

Graphic Assault

Reading Sexual Assault and Rape Narratives in Biblical Comics

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Abstract

The Bible is a foundational document for Western culture, and is both beloved *and* dangerous, containing stories of hope, love, and justice as well as narratives of abuse, violence, and sexual assault. Stories from the Bible continue to be retold in art, literature, film, theatre, and, more recently, comic books. Comic book Bibles are increasing in popularity yet remain undervalued and understudied, especially their retellings of “texts of terror” which include themes of rape, sexual assault, and gendered violence. In this article, I read the stories of Gen. 16:1-6 (the rape of Hagar by Abraham) and Genesis 34 (the rape of Dinah by Shechem) in two biblical comics, R. Crumb’s *Genesis* (2009) and Brendan Powell Smith’s *The Brick Bible* (2011), using the methodological approach of visual criticism. I demonstrate how each creator reinforces androcentric readings of biblical material and fails to take an intersectional approach to their interpretation of the biblical material, resulting in the further silencing of victims of sexual assault and the elevation of their attackers. I then assess the potential impact these graphic retellings may have on their readers, in terms of reinforcing androcentric and hegemonic ideologies in the reader’s own world.

Key Words

Comic books; biblical reception; visual criticism; gender violence; rape; Dinah; Hagar; Genesis

Introduction

The Bible is both a beloved and a dangerous document.¹ It has the power to offer hope and comfort to victims in pain, yet it contains words that can inflict harm and support dangerous ideologies. It contains colourful characters that can make the reader laugh, and scenes of devastation that can make the reader weep. As a living document, the Bible is both upheld and opposed by individuals who wrestle with it on a personal level, as well as by religious and secular communities who may interpret its stories in multiple and divergent ways.

The Bible also continues to be an important source of inspiration for cultural creators around the world. Throughout history and up to the present day, fine art, poems, literature, sculpture, theatre, and epic films have drawn upon scriptural

¹ This article is an expanded version of a blog post I wrote for *The Shiloh Project* website. See Domoney-Lyttle (2018).

characters, stories, leitmotifs, and plot twists, often representing themes considered universal to the human condition, such as love, redemption, betrayal, and family breakdown. More recently, biblical narratives have become sources of storytelling for the broad and diverse world of comic books.² It is now quite normal to enter a bookshop or comic book store and see, for example, Siku's *Manga Bible* (2007), R. Crumb's *The Book of Genesis, Illustrated by R. Crumb* (2009), and Brendan Powell Smith's *The Brick Bible: A New Spin on the Old Testament* (2011) sitting on the shelves. Likewise, there are plenty of comic books that are not direct remediations of biblical material, but which borrow heavily from scripture, such as Sean Murphy's *Punk Rock Jesus* (2013) and Jason Aaron and r. m. Guéra's *The Goddamned* (2017), an adaptation of the Cain and Abel story (Genesis 4) that also draws on the tradition of Noah and his ark (Genesis 6–9).

Arguably, one of the reasons that comic book adaptations of the Bible are increasingly popular is that publishers have an abundance of readily available material and stories that are already embedded in the general knowledge and consciousness of Western communities. By turning to and referencing scripture, they also have a ready-made audience in both religious and secular circles who are likely to buy such products because of their familiarity with the biblical stories.

Such remediations, which make use of both text and image in their mode of storytelling, bring a new set of questions regarding biblical interpretation to the forefront of biblical studies and biblical reception history (Exum and Nutu 2009, 1-3). For example, how do text–image versions of the Bible affect our reading and understanding of the “original” written text? What kind of “space” do such adaptations create and inhabit? Should they be classified as literature or art? Do they belong in museums, churches, libraries, universities, or even all of these? Who has the right to re-interpret sacred texts anyway, and what (if any) responsibility should comics creators assume in their role of biblical interpreter? Finally, how do biblical comic book creators decide to portray their interpretations, and what impact does this have on the reader's reception of those biblical stories?

Like any form of literary or visual adaptation, creators of biblical comic books must select which stories to tell, which characters to include, and most importantly, who and what to omit. Whose voice is elevated in such remediations, and whose is silenced? Whose perspective is represented, and whose is erased? Such decisions impact how readers respond to and understand biblical characters with regard to those characters' social positions, their purpose in the narrative, and even their physical appearance. As J. Cheryl Exum and Ela Nutu note, more often than not, visual representations shape our reading of a biblical text, and it is difficult to disentangle ourselves from these impressions (2009, 2-4). In this article, I therefore consider these questions, focusing on the ways that biblical scenes of rape and sexual

² I prefer the term “comic book” to “graphic novel,” even though these are often used interchangeably. Within the field of comic book studies, there has been some debate over the use of the term “graphic novel” which to some, suggests a hierarchy within comics which should not exist. The use of the word “novel” is particularly problematic, potentially differentiating between long-form and short-form comic books with the implication that long-form comic books belong to a higher stratum than their short-form relations. I do not think this is the case and while it is correct to observe there are many different genres and styles within the world of comic books, I am uncomfortable with the suggestion that some comic books are higher in intellectual (and often monetary) value than others because of their length and/or complexity. For more on this, see La Cour (2016).

assault are presented in biblical comics. Since biblical comics are increasing in popularity, it is important to assess how difficult stories such as the rapes of Hagar (Gen. 16:1-6) and Dinah (Genesis 34) are presented in a format which relies on interplay between text and image. Reading comics is different to reading text or image alone for many reasons, but significant here is that the act of reading a comic relies on deciphering a code of symbols which exist within *both* text and image. The presence of text and image alongside each other accelerate the reader's understanding of the story while also shaping their reception of that story both visually and textually (Domoney-Lyttle 2018, 57-59).³

I have chosen to read the stories of Gen. 16:1-6 (the implicit rape of Hagar by Abraham) and Genesis 34 (the explicit rape of Dinah by Shechem) in two biblical comic books: Crumb's *The Book of Genesis* (2009) and Powell Smith's *The Brick Bible* (2011) using the method of visual criticism. By visual criticism, I refer to J. Cheryl Exum's (2019) discussions that the reader/viewer is central to the process of making meaning from, or interpreting artistic retellings of, the Bible. As a method, visual criticism is embedded in visual exegesis (Berdini 1997; see also Gunn 2007, 207-209), which focuses on the role of the image's creator in making meaning. However, where visual exegesis is about "the processes at work when an artist paints a biblical scene and ... what is visualized is not the text but a reading of the text" (O'Kane 2005, 340), visual criticism is more concerned with the interpretive point which is created when a visual retelling is read next to the biblical text it retells. Such an interpretive point relies on the reader/viewer inserting themselves into the visualization/text to make meaning. Visual criticism thus considers the artist's role as active reader of the Bible *as well as* the role of the reader in making meaning from the artist's biblical retellings (O'Kane 2005, 339). It shifts "the focus away from artist and their historical circumstances to the work of art in and of itself" (Exum 2019, 7). Because I am concerned with how the creator of the comic book reinforces androcentric perspectives of women's bodies and characters, visual criticism lets me focus on the interaction of visualization, text, and reader to highlight the ways in which meaning can be made without an over-reliance on the creator.

The two comic books I have chosen were published around the same time, and each was produced for a Western, English-speaking audience, though neither was created from a faith perspective. Instead, these comic book Bibles were designed to "illuminate the original text" (Crumb 2009, Introduction) and to "present the Bible's content in a new, engaging and fun way" (Powell Smith 2011, Introduction). Importantly, both creators argue that they remain faithful to the original texts of the Bible, meaning that, as far as possible, they do not alter the texts.⁴ Yet by analysing depictions of biblical rape/sexual assault in each comic book through a theoretical framework of visual criticism, I demonstrate how each creator reinforces androcentric readings of biblical material and fails to take an intersectional approach to their interpretation of the biblical material. This, I argue, results in the further silencing of victims of sexual assault and the elevation of their attackers. I then assess

³ For further discussion of the methodologies employed to interpret comic books, see McCloud (1993); Miller (2007); Groensteen (2007).

⁴ This is true of Crumb's efforts, wherein he "faithfully reproduced every word of the original text," but Powell Smith has been more liberal with where they redact and edit texts in the interest of space and clarity. However, the commonalities between each creator's approach to their projects allows me to compare their works against each other in a meaningful and helpful way.

the potential impact these graphic retellings may have on their readers, in terms of reinforcing rape myths and hegemonic ideologies in the readers' own world. Because visual-critical approaches rely on an interaction between visualization, scripture, and reader, they demonstrate clearly how the reception of each comic book character is potentially shaped by the reader, as well as the impact this has for readers who encounter texts of terror in comic book format.

Implicit and Explicit Rape in Genesis

In Genesis 34, we are told that Shechem rapes Dinah: "When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force" (Gen. 34: 2).⁵ Though there has been some debate over the verb *'innâ* and its possible meanings in this verse,⁶ many biblical scholars accept that Dinah was raped and that the translation of the word as "defiled" (KJV) or "humbled" (JPS, 1917 edition) alludes to rape.⁷

The choice of language used by Dinah's father Jacob and her brothers Simeon and Levi also suggests she was assaulted by Shechem in some way: Jacob speaks of his daughter being "defiled" by her encounter with the Canaanite prince (Gen. 34:5).⁸ Her brothers interpret the event as an "outrage" that has been committed against Israel, "for such a thing ought not to be done" (v. 7). Simeon and Levi go onto deceive Shechem and his father Hamor, "because [Shechem] had defiled their sister" (v. 13) and they ultimately kill all the men in the city of Shechem. Dinah's other brothers partake in the act of avenging Shechem's rape by plundering the city and taking all the flocks, herds, wealth, children, and women that remained (v. 27). When Jacob questions their motives and insinuates that their actions have endangered his life and household, Simeon and Levi reply, "Should our sister be treated like a whore?" (v. 31).

Studying the language in this narrative, it is clear that Shechem raped Dinah, and that her family considered her sexually unclean because her attacker had defiled her. Aside from the language used to describe the rape event, Dinah's story may be considered an act of rape for two additional reasons: first, her own lineage, and second, the elevated status of her attacker. Dinah is borne of Jacob and Leah (Gen. 30:21), and though her female gender means she cannot inherit the covenantal blessings bestowed upon her father and passed onto her brothers, she still comes from the family that traces its ancestry to Abraham, Noah, and Adam.⁹ Particularly, her connection to the patriarchal triumvirate of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob means that she is a descendant of the covenantal promise made between God and her great-grandfather Abraham (Genesis 12, 15, 17). Dinah may not be from a royal family per se, but she is from a family central to the Genesis narrative, and in that sense, is as important as any royalty who feature in this text.

⁵ Unless otherwise stated, all English translations of biblical verses are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).

⁶ See, for example Shemesh (2007), who discusses scholarship that reads Dinah's narrative as a seduction rather than a rape; cf. Bechtel (1994); Gruber (1999); Frymer-Kensky (1998).

⁷ See, for example Scholz (2010); Blyth (2010); Brenner (2005).

⁸ The Hebrew verb *tm'* used here is in the Piel form, and means, "to violate a woman or virgin." The same form appears in Gen. 34:13, 27.

⁹ For more on genealogical inheritance of covenantal promises which pass only from fathers to sons, see Delaney (1998, esp. 140-43).

Dinah's attacker *is* royalty: he is the son of Hamor, ruler and prince of the land, and likely used to a life of wealth, luxury, and privilege. This last point is reflected in the biblical text when he tells his father, "Get me this girl to be my wife" (Gen. 34:4) after falling in love with Dinah (v. 3). Both Dinah and Shechem are privileged in their status, enjoying the luxuries of property, servants, and possessions that go with the position of coming from either God's chosen family or a Canaanite royal family. I argue, then, that when Dinah is raped, her attack is avenged by her brothers because it is seen as an attack on their property, an assault on their possessions and their wealth, and an offensive act against their status as descendants of the covenant (cf. v. 7). We can neither prove nor disprove that they seek revenge out of love or a duty of care for their sister because the text does not support such a reading, but we can infer that Dinah is avenged because a powerful Canaanite prince "lay with" her without her family's consent, thereby threatening the status of their patriarchal covenant. It is the status of both Dinah and Shechem, then, that explicitly affirms Dinah's portrayal as a victim of rape.

Hagar's story in Gen. 16:1-6 is not explicitly identified as rape, but by reading the story from the same feminist-literary perspectives as Dinah's narrative, as well as using an intersectional approach, we can suggest that Hagar should also be understood as a victim of rape. Many scholars have already argued this point, including for example, Exum (2016), Susanne Scholz (2010), Phyllis Trible (2006), and Renita Weems (1998). In the text of Gen. 16:1-6, Hagar is given to Abram "as a wife" (v. 3) by Sarai in order that Sarai and Abram might "obtain children by her" (v. 2). Abram listens to the voice of his wife, and "he went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (v. 4). Though Hagar is the object of Sarai and Abram's discussion and plans, she does not appear to get the chance to speak or express her feelings about these events. Her existence as Sarai's slave limits her from resisting, objecting, or voicing her consent (or lack thereof). Even if she were to object or resist, her station as slave-girl likely means her resistance would not even have been acknowledged.

Interestingly, there is the briefest of moments when Hagar's status is raised potentially to be on a par with that of Sarai. In Gen. 16:3 when Hagar is given to Abram, the noun used to describe her is *'iššâ* ("wife"), the same noun given to Sarai, Abram's primary-wife (Gen. 11:29). This is the only time Hagar is referred to as wife; her status as slave is swiftly restored in Gen. 16:5 when she is again described as a *šiphâ* or "slave-girl,"¹⁰ and is doubly enforced when Sarai complains that Hagar looked with contempt upon her, a move which indicates Hagar is, at the least, of a lower social order than Sarai. Hagar is not even given the same status as Abram's third sexual partner, Keturah,¹¹ both because Hagar is a slave and because, I argue, she is not chosen by Abram but rather is unceremoniously foisted upon him by Sarai in a bid to procure children. Furthermore, Hagar is an Egyptian woman, a foreigner who is the property of a Hebrew family, which further disempowers her vis-à-vis her relationship with Abram and Sarai.

¹⁰ The noun *šiphâ* is also translated as "maid," "maidservant," or "handmaid," but I prefer to use "slave-girl" because, as Robert Alter suggests, "the tradition of rendering this 'maid' or 'handmaiden' imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story" (1996, 67).

¹¹ After the death of Sarah, Abraham marries Keturah (Gen. 25:1) who is also identified as Abraham's *'iššâ*. However, Keturah is later referred to as a *pilegēs* ("concubine" or "paramour") in 1 Chron. 1:32, a demotion from the position of primary wife that she occupies in Genesis.

Hagar's lowly status silences her from resisting or rejecting Abram as a sexual partner. She is forced into a sexual encounter with Abram without her consent, and is forced into falling pregnant with his child—again without her consent. As a slave, her body does not belong to her, but to Sarai, who gives it as an object to Abram to abuse, impregnate, and, ultimately, get rid of (Genesis 21). Reading Hagar's story with an intersectional approach—considering her gender, socio-economic status, and ethnicity—it is irrefutable that Hagar is a victim of rape in Gen. 16:1-6.

Thus, Hagar and Dinah are *both* victims of rape in the Genesis text. However, as noted, these women's rapes are not always represented in either biblical translations and interpretations, nor are they always depicted in cultural retellings. Where they are retold in cultural products such as art, novels, or film, the representations are often problematic. In the rest of this article, I illustrate this observation using the two aforementioned biblical comic books, Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* (2009) and Powell Smith's *Brick Bible* (2011). Particularly, I underline the ways in which representations of biblical rape in popular culture can perpetuate certain contemporary myths and misperceptions about sexual violence. After presenting a descriptive summary of how each comic book creator has represented the two stories, I then draw on visual criticism to explore the implications of these retellings.

Visual Criticism in R. Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated*

In 2009, R. Crumb produced a singular work, *The Book of Genesis, Illustrated by R. Crumb* which purports to be a faithful, graphical interpretation of the book of Genesis. Crumb suggests that among other sources, he used Robert Alter's (1997) translation and commentary on Genesis to inform his work, along with the KJV and JPS translations of the Bible. From these, he produced his own interpretation of this biblical text, together with annotations to explain his interpretive decisions (Crumb 2009). Drawn and heavily cross-hatched in black and white ink, Crumb's approach to visualizing Genesis in his comic book was to incorporate every word of the text and to only add clarification where he thought it absolutely necessary. He "refrained from indulging too often in such 'creativity', and instead let [the text] stand in its own convoluted vagueness rather than monkey around with such a venerable text" (Crumb 2009, Introduction). Clearly, there are problems within this statement, which could be brought to the fore and unpacked;¹² however, for the purpose of this article, the reader can keep in mind that Crumb's intention was to provide a "word-for-word" illustrated version of Genesis.

Crumb's version of Genesis 16 opens with a close-up of Sarai's withered old face eyeing a young Hagar from the corner of her eye. The accompanying text refers to Sarai's continued state of childlessness, drawing the reader's attention to Hagar: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children, and she had a handmaid,

¹² For example, Crumb claims to reproduce every word of the "original text" (and fails to explain what he understands the "original text" to be), and then states that he uses several translations to develop his own text of Genesis. Further issues include "adding clarity" where he thought necessary, which challenges the idea of a "word-for-word" retelling, and a lack of consideration given to how his illustrative decisions themselves potentially limit the reader's experience of reading the "convoluted vagueness" of the biblical text. For further discussion on these issues, see Domoney-Lyttle (2018, 5-6).

an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar” (Crumb 2009).¹³ Crumb refers to Hagar as a “handmaid” rather than a slave, a word choice that may suggest to the reader that Hagar enjoys some status as a person in voluntary paid employment, as opposed to somebody who is forced to work without wages, rights, or freedoms. In short, this particular textual decision by Crumb may shape how the viewer reads the rest of Hagar’s story.

In the next panel, Sarai whispers to Abram, whose head is bowed towards her as flecks of sweat fly off his face. Hagar stands in the background, arms folded as if protecting her body. Her eyes are downcast, her cheeks are flushed, and her hair is worn cropped short as a mark of her Egyptian heritage (and thus a mark of her enslavement). Hagar is presented as an inversion of Sarai in these panels: where Hagar is young, Sarai is old; where Hagar wears a simple, short robe which barely covers her body, Sarai is covered from head to toe; where Sarai has authority and power to make suggestions to Abram, Hagar can only stand silently and red-faced behind her mistress. Athalya Brenner-Idan suggests that mirroring in female pairs is a common way to present conflict in the Hebrew Bible, “in the sense that [Sarai] has certain properties which the other lacks but tries to obtain for herself . . . if combined into one person, each pair would form a complete and balanced personality” (2015, 92; see also Tribble 1984, 10; Kramer 1998). Crumb has visualized what he considers as the complete, healthy, and whole woman in the two halves of Sarai and Hagar.

These first two panels of Genesis 16 are positioned on the bottom row of the right-hand page. This means that the end of Genesis 15 constitutes the periphery¹⁴ for readers, a significant artistic choice because Genesis 15 contains the story of the covenant of the pieces between Abram and God,¹⁵ wherein God repeats his promise that Abram will have countless descendants (vv. 4-5) and land to support them (vv. 18-21). The end of that chapter, juxtaposed as it is against the textual and visual reminder of Sarai’s infertility and the inclusion of Hagar as a background figure, emphasizes to the reader that, visually-speaking at least, Hagar is “plan B,” the second choice to help Abram fulfil the covenant.

The reader must turn the page to continue the story into panels three and four, which are concerned with the “union” of Hagar and Abram. In panel three, Sarai gives Hagar “as a wife” to Abram (cf. Gen. 16:3), an idiom visually expressed by Crumb drawing the scene as though it were a wedding. Sarai stands over the joining of Abram and Hagar’s hands, a visual recall to modern marriage ceremonies where officiants stand over the joining of hands of newlywed couples. Sarai’s position as officiant reinforces her status and authority over Hagar, whose diminutive stature is powerfully overshadowed by Abram and Sarai. Hagar’s eyes remain downcast, Sarai looks towards Abram, and Abram looks straight at Hagar

¹³ Crumb (2009) does not use page numbers in his remediation. This image can be found in Genesis 16, panels 1-4. Due to copyright issues, I cannot reproduce the images but some of them can be seen at <http://shiloh-project.group.shef.ac.uk/the-handmaids-jail-framing-sexual-assault-and-rape-narratives-in-biblical-comics/>.

¹⁴ The periphery, or *périchamp*, is a term introduced by Peeters, which describes how each panel is read with other panels in visual periphery. Therefore, panels are not read alone, but along with neighbouring panels. For further explanation of Peeters’ term, see Miller (2007, 83).

¹⁵ The covenant of pieces, which occurs in Gen 15:1-15, is an event where God appears to Abram and makes a covenant with him, announcing that Abram and his descendants would inherit land. It is the first covenant ceremony between God and Abram.

with a scowl on his face. Sarai holds the joined hands of Hagar and Abram in hers, a visual reminder that this is a marriage of three people: mistress, master, and slave.

Though Hagar is briefly called Abram's "wife," this panel of a forced "marriage" is visually rather than textually encoded to suggest to the reader that we should read this action as one that is legitimate (in the eyes of the law) and sanctified (by authority figures who represent God). The next panel represents Gen. 16:4 wherein Abram "came to bed with Hagar and she conceived" (Crumb 2009). A rounded fertility vase (a symbol that pops up across Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* whenever discussions of family, lineage, and fertility are in the frame) sits in the corner. Hagar's presentation as Abram's "wife" in this section of Crumb's retelling suggests two things to the reader: first, that the union between Hagar and Abram is in accordance with normative heterosexual ideals concerning marriage between a man and woman (i.e. that their union is recognizable and legitimate), and second, it alludes to the idea that sex in marriage is not rape. This last point is almost certainly why Crumb chooses to depict the "marriage" scene between Abram and Hagar in the first place. Where there is a union approved by the surrounding community (in this case, Sarai), there is only consensual sex. This idea itself is a rape myth still prevalent in contemporary societies around the world.

When combined, the visual and textual decisions employed by Crumb in these opening panels suggest that he does not view Hagar's treatment as rape, nor does he read the story as enforced marriage and pregnancy. By graphically capturing Hagar's union with Abram in the way that he has, Crumb encourages the reader to view the union as legal, consenting, sanctioned by God, and legitimate—rather than as a forced marriage between a slave and a powerful man for the purpose of producing Sarai's surrogate child. There can be no space to read Hagar's story as rape in Crumb's version; there is no implied reading of sexual assault here.

In contrast, Crumb's treatment of Dinah is explicitly concerned with her rape, at least in the first two panels of her story. Crumb's version of Genesis 34 (retold over four panels) opens with Dinah in the foreground talking with a group of women. She wears jewels and hair accessories suggesting she enjoys some wealth or status, as do her friends. In the background, Shechem lurks behind a pillar, watching the group. The scene is unsettling; by positioning Shechem behind the group, partly concealed by a pillar, Crumb offers a visual device that signals to the reader the Canaanite prince's ill intentions. He appears voyeuristic, gazing at Dinah as though she were an object of desire. Dinah's body language indicates her discomfort; her arms are folded protectively across her body and her face is impassive.

In the second panel, Shechem grabs Dinah from behind in a shaded, isolated area where there are no other people present. His hands cross her chest but his gaze is turned away as if to check nobody has seen his actions. Visually, Dinah is trapped between Shechem who is taller than she is, and a dark wall with darker archways. The panel is captioned simply "...and he took her..." Crumb frequently uses ellipses in his work either to add suspense or to suggest something is missing. In this case, it is the former. The rape narrative continues to a third panel, where the reader sees Shechem having sex with Dinah on the ground surrounded by fruit trees and protected by a wall. Here, the reader adopts Shechem's previous position as voyeur, perhaps watching the scene as Shechem had imagined it in the first panel. The panel

is captioned with "...and laid her and defiled her." Word choice here is key. Crumb does not use the term "rape" but borrows "defiled" from the KJV translation.

I suggested that Crumb approaches Genesis 34 as a narrative of rape, at least in the first two panels. He visually and textually portrays Shechem as voyeur and attacker, who treats Dinah as an object that can simply be "taken." However, in the third and fourth panel, his reading of Shechem's actions changes. In the third panel, hints creep in that blur explicit connotations of rape. By using the term "defiled" rather than "raped," for example, Crumb suggests that Dinah has been morally fouled, that her purity has been destroyed.¹⁶ In other words, Dinah as an *object* has been ruined, as her purity has been tainted, although she is not unsalvageable at this point. This becomes clear in the fourth panel, where Shechem cups Dinah's face lovingly, gazing down at her face with an adoration that she reciprocates. The corresponding biblical text does not mention how Dinah responds to the event, which may be one of the reasons why Crumb has filled the gaps in this way.

Crumb reads Genesis 34 the way many commentators have understood it:¹⁷ as a love story between Shechem and Dinah that has a sticky start but ends well because, actually, they love each other. Crumb acknowledges that Dinah is a victim of sexual assault in the first instance, but then suggests to the reader that her victimhood is usurped by her love for her attacker. The rendering is disappointing in the way it plays to traditional interpretations of Genesis 34, which justify sexual assault as a right belonging to men who are in love with, or fall in love with, their victims, rather than challenging androcentric perspectives that objectify and debase women. More importantly, however, it is troubling because Crumb's visual and textual interpretation also undermines the seriousness of rape as a violent event, disregards the traumatic impact of rape on the victim (i.e. Dinah), and suggests that the pattern of aggressive male and resisting female within an initially reluctant love story is somehow "normal" or acceptable.

Crumb's depiction of the rape narratives in Genesis 16 and 34 thus erase the experience of violence against the female victims. Crumb encourages the reader to see Hagar's treatment in Genesis as consensual and ultimately favourable by choosing particular words and visual codes for his images. By doing so, narratives of slavery, rape, and abuse against Hagar are erased or forgotten and the reader glosses over her story, understanding it only as a means to fulfilling God's promises to Abram. One could argue that Hagar's depiction in Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* is representative of her appearance in the biblical text, which is likewise primarily focused on Abram and his role in God's plan. The biblical text, too, focuses on

¹⁶ The relationship between purity and virginity in biblical texts is complex and has been written about extensively by scholars such as Keady (2018), Blyth (2010), and Scholz (2010). While I cannot do justice to the topic here, it may be argued that Crumb's representation of Dinah reinforces a popular rape myth which suggests that women who are raped are "damaged goods" and of less value to men/society than sexually chaste women. Popular (mis)conceptions about a women's sexual status and "value" is that it is dependent on their sexual chastity, and this may be the reason Crumb chooses to describe Dinah (now no longer a virgin) as "defiled."

¹⁷ For example, see Bechtel (1994) and Gruber (1999) who argue that Genesis 34 should be read as a story of seduction rather than a rape narrative, and also Fleishman (2004), who argues that Genesis 34 should be read as a case of abduction-marriage, but not rape.

Hagar's role as child-bearer, who "solves" the problem of Sarai's apparent infertility.¹⁸

In the case of Genesis 34, Crumb encourages the reader to view Dinah's rape through the lens of a love story; what begins as a voyeuristic act on Shechem's part and progresses to an act of violence against Dinah is quickly overcome by the suggestion that they both love each other. The justification for physical and sexual violence presented by Crumb here is romance. Crumb possibly takes this approach to avoid the repercussions of reading the story as rape (i.e. avoiding highly problematic interpretations which Crumb neither wishes to deal with nor to draw), and I will expand on this point after analysing the same biblical texts in Powell Smith's *Brick Bible*.

Visual Criticism in Brendan Powell Smith's *The Brick Bible*

Powell Smith's retelling of the Bible is markedly different to Crumb's in both style and approach.¹⁹ Presented in full colour, the scenes from the biblical texts are composed entirely of Lego figures which are then photographed with captions inlaid over them.²⁰ Where Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* is carefully hand-drawn with ink on paper allowing him the freedom to control expression, characterization, and scene setting, Powell Smith's images are limited by the material he uses to create them. The effect of this is often comical; for example, when a servant in Abram's household circumcises Ishmael (Gen. 17:26), the blood is symbolised by a piece of red Lego brick and we see a painted expression of shock on Ishmael's face. Relatedly, the juxtaposition of using a child's toy to create scenes that are often violent and full of trauma often draws the reader's attention to the absurdity of the story and can highlight violence or trauma in ways that are less obvious in more traditional ink-on-paper remediations.

As noted above, Powell Smith (2011) claims he wants to illuminate the text of the Bible for those who do not know it well, but does not acknowledge that his choice of material and presentation affects how seriously the reader may take his work. Maybe the point he wishes to make is that the Bible should not always be taken seriously. Yet the reader may begin to forget the comedy and humour as they read Powell Smith's version, perhaps because they cannot fully disregard the "sacredness" of a biblical retelling.

Powell Smith's depiction of Hagar's story spans three panels (2011, 38-39). In the first panel, Hagar serves a relaxed Sarai who is lying back in a hammock between two palm trees. Sarai wears a blue gown with jewels around her neck and has grey hair. In contrast, Hagar has short, black hair (which again visually indicates her Egyptian heritage and her status as slave), a bra/bikini top and a loincloth held

¹⁸ Not only is Hagar considered a solution for Sarai's infertility, but Crumb's visual-textual choices here suggest that as Hagar becomes Abram's wife, she should perhaps consider herself fortunate to be the partner of a powerful man. Additionally, by having her "marry" Abram, Crumb seeks to legitimize the union between Hagar and Abram which itself feeds into the rape myth that sex in marriage is not rape; Hagar's story is not one of rape because Abram is her "husband."

¹⁹ Due to copyright issues, I cannot reproduce the images but some of these images can be seen at: <http://shiloh-project.group.shef.ac.uk/the-handmaids-jail-framing-sexual-assault-and-rape-narratives-in-biblical-comics/>.

²⁰ Powell Smith does not use a particular translation of the Bible, but paraphrases texts to create his own version of scripture.

up by a belt. Visually, Hagar is the more “sexualized” figure in this retelling, a visualization which—in keeping with contemporary rape myths—suggests a woman’s “lack” of clothing is often to blame for her sexual assault. In the second panel, Hagar is out of focus in the background while a conversation between Sarai and Abram takes place, wherein Sarai urges Abram to lay with Hagar in order that Sarai may build a family through her. This image suggests that Hagar is not part of the decision-making process regarding how her body will be used. Abram’s face is in a scowl and his body turns away from Sarai as if recoiling from the proposal. This suggests that Sarai is the initiator of the plan, thus downplaying Abram’s role (or culpability) in it. In the third panel, “Abram did what Sarai said, and lay with Hagar. She bore him a son and Abram named him Ishmael. Abram was 86 years old” (39). The scene that accompanies this caption is of Hagar and Abram standing beside each other looking down at their baby son. Sarai stands in the background, out of focus, with a cross look on her face. This visual call back to the previous panel where Hagar is out of focus suggests that now, Sarai is not part of the decision-making process regarding her husband’s progeny. Abram is likewise scowling, Hagar appears as happy as a Lego face can be.

Powell Smith chooses to use the designation “slave-girl” for Hagar, which emphasises her lowly position. However, again her status as slave is not challenged, highlighted, or problematized. As in Crumb’s retelling, there is no allusion to forced marriage, rape, or involuntary impregnation. As I already mentioned, *The Brick Bible* is more of a humorous take on biblical narratives than Crumb’s counterpart, and this might be why Powell Smith chooses to ignore “difficult” or violent elements in Hagar’s story, including any visual or textual suggestions that imply Hagar is a victim of rape.

Like Crumb, however, Powell Smith’s depiction of Dinah’s story is explicit in confirming that Dinah *is* raped. His visualisation of Shechem is similar to Crumb’s. Shechem hides behind a palm tree and is partly concealed, watching Dinah who has her back to him and is unaware she is being surveyed (Powell Smith 2011, 61-62). Both Shechem and Dinah are dressed in clothes which reflect their high social status, Dinah in a dress with jewels, and Shechem in armour. The panel of Shechem watching Dinah closes the page; to continue the story, the reader must turn the page. By closing the right-hand page with this panel, Powell Smith creates suspense in the narrative. The reader cannot see what will happen and must become complicit within the narrative by turning the page and allowing the story to continue. This is a spatio-topical tool employed within comic books that both drives the narrative forward by controlling the pacing of the story, the focus of the reader and, to an extent, the reader’s consumption of emotional content (Groensteen 2007, 30; McCloud 1993; Eisner 2008, 61).²¹

When the reader turns the page, they see Shechem run (insofar as Lego people can be shown to run) from behind some bushes towards Dinah, who appears scared and leans away from her attacker. The caption on this panel reads, “He seized Dinah and laid with her, raping her” (Powell Smith 2011, 62). This is an explicit depiction of rape. In the next panel, Dinah is shown on the ground with the skirt of her dress removed while Shechem stands over her, presenting her with a bunch of

²¹ For more discussion on the use and impact of the spatio-topical code in general, see Miller (2007, 79-86).

flowers. Her facial expression is still frightened, unchanged from the previous panel. The caption reads, “He became deeply attached to Dinah. He loved the young woman and spoke to her heart” (62). In the final panel, Shechem and Dinah are in a courtyard in front of Hamor, Shechem’s father. Dinah’s expression is still unchanged, but she is now fully dressed. The caption reads, “Shechem said to his father Hamor, ‘Acquire this young woman for me as a wife’” (62).

Unlike his depiction of Hagar’s story, Powell Smith’s treatment of Genesis 34 does not try to hide Dinah’s rape. Instead, it lays bare the act of rape by framing Shechem as a voyeuristic young man who commits a pre-meditated assault of a young woman; Dinah, meanwhile, has no idea of Shechem’s presence until the moment when he attacks her. The depiction of events immediately after the rape do not attempt to justify Shechem’s behaviour by suggesting that there is a mutually romantic connection between the pair. Dinah is clearly scared and unsettled by Shechem, but has no voice or power to resist or reject him. Shechem appears slightly unbalanced; just as Dinah’s expression of fear never changes, Shechem’s constant grin adds a sense of inanity and unease to his image. This gives the impression that he is either unhinged, or mentally unable to process that he has committed a brutal crime against Dinah. Shechem visually and textually overpowers Dinah across the panels, which suggests a power imbalance between the pair, and instead of mirroring each other to suggest mutual affection (as in Crumb’s version), Powell Smith contrasts Dinah against Shechem to suggest romance is not an option.

Reading Rape in Biblical Comic Books

I have presented a focused analysis of rape scenes in biblical comics, focusing on Genesis 16 and 34. Neither remediation shows Hagar as a victim of rape, though both draw attention to her lowly status as handmaid (Crumb) or slave-girl (Powell Smith). Both remediations do show Dinah as a victim of rape, but Crumb justifies the brutal assault by suggesting a subsequent romantic connection between Dinah and her attacker. Powell Smith does not, but suggests that Shechem is either unhinged or does not recognize that his assault was just that—an assault.

Generally speaking, comic book adaptations of Hagar’s story are always shown from the perspective of Abram and his “need” to have children. Depictions rarely, if ever, concentrate on the perspective of Sarai his wife, let alone on Hagar, a slave. Hagar is not suppressed in biblical comics but her representation is only ever at a surface level; she is without autonomy and reflects a purely patriarchal perspective. Added to the exclusion of her voice, comic book creators such as Crumb and Powell Smith also employ certain visual tools and word-choices, which further misrepresent Hagar’s experiences. The effect of this plays into another common rape myth: that silence can indicate consent. Hagar’s under-representation, and most importantly her silence, may signal to some readers that she consents to sex and surrogacy. Such a move normalizes the treatment she receives at the hands of God, Abram, and Sarai, a point which is reflected in the readings of Crumb’s and Powell Smith’s comic books outlined above. By performing a resistant reading of Hagar’s story through an intersectional lens that considers her social status, gender, and ethnicity, we can see that biblical comic book creators commit further harm against her character because they ignore or at least underplay the very identity markers that cause her vulnerable and powerless position.

In contrast, explicit textual references to sexual violence combined with Dinah being the privileged daughter of Israelite patriarch Jacob (rather than the foreign slave of a patriarch) means biblical comic book creators appear more willing to recognize Dinah as a victim of rape. However, differences occur in the aftermath of Dinah's rape, where creators like Crumb attempt to justify (and arguably normalise) the assault by suggesting the pair are romantically linked. Other creators such as Powell Smith take a different approach, suggesting Shechem is mentally unbalanced. This approach is equally damaging to Dinah's story because it correlates the act of rape with mental instability; this removes agency and culpability from Shechem by suggesting he is not in his right mind, ergo, he is not fully in control of his actions. Such a representation plays into another common rape myth: men who commit rape, sexual assault, and gendered violence are often cast as mentally "unhinged" because such acts are not something a "normal" man would ever do.

To visually and textually represent a scene of violence from the Bible is difficult enough; to visually and textually represent a biblical scene of rape or sexual assault requires the creator to not only interpret and imagine the scene, but to recreate the act. It is the creator or the team of creators who must physically draw Dinah being raped, for example, and this makes them complicit in the act of rape itself. Such complicity may be more pronounced in the act of creating text-image narratives of rape than it is in simply translating or transcribing text, because the visual image is often more visceral than words alone. The creator(s) must figuratively and literally picture how the scene looks; their hands must physically transmit the violent act onto paper where it is apprehended instantaneously and directly, without the "cover" of words. In a similar way, the reader also becomes complicit in the act by reading the text *and* looking at the image, and by physically handling and turning pages, effectively allowing the story—and the rape—to continue.

The other option biblical comic book creators take with these stories is to simply not represent them at all. In the thirty or so biblical comic books that sit on my physical and digital shelves, none depict the rape of Dinah apart from Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* and Powell Smith's *Brick Bible*. Many of my other biblical comic books do include the story of Hagar, but she is represented in more-or-less the same way as the two examples by Crumb and Powell Smith discussed in this article.

There is a reason and a need to represent such events in the graphic medium, because excluding difficult narratives not only erases their violence and horror, but silences the voices and experiences of the victims involved. However, I contend that comic book creators who leave out "texts of terror" (Trible 1984) may do so because they do not want to be complicit in any act of sexual violence or assault on the memory of the victim. Alternatively, they may not want younger or otherwise vulnerable readers to see violent scenes, and on this last point, publishers may have a say as well with regard to the target audience of the biblical comic book. Questions concerning who has the "right" to reinterpret sacred texts, and what responsibility (if any) they should assume in new remediations resurface here, as do questions concerning how comic book creators approach representations of murder, war, animal abuse, and other violent acts within graphic retellings of the Bible. Why would one violent act be considered "safe" to represent, while others are deemed

off-limits? Such choices, especially when considering the visualization of rape and sexual assault, raise question about the propensity to present rape as culturally “taboo,” which is, in itself, highly problematic.

Conclusion

By presenting a focused analysis of rape in two comic books using the methodological lens of visual criticism, wider issues concerning popular cultural remediations of the Bible also begin to surface, including matters concerning reception in biblical comics, the space between art and literature inhabited by biblical comics, and issues of translation and interpretation within contemporary remediations. The importance of graphical remediations in exploring the boundary crossings between ancient script and contemporary popular culture, which regenerate and re-present the text for the modern reader, cannot be ignored. However, with the decision to retell biblical stories in graphic form comes responsibilities.

In an article for the *New Yorker*, actress Molly Ringwald posed the following question as part of a personal reflection on watching a sexual assault scene from her film *The Breakfast Club* in a post-#MeToo world: “How are we meant to feel about art that we both love and oppose? ... Erasing history is a dangerous road when it comes to art—change is essential, but so too is remembering the past, in all of its transgression and barbarism” (Ringwald 2018). This is a question that must be asked of the Bible as well, especially when it is adapted in modern times into new media like comic books. The responsibility of those who make biblical comics is to represent the troubling texts and multiple voices within the stories, rather than presenting a version of the Bible that ignores some of these voices. This might include, for example, acknowledgment of Hagar as a victim of a status-driven system where God, Abram, and even the matriarchal figure of Sarai are guilty of oppressing and abusing a slave woman in a quest to produce children “for Abram.” By *not* problematizing such texts, retellings only reinforce and endorse damaging, androcentric readings of the Bible. They fail to free Hagar from the constrictions of her story, thus imprisoning her both within the panels of the comic book and, literarily, within the word-choices of the written text. Similarly, they fail to take seriously Dinah’s narrative as a victim of rape who is further exploited by a patriarchal family, thus reinforcing her character as an object who may be passed off as a bargaining tool between two dynasties.

Skipping over narratives of rape and sexual assault in the Bible can be a dangerous road when it comes to biblical interpretation. It is essential to remember the violent stories and to revisit them with all of their transgressions and barbarities. In the conclusion to her article, Ringwald suggests that it is up to future generations to respond to stories of rape and sexual assault, like those in *The Breakfast Club*, in order to make those stories their own. Biblical comic creators also need to actively contest and reframe stories of rape in the Bible, so that we can redeploy them as potential challenges to androcentric readings and oppose their depictions of female subjugation. By accepting the existence of these texts, and by probing, problematizing, and challenging their resonances and implications, we can both remember the violence within the text but also ensure the victims therein are given focus and centrality so as to recover and honour their voices.

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