughout *Yossel* communicates the high anxiety and tension of the story ... in Kubert's oversized expressionistic rendering of the rabbi's anguish" (199). This powerful chapter brings these drawings into dialogue with masterpieces of European art-history whilst exploring the existential questions of faith in God arising out of the Holocaust and now being posed by this comic.

Part 4 of the volume turns to the everyday sacred:

> a holy presence in the mundane, common, and often overlooked features of familiar existence ... these comics arrive to inform that new vision. It is a kind of educational wisdom, a form of visual learning, in which the pedestrian and local can become windows to revelational encounter. (213)

Ofra Amihay opens this section with a chapter looking at Paul Madonna's musings on the telling minutiae of snippets of conversation and location

in his comic strip *All over Coffee* in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. The focus on everyday life and fleeting conversations frames *All Over Coffee* as a secular work, with minimal references to religion, God, or the supernatural. Yet its exploration of the human soul and existential questions, especially within the comic genre, makes it a deeply reflective piece on popular culture and the "everyday sacred". Through text and beautiful, delicately rendered, local cityscapes, Madonna's snapshots provide meditations on urban life in the 21st century.

Chapter 13 turns to the natural environment and Shiamin Kwa's essay on the prize-winning creator Kevin Huizenga's 1998 comic *Walkin',* in which he brings the reader, on a visual walk of sorts through the pages of this comic as he offers this meditation through the simple rituals that accompany the narrator's walk in a new neighbourhood, on a late summer Sunday morning. Mindful walking has long been recognized as a spiritual practice and here attention and appraisal mark the purposefulness with which this walker perceives the world around him.

Having been exposed to so many varied styles of drawing and narrating, we are in the later pages of this volume brought to the more conventional superhero comic in Joshua Plencer's essay about the Marvel comic *Fallen Son*. In this post-9/11 series, Captain America dies. Moreover, not as a hero, but "rather ingloriously under criminal suspicion and subterfuge" (249). Employing the work of psychologists, anthropologists and scholars of Affect Theory, Plencer embarks on a thoroughly interdisciplinary exploration of how the inescapable experiences of grief and bereavement are treated in this comic series.

Finally, in the closing chapter of this book, Leonard V. Kaplan presents a tribute to "the reputed godfather of graphic sequential art in the United States", Will Eisner, a towering influential force of this medium whose legacy is seen in the later work of so many other comic book artists, writers, and creators. Eisner was, moreover, a creator who legitimized the world of comic books as a medium through which one could pose questions of faith and visually draw out the "everyday sacred".

This is probably one of the richest edited volumes I have come across and it must be commended for its thematic coherence and high standard of quality essays throughout. Each chapter offers something entirely fresh from the previous, both in terms of the case studies presented and in the diversity of approaches, perspectives and discussions of the comic book/s in focus, as well as the vast range of comic books dealing with the sacred surveyed here – whether it be gender in Asian manga iterations of a Daoist

genre, the dramatic ending of Mark's gospel, or existential questions of faith placed on the lips of modern-day Jobs after the Shoah.

These two volumes demonstrate the growing depth and maturity of this exciting field that examines sacred texts within comics and graphic narratives. Both *The Bible and Comics* and *Comics and Sacred Texts* underscore the unique ability of the comic medium to bridge historical reverence with contemporary critique, transforming ancient religious texts into vibrant, accessible, and often provocative forms. By exploring everything from cultural retellings to satire, from manga to superhero comics, these books reveal how comics can offer fresh interpretations of sacred texts that invite diverse audiences into dialogues about faith, identity, and the human experience. This field of study not only enhances our understanding of contemporary religious iconography and narrative but also affirms comics as a legitimate and insightful medium for engaging with the sacred.