

*Not your Relief Society president's Bible*

# ... AND CRUMB SAID, “LET THERE BE GENESIS”

By Dallas Robbins

**S**OMEONE WAS BOUND TO DO IT EVENTUALLY. And R. Crumb is the one. He, the best known of iconoclast comic artists, tackled one of the most revered books in Western culture: the book of Genesis. During a four-year almost-monastic effort, Crumb illustrated all fifty chapters of Genesis—all of them—from God's creation of the heavens to Joseph's death and burial in Egypt. He says,

I, 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*.<sup>1</sup>

The cover, which evokes the color and style of the Classics Illustrated books from Crumb's childhood, proclaims, “The First Book of the Bible Graphically Depicted! Nothing Left Out!” and “Adult Supervision Suggested for Minors.”

As with any R. Crumb adventure, adult supervision goes without saying. But for those who know only the Sunday School version of Genesis, or who simply suffer from cultural amnesia, Crumb's approach will indeed be a revelation.

With his singular artistic vision, Crumb, godfather of the “underground comix” movement during the late 60s and 70s, has inspired literally thousands of comic artists. Featuring such characters as Mr. Natural, Devil Girl, Felix the Cat, and Joe Blow, his comic stories didn't simply push the boundaries of good taste; they ignored them. Many of



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his stories are filled with pornographic perversities, earthy obsessions, racial stereotypes, social satire, and just plain indecent fun where censorship is the only offense. With such a long history of unscrupulous sequential art, Crumb's turn to Genesis may seem odd. But in the introduction, Crumb shares what attracted him to the first book of Moses:

I, ironically, do not believe the Bible is “the word of God.” I believe it is the words of men. It is, nonetheless, a powerful text with layers of meaning that reach deep into our collective consciousness, our historical consciousness, if you will. It seems indeed to be an inspired work, but I believe that its power derives from its having been a collective endeavor that evolved and condensed over many generations.<sup>2</sup>

**AND HE SAW THAT HE HAD NOT WON OUT AGAINST HIM AND HE TOUCHED HIS HIP-SOCKET AND JACOB'S HIP-SOCKET WAS WRENCHED AS HE WRESTLED WITH HIM.**



Images: R. Crumb—The Book of Genesis

## Chapter 1



One of Crumb's primary sources on Genesis, Robert Alter, provides additional reasons for the irreligious to take the book seriously,

Nowhere else in ancient literature have the quirki-ness and unpredictability of individual characters and the frictions and tensions of family life—sibling rivalry, the jealousy of co-wives, the extravagance of parental favoritism—been registered with such subtlety and insight.<sup>3</sup>

The same statement could be applied to Crumb's own oeuvre. His unpredictable, fractious stories and characters seem to have laid a uniquely appropriate groundwork for approaching the utter strangeness and startling quirkiness of Genesis. His gritty, earthy style reminds the reader that Genesis is a work of literature not bound by the constraints of theology or good manners.

Crumb's rendering itself is inspiring, with his detailed, almost obsessive pen marks and the unflinching portrayals of moments when one is tempted to look away. The art sometimes has a woodcut quality, utilizing stark contrasts and

subtle shades, mirroring the emotional complexity of the stories in the harsh landscape of ancient Palestine. The text, often taken directly from Genesis, could have slowed the story with its ancient diction, but the panels are perfectly matched to it, creating flow, tension, and more than a few surprising and delightful moments.

One such delight is the anthropomorphic portrayal of Yahweh and his messengers, who walk into scenes from stage right or descend from the sky without warning. This image of an embodied God is already familiar to Mormons, but seeing it played out in context gives added meaning to the relationships among God and those he created in his image.

I was often moved by the expressions on familiar characters in familiar situations—for example, the resignation and reticence in Abraham's eyes as he holds a sacrificial knife above his son, crying to God, "Here I am!"

Another moment that took me by surprise is Jacob's wrestling the angel until the break of dawn. The earthiness of the panels is comical but reminded me that our mortal frame, when in competition with immortal desires, shouldn't be afraid to break a little sweat and roll around in the dirt.

As for love and sex, there are poignant moments, as seen in Isaac and Rebekah's sharing a bed together in joyous intimacy with the accompanying text, "Isaac found solace after the death of his mother." But there are also visceral moments of sexual confusion—as when Lot's daughters bed him, believing that they are the last of humankind, hoping to "keep alive seed from our father." The art evokes sadness while at the same time respecting the women's desperate rationale.

As with any biblical re-telling, the temptation to "fill in the blanks" is always in the background, and one may wonder if Crumb took too many liberties. "In a few places I ventured to do a little interpretation of my own, if I thought the words could be made clearer," he admits, "but I refrained from indulging too often in such 'creativity,' and sometimes let it stand in its convoluted vagueness rather than monkey around."<sup>4</sup> While his images may surprise many readers, his written interpretation is kept safely in an appendix, offering his own Midrashic take on several of the stories.

But whether he "monkeyed around" too much or too little, his illustration of the ancient text is a challenging, but rewarding, introduction to Genesis or Crumb or both. In this latest creation, Crumb is at the height of his comic powers, showing that sequential art is not just for superheroes or indie poseurs. Crumb reminds us that as an art form, comics have the ability to contain the intimate and the epic, giving us renewed insight into familiar stories.

## NOTES

1. R. Crumb, *The Book of Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), vii.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), xii.
4. Crumb, *The Book of Genesis*, vii.