

Drawing on God: Theology in Graphic Novels

by Sarah Stanley

Religion, faith, and theology may not be themes that one would initially associate with the comic book format. Historically, comic books have been viewed as second- (or third-) rate literature aimed at readers with short attention spans and consequently contributing very little to intellectual conversations. However, these illustrated stories have a rich history of incorporating religiously inspired themes and characters into their narratives. The themes of good versus evil that populate comic books are often reminiscent of religious mythologies. Superman himself is said to be evocative of the Jewish protector, the *golem* (Cornog and Raitery, 2007). In recent years, the graphic novel has been introduced as a new form of the sequential art format. Customarily, a graphic novel differs from a comic book in that it is a full-length and complete story, though bound collections of serial-issue comics may also be referred to by this name. In 1978, *A Contract with God* by Will Eisner was the first graphic novel published in the longer format. Currently, hundreds of these sequential art novels are in print ranging in subjects from history to autobiography to science fiction to classic literature. Appealing to a diverse audience, graphic novels offer interesting perspectives on a variety of themes and questions, in a format that is both entertaining and visually appealing.

This objective in this essay is to survey an assortment of graphic novels that either use theological themes or discuss religious experience. There are currently many explicitly religious comic books and graphic novels developed for the purpose of supporting a particular faith or as literary supplements to what is perceived as a very secular comic industry. While such books offer a particular theology of their own, this essay focuses on those works that are more mainstream and, for the most part, use religion as a narrative theme rather than a primary motivation for publication. Though the majority of books discussed are original single-volume graphic novels, some first appeared in a serial format which now appear in multi-issue bound editions or are a part of a multi-volume story line. The books collected here all have found inspiration in the themes of religion and faith, whether they deal with these on an historical, personal, or purely fictional level. Some approach these issues negatively, with an amount of skepticism or outright disbelief, while others offer a more favorable perspective. It is best to engage these materials with an open mind and willingness to engage in theoretical exercise. Given the right circumstances, many of these texts add value to specific areas of study and would even be interesting additions to more church-related activities like Sunday School classes.

INTRODUCTIONS TO SEQUENTIAL ART

For those unfamiliar with the sequential art format, there are a few resources that are useful for gaining an understanding of this genre. The comic book/graphic novel format contains nuances that may elude or confuse a new reader. Two of the most prominent works on this subject are by comic artists. Will Eisner, viewed by many as the godfather of the graphic novel, authored *Comics and Sequential Art* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008) based on lectures he delivered at the School of Visual Arts in New York. In this work, Eisner explains how images can be used to create meaning and narration all their own by elaborating on such ideas as timing, the frame and expressive anatomy. While this book might be the first of its kind, Scott McCloud has written what has become the new authority on this subject, *Understanding Comics* (Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press, 1993). Written in a comic format itself, *Understanding Comics* uses the sequential art format to its advantage and illustrates just how

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this genre works, how images can be powerful assets to the storytelling process and why the comic is an important medium. Reading either of these two books may be helpful for those approaching graphic novels for the first time and may give added meaning to some of the novels presented in this essay.

GRAPHIC NOVELS

The novels discussed here can be divided into two distinct groups: those that have a religious element as part of a nonreligious plot, and those that use religious themes as the primary focus of their plots. Some of these books are almost entirely about religion—such as Tezuka’s *Buddha*—while others may have merely one character who is interested in the divine. It is not the amount to which theology plays a role but the uniqueness and depth to which these themes are explored that merits inclusion in this list. Some of these stories approach religion in a fairly traditional way, while others do not. This helps to provide a broader understanding of how religion can be used as a theme in the graphic medium, and to explore the different ways religion is used to enhance or influence narratives.

A Contract with God and Other Tenement Stories (New York: Baronet, 1978) is generally regarded as the first graphic novel, so it is reasonable to discuss this work first. While the novel is composed of four different stories that all take place in a 1930’s Bronx neighborhood, the title story is a kind of parable. As a child, Frimme Hersh makes a contract to honor God as long as God honors him, but when his only daughter dies he feels as if God has broken his vow. Feeling alienated, Frimme decides that he does not need to obey God’s commandments any longer and heads out to fulfill all of his selfish desires. As with many parables, the story has a tragic ending, but the questions Eisner raises about God’s responsibility to those who are faithful, as well as how humans are to view a relationship with God, are very interesting.

“The Revival,” a story in James Sturm’s collection *God, Gold and Golems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), asks questions about faith in religion as a concept and faith in a higher power. Similar to “Contract with God,” the first story in this collection revolves around faithful individuals who find that God has not given them what they thought was best, in this case the healing of their child who has died. In Sturm’s story we are not privy to what actions the couple takes after their child cannot be brought back from the dead. Instead we see their slow realization that their faith in the power of a revival preacher’s ability and in the willingness (or ability) of God was misplaced. This heartbreaking story asks readers to consider what would happen if their deepest and most desperate belief was disproved, a theological exercise that requires the reader to determine how much of their faith is based on truth or on desire.

At first glance, Scott Morris’ *Visitations* (Portland, OR: Oni Press, 2003) might seem like an oversimplified attempt at explaining the existence of God, but the story also evokes deeper theological themes that may be difficult to reckon with. The story revolves around a distraught young woman who enters a church looking for a quiet place to sit and, to her chagrin, is confronted with a fairly unrelenting minister who takes it upon himself to prove to her that God exists. Using newspaper stories he attempts to explain how God is in everything, but when he comes to the last story about a child who has been accidentally shot, we realize the reason for the woman’s doubt in God and her need for solitude. While much of the book is theologically shallow, the ending scene raises some potentially interesting ideas about the fairly common religious belief that “everything happens for a reason.” By the end of the story we are asked to question, or perhaps just believe, that bad things happen in order to prevent other bad things. The reader is also left with the issue concerning how God decides who/what will be sacrificed for the good

of another. While these are fascinating theological questions, whether or not they were the intent of the author is unclear.

Many of Doug TenNapel's graphic novels have at least vaguely religious themes, but none are as obvious as *Creature Tech* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2002). This science fiction story featuring a lapsed theologian is laden with life and death sacrifices, crucifixion images, and an enthusiastically evangelical pastor, who is also the main character's father. There is no doubt that the author's intent is to challenge the secular notion that faith in science is more relevant than religious belief. Throughout, there are large sections of the text in which Dr. Michael Ong and his father debate the merits of faith in the unexplainable. These exchanges are sometimes awkward and out of place amidst the primarily action-packed text, but they do serve as thought-provoking moments. It is interesting to see these theological themes in a science fiction context and even more interesting to see such powerful images as Christ's crucifixion scene being acted out by an eight-legged alien. And though some of the dialogue and images TenNapel uses to make his theological point can be heavy handed, the overall story and artwork are very compelling.

A cat might seem like an unlikely character to lead a reader on an enlightening journey through faith and Judaism, but this is just who Joann Sfar employs as a guide in *The Rabbi's Cat* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005). After eating the family parrot, the cat of a widowed Rabbi gains the ability to talk and demands to learn more about the Torah and Judaism. Through dialogue reminiscent of debates that occur during rabbinical training, the cat challenges his master about many of his beliefs which leads to very insightful discussions about faith and our relationship with God. Divided into three basic stories, *The Rabbi's Cat* combines humor and frankness with themes of faith and community to create an enjoyable and thought-provoking journey into the life of an Algerian family. Through the cat's narration we are able to look at the state of humanity from a different perspective. Sfar's well-chosen images and words cause the reader to identify with even the most irritating characters by illustrating how we are all in search of something, even if we might do it in a different way. Though the theme of religion may be most apparent in the first third of the book, its presence and influence is felt throughout.

Mike Carey's *My Faith in Frankie* (New York: DC Comics, 2004) explores a side of humanity's relationship with God that is not often discussed in this tongue-in-cheek, but compelling, comic book collection. Carey asks his reader to consider what the implications might be if it turned out that God actually needs us more than we rely on God. The story introduces us to Frankie, the sole worshipper of Jeriven, her own personal deity. Throughout her childhood, Frankie enjoyed a very lucky life with Jeriven watching over her, but when her interest begins to turn from her god to boys, things are thrown into chaos. We learn as the story goes on that Jeriven not only loves Frankie, but relies on her for his power as a deity. Basically, if this god is not worshipped, it has no power at all. This is an interesting turn on a theological theme. Instead of asking what happens to us when we do not believe in God, we are faced with the question of what happens to God? This is not a serious or heavy-handed work and makes no significant claims about theology, but if read with a sense of humor it is a thought-provoking read for those interested in theological studies and questions such as the fate of ancient gods that are no longer worshipped.

American Born Chinese (New York: First Second, 2006) primarily addresses both systemic racism and the difficulties one encounters when attempting to bridge two different cultures. But within these broader themes is a very distinct underlying message that is strikingly, and surprisingly, Christian, considering it employs traditional Buddhist mythology. Using the story of Sun Wukong, or the Monkey King, author Gene Luen Yang weaves a story

that encourages accepting oneself and one's heritage. The interesting aspect is that while he is very faithful in his adaptation of this legendary Chinese story, at the climactic moment of Buddha's appearance, the main character is replaced with a character that looks suspiciously similar to traditional illustrations of the Judeo-Christian God. This change is significant because it moves the story from being a cultural one to a religious one and gives added meaning to the end of the story in which the Monkey King's son is sent to Earth.

Linda Medley's *Castle Waiting* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics, 2006) starts out as a revised fairytale and ends up being a commentary on society and the relationships that exist within it. Though most of the story has little to do with religion, near the end of the book we are introduced to Sister Peace, a rather unorthodox nun. Wearing a habit throughout the beginning of the book, it is not until later that she reveals that she has a beard, a characteristic that led her to be in the circus and join a very specific convent. Medley's use of the 14th-Century bearded Saint Wilgefortis in this part of the narrative is most striking. She incorporates the entire myth of Wilgefortis into Peace's story, making this character the founder of the abbey and the "savior" in many respects of the nuns that live there. The image of this saint consistently seen throughout the text is of her hanging from a cross above an altar. This illustration is more than reminiscent of the Italian art of this saint and the traditional renderings of Christ's crucifixion (Friesen, *The female crucifix* Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001). Though the saint herself prayed for a beard so that she could stay married to Christ, this female version of a crucified savior has essentially replaced the masculine one within this community of women. Medley never makes it obvious that this is what is happening, but it seems to be a very subtle acknowledgement of the sacred feminine.

The biography of a great religious figure is not usually a subject broached in the *manga* genre of Japanese comics. Therefore, Osamu Tezuka's series *Buddha* (New York: Vertical, 2003) is remarkable in the raw and charismatic way that it approaches the story of this significant figure. This lengthy eight-volume series tells the story of holy man Gautama Buddha from before his birth until his death. Tezuka certainly brings his own interpretation to this biography, but his efforts are filled with respect. Aside from merely teaching the reader about the life of Buddha, this story brings to life the characters and events of the tale, moving them from untouchable myth to reality. Though portrayed in a *manga* format, the work conveys many of the same lessons that Buddha sought to teach to the world in a way that is artistic and at times humorous.

In his personal memoir, *Blankets* (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf, 2003), Craig Thompson recounts his childhood and first love. Reflecting on his evangelical upbringing, his relationship with his brother, and his first romance, Thompson weaves together a story about growing up and moving on. Though the majority of the book centers on his relationship with his girlfriend Raina, in the epilogue the pieces of religious reflection scattered through the text are brought together. Distancing himself a few years from the main events of the book, Thompson considers his relationship to religion, methodically taking his reader through the steps that led to his choice to leave Christianity, a decision that affects both him and his family. This incredibly personal memoir is illustrated with flowing illustrations and sensitive renderings of the years during which we are often the most vulnerable.

FURTHER READING

Graphic novels with theological themes are far more numerous than the few listed here. There are many other ways in which the sequential art format explores and represents theological ideas and icons. For those interested, there are other resources available that may help facilitate any sort of investigation into this subject and its materials. Just a few of these are *The Gospel According to Superheroes* (New York: Peter Lang, 2005) by B.J. Oropeza, *Holy*

Superheroes: Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels and Film (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) by Greg Garrett and *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: Continuum, 2007) by Danny Fingeroth. There are not, at present, many critical works dealing with graphic novels and religion not within the superhero genre, but there are insights and information within these texts that can be applied to other genres nonetheless.

CONCLUSIONS

The books mentioned here represent a broad range of genres and perspectives. Most are united only by their use of religion and its artifacts. As previously mentioned, there are far more works that fit into this category than are listed in this essay, but these are certainly among the most accessible. Graphic novels are a fairly untapped medium that can be used in the same ways that any other literature would be used to enrich a class or curriculum. The narratives listed here, among others, are rich with illusions, cultural significance, and characters that would be interesting to consider on many different levels. In addition to their literary qualities, their use of images makes them particularly enticing. Courses on a University level might find them intriguing for their ability to convey meaning through images. Their reflection of cultural trends and concerns is useful in scholarly research as well. More church-based groups might find them useful for igniting conversation among younger groups. As a literary genre, graphic novels and comic books are very successful at stimulating interest in books among even the most reluctant of readers. This ability can be tapped into to arouse interest in courses and groups of all different ages and focuses. They are unique in that their literary merit allows them to be used alongside any other theologically interesting text, while their incorporation of images to tell a story provides readers with the opportunity to consider them in ways similar to the study of art and film. By acknowledging these qualities and moving beyond possible misconceptions of the format, the potential to use graphic novels as a tool to study theology is limitless.

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