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## Chapter 7

### “And Abram listened to the Voice of Sarai”:

#### R. Crumb’s pro-feminist interpretation of Sarah in the Bible<sup>1</sup>

Zanne Domoney-Lyttle

*The Book of Genesis, Illustrated by R. Crumb* purports to be a faithful, graphic interpretation of the book of Genesis from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> Crumb states that Robert Alter’s translation and commentary on the book of Genesis, among other sources, informed his work, along with the *King James Version* (KJV), the *Jewish Publication Society* version (JPS), and a little-known academic volume by Savina J. Teubal titled *Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch* (1984). From those, Crumb produced his own interpretation together with annotations to explain his interpretive decisions. What resulted was a re-telling of Genesis which placed women at the forefront of the narrative, subverted “traditional” readings of biblical stories, and challenged common perceptions of R. Crumb’s troublesome history of representing women, which include accusations of misogyny, sexism, and racism.

This chapter will present an analysis of Crumb’s representation of biblical women from the book of Genesis, through the lens of biblical reception history and interpretive approaches to reading text-image narratives using the work of Ann Miller, Thierry Groensteen, and Scott

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<sup>1</sup> “And Abram listened to the Voice of Sarai” is taken from Gen. 16:2. Unless stated otherwise, such as when I quote from R. Crumb’s *The Book of Genesis, Illustrated by R. Crumb*, all biblical references are from the NRSV.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter shortened to *Genesis, Illustrated*.

McCloud. I will argue that Crumb's remediation of the matriarch Sarah in his *Genesis, Illustrated* presents to the reader a strong, dominant character who is cast as a potential leader in an otherwise traditionally patriarchal world, and that this treatment of Sarah is also reflected in other biblical women such as Eve, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. These renderings of biblical women subvert traditional biblical readings of the women of Genesis, as well as expectations of Crumb as an artist. This is a result of Crumb's identification with "pro-feminism", a term which is as problematic as it is unclear.<sup>3</sup> However, defining Crumb's understanding of pro-feminism will illuminate his treatment of women within *Genesis, Illustrated*, and potentially challenge the accusations of misogyny and sexism which have followed Crumb throughout his career in two ways: firstly, grounding Crumb's representation of women in his identification of pro-feminism demonstrates his intention to present women at the forefront of the narrative (and therefore leaders of the story), and secondly, such positive representations demonstrate Crumb's nuance of thought with regards to gender and society. Where early representations of women in Crumb's work may appear sexist and misogynistic, his later work (as demonstrated in his *Genesis, Illustrated*) potentially

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<sup>3</sup> Crumb does not clearly unpack what he means by "pro-feminist", though it is a term he identifies as (see: Hignite 22). Cues from other interviews (e.g. Domoney-Lyttle 2017, Appendix A) indicate that while Crumb supports and sympathizes with many of the causes associated with feminism he does not actively pursue or involve himself in campaigns to further the feminist agenda because feminism is a movement created by and for women. Men who partake in feminist movements can themselves be deemed to be taking power from, or colonizing women's movements, a move which some wish to avoid. Identifying with pro-feminism is one way to do this.

demonstrates some growth and development with regards to his understanding of women and gender.

### **Crumb's Problematic History with Women**

R. Crumb has often been accused of producing sexist or misogynistic work throughout his career.<sup>4</sup> His depictions of large, curvaceous women are often described as unflattering and unrealistic, and he is known for producing images of gratuitous sex scenes, many of which involve smaller, inferior men being dominated by strong females,<sup>5</sup> but which also depict scenes of violence against, and sexual exploitation of, women. For example, Roger Sabin notes that of the underground comix culture prevalent in America during the 1960s and 1970s, the works of Crumb, S. Clay Wilson, and Spain Rodriguez frequently expressed misogynistic and sexist views which resulted in those “three names being singled out for feminist criticism in this respect” (Sabin 224). Of those three

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Crumb cancelled a scheduled attendance at a comics/film festival in Australia in August 2011 after newspaper reports emerged in which Crumb was accused of being “sick and deranged” by several groups including sexual assault crisis groups. For a fuller picture and an interview by Crumb on the incident, see Groth, “Robert Crumb.”

<sup>5</sup> More recent examples include a two-page strip of Adam and Eve entitled “Our First Parents” which depicts Eve as an object in Adam’s gaze as soon as he consumes the forbidden fruit. This strip was one of triggers for Crumb deciding to draw the entirety of Genesis because he was “never fully satisfied with the results of those drawings and so experimented with the idea of drawing Adam and Eve in a straightforward way” (Domoney-Lyttle 74). See also Crumb and Poplaski 46-47.

names, Sabin continues, Crumb was the creator most likely to be criticised: “indeed, it has been argued that by example he set in motion a vogue for misogynist comix featuring violence against women” (Sabin 224 n12). In his defense, Crumb has often described his most lurid works as “all fantasy” (Arnold) and has previously addressed such claims of propagating violence against women as follows:

When I started doing it in '68 or '69, the people who had loved my work before that, some of them were shocked and alienated by it – especially the women, of course. I lost all the women. I'm not antifeminist. I like strong, independent women, like the matriarchs of Genesis – they ordered the men around. The sex-fantasy thing was a whole other side of myself, and when that started coming out, I could no longer be America's best-loved hippie cartoonist. (Widmer)

In the same interview, Crumb describes women as “powerful and predatory”, and in a later interview with NPR, he explains that depictions of sex and women have, for him, always been personal and fetishistic, and only meant for his own enjoyment (Crumb, 2013). Quite what this means is unclear, but for many, reading depictions of women in Crumb's works of the 1960s and 1970s has been particularly challenging because his work draws upon the problematic issue of the male gaze, through which Crumb depicts women as subservient and objectified rather than as independent characters in their own right. Sabin notes that Crumb's work including women has “mellowed over the years” (Sabin 224 n12), and it also appears that Crumb has, for his part, reframed his understanding of women, gender, sex and power in his comics by identifying as pro-feminist (Hignite 22).

As noted above,<sup>6</sup> Crumb does not clearly unpack what he means by the title “pro-feminist” (though it is a term he uses to identify himself: see Hignite) but has been vocally critical of feminist

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<sup>6</sup> See n.3 above.

movements in his earlier years,<sup>7</sup> a move which suggests pro-feminism is not deeply connected to feminist perspectives. This is a perspective which, I argue, can be seen in some of his more recent work, *Genesis, Illustrated* included. By identifying as pro-feminist, Crumb suggests that he understands masculinity to be oppressive to women (though does not mention non-binary/LGBTQ+ members of society), and he sympathizes with many of the causes associated with feminism such as challenging unequal status between men and women; however, it does not appear that he actively pursues or involves himself in campaigns to further the feminist agenda.<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, it is normally men who identify as pro-feminist as they argue that feminism is a movement created by and for women, and to identify as a feminist for a cis-het male would be to colonize a women's movement and remove power and agency from the very group of oppressed people fighting to claim rights. For Crumb, then, identifying as pro-feminist is expressed through his visualizations of women in comic books, such as showing women in leadership roles and through positive characterizations. How well he expresses such representations is somewhat debatable and potentially reveals his misunderstanding or even basic understanding of gender politics.

Clearly, this definition and understanding of feminism (and by extension, pro-feminism) is highly problematic: there is not one form of feminism but many, including liberal, radical, black, queer and postmodern feminisms, and this diversity is reflected in the beliefs of men who identify

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<sup>7</sup> Sabin notes that Crumb responded to accusations of sexism by suggesting feminism was “analogous to fascism” and arguing that he had a right to present his opinions on any matter through text and image (Sabin 224 n12).

<sup>8</sup> For a general overview of the qualities of “pro-feminism,” see Burrell and Flood.

as pro-feminist as well (Burrell and Flood). However, one of the overarching viewpoints of pro-feminism is that it is a movement concerned with anti-sexism and anti-patriarchalism. This is a view that more recently at least, Crumb agrees and identifies with, and arguably has tried to incorporate into his remediation of Genesis.

In particular, Crumb has concentrated on depicting women as strong, story-leading figures in *Genesis, Illustrated*, a move which is influenced in part by his dependence on Savina J. Teubal's *Sarah the Priestess*.<sup>9</sup> It is worth noting that within the circle of biblical hermeneutics, Teubal's study has been widely critiqued for failing to provide supporting evidence for her claims, as well as situating modern feminist concerns onto ancient texts. The veracity of her work is not the concern of this chapter; however, Crumb's understanding and use of Teubal's work is important to understand the context of his remediations.

### **Teubal, Crumb, and Sarah, the First Matriarch of Genesis**

Published in 1984, Savina Teubal offers a perspective on the matriarch Sarah (who appears sporadically between Gen. 11:29-23:20) which is garnered from an archaeological, history-sociological and to an extent, literary approach (Teubal, xiv). Arguably based in a feminist reading of Sarah and the matriarchs, Teubal's thesis attests that Sarah is descended from a line of high-priestesses and a matriarchal society, elements of which she brought with her when she left her homeland to marry and travel with Abraham (Teubal, xv). Teubal reads Sarah as being of equal stature to and equal in importance with Abraham. Moreover, she contends that it is the narrative

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<sup>9</sup> For a more thorough discussion on Crumb's reading of Teubal, see Groth, "R. Crumb" 17-69.

of Sarah (and later the matriarchs Rebekah, Rachel, and Leah) which propels the story forward rather than their male counterparts:

In the story of Abraham the narratives begin with an account concerning Sarah and Pharaoh and continue with this women's trials in securing progeny. Finally, a whole chapter is dedicated to her place of burial. Of the forty-eight years of Abraham's life after Sarah's death there is no detail whatever. In other words, it is Sarah's role that furthers the story. (Teubal xv)

Within the book, Teubal revisits key scenes of Sarah's story which often seem to be missing information, or which are inconsistent with the rest of the narrative. In some cases, Teubal's approach is convincing and attractive, and it is easy to see why Crumb became so interested in this non-traditional approach to the matriarchs. In most cases, however, Teubal's thesis is based on assumptions about inconsistencies in the biblical text without historical or literary evidence for support. By highlighting such inconsistencies, problems, and moments of erasure within Sarah's story, Teubal gets to her overarching hypothesis: that such gaps exist because the stories of the matriarchs and patriarchs of Genesis were written at a time when a patriarchal society was developing in strength and power and was challenging and diminishing the power of a matriarchal culture which went before it, and that this can be read in the texts of Genesis pertaining to the matriarchs/patriarchs. While the theory has not gained much academic support, Crumb was captivated by the ideas within Teubal's book (Conan). As such, my analysis is concerned with Crumb's representation of the matriarchs, how he uses the tools of comics to construct their characters and stories concerning motherhood, and how this can be contextualised within the scope of biblical scholarship about women in Genesis.



### **Sarah the Priestess in *Genesis, Illustrated***

Sarah first appears in Gen. 11:29, and her story is told sporadically across the next twelve chapters, ending with her death and burial in Gen. 23:20. She is introduced to the reader as Abraham's wife, and it is noted that she is barren (Gen. 11:30). One of the most notable arguments within Teubal's study on Sarah was that the matriarch *chose* not to have children and was not barren. According to Teubal, this decision was linked to Sarah's role as a high-priestess, details of which are vague but include representing a goddess in the ceremony of *hieros gamos*, as well as playing a part in the ecclesiastical community in her area. Traditionally, the role of high-priestess in the Ancient Near Eastern traditions also encompasses certain political and social obligations such as acting as the spiritual head of the temple. However, because of Teubal's reading of the historical context of this story reflecting a time when matriarchal traditions are being usurped by patriarchal ideologies, Sarah's role as high-priestess is erased from the biblical text to better reflect contemporary social situations; ergo, Sarah is described as barren rather than choosing not to have a child.

The first image we see of Crumb's version of Sarah reflects her barrenness and does not suggest Teubal's ideas of decision-making (see figure 7.1). Taking centre position on the page, the panel frames Abraham embracing his brother Nahor, with Sarah on the right holding a bowl of food, which appears to be bread, and on the left, Nahor's wife Milcah nursing a new-born baby surrounded by excited people. The symmetry of the panel contents suggests this is a harmonious affair, but the look on Sarah's face suggests otherwise. Outside of the panel, in the hyperframe, is the text from 11:29. Within the panel in its own caption box, is the text from 11:30: "And Sarai

was barren. She has no child.”<sup>10</sup> The panel is designed to emphasise the contrast of situation and emotion which the text indicates. The embracing brothers act as a divider between a scene of a happy family situation on the left, and the lack of one on the right. **[Insert Figure 7.1]**

Sarah is the opposite of Milcah, who wears her hair behind her neck and a dress with a geometric design on it. Sarah wears her hair over her shoulders, and a dress with an organic, wavy line. Where Milcah nurses a child, Sarah holds a bowl of bread close to her body. Where Milcah shows happiness and a concentrated gaze on her child, along with the people surrounding her, Sarah looks away, showing no interest in the scene. The caption box above Sarah’s head, declaring her inability to bear a child, is in contrast to the unboxed text of 11:29, introducing the rest of the family.

Of special note here is Miller’s description of speech bubbles as “non-diegetic elements that intrude into the space of fiction” (Miller 97). The caption box is not a speech bubble, but Crumb has incorporated it in a way that it visually intrudes upon the space of the visual story, signifying the intrusion of the newcomer in Sarah’s space. The position of the text-box above her head is also reminiscent of a thought bubble, as if her supposed barren-ness is on her mind. To the reader, it might as well be a neon sign above Sarah screaming “infertile”.

The panel with Milcah and Sarah is larger than the others on the page, and is in a central position. The deliberate configuration of panels conveys what Crumb considers to be the most important point: the introduction of the family of Abraham, and the fact that Sarah is barren and

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<sup>10</sup> Prior to Gen. 17:5-15, Sarah is called Sarai and Abraham is called Abram in the biblical texts.

Unless quoting biblical text, I will refer to both characters as Sarah and Abraham to avoid confusion.

childless. Further, the position of that panel, which is themed around family and new life, contrasts with the contents of the panel beforehand, which is the scene of Haran's funeral and bereaved mourners, and of the succeeding panel which shows a departure: both from the happy family scene just witnessed, and from the hometown of Abraham and his family.

Crumb has configured this page to imply that the introduction of Abraham and his family is of central importance. Most importantly however, Crumb has composed this introduction to Abraham and Sarah in such a way that the reader is left under no illusion that a) Sarah is barren and childless; b) this contrasts Sarah with the rest of the family; and c) Sarah is not pleased about her situation. The scene marries the issues of fertility and child-rearing to Sarah, so that every time Sarah appears in Genesis from this point until the birth of Isaac, the reader sees that neon sign above her head, screaming "childless". To reinforce this, this page is partnered with the beginning of Gen. 12, where Abraham is first promised descendants. Crumb is using the periphery<sup>11</sup> – the field of vision within the viewer's periphery - to contrast themes of fertility and infertility against each other in panels and across pages. Moreover, the focus on Sarah's infertility over Abraham's narrative is the beginning of Crumb's attempt to locate Sarah at the center of the Abrahamic narrative in general, a move which continues across Gen. 16 and 18.

## **Genesis 16**

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<sup>11</sup> The periphery, or *périchamp*, is a term introduced by Benoît 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. See: Peeters, 1998: 41-42.

Sarah does not reappear in any significant part of the story until Genesis 16 (see figure 7.2). It starts with a reminder that Sarah is childless: “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, bore him no children” (16:1). The story concentrates on Sarah’s alleged quest for a child, and the consequences of her decision to fulfil that quest through her slave-girl, Hagar. It also contains the first record of Sarah speaking (16:2). Of note here is the visual contrast between Sarah and Hagar: Sarah is old, stern, powerful. Her head and body is covered; in contrast, Hagar is young with short black hair on show, and her simple robes show her figure, especially when pregnant. The simple garment is a visual reminder of Hagar’s subservient status to Sarah but is also a visual marker that Hagar is the opposite of Sarah in status, looks and child-bearing abilities.<sup>12</sup> **[Insert Figure 7.2]**

Maintaining a structure wherein the narrative directs the design of the panels, rather than the panels dictating how the story unfolds,<sup>13</sup> Crumb uses the principles of spatio-topical coding to his advantage: in other words, the pattern of frame shapes and sizes is designed to reflect the emotional content of this chapter – one of the clearest ways to embed emotion into a comic book

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<sup>12</sup> Athalya Brenner-Idan points out that often, pairs of women in the Bible are written in such a way that they complement each other – one woman has something the other does not – so that the two women when combined make a perfect, whole woman. See Brenner-Idan, 2015.

Crumb’s treatment of Sarah and Hagar is a visual representation of this.

<sup>13</sup> Narrative-dominant forms of comic books are either ‘Conventional Use’ (i.e. a regular grid of frames) or ‘Rhetorical Use’ (i.e. a pattern of frame shapes and sizes which reflect the demands of the story being told within the comic book). Crumb makes use of conventional narrative-dominant grids in *Genesis, Illustrated* which lend the story a systematic and logical framework through which to read the characters. See Miller 86.

(McCloud 94-117 and Eisner 24-26). For example, the first panel is a close-up of Sarah. Her eyes are looking behind her, creating a diagonal which the reader follows to the figure of Hagar, who is on her knees working behind Sarah.

The composition in this panel indicates Hagar's subservient status to Sarah, her mistress. It is repeated in the second panel where Hagar stands at a distance behind Sarah, making her appear smaller than the dominant matriarch and her husband. In almost every panel where Sarah appears with Hagar, Hagar appears smaller than her mistress. Also of note, Hagar is kneading bread in a large bowl in the first panel which is a recall to when the reader first meets Sarah who likewise holds a bowl of bread. In this panel it is Hagar that makes the bread, which is symbolic of her conceiving and carrying a child for Sarah to own, another example of tressage or weaving visual connections across the story.

In the third panel illustrating *Genesis* 16, narrative voice-over dominates the text, as the narrator describes Sarah giving Hagar to Abraham "as a wife" (see Fig. 7.3). The pairing of panels on this page signals that this "marriage" should be understood as ritualistic in the sense that, in the initial panel, Sarah stands over the joining of Abraham and Hagar's hands, as if presiding over a marriage ceremony, and physical in the sense that, in the next panel, Abraham and Hagar are pictured in a sexual embrace, consummating their "marriage". In the background, there is a large, rounded vase which is often associated with the womb, pregnancy or fertility in general. In both panels, Hagar is submissive, indicated by her smaller stature, her dropped gaze, and the physical dominance of Abraham in the consummation scene. **[Insert Figure 7.3]**

Some time has passed between the scene of conception and the following panel. Hagar is clearly pregnant, and in a reversal of the opening panel of this chapter, this time it is Sarah in the background and Hagar who is physically dominant. Pregnancy and fertility in Crumb's eyes are

enough to elevate a woman's status in the texts of Genesis. Crumb has purposefully drawn Sarah smaller. She sits in the doorway of a tent as Hagar proudly walks past, holding her pregnant stomach. This panel is captioned with 16:4, "and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress seemed diminished in her eyes."

Again, Crumb includes an empty basket, similar to one used to carry food or bread. It hangs above Sarah's head, in a call-back to the first two panels of Gen. 16 and Gen. 11:29. Crumb uses this as a symbol to signify Sarah's lack of child, and it continues to pop up. He depicts Sarah's indignation by a white aura around her body against a dark background, as if her anger is emanating from her frame, when Sarah confronts Abraham. This aura is drawn negatively in spikes which point towards Abraham.

The background then turns to total blackness, when an angry Sarah exclaims at an annoyed Abraham, "Let the Lord judge between you and me!" There is no light or joy in Sarah's tone. Abraham's eyes are squeezed tightly shut in this panel, as if by not being able to see Sarah, he cannot hear her. Sarah's final appearance in this chapter also closes the page, and contrasts with the marriage scenes which opened the page. Sarah blessing the union of Abraham and Hagar after he "heeded the words of Sarai" has turned to become Sarah harassing Hagar, forcing her to flee from the union and her home.

The design of the whole page neatly showcases the emotional aspects of the narrative.<sup>14</sup> It moves from a place of giving/security, to physical touch/intimacy, to distress (from Sarah) and

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<sup>14</sup> Thierry Groensteen's understanding of the multistage multiframe is that the page itself constitutes a single unit with the narrative of the comic book (hyperframe) but that other units of information – strips, panels, double-page spreads, and the comic book as a whole are

contempt (allegedly, from Hagar), to anger (from Sarah), and frustration (from Abraham). It ends in Sarah venting her emotions, “harassing” Hagar and banishing her. Hagar’s own situation is upended across the panels, moving from a place of marriage and security to isolation and a quest for survival. Crumb has successfully utilised the resources of comic-making by using the page as a single unit to tell the emotional cycle of the story of Sarah and her initial solution to providing Abraham with a child within the periphery for the reader. Furthermore, it again positions Sarah as the central character of this arc who is given agency and direction, subverting the original texts of the biblical Genesis wherein Sarah is often read as no more than a passive character.

### **Genesis 18**

In Gen. 18, the narrator begins by describing Abraham’s location at the door of his tent in the heat of the day, when three men appear before him (see figure 7.4). Abraham springs to his feet, offering hospitality to the strangers and ordering Sarah to make bread (18:1-5). Sarah has visibly aged after her appearance in Gen. 16; she sits on the floor, working at what might be a loom. The rounded vase makes an appearance in the corner of the panel, next to which sits a basket, similar to the one held by Sarah in previous panels. **[Insert Figure 7.4]**

The same vase and basket appear in the panel relating to Gen. 18:8, which shows the strangers sitting down to eat. Similar to their appearances in earlier chapters, Crumb uses the items as symbols that the promise of a child for Sarah and Abraham will be fulfilled – the basket will be

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multiframes. Multistage multiframes are “systems of panel proliferation that are increasingly inclusive” and “the multiframe is the sum of the frames that compose a given comic” which include the sum of the hyperframes within each comic book. See Groensteen 30-1.

filled, the vase will hold water, or life. The pronouncement of a child for Sarah is divided over three smaller panels which appear in the second row, the central position of the panel grid, centring the promise in story of the page. Once the visitor has declared that Sarah shall bear a son within a year, Crumb depicts Abraham's surprise using exclamatory marks which emanate from his shocked facial expression. In complete contrast, Sarah is shown in the next panel, in the bottom row of the grid, with a hand to her face as if in deep thought. She shows little emotion – certainly not shock like Abraham – instead, her body language is such that her arm is curled protectively over her stomach indicating there is truth in the pronouncement. Once again, the corner of a basket appears in the edge of the panel.

In this panel, Crumb uses a thought bubble to identify Sarah's thoughts: "Now that I'm withered, shall I have pleasure, and my husband so *old*!?" The thought bubble positions the reader in a unique position to comics because the text implies Sarah speaks the words out loud, to herself (the NRSV for example states: "So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?") but with the use of a thought bubble, Crumb implies Sarah thinks these thoughts to herself. Therefore, the reader is involved in her thought process, and we become privy to Sarah's innermost voice. When this is paired with the next panel, where the visitor questions why Sarah laughed and said "shall I really give birth, old as I am??", the implication is that the visitor can also read her thoughts, or in fact, hear them. If the visitor is, as suggested, an embodiment of God, then the reader is given the same status as the divine by being allowed to read Sarah's thoughts.

On the next page, the visitor continues to respond to Sarah's reaction. In a call-back to 16:5, Crumb replicates the use of an angry aura, white on black emanating from the figure as he speaks, directed towards Abraham who cowers into the frame, diminished against the tall, angry



visitor. Though his reprimand is directed towards Abraham, it is Sarah who is shown in full profile in the next panel, visibly shaking as she denies laughing. She is not seen again in Gen. 18. The arc of child-bearing is completed in Gen. 21, which is the fulfilment of the promise to Sarah and Abraham from God to provide them with a child.

### **Representations of Sarah in *Genesis, Illustrated***

Initially, the overriding portrayal of Sarah in Crumb's interpretation of Genesis is one of a dominant, powerful woman and not a domineering, controlling woman. Visual and textual analysis of Sarah's story in relation to motherhood present a character who is strong-willed, forceful and clever. She understands the importance of her role in God's covenant with Abraham, but also harbours her own ambitions to become a mother. While this is not always the case, the narrative of Sarah's quest for motherhood between Gen. 16 and 21 is certainly told with Sarah at the forefront of the dialogue, action and power relations between herself, her husband, and her slave Hagar.

This representation of Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar is a non-traditional reading of the texts of Genesis, and it reflects Crumb's interpretation of the text, as well as the sources which he used to shape his text. Most significantly, his remediation reflects the influence of Teubal especially in terms of presenting Sarah as a dominant character, and Abraham as a passive, weak character. Even so, I do not think that Crumb presents Sarah as a high-priestess throughout these passages in any way, shape or form. Being a strong, dominant leader of a character does not equal the role of a high-priestess, but his reluctance to depict Sarah in that role is probably connected to his desire to faithfully reproduce the text of the Bible. Because Sarah never appears as a high-priestess within the biblical text, it is almost impossible for Crumb to present her as such in his remediation without

offering further explanation to the reader. Offering further explanation would go against his aim of allowing the text to stand as it is and would demonstrate external influences to the reader much more obviously than Crumb would want.

The idea of Sarah as dominant and Abraham as passive also goes against the more traditional idea of Abraham as the patriarch, the father of nations, who is supported by his wife, nominally a secondary character in the text. Another challenge to traditional interpretations of Genesis is the fact that Hagar is also portrayed in a more significant light in Crumb's work than normal, especially in terms of giving a face and a prominent visual role to a slave who is supposed to occupy and represent the margins of society. While she is still somewhat marginalized within the visual representation of her story, Crumb attempts to depict Hagar as a woman who has a happy ending despite the wrongs done to her by visually connecting her to Sarah at the end of Gen 21:20-21 where she presides over Ishmael's marriage. The visual links suggest that as everything turned out well for Sarah, it also turned out well for Hagar.

One aspect which I have not yet discussed is whether or not Crumb can be accused of adhering to a particular stereotype of a Jewish woman in his representations of Sarah, a question which would apply to other women in his remediation of Genesis as well. Has Crumb drawn Sarah as dominant and in control, or is she domineering and controlling? If the latter, Sarah's character may be read as an overbearing Jewish woman or, indeed, a stereotypical Jewish mother? As Lois Braverman notes, the stereotype of a Jewish woman (and Jewish mother in particular) brings to mind ideas of women who are heavily involved in their children's lives, who are controlling, domineering "pushy, loud, seductive, materialistic, guilt-inducing" and often more so in the case of sons (Braverman 10). Given that in American popular culture this is a stereotype created and

propagated during the 1960s when Crumb began his career in California, it is safe to surmise that Crumb would have been exposed to and aware of such stereotypes (Ravits 4).

In that respect, it is not impossible that he consciously or subconsciously drew the matriarchal characters in adherence to those stereotypes. Sarah and the successive matriarchs Rebekah, Rachel and Leah were, after all, the first Jewish mothers in the Bible. Because Crumb has not distanced himself from the stereotypes he knows to exist, this allows the reader to engage with those stereotypes should they interpret the characters that way in *Genesis, Illustrated*. I do not read the matriarchs as stereotypes of Jewish women; rather, I read them through the lens of Teubal's theories which means they are powerful, in control and dominant as pro-feminist visions of women. Crumb's eagerness to represent the matriarchs as dominant creates a tension in which his representations of the matriarchs can also be interpreted as perpetuating stereotypes of Jewish women. This tension is underscored by Crumb's suggestions of Jewish ethnicity in his representations of the matriarchs and is created partly through the history of Christian reception of the biblical texts, in which the ethnicity of the characters – assumed to be historical figures – has been a source of anxiety.

### **Drawing Conclusions**

Crumb's pro-feminist portrayal of the matriarchs contradicts with what many believe him to be: he has often been described as misogynistic, sexist, racist, and sexually perverse. He can also be accused of adhering to stereotypes of strong women by often portraying Sarah as a domineering and controlling figure rather than a dominant figure in control. However, the fact that her character can be read in both ways represents Crumb's ambiguous idea of pro-feminism, where he draws women through a man's eyes rather than stepping into a woman's shoes.

In this sense, Crumb's unwillingness to identify as feminist and his sympathy with the feminist cause means that Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* encourages the reader to believe women had more control than they actually probably did, and it is a reminder that even if we want to read them as women in control of their own destinies, their stories are still bound by the patriarchal system in which Genesis was originally written, and in which it is still received.

Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* in particular shows the power that image has over word. As was his intention, Crumb remains "faithful" to the biblical texts – that is, he does not leave out any story, character or image presented in the versions of the Bible which he consulted as sources. However, while Crumb has not changed anything textually, he has added layer upon layer of suggestion, emotion, and interpretation through the addition of images. In that respect, he has literally given a face and voice to each character, and they have come to life, bringing the text with them.

As with any adaptation or interpretation of a sacred text, Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* and other biblical comics should be considered cultural markers. *Genesis, Illustrated* documents what its creator holds to be of value, and also often reflects societal perceptions. For example, Crumb wanted his Genesis to portray Sarah as a strong woman from a high priestess tradition, but instead has presented us with a woman who often appears vulnerable, upset, angry and unsure of her status in Abraham's world. This ambiguous portrayal of a feminist reading of the Bible arguably reflects Crumb's own understanding and interpretation of pro-feminist ideology which is itself a problematic notion that truly fails to take into account intersectional identities or power dynamics between genders. Perhaps the ambiguity of pro-feminism as an ideology is why Sarah is herself an ambiguous character, unsure of her place in a man's world.

One might argue that credit should be given where credit is due to Crumb because *Genesis, Illustrated* is at the least an attempt to re-present biblical women in stronger positions than the text actually suggests. However, by attempting to refashion Genesis in response to a shift in cultural notions of gender, Crumb's depiction of women is somewhat confusing to the reader who is never sure if they are strong, independent women or nagging, mouthy matriarchs.

Finally, the tools of comics used by Crumb open *Genesis* to layers of interpretation that text alone cannot support. Comic creators are in that respect simultaneously interpreters and open to interpretation (Alderman 36), and depending on how they are read, text-image narratives allow for different readings of the text to emerge which are as meaningful as other critical readings of ancient texts such as the Bible.

On that point, Crumb's *Genesis, Illustrated* is not just a cultural marker but a marker in biblical reception. The history of the interpretation of the Bible has shaped our culture profoundly, and ignorance of the Bible leads to ignorance of significant cultural products from Renaissance art to Victorian novels, and now to biblical comics. Along with other biblical comics, Crumb's remediation of *Genesis Illustrated* continues the work of interpretation and reception in biblical exegesis, exploring the boundary crossings between ancient text and modern popular culture and regenerating what is after all, a very old text indeed.

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