Imagining the Scandal of the Cross with Graphic/Novel Reading

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Imagining the Scandal of the Cross with Graphic/Novel Reading

A Dissertation

Presented to

the Faculty of the University of Denver and the Iliff School of Theology

Joint PhD Program

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Elizabeth Rae Coody

June 2015

Advisor: Gregory A. Robbins
Abstract

For countless adherents to the Christian tradition, the Cross functions as a symbol of divine power. For the earliest Christians, however, this overwhelmingly positive valuation of crosses would have been unintelligible. Living under Roman rule, their immediate understanding of crosses would have been as instruments of execution and thus symbols of the power and victory belonging to a foreign empire rather than to the Lord they worshipped. For them, the crucifixion was a traumatic event in which the Messiah died shamefully. It is for these reasons that the scandal of the Cross is a prominent theme in the New Testament, yet it is precisely this scandal that the traditional valuation of the Cross has come to domesticate and exclude from popular interpretation.

The academic discipline of biblical interpretation can help readers recapture an understanding and appreciation for this scandal by embracing hermeneutical practices that recognize the “weirdness” of the Cross. It is “weird” in that it is a symbol in which the world and the divine come together in startling, confounding, and undeniably violent fashion. The standard practices of biblical interpreters will not do, however, insofar as they remain imbued with modernity’s categorical mistrust of the supernatural elements of biblical texts. Comic books and graphic novels, on the other hand, are a contemporary medium in which the most challenging and outlandish elements associated with the Cross are not only tolerated but embraced and appropriated.
This dissertation places several New Testament passages that interpret the Cross from Galatians, 1 Corinthians, and Mark’s Gospel into dialogue with comics and graphic novel portrayals of the life and death of Jesus. The outcome of this dialogical reading is that the effectiveness in which the comics texts present the weirdness and scandal of the Cross helps illuminate where these same elements are operative in the New Testament. Foremost among the theological implications of this study is the manner in which such an understanding of the Cross increases the power of biblical texts for present-day readers.
Acknowledgements

Though this is a project about comics rather than superheroes, there are many heroes who made this work possible. My parents, Gene and Johnny, first allowed me to dream of doing a doctoral degree. Their love, support, and patience never stops. Gregory Robbins has been an inspirational advisor; I hope he recognizes himself in this final product. Pamela Eisenbaum has advised me since my master’s program, and it is in part thanks to her that I had the audacity to do this project. Jeffrey Mahan offered support and encouragement of the best kinds at critical times. Rafael Fajardo was a rare and invaluable find in the world of art and technology. Julia Lupton was a muse of theory that I met at the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University.

Katie O’Brien Fisher of the Ira J. Taylor Library at the Iliff School of Theology offered exuberant help in finding many obscure and wacky resources. Deborah Creamer, Heike Peckruhn, April Favara, and Christa Schwind offered many wise words at exactly the right time. Dave Scott has been my helpmate and co-conspirator through the whole “dissertation thing.” We survived and even thrived together.

I offer this to the memory of my aunt Hope Ann Crain, who found comfort in the crucifix she always wore. Her memory is a blessing to all of us who remember her. That Cross and many others remain beautiful to my eyes.
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Eric Peterson for images from: Eric Peterson (w), and Ethan Nicolle (w,a), *Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun*. vol. 1: A Hollow Cost. [Unknown]: Bad Karma Productions, 2009.


Creators whose approval is pending retain full rights to their work. By including them in this scholarly discussion, I have no intent to profit from or reproduce their work elsewhere. This is for the dissertation alone for educational purposes. They include:

Jimmy Blondell (w), David Krintzman (w), and Nicholas Da Silva (a). *Black Jesus*. Coquitlam, B.C., Canada: Arcana Comics, 2009.


Key for Comics Citations

Comics publications are notoriously difficult to cite thoroughly because of the number of creators involved in each piece and the inconsistent values placed on location and credit. I am guided in my citation of comics by the work of Allen Ellis, research and instructional services librarian at Northern Kentucky University, who created *Comic Art in Scholarly Writing: A Citation Guide* in accordance with the Comic Art and Comics area of the Popular Culture Association (http://www.comicsresearch.org/CAC/cite-em.html). He adds the following letters behind creator names to indicate their contribution to the work.

w- Writer
a- Artist
p- Penciller (often credited as “artist”) 
i- Inker
l- Letterer

Although there are more jobs in comic creation, and as Ellis says, “we must stop somewhere.”

[]- indicates information not shown on the material itself but gained from other resources

?- indicates uncertainty that is sometimes inevitable in comic research

General Format:
Writer (w), Artist (a), Penciller (p), Inker (i), Letterer (l). “Story/Chapter Title.” *Title of Comic*. vol. Volume Number, # Issue Number. Series Title (Date Published), Place Published: Publisher, Year.

Example:
Chapter One: Imagining a Biblical Studies Project

Southern trees bear a strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black bodies swinging in the southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

Pastoral scene of the gallant south,
The bulging eyes and the twisted mouth,
Scent of magnolias, sweet and fresh,
Then the sudden smell of burning flesh.

Here is fruit for the crows to pluck,
For the rain to gather, for the wind to suck,
For the sun to rot, for the trees to drop,
Here is a strange and bitter crop

—Abel Meeropol, “Strange Fruit”
As famously performed by Billie Holiday

The view of the sunset over the Rocky Mountains from almost anywhere in Denver, Colorado is unbelievably beautiful. The riot of color over the jagged peaks is the definition of sublime.¹ After the sun sinks below the horizon, just to the south, a large Christian Cross made of powerful lights brightens against the side of a lower peak.² The

---

¹ Already, words are loaded. I use the “sublime” here to echo work of both Immanuel Kant and Henry Wordsworth.

² The lighted Cross is hosted by Olinger Mount Lindo Cemetery (Morrison, Colorado) and was first illuminated on Easter morning in 1964. (http://www.dignitymemorial.com) The capitalization of Cross is intentional. Throughout this work, a lower-case “cross” indicates the object which might be anything from a railroad trestle to a torture device for an insurrectionist, the upper-case “Cross” refers specifically to an object that symbolizes the cross upon which Jesus died or the true Cross itself. These are not interchangeable. The implications of these choices will be explained shortly in the section “Usage of ‘Cross.’”
experience of seeing this 400-foot Cross set against the grandeur of the 15,000-foot mountain peaks after the spectacular sunset is nearly always anticlimactic, almost regardless of any other feelings and meanings the viewer holds with the symbol. Guests who see it for the first time are often a bit bemused and wonder what this particular symbol is doing there. The human story behind this Cross on the mountain confuses these feelings further. Denver millionaire Francis Van Derbur commissioned the Cross. He created this Cross to mark his father’s grave so that, as he tells it, his mother could see the grave from her window: “I put up larger and larger lights until, finally, I installed this 400-foot illuminated cross so that my mother could see exactly were her beloved husband was buried.” The entire city of Denver can see it when they look west. What only became clear years later was that the same man who constructed this ostentatious proclamation of Christian power had hidden a dark secret for decades. This same man sexually molested his daughter Marilyn nearly every night from the time she was five years old until she left his house at eighteen. He controlled his family through terror of his violence and kept a stick with which to threaten and beat his wife and daughters over every doorframe. Knowing her painful story of incest and years of struggle to tell her own story, even to herself, gives seeing the Cross her father imposed on Denver another layer of confusion. Marilyn Van Derbur has worked hard to turn her painful story into an object lesson and has helped countless people with similar struggles. Something of her triumph is there in the Cross on the mountain; it is a pride in survival and overcoming

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4 Van Derbur, *Miss America by Day*, 20.
haunted by the abuser who made the sign there. The importance of the Cross in Christian life, from the time Constantine to the present day, can hardly be overstated. However, horror like the suffering of an innocent child is rarely a clear feature of this symbol.

As the darkness gathers and the glowing crossed lines become more distinct in the clear Denver night, I am often struck by a version of the unwieldy question, “What is this Cross?” What do people imagine the Cross to be when it is on the mountain or anywhere else it appears? That is, I want to understand the ways the Cross acts on the imagination. I want to begin to see the Cross as a bundle of ideas constructed in relationship to the people who think about it.5 For me, “What is this Cross?” has become what Nils Dahl calls one of the “really burning questions [that] cannot be answered in principle, but only through constant new encounters with material.”6

While living with this provocative view of Denver and the Cross, I had a new encounter with the Cross in Steve Ross’s graphic novel Marked—a work that re-presents the Gospel of Mark in comics form in wonderfully weird ways. In Ross’s techno-dystopia Jesus gasps his final words on a mechanized Cross with a grotesque spigot dripping his blood into a bucket, while insect-like cameras crowd around.7 (Ross 2005, Illustration i)8

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5 In making this move from strictly historical to more postmodern questions about the Cross, I echo the questions Wayne Meeks raises about the Jesus “who made history” rather than the historical Jesus (21). That is, I am more interested in the Cross as it acts, rather than the Cross as it exists in history. Wayne A. Meeks, Christ is the Question (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 20-23, 83-100.


7 Steve Ross (w, a), Marked. (New York: Seabury Church Publishing, 2005), n.p.
The unfamiliar experience of the Cross inspired me to seek out more new experiences of the Cross in comics and what are often called “graphic novels” in order to watch the interplay between the Biblical text and comics interpretations. I have sought out new encounters with the Cross through irreverent interpreters often ignored by scholars and Christians alike, and found they have a fascinating set of insights into the Cross that expresses the confused pain found in the Cross as it lives in the modern world. This endeavor has led to this project’s imaginings of how Paul and Mark use the Cross in the New Testament.

**Thesis of the Project**

By doing a close reading of the New Testament by means of comics, I will show that the Cross that Mark and Paul scandalously evoke is “weird” and attempt to uncover the means by which Paul and Mark use the subversive gathering power that the weird Cross affords. For the purpose of this project, “weird” contains a weighty etymological history that I will detail momentarily. In short, the weird combines the ideas of fate, strangeness, otherworldliness, uncertainty, horror, terror, and the spectacle of the odd. Comics can expose and relish this weirdness in a way that traditional biblical scholarship has not been capable of doing. Through a dialogue between this novel and graphic understanding of Paul and Mark and the weird Cross these biblical writers conjure in the

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8 All illustrations included with this work are found in the “Illustrations” section at the end of the document. They are noted in the text with the label “Illustration” and a Roman numeral.

9 The identity of the author of the Gospel of Mark is not a concern of this project. I will call the author “Mark” without deciding on a historical identity for him other than the locating statements I will make at the beginning of the close reading of Mark in the appropriate chapter.
New Testament, I can re-appropriate and move toward a more abundant imagining of the weirdness of the Cross that they “used” in first century Christianity.\textsuperscript{10} My concern for what this means for Christians who inherit this symbol and carry it as part of their Christianity runs throughout the project.

Although this is a scholarly, theological account that makes use of academic language and theoretical schools, it is also a personal project for me as, I dare say, scholarly projects always are.\textsuperscript{11} My encounters with crosses did not begin in Denver with the spectacular and disconcerting view. I grew up white in the southern United States, where religion, particularly evangelical Protestantism, is a “tangible part of the landscape of places where many people were passionate and open about their faith.”\textsuperscript{12} The dialogue among Christian churches and between these churches and the institutions and people of the South has shaped its character from the first European settlement. This legacy continued though my own upbringing. My parents and I joined Broadmoor United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana when I was five years old, a majority white middle-class congregation of around 400 on Sundays in a bustling, quiet neighborhood. Although the stained-glass windows are colorful and illustrate stories from the Bible and

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{10} I am making use of the nuances of “use” as defined by Michel de Certeau, that is as an active selection of a good that one remakes for another purpose, interest, or value. See my section “Users and Affordances” below.

\textsuperscript{11} Karl Barth explains: “For a short time, around 1910, this idea [that complete impartiality is the only mode that befits exegesis] threatened to achieve almost canonical status in Protestant theology. But now we can quite calmly describe it as merely comical.” Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics (vol 1:2, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 469.

\end{flushleft}
Methodist history in moving ways, it is the Cross that dominates the sanctuary.\textsuperscript{13} It is a simple, empty wooden cross-sculpture with wavy lines running through it. (Lewis 1952, Illustration ii) The official literature from the church describes it poetically, “The light is ever changing and the curve of the oak suggests the movement of flame or wind—both symbols of the spirit.”\textsuperscript{14} The sculpture is suggestive of these things to certain Christian-trained eyes, but “The Cross” (the sculpture’s official name) remains open to other interpretations. I have heard people talk about this Cross as a strong focal point that should not be blocked by other objects (a projection screen, for example), a turn-off to young visitors, an attraction for new members, a reminder of the Methodist cross and flame, even (rarely and disturbingly) the sign of a burning cross à la the Ku Klux Klan. This particularly horrifying “movement of flame” has not, to my knowledge, been discussed from the pulpit. Between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and until roughly 1950, the KKK and like-minded individuals perpetrated the lynching and terrorization of African Americans all over the United States. There are 54 documented victims of lynching in Shreveport’s parish.\textsuperscript{15} Yet, this is not a regular topic of discussion in the Broadmoor congregation. Nor has it ever been to my knowledge. This is a plain case of what James Cone calls “a defect in the conscience of white Christians” that I seek to

\textsuperscript{13} Jack Lewis and Novem Mason, \textit{The Cross}, 1952, Broadmoor United Methodist Church-Shreveport.


work toward healing.\textsuperscript{16} To show the Cross as “weird” is an act of imagination that is able to hold the disparate parts of the idea of weirdness together. This kind of act is a small step toward finding a more robust imagination that can hold more of the abundant meanings of the Cross.

I only vaguely remember being intrigued by “The Cross” the first time I saw it as a child, certainly not anxious or afraid. The official description of Broadmoor’s Cross sculpture reminds the readers that the “fluid beauty of the sculptured cross is in stark contrast to the rough hewn cross that Jesus bore.”\textsuperscript{17} As a child, I knew that Jesus’s Cross was the means of his death. Nevertheless, I was often loved and comforted at my church, so I associated the Cross and that sculpture in particular with the warmth of family and close friends. I seek a vision of the Cross that can hold this comfort.

However, I understand with increasing intensity that there is much more to be known about crosses and the Cross, much of which is painful and horrifying.\textsuperscript{18} Like the abuse borne in silence for years by Marilyn Van Derbur, the Cross is the site of profound violence and torture. Feminist and womanist scholars in particular have pointed out the problems with having a violent image of suffering at the center of the Christian message for people who suffer and especially for those, like women, for whom the dominant society imposes suffering as their “proper” burden. Rather, in their work “the death of

\textsuperscript{16} James H. Cone, \textit{The Cross and the Lynching Tree} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 32.

\textsuperscript{17} Wood, \textit{Building in Faith}, 1.

Jesus on the cross is a tragic event that should not continue to be visited on the lives of women.”

Interpreters like Rita Brock, Joanne Brown and Rebecca Parker find most common interpretations of the Cross to be sadistic and hurtful to women in particular. In their view, the death of Jesus was caused and carried out by systems of patriarchal power, so it was only necessitated by and continues to be served by these systems. To resist the Cross is to resist political oppression. Delores Williams levels a powerful critique at interpreters who imagine the Cross as only a symbol of redemptive suffering. She asks whether a surrogate God figure who suffers on a Cross is liberating or simply reinforces the suffering surrogacy experience of black women.

I take this caution to heart as a part of the bundle of concepts that make up the Cross, but I want to show more parts to the meaning of the Cross than redemptive suffering. What I offer here is an understanding of the Cross as the sort of dangerous thing that these women show it to be—something “weird” that must be understood as such. These feminists and womanists inform me that the power of the Cross has must be treated with caution.

I want to offer a more rounded understanding that takes the concerns of these interpreters and builds from them rather than avoiding them. Marilyn Van Derbur was able to find the beginning of her healing through the care of a Christian pastor friend, D.D. Harvey. When he finally began to suspect that childhood abuse might play a part in her adult marital problems, she sobbed out a confession:

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“Don’t… tell… anyone.” I know now that those are the three words that almost every survivor of childhood rape/sexual violations thinks or says. D.D.’s response to my plea was brilliant… “Who don't you want me to tell?” That would prove to be a life-changing question and a simple one to answer.\textsuperscript{21}

Her instantaneous response was Larry, her childhood sweetheart. “D.D.’s response chilled me to the bone ‘Then Larry is the only one we have to tell.’ Only one word was screaming inside my head. ‘Never. Never. \textit{Never.}’” Despite her initial resistance, telling Larry gave her a steady ally in what has become a lifelong service to children and adults who have experienced the betrayal and heartbreak of incest and sexual abuse. The very person that her shame and guilt insisted she keep her secret from became what she calls her “dearest friend” and “hero.” In a similar way, I struggle to find a way to articulate the violence and trouble of the Cross to those who need to hear it most, but from whom interpreters keep it: the laity of the church, especially those who suffer themselves.

The tangle of this effort means finding a way to be honest with the abundant meanings of the Cross. To this serious effort, I will use whatever means I can, even comics—even the most ridiculous and crazy comics. Indeed comics, by their complex use of text and image at the same time allow meanings to be multiple by design. The Cross is already a bundle of concepts. It is more than the bare fact of the event, the fervent faith of martyrdom, or the “hour” of glory that John repeatedly names (John 17:1; 16:2, 4, 21, 25; 13:1; 12:23). These factors are all included in the conceptual reality of the Cross, but they are not complete alone. It is such a mass of disparate concepts that include but are not limited to the event itself, the faith required to follow the crucified, the hour at hand, the suffering involved in the original moment or the long history of sharing in that suffering.

\textsuperscript{21} Van Derbur, \textit{Miss America by Day}, 107.
or resisting that suffering; insight on more of these concepts might travel from many sources. The biblical text is a major source of these concepts.

When Paul invokes the Cross as power and glory, he understands the tension of having the Cross a central part of his message as σκάνδαλον, often translated as “scandal,” “offense,” or “stumbling block,” certainly something uncomfortable or disruptive (1 Cor 1:23, Gal 5:11). To ignore this tension dangerously suppresses the way New Testament faith relies on the process of overcoming this Christological problem and flagrantly ignores the plight of the suffering in the world. To imagine the Cross means to attend to the great love as well as the great tragedy that makes it a powerful symbol through its transformations over the centuries. It merits an ironic sensibility paired with a delicate understanding of one of the core “images by which the Christian imagination articulates its self-understanding.” In this project I will define the Cross not quite as Paul’s σκάνδαλον (or “scandal”), but as “weird,” a name for the way Paul and Mark use the Cross that I have chosen both for its interesting etymological history and for its common place in American English. I will argue that pairing the creative imagination of comics and New Testament understandings of the Cross can reveal what the Cross does for those who use its weirdness. I offer a vision of the Cross Paul and Mark describe remixed through comics in order to understand this weirdness.

22 Paul Sevier Minear, Images of the Church in the New Testament (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 16. As Minear says, “To focus attention on images may alleviate the difficulties [of understanding the New Testament church in modern times], since they sometimes transcend changes in forms, concepts, and practices better than does the more prosaic language. On the other hand, they many enhance difficulties, since they are peculiarly subject to changes in content which are hidden behind continuity in sound” (17).

23 This will be explained below in the section below called “Weird.”
In this chapter, I introduce this particular biblical study as an act of “imagining” the Cross as articulated and “used” in the New Testament. I explain the importance of the key terms “weird,” “imagine,” “use,” and “Cross” as I will be defining them in this project. I show how the Cross is an example of a moment of “abundance” that biblical studies needs creative assistance to access. This chapter sets the stage for the overall project. The next chapter explains how comics can provide that creative assistance necessary to find the weirdness of the Cross (chapter 2) in a graphic/novel close and theological reading of the crucifixion centered on Pauline and Markan texts (chapters 3 and 4). In closing (chapter 5), I use this work to offer something of this weirdness to contemporary Christians who value Paul and Mark’s texts and use the Cross in their own ways and to show the part of the past in our present. My focus is on the theological nature of the Cross through the images in the Bible as seen through comics. Before I explain how I will go about the task of imagining the Cross, I first show how the concept of “weird” fits into this project.

Weird

Paul describes the Cross as σκάνδαλον in 1 Corinthians and Galatians. Most translate the word with its cognate as “scandal,” and it can be less figuratively a trap or a snare. In the New Testament, most often it is understood to be a stumbling block or an offense. It is a provocative term used by a provocative writer in letters where he

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explicitly seeks to provoke his audience. By juxtaposing the Crucified Christ or the Cross with dangerous objects—as a trap or the trigger of a trap, an impediment placed in the way and causing one to stumble or fall—he uses a common word that might shock his hearers. I am not using weird as a direct translation of σκάνδαλον; this would not be etymologically responsible. Rather, I am using weird as a corollary that allows modern readers to relate to the Cross in our world in a way that dovetails with how Paul and Mark ask their hearers to relate to the Cross. Whereas Paul and Mark have their readers’ own experiences of their physical world to draw from, I am showing my readers comics in order to communicate this concept. Weird is a strategic choice, as it has an interesting and weighted etymological history.

The word ‘weird’ was common in Old English, although it does not appear in Middle English until c. 1300. When used as a noun, “weird” meant fate or destiny. Once William Shakespeare used in it Macbeth to refer to the “Weird Sisters” who control and report fate, it became an adjective describing something that has the supernatural power of dealing with fate or destiny. For example, Banquo uses “weird” as an adjective describing the witches to Macbeth, just before Macbeth goes to murder the king: “I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters:/ To you they have showed some truth.”

These sisters are not only related to fate, they are also strange and disturbing, propelling the tragic plot. Here the word also took on the nuance of something uncomfortably strange or uncanny. Hence, in common use it refers to something unusual but also

25 Macbeth II.1.20.

points to the source of that strangeness being something otherworldly. However, the Scottish play is not the last time the word “weird” changed in nuance in English.  

Even a cursory consideration of mid-century popular and pulp fiction of many genres in North America reveals producers’ fondness for the word in a variety of situations. Instead of understanding the “weird” as repellent, they used the word “weird” to attract and titillate their audiences. Consistently, weird in the 20th century describes the adventures and creatures in the titles and advertisement of the monster B-movies peculiar to the era. Weird was also a hot-button word for the burgeoning and incredibly successful comic book industry. Titles like *Weird Chills, Weird Fantasy, Weird Horrors, Weird Mysteries, Weird Science, Weird Science-Fantasy*, and *Weird Thrillers* populated comics through the 1940s and 50s. These titles displayed the sort of heterodoxy—sex, violence, disobedience to recognized authorities, and otherworldly power—that was under attack in the 1950s Comics Trials before the United States Congress. The resistance to the weird had been brewing for over a decade, often in church contexts. For example, Rev. Thomas E. Doyle wrote an article titled “What's Wrong with Comics?” in the February 1943 issue of the monthly *Catholic World*. He distrusted the otherworldliness, supernaturalism, “weird names and still weirder attributes” of popular superheroes like the Flash and Hawkman. He was troubled that their “untold power” to “defy natural laws” made

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27 The most recent change to “weird” is in the verb. The draft additions to the 2003 *OED* include the sense “to weird out”, that is, “to induce a sense of discomfort, alienation, strangeness, etc., in; to make anxiously uncomfortable.” *Oxford English Dictionary* [Electronic Resource], s.v. “Weird, v.”

superheroes “false cartoon gods.” The weird here is negative version of an aspect of
religion that Doyle wants the church to retain some control over—the supernatural.

In the stresses of the post-war decades, weirdness became the improper use of
supernatural powers. Weird was always an uncomfortable thing, but there was an
increased sensitivity to the subversion of authority in the McCarthy era. As far back as
Macbeth’s murder of his king, the weird dealt in the troubling of governmental powers,
but this sense took on extra dangers in the tense U.S. socio-political climate. To be weird
was to be an untrustworthy outsider and related to horror, terror, and the spectacle of the
odd. Rather that delighting in this in the sense of the weird and wonderful, the U.S.
religious and governmental authorities by and large condemned it as dangerous to the
American way of life. “It was a bad time to be weird,” claims Weird Science writer Al
Williamson; “You were either a Communist or a juvenile delinquent.”

However, Williamson and others called on the Bible as a warrant for weirdness.
Williamson’s brand of “weird” included a Genesis-inspired time travel story in the
November-December 1953 issue of Weird Science. In the attempt to cut back on the less
socially acceptable forms of weirdness, he relied on the weirdness of the creation
account. By telling a story set in Eden, he could both give his audience the weird the title
promises while protecting himself from criticism. Before the U.S. Congress, publisher
William M. Gaines appealed to his father’s then decade-old title Picture Stories from the
Bible as support for the value of comics. In his testimony on April 21, 1954 he claimed

29 Hadju, Ten-Cent Plague, 81.


that the comics industry had “weaned hundreds of thousands of children from pictures to the printed word… stirred their imagination, given them an outlet for their problems and frustrations, but most important, given them millions of hours of entertainment.” He appealed to the Bible and educational value as a last-ditch effort to recover his sinking industry.  

Weird is fraught with misunderstandings. Gaines claimed that the first motion of the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA), an industry-led association that met in response to the trials, was to ban his “three big words”: weird, horror, and terror. The CMAA never formally limited the use of the word “weird,” but certainly they sought to distance the industry from the panic and industry catastrophe that the reaction to stories that were in fact weird had produced. Weird is a frightening word to certain authorities and uniquely associated with particular kinds of discomfort related to violence and sex in the United States and in the North American comic book industry.

The “weird” in comics is not limited to North America. German theorist, Ole Frahm has written at length on the “weird signs” in comics that reveal a constant

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32 For the record, his appeal did not stem the rising tide of doom for the comics industry of the time. In the disastrous time between 1954 and 1956, over half the comic books on U.S. newsstands disappeared, the number of titles published in the United States dropped from near 650 to only 250, and ten entire publishing shops closed. Hajdu, Ten-Cent Plague, 326.

33 Amy Kiste Nyberg, Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1998), passim.

34 This is reported as a true account of the meeting by Mike Howlett, The Weird World of Eerie Publications: Comic Gore That Warped Millions of Young Minds! (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010), 4. However, both Nyberg and Hajdu (286) point out that the CMAA never officially or even unofficially limited the use of the word “weird” in comics.
interplay with power and resist scientific explanation.\textsuperscript{35} Although Frahm resists the idea of a comics-science, he shows how 20\textsuperscript{th} century comics establish an aesthetic of parody that reproduces and reflects the racist, sexist and class stereotypes and inherent epistemological systems that produce them.\textsuperscript{36} These comics “haunt” the reader with a certain unforgettable “\textit{Umheimlichkeit},” an eeriness or weirdness that sticks in the mind.\textsuperscript{37} His often-racy weird examples come from both American and European comics.

I am using ‘weird’ with the full weight of its messy etymological history in North America. I am doing a “uniquely philosophical athleticism” in choosing this sort of name for my concept. It is not a unique name or a neologism. It is one of those everyday words whose harmonics I hope to bring to our ears.\textsuperscript{38} Also, I am working here outside of the language of “queer”—a word with its own useful, fascinating, and unique social history and use in biblical scholarship.\textsuperscript{39} While what I am doing might be considered by some a “queering” the Cross by reading it as “weird” to challenge prevailing view, I am not

\textsuperscript{35} Ole Frahm, \textit{Die Sprache Des Comics}, ed. Jan-Frederik Bandel (Fundes 179; Hamburg: Philo Fine Arts, 2010), 31- 57. My thanks go to both Birte Wege for introducing me to this book and other parts of the comics conversation in Germany and Heike Peckruhn for her assistance with the nuances of modern German.

\textsuperscript{36} Frahm, 11.

\textsuperscript{37} As he says, “\textit{Ihre Unheimlichkeit ist nicht leicht zu vergessen}.” Frahm, \textit{Die Sprache Des Comics}, 56.


\textsuperscript{39} The word “queer” includes a history of being a negative form of strange, a pejorative term for non-normative sexual identities, and a reclaimed word embraced by activists. In academia, it often means reading against the grain. For an example in biblical studies see, a commentary that practices queering the Bible all the way through, Deryn Guest, \textit{The Queer Bible Commentary} (London: SCM, 2006).
reading the Cross as “queer.” I want to keep the sense of horror and supernaturalism that is most obvious in “weird.”

I am reading the Cross as weird—that is, dealing with fate or destiny, controlling fate, but also strange, uncanny, otherworldly, untrustworthy, outsider, and related to horror, terror, and the spectacle of the odd. I want to help modern readers see the discomfort and terror in Paul and Mark’s stories. A cross is an inappropriate place for a Messiah and an uncomfortable place for the supernatural. The Cross that Paul and Mark use subverts the established authority that was using crosses to advertise their power and control over the populace.

Why imagine σκάνδαλον at all, past or present? Understanding the way this scandal functions and its very oddity is important to understanding New Testament Christianity as envisioned by Paul. It is “essential.” According to Gustav Stählin, “An essential part of faith is the overcoming of the σκάνδαλον, posed with this appointment of God in Christ. Without the σκάνδαλον faith in Christ would not be true faith in the NT sense.”40 The task of understanding how the Cross is both scandal and the basis of Christian faith and that these two are mutually dependent on each other strikes at some of the most fundamental questions of Christian origins. Nils Dahl explains how the Cross is difficult for earliest Christians to accept, but that the overcoming of the scandal of the Cross, the vindication of Jesus in the resurrection, in fact is the basis of Christianity.41 In essence, the task of understanding what early Christians overcame when they overcame the σκάνδαλον of the cross is to understand “the formulation of the first Christian dogma:


Jesus is the Messiah” and the basis of the faith that overcomes the scandal. Imagining the character of this scandal as “weird” renews the conversation around the infamy of Christian origins. This project is a stone in a much larger mosaic of the whole “Christian thing” from its earliest texts.

New Testament Project by a Biblical Scholar

Theory and Method

When I read comics, the visual languages of comics that address the biblical stories awaken new parts of my interpretive imagination. I notice different aspects of the Cross than those I had been conditioned to imagine. The core of my project is an exegesis of canonical biblical texts: 1 Corinthians, Galatians, and the Gospel of Mark (chapters 3 and 4). I discuss and analyze comics in conversation with biblical texts as part of a literary project.

The main practice of my dissertation will be a close reading, a method born in biblical scholarship, now thoroughly adopted and integrated into literary studies. My practice of close reading is based on the values espoused by Mieke Bal's “newer close reading,” that is, traditional close reading that has gone through the mill of postmodern

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43 The term “Christian thing” is drawn from G.K. Chesterton and expanded in David Kelsey, To Understand God Truly (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 203.

insights about the subjectivity of the reading and gained from the self-reflexive insights of cultural studies.45

The practice of newer close reading has grown most directly from the older model of close reading established by T.S. Eliot and the school of New Criticism.46 By attempting to filter out all the historical background, sources, and the social and biographical contexts of the text under scrutiny, the tradition of New Criticism returned to the sort of “pre-critical” commentary that has been often ignored by biblical scholars in favor of historical criticism. The idea of close reading is to allow a text to speak for itself, but the critical experience of postmodernity has revealed that texts do not speak at all. Therefore, this is a “newer close reading” informed by “old close reading, where the text is alleged to speak for itself” and “cultural studies, where, in contrast, critique is more important than the object.”47 Close reading uses the analytical tools of the study of the Bible as literature, such as rhetorical criticism, speech-act theory, post-structuralism, or literary studies, where the focus is on the world within the text. As Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood explain, “biblical scholars have always regarded the pre-critical interpreter as their constitutive other.”48 Biblical scholars have a modern history of having to legitimize their place in the academy that has given them a peculiar distaste for readings that might seem less than scientific or historical or lead outsiders to question


48 Moore and Sherwood, Invention of the Biblical Scholar, 76.
their professional place in the academy. Pre-critical reading smells of confessional reading or at least reading that can be accomplished without the rigorous historical and methodological training increasingly synonymous with biblical scholarship. However, I argue that such synchronic literary readings offer insights, especially theological insights, unavailable to historical criticism alone.

David Steinmetz does not follow the trend of distancing the professional work of biblical scholarship from the pre-critical; he argues forcefully not just that pre-critical exegesis deserves attention from biblical scholars but for its “superiority.” Steinmetz concludes, “The principle value of precritical exegesis is that it is not modern exegesis; it is alien, strange, sometimes even, from our perspective, comic and fantastical.” Rather than seeking a single original or most primitive meaning of the text, pre-critical exegesis sought the “truth” of the text, which can be found only in understanding the multiple senses of Scripture. While I share the suspicions of other scholars who have been trained in the historical-critical method, I am also willing to try to understand how theology shapes my reading—“in the sense that it determines the question asked of the text and the results obtained.”

Gregory Robbins suggests that modern critics who attack the inadequacies of the pre-critical approach often hold it to anachronistic standards of

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meaning and separate exegesis and theology in inappropriate ways.\textsuperscript{53} Despite my sympathies to the pre-critical approach, this project is not a pre-critical reading per se. However, my close reading revels in the multiplicity of meanings in the biblical use of the Cross that find expression in comics interpretations. My work does theological reading to understanding the meanings and uses of biblical texts for ancient and modern readers.\textsuperscript{54} The concept “weird” holds some of these possible multiple meanings together in tension. The method of “newer close reading” that I am using here blends the close reading techniques that have come from the tradition of pre-critical exegesis with the insights of postmodernity and cultural studies.

The project of many cultural studies of the Bible is to study the Bible as an icon in a culture. Some studies work toward showing that the Bible is an object that a culture cannot be explained without. Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood have dubbed this work the study of a strictly “Cultural Bible.” That is, they are concerned with how the Bible as an object after its creation relates to cultures through time rather than the cultures behind the text. They point out that the study of the “Cultural Bible” is “as locked as [historical criticism] into the Enlightenment project of biblical studies—the mission to ensure that the Bible remains relevant to the modern age.”\textsuperscript{55} However, they


\textsuperscript{54} Put more simply, I am doing a theological reading of the Bible modeled on the work of scholars like Greg Robbins, Donald Juel, Nils Dahl, Phyllis Trible, Dale Martin, David Tracy, David Kelsey, Paul Ricoeur and many others grouped most loosely under the category of “biblical theology.” In other words, I read the Bible with comics with an eye to people who might use the text and its interpretation to somehow guide their lives or performance of their Christian thing.

\textsuperscript{55} Moore and Sherwood, \textit{Invention of the Biblical Scholar}, 95.
note that there has been an explosion of work done on the Cultural Bible and name themselves as part of this blast.\textsuperscript{56} Per their warning, I am interested in the operative mechanisms by which the use of the Bible has kept it relevant, while remaining clearly aware of my own bias (as a biblical scholar) for keeping it topical.

The major insight of cultural studies for my project is this constant self-reflexive mode.\textsuperscript{57} The older model of close reading claimed to allow a text to speak for itself, but the critical experience of postmodernity has revealed that texts do not speak. Rather, “we surround it, or frame it, before we let it speak at all.”\textsuperscript{58} Therefore, this is a “newer close reading” informed by what Mieke Bal explains is both “old close reading, where the text is alleged to speak for itself” and “cultural studies, where, in contrast, critique is more important than the object.”\textsuperscript{59} Bal demonstrates this sort of sensitive mixing and close reading in her readings of paintings and their relationships to the cultures around them in a cultural studies mode of critique. For example, in her works on Caravaggio and Rembrandt she argues that many cultural studies have underestimated the importance of accounts of religious studies for historical work in the visual arts and how biblical literature might be interpreted both as strange and relevant to our post-Enlightenment

\textsuperscript{56} They mention the work of Mieke Bal, Gary A. Phillips, Danna Nolan Fewell, Andrew C. Dowsett, Phillip R. Davies, Kathleen E. Corley, Robert L Webb and others who have worked on the encounter between culture and Bible. Moore and Sherwood, \textit{Invention of the Biblical Scholar}, 94.


\textsuperscript{58} Bal, \textit{Travelling Concepts}, 8.

\textsuperscript{59} Bal, \textit{Travelling Concepts}, 18. Close reading uses the analytical tools of the study of the Bible as literature where the focus is on the world within the text such as rhetorical criticism, speech-act theory, post-structuralism, or literary studies.
culture." With this and other works, Bal has “contributed to our understanding of the relationships among works of art, written texts, and cultural surroundings by describing the historical variants of social codes that structure cultural production.” Here and elsewhere, the way she mixes art and texts, particularly the Bible, serves a useful model for work that puts comics and the Bible in dialogue.

Cultural studies’ call to democratize interpretive practices can do more than just bring biblical studies to a group of under-served readers (although this is a worthy goal). Readings by groups that the academy has habitually ignored can give ‘high-culture’ biblical scholars new life and a broader conception of the text. New interpretive practices from underrepresented fields can help traditional biblical scholars solve interpretive problems or create more satisfying readings of bothersome passages.

In this work, I use comics to understand the concept of “weird” as it relates to the Cross in order to uncover this concept in Paul and Mark. I am treating the texts of the Bible as truly living, as a true intertext, part of a web of texts that move through time and space.

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have something to say to many cultures. The concept of “weird” travels between these times and cultures. As a close reader, I am using comics to open my imagination to a new encounter with the Cross. I want to track the concepts of the Cross as they travel across time and through people.

Scope and Limits

Rather than a study only of comics for the sake of today or a study of the biblical texts only for the sake of history, this project is a dialogue between comics and the Bible. As Charles Mabee says about America biblical hermeneutics, “It does not try to establish anything; rather, it attempts to uncover…. Meaning, in other words, is not understood as a one-way street, leading from text to reader. It is a back and forth, a give-and-take, a negotiation.”63 It is even what Bal calls “an attempt to grasp how we live the past inside the present.”64 Although the primary goal of this project is to uncover that past in which Paul and Mark used the Cross, my work remains firmly grounded in the present understandings of this past by biblical scholars and comics producers.

Before I give more information about the texts I will be “close reading,” I want to disabuse my reader of the types of “establishing” notions, to reference Mabee, about what this project might be. This is not an intellectual history of the image of the Cross. I am concentrating on understanding the Cross in the first century in the Roman Empire and in comics in the late-twentieth and early twenty-first century United States. I use weird


images from contemporary comics to read the scandal of the Cross, not to make historical claims about their accuracy or to sketch a complete picture of the Cross from then to now.

This is neither a history of comics nor a history of the Cross in comics. I give some deep background and a guide to reading comics in chapter two, but that is not the focus of this project. I interpret and read comics understandings of the image of the Cross through my own understanding and scholarly discretion. The comics are the “new encounters with material” that Dahl encourages.\(^65\) As such, I encounter them and have allowed them to guide my imagination rather than appropriate them.\(^66\)

This project is not a catalog of comics produced specifically or explicitly for religious educational or devotional purposes. Although a few comics on the list were published with this in mind and even in some cases by religious presses, these are not a requirement of my project. Religious practitioners might use some for evangelism or teaching, while others are neutral or even hostile to religion or religious uses. Of course, as active “users” some Christians might make do with comics for religious purposes even if this is not the intent of the producer. In a similar way, some religious comics could as


\(^{66}\) My work does not use superheroes as a type to pursue an already-held political or theological point, as does Robert Jewett in his The Captain America Complex: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism (Santa Fe, NM: Bear, 1984). Nor does this work use existing comics to make religious points in the name of characters that have less explicit or no religious points to make. Such as, John T. Galloway, The Gospel According to Superman (Philadelphia: A.J. Holman Co., 1973) or the perennially popular Robert L. Short, The Gospel According to Peanuts (1965, repr., Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).
easily be used against their producer’s intent. As such, authorial intent has only a peripheral part in the matter at hand.\textsuperscript{67}

I am also not doing a project on comics as religion.\textsuperscript{68} I am not writing about the devotion of comics fans, nor the worship and ritual practices that a scholar could handily argue they participate in. There is a fascinating community around comics that lends itself to such a sociological study, yet I am studying them from a textual point of view. In that vein, I am also not using comics to explain our own era or their historical moment.\textsuperscript{69} At the same time, comics are not simply an example or demonstration of a point I have in mind about the Bible. Rather, comics are the source of the insight and imagination I hope to bring to this aspect of the biblical narrative.\textsuperscript{70}

Pericope Choice: Why Read Mark and Paul with Comics

I will be reading the canonical Christian biblical texts to gain insight into their particular use of the Cross. Here, I will express some of the value I find in reading from

\textsuperscript{67} At times, with Luedke’s work in particular, concerned with what the author claims he is doing, but I am close reading with cultural studies rather than psycho-socially reading. Therefore, I make no actual claims about the mental state of my authors, only their expressed goals.


\textsuperscript{69} This has been done quite well by William W. Savage, Commmies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945-1954 (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990) and Bradford W. Wright, Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University, 2001).

\textsuperscript{70} In this way, I see my project more closely aligned with the sort of work done by Dan W. Clanton, ed., The End Will Be Graphic: Apocalyptic in Comic Books and Graphic Novels (Bible in the Modern World 43; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2012).
within the biblical canon, the reasons I chose these texts and not others, and the reasons I think these texts lend themselves to a reading with comics.

The particular value of reading the Christian canon lies in its ability to speak to communities of believers, the interesting margins to be found there, and the tensions it expresses. Scripture’s most enduring resource for many believing communities is the way they can find “in the Bible mirrors for [their] identity.”71 Scriptures reflect the hermeneutics of their communities and can be used by their communities to reflect their understandings of their purpose as groups. If a person wishes to direct the identity of a community, scripture is a place to gain the power necessary for change. If a community is going through a crisis of identity, it might look to scripture in the form of a canon to halt dangerous change. The power of the scriptures as an established “norm” is far more concentrated and directable if confined to a closed canon.

However, the canon is a source of important unresolved and irresolvable tension of believing communities. This is the sort of tension that binds and allows for better movement (the way that balanced joints keep the body steady and allow it to move)—a very human sort of tension. David Kelsey uses the image of an Alexander Calder mobile to show how different angles and movements change the way we perceive even our working canons.72 (Calder 1961, Illustration iii) Kelsey shows that the structures and patterns that people bring to texts affect the doctrines they get from them. The creation of

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doctrines here is a process that involves the cares and concerns of the interpreters and theologians themselves.

In order to continue to gain from their readings of the Christian Bible, Christian people must be both open to what new texts have to teach us about the history of Christianity and held by the weight of history. Readers make the character of the canon in ways that cannot be constrained. Even when authorities try, “the attempt to close the process of semiosis is bound to fail because new ruptures of interpretation will counter every closure.”

Rather than being pushed out of contemporary North American culture, the Bible has simply taken on new sorts of meanings. It is not just a collection of texts that are important to the history of Christianity—it is a focus around which new interpreters congregate and discuss. The canon is remade and remade again by each new interpreter who treats it like a canon. I am one such interpreter. I hope that my reading with comics holds the tensions, ironies and identities of believing communities with appropriate sensitivity and care even and especially for people at the margins of these communities.

From within the canon, I have chosen to read Paul’s letters to the churches at Galatia and Corinth and the Gospel of Mark rather than other texts. All of them are particularly early in the history of the New Testament. Paul wrote the oldest canonical texts. Mark is widely believed to be the oldest gospel, written around 70 CE and the

destruction of the Temple.\(^7^4\) In part, I have chosen these texts for their early date. They are both concerned with the activities of natal Christians struggling actively with their identity. Clearly this is an ongoing activity; these texts are our evidence of some of the earliest Christian identity struggles. They come far before Christianity is identified with empire during the reign of Constantine. They are less concerned with establishing a domestic Christianity than they are with dealing with the immediate concerns of communities in crisis.

Also, Paul and Mark pair well because they likely share a common oral narrative of the Passion. In her influential commentary, Adela Yarbro Collins focuses on what she calls an “eschatological historical monograph,” but she also does work to reconstruct the connections between Mark and Paul.\(^7^5\) In an appendix to her commentary, she offers her work on the Passion narrative that Paul and Mark might have worked from, what she calls a “Tentative Reconstruction and Translation of the Content (not necessarily the wording) of the Pre-Markan Passion Narrative.”\(^7^6\) Assuming this brief core narrative and the subversive interpretations of comics, I hope to show how part of the core that Paul and Mark share is a subversive understanding of what we would now call a weird Cross.

\(^7^4\) Here I should state that I assume Mark to be a Syrian text written to a persecuted community with knowledge of Rufus and Alexander at around 70 CE following Joel Marcus, *Mark 1-8* (Anchor Bible Commentary. v. 27. New York: Doubleday, 2000) and *Mark 8-16* (Anchor Yale Bible Commentary. v. 27A. New York: Doubleday, 2009).


\(^7^6\) Collins, *Mark*, 819.
Finally, I have chosen these texts for the subversive power to which they claim. The concept of ‘subversive’ power is from Dick Hebdige. Hebdige explores the “subversive implications of style” and how “the expressive forms and rituals of subordinate groups” (in his case, teddy boys, mods, rockers, skinheads, and punks) are “alternately dismissed, denounced, and canonized” and how the objects they use “take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, token of self-imposed exile.” 77 Walter Brueggemann writes about preaching as an act of what he called “sub-version,” and plays on it as an “under-version” that “does indeed intend to sub-vert the dominant version and to empower a community of sub-versives who are determined to practice their lives according to a different way of imagining.” 78 By ‘subversive’ power, I simply mean power claimed by subordinate groups that subverts accepted means of gaining power. Paul and Mark were part of a subculture, an underground group of Christians who might be persecuted at any moment. There is a sense of urgency and an undercutting of authority that runs through their works and even their language. Paul and Mark have a reputation for casual or crass language. They share this reputation and subversive style with the comics that I read with them. While Paul and Mark arguably may not have the most popular accounts of the Cross in the canon, Mark in particular has the reputation of having this most disturbing account of its aftermath in the New Testament. The women run away in fear from the tomb, and only the addition of the later ending(s) makes the


ending palatable to later Christians. Most shocking of all, Paul and Mark use the Cross, the Imperial cross on which their leader Jesus died horribly, as a focus of their stories of his ministry.

**Defining the Terms of the Task**

My primary focus is on understanding biblical pericopes using textual methods with a historical-critical undergirding. The fact that my imaginative window into the world of Mark and Paul is comics might distract from the fact that what I am doing is in fact a rather traditional kind of exegetical project. My task as I have set it up is to imagine the use of the Cross in a part of the Bible as weird. In what follows, I briefly explain my usage of the verbs and nouns that make up the statement of my primary task: cross, imagine, use.

**Usage of “Cross”**

The primary focus of my study is the Cross as a bundle of concepts. Before I begin in earnest, I need to establish some syntactical ground rules that I will be following in this project. In particular, I use the lower-case “cross” to indicate any object with the familiar shape of two straight lines that intersect. The main crosses that I talk about are the kind upon which people may be tortured to death and were in ancient Rome, but the lower-case also includes other objects with this shape—railroad trestles, architectural...

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79 I used “understanding” here with echoes of Paul Ricoeur’s triadic method of biblical interpretation: preunderstanding reality that we bring into the text (mimesis 1), restructuring of this reality by the text (mimesis 2) and the final understanding at the intersection between the world of the text and of the reader (mimesis 3). Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellaeur, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984), 52-87.
supports, telephone poles, etc. I use the upper case “Cross” to refer specifically to an object that symbolizes the particular cross upon which Jesus died—two crossed lines that through context clearly recalls the death of Jesus but may or may not include the body of Jesus at any one time. Most Cross images, even and often especially serious devotional ones, seek to be historically accurate to the instrument of crucifixion. Some are made of flowers or gold, yet for the purposes of this project, they must recall the death of Jesus for me to speak of them as a “Cross” rather than a “cross.”

There are other terms for particular Crosses that need some syntactical ground rules here. What is traditionally called the “true Cross” is the actual physical object upon which the historical Jesus died in the 1st century. An old joke is that one could build St. Peter’s with the wood of all the pieces of the true Cross. The subject of this dissertation is the Cross image through time, not the historical object. The term “crucifix” indicates a Cross that always includes the corpus. The modern definition of the word “crucifix” does allow for the meanings “cross” and “a figure of the cross,” but I have chosen to keep the term more exact—only the cross with the body of Jesus Christ.

Writers of the 18th and 19th century incorporated the inexact meaning that could include a bare Cross; however, the etymology of the word crucifix (the Latin, “cruci fixus, later crucifixus, (one) fixed to

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80 This insistence on recalling the death of Jesus is, of course, gloriously imprecise. It relies on the reader to have an imagination conditioned for such a recollection. In many instances, it is nearly impossible to adjudicate whether sometime recalls the death or not, through the intent of the maker or the decision of a reader. The 9-11 (C/c)ross, the two pieces of the World Trade Center that some Christians took as a sign of hope and many other people took to be debris shows just such a place of multiple meanings.

81 This wording of “Christ” is precise; the Jesus on the Cross is the Christ. The historical Jesus died on a cross. Christ is the name of the eternal figure, but Jesus became known as the Christ probably fairly soon after his death, “from the beginnings of Greek-speaking Christianity—within a few years of the crucifixion.” Dahl, “Crucified Messiah,” 25.
a cross, crucified”) favors the reading that requires the body to be present. It is important to be clear that the terms Cross, cross and crucifix are not interchangeable, as I am specifically seeking to understand the notion of a Cross in the narrative. Some of the Crosses that I study here include a body.

I have established that the subject of this project is a Cross, not a crucifix. Especially in the Western world, the crucifix is associated most closely with the Catholic church; the empty Cross, the Protestant church. As a reflexive and critical scholar, I am aware that images of the Cross are subjective and multiple and that this has historical weight. The Cross that Mark and Paul are speaking of does not have this particular distinction, though it is a large bundle of ideas held together. My concern with the Cross as I have defined it here forms the subject of the rest of the dissertation, while “imagination” is my action.

The Act of Imagination

The primary task of this project is to imagine, not to fantasize, although many of the texts I engage with the Bible are works of fantasy. It is through this type of fantasy that people can come to grips with reality. Through the act of imagination that fantasy requires, I can encounter the Cross as if for the first time. Imagining is a serious task, even if the materials are fun. I have chosen the word “imagine” to describe my act for some of the nuances from within and without including its etymology, the definition given by philosopher Paul Ricoeur, the distinction from opinion, and its moral dimension.

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First, the process of imagining often involves forming a mental image. The Latin origins of the word, *imaginare* (‘form an image of, represent’) and *imaginari* (‘picture to oneself’) are both from *imago, imagin-* (‘image’). Comics are made at an encounter between text and images. They make sequential images that show progression through time and space, not just still subjects. The pictures in comics are a sustained envisioning of time and action. Therefore, “imagining” is an appropriate task to do with the assistance of comics.

Second, I am following the lead of the Ricoeur in understanding the imagination as a tool in creating novel relationships of reality, understanding (and developing) faith, and accessing the power to re-describe reality in otherwise impossible ways. I am using Ricoeur’s sense of the active and schematizing imagination, rather than the passive imagination he finds in Jean Paul Sartre that merely allows us to see that which is absent. This is what he calls “imagination at work—in a work” that is able to “produce itself as a world.”

I insist that this work is the work of being our best selves as thinking creatures in the world. Imagination at work is the means by which we participate in all reality.

Ricoeur offers more than simply a useful demonstration of imagination at work; he also theorizes the value of the work that imagination turned toward the Bible might do. In his identity as a Reformed Christian, he sought to uncover God in biblical texts using the tools of interpretation. For Ricoeur, God in the Bible is an “eruption of something

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from the other side” that cannot be proven: it can be only shown by a theological hermeneutic.\textsuperscript{86} In this way:

the Gospel will always be carried by an extraordinarily fragile testimony, that of the preacher, that of personal life, that of community. There is no proof which can support either the experience or the rationale. In this sense, the Cross remains a folly for the intelligent, a scandal for the wise.\textsuperscript{87}

It is only through a sophisticated act of imagination that he can provide a means to provide occasions of the God of the bible in contemporary life. Ricoeur shows how “the metaphorical imagination is an ally for the understanding and articulation of faith.”\textsuperscript{88} In this way, however analytical it is, I have designed this act of imagination to invite further interaction from people outside of biblical scholarship proper. Donald Juel calls on this imagination throughout his career as a requirement for the “creative appropriation of a biblical fact.”\textsuperscript{89} Imagination, even a moral imagination is required for thorough-going, inclusive biblical thought.

Third, I think that the Cross in particular needs scholarly imaginations rather than simply opinions turned toward it. As with other symbols and concepts that Ricoeur talks about as “giving rise to thought” and to which “thought returns,” its


\textsuperscript{87} Ricoeur, “The Critique of Religion,” 220.

\textsuperscript{88} Mark I. Wallace, introduction to Figuring the Sacred, by Paul Ricoeur (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 8.

polysemous and difficult meanings are virtually inexhaustible.⁹⁰ It is the center of what Robert Orsi calls an “abundant event,” that is, an experience “of radical presence or realness” that is “not exhausted at its source.”⁹¹ The divine, the transcendent, breaks into time at Christ’s crucifixion and bursts open a whole network of routes of presence from it. The Cross as abundant calls out to be imagined, made into yet another image; there is always more to be described the next time it comes up.⁹² There will never be a complete picture of the Cross.

Fourth, and most urgently, there is a moral need turn a careful imagination toward the Cross. When Christians fail to imagine the Cross, they fail to connect its terror and tragedy to their own action and world. As James Cone says, a very particular sort of imagination is required to apply the reading about the Cross “to one's own social reality” and to find that “Both Jesus and blacks were ‘strange fruit.’…[Jesus] was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America.”⁹³ A new and particular reading can drive the imagination from the far past and a distant culture to

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⁹³ For the full text of “Strange Fruit,” the poem and song to which Cone refers here, see the epigraph of this chapter. Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.
one’s own time and place so that one may see the Cross in a new way and one’s own participation in culture in a new way.\textsuperscript{94}

When imaginations fail around the Cross, the results are devastating. White Christians in the United States could not discuss or even see the obvious connections between Jesus’ death and the lynching of thousands of African-Americans. In the sixty years white para-Christian organizations perpetrated this horror, white scholars and theologians were distressingly silent. As Cone diagnoses the problem, “they lacked imagination of the most crucial and moral kind.”\textsuperscript{95} The incredible and atrocious failure of white U.S. Christians to confront or remember the horrors of lynching even with the ready example of the first-century lynching of Jesus at hand is an interpretive and imaginative travesty.\textsuperscript{96} These Christians failed to connect the Cross to what they saw in their lives with their own social reality, and white biblical scholars and theologians failed to help them in this process.\textsuperscript{97}

As a white female Biblical scholar from the South, I am driven to remember this tragedy and develop the imagination necessary to confront this pain. Consideration without imagination can all too easily dismiss or gloss the body or the intended body on the Cross, but a careful and what Cone calls moral imagination cannot avoid confronting the horror of the Cross. This confrontation is a necessary initial step in trading “cheap

\textsuperscript{94} I have already mentioned the work of feminists like Williams, Brock and Parker. The problems they present with the Cross call for a new imagination, too.

\textsuperscript{95} Cone, \textit{Cross and the Lynching Tree}, 94.

\textsuperscript{96} Cone, \textit{Cross and the Lynching Tree}, 30.

\textsuperscript{97} The history of the intellectual pressure that led to this state is elegantly presented by Moore and Sherwood, \textit{Invention of the Biblical Scholar}, passim.
grace” for “terrible beauty.”\textsuperscript{98} For users of the cross in the Roman imperial government, Paul, Mark, and some present-day Christians (especially on Good Friday) the power of the Cross lies in part in this horror. The Cross requires a well-fed imagination and “constant new encounters with material” in order to help us understand how this use can and did function.\textsuperscript{99}

Users and Affordances

As I have explained, modern readers are greatly assisted by images (whether pictorial or descriptive) when attempting to understand the ancient conception of crosses and remember the dying bodies that it evokes, yet for Paul, Mark, and their hearers this meaning was all too real and present. They would have seen bodies hanging from beams or the empty posts that would ominously suggest their potential for suspending another body. They saw death and pain as an “affordance” of crosses in their world. In what follows I will define the terms of what will be applied in the discussion of what Paul and Mark did to define a particular cross as the Cross.\textsuperscript{100}

To begin, throughout the project I will be studying crosses as a “thing” in one of the senses that Martin Heidegger uses. That is:


\textsuperscript{100} I would like to thank Julia Lupton for introducing me to the concepts of “thing” and “affordance” as they appear in this particular project. I treasure her excellent guidance in the early stages of this project.
The Old High German word *thing* means a gathering, and specifically a gathering to deliberate on a matter under discussion, a contested matter. In consequence, the Old German words *thing* and *dinc* becomes the name for a matter under discussion, a contested matter. They denote anything that in any way bears upon men, concerns them, and that accordingly is a matter for discourse.¹⁰¹

As such, I am concerned with crosses as they constitute a gathering of the range of meanings available to them in the Roman Empire and in our own time. I am concerned with them as they gather and “bear upon men” [sic] and a particular set of people at that—the rough contemporaries of Paul and Mark, American comics creators in roughly our own time, and contemporary Christians in the United States. Therefore, I am interested not in the full architectural and pan-historical range of meanings of crosses— even crosses that have other non-Christian religious significance, of which there are many. Rather I am interested in the specific gathering around and by crosses in the historical periods I am discussing.¹⁰² In Heideggerian context, things such as crosses have agency. A cross and especially a Cross can be said to gather others around it, but the purpose of this gathering depends on the context and those who gather.

Before going to the specific context of the Cross, one must understand the properties of crosses. A cross of any kind has certain inherent properties that are both inherent to the figure and take part in an interaction with the whole perceiver. These properties are “affordances.” I am borrowing this term from the environmental

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¹⁰² One need only glance at Celtic, Norse, or Hindu symbols to see how widespread the symbol has been over history. Certainly, “a cross has been the symbol of many cults throughout the world. However, since the 5th century in the West it has represented Christ’s crucifixion and, by extension, the Christian faith.” Sarah Carr-Gomm, *The Dictionary of Symbols in Western Art* (New York: Facts on File, 1995), 71.
psychologist James J. Gibson. As he discusses its use (the emphases are his), “The verb to afford is found in the dictionary, but the noun affordance is not. I have made it up. I mean by it something that refers to both the environment and the animal in a way that no existing term does. It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment.”

That “complementary” relationship guides a discussion toward the way an environmental object acts on people. This term has been useful in literary studies before. Here it allows me to discuss both ontological properties of crosses themselves and the relationship of crosses to their particular communities. It is this meeting of crosses and humans in particular moments and texts that I wish to analyze.

There is a range of possible meanings to be taken from the properties of the shape of the cross that human beings can find more or less often under different circumstances. That is, “the usual affordances of interest exist between artifacts and users.”

A cross (even before the crucifixion or in a community that crucifies) is a “thing” (in the sense of gathering) that affords spectacle and display. Crosses of any size demand attention when against an otherwise unstructured background, allow for hanging up (objects or people) within sight and suggest and draw the eye toward a center. The adage “x marks the spot”


reveals this affordance upon which humans often rely for assistance. A line crossed over a taller upright line attracts the attention upward. A vertical column standing alone invites additions and further building—whether it is roof or wall.\textsuperscript{106} It recalls Mircea Eliade’s \emph{axis mundi} that connects the whole of heaven and earth.\textsuperscript{107} It is the “vertical…, which unites earth and sky, since it is the point where all horizontal movement comes to an end… the vertical is considered the \emph{sacred} dimension of space.”\textsuperscript{108} At the same time, crosses point to the human realm by crossing the sacred vertical with the \emph{path} of the horizontal axis.\textsuperscript{109} Philosophers of architecture like Christian Norberg-Schultz suggest that because crosses afford thinking about position relative to the horizontal and vertical, they sometimes even suggest the viewers position within the cosmos.\textsuperscript{110} This inherent religious meaning affords the meaning made by numerous groups.

These crosses gather communities around them to see, but what they see and what it means is dependent on other factors. Meaning in architectural structures like crosses,

\textsuperscript{106} In older Western architectural theories from which modern theories derive, column, entablature and pediment were the basis of all building. See Marc-Antoine Laugier, “An Essay on Architecture,” in \textit{Introducing Architectural Theory: Debating a Discipline} (1753; ed. Korydon Smith; New York: Routledge, 2012), 336.


\textsuperscript{109} Norberg-Schulz, \textit{Concept of Dwelling}, 23.

“may be associated with specific cultural, political, or social symbolism.”¹¹¹ How these meanings are attached to structures depends in part on the range of possible meanings that the object affords, but this affordance also relies on the animal’s contribution (in this case, the human’s building or co-creation with the object). Humans gather around crosses as things.

A cross’s affordances of display lend it to certain exploitations of gathering. In the case of the Roman Empire, crosses afforded the hanging and display of insurrectionists and rebels. It allowed the Empire to kill those who were suspected of sedition, rebellion or other anti-imperial crimes in a painful, drawn out, and spectacular way. The act of crucifixion efficiently combined the revenge, torture, and execution of those who threatened the empire while simultaneously making public propaganda to discourage future trouble.

In such a community, when one sees a cross, it would afford death and mean imperial power. It might seem that imperial power is a phenomenal quality of crosses in this situation, not a physical quality of them. However, Gibson discourages parsing the phenomenal and physical qualities of object in an example involving a postbox. He warns, “this duality is pernicious.”¹¹² Instead of separating the phenomenal and physical qualities, he points to the dependence between the sense experience and the physical object. Crosses afford power both physically and phenomenologically. In discussing how postboxes afford letter-mailing in society, not just when one has a letter to mail, he says:


¹¹² Gibson, Ecological Approach, 139.
the real postbox (the only one) affords letter-mailing to a letter-writing human in a community with a postal system. This fact is perceived when the postbox is identified as such, and it is apprehended whether the postbox is in sight or out of sight. To feel a special attraction to it when one has a letter to mail is not surprising, but the main fact is that it is perceived as part of the environment—as an item of the neighborhood in which we live. Everyone above the age of six knows what it is for and where the nearest one is. The perception of its affordance should therefore not be confused with the temporary special attraction it may have.\textsuperscript{113}

Here, Gibson stresses the importance of communities in building the systems that allow for things to gather. The neighborhood and the larger community of people constantly co-create affordances. In a community with a system of control that involves crucifixion, everyone would know what a cross was for and where the nearest one was. Otherwise, it would not be an effective system. They would perceive the danger or power inherent in crosses as soon as one was identified as such, whether they could see one at the moment or not. To feel especially fearful of it when performing subversive activities is not surprising, but the main fact is that it is perceived as part of the colonized or controlled system in which they lived.\textsuperscript{114} People contemporary to crucifixion would quite naturally associate crosses with Roman control, whatever side of this system they were on.

Somehow, Paul and Mark were able to put the Cross to another particular “use” of their own. Paul and Mark are “users” of the Cross in that they change what it afforded for their hearers—and in the process began the change of the particular cross upon which Jesus died to a Cross of power and wisdom. Here and throughout I take the terms “user” and “making do” in the sense made by Michel de Certeau. Rather than being passive consumers, users often and very selectively take mass-produced goods and remake them

\textsuperscript{113} Gibson, \textit{Ecological Approach}, 139.

\textsuperscript{114} This has implications for post-colonial study and systems I have not fully considered here.
into vehicles that serve their own interests and express their values, rather than that of the original producer.\textsuperscript{115} These particular writers were not passive consumers; they were users who “made do” with a cross used by the Roman Empire to create a new meaning for their subcultural group.\textsuperscript{116}

“Making do” is the concept of taking already existing and cultural objects and making them mean and mean again. This is a cultural studies project and concept that I model here on the work of Dick Hebdige.\textsuperscript{117} His style is an “eclectic theoretical poaching adapted to the needs of his specific research project, that continues to typify much work in cultural studies.”\textsuperscript{118} The focus of his critique is on hegemony shows that not all cultural ideologies are equal; there are dominant ideologies and discourses that need to constantly reassert themselves over marginalized or subcultures. The tension between dominant cultures and the marginalized and the shifting sands over history makes this a fascinating strategy to turn on Christianity and its objects. In my study, Christianity is both a marginalized group under Roman authority and the dominant cultural force that the subculture of comics comment on and “make do” with. Both of these social positions and relationships are true for Christianity, though there is no straight-line progression from

\textsuperscript{115} De Certeau’s description of the process is deeply influenced by Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. I reserve the term “prosumer” for modern phenomena like fandom and interaction with contemporary popular culture.

\textsuperscript{116} Michel de Certeau, \textit{The Practice of Everyday Life}, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California, 1984), 29-35.


one to another. It is this back and forth with the Cross as the common term that holds this study together.

The longer process of “use” also helps me explain the way that the Cross can be adopted comfortably by consumer culture today. In Henri Lefebvre’s terms, “That which yesterday was reviled today becomes cultural consumer-goods; consumption thus engulfs what was intended to give meaning and direction.”119 In the final chapter, I will explore how the Cross participates in this process in what I call “domestication.” I address the complicated matter of how a cross could become the Cross when it so easily affords the use to which the Roman government put it.

The simplicity of the shape of the object afforded the use to which the Roman government put it. It lacks the glamour of a massive carved stela, but the message does not require words. It could be easily installed all over the empire with little expended effort. This pervasiveness might explain another reason why Christian art does not include the consistent use of the Cross containing the corpse of Jesus until the tenth century.120 They hear the scandal and horror at the first shout of “σταύρωσον αὐτόν” — “Crucify him!”

Crosses were about the spectacle of torture and humiliation that led to death; they were also part of a frequent practice of Roman execution. The Cross could have been lost in the commonness of crosses in the Empire, yet somehow some Christians contemporary

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120 Brock, *Saving Paradise*, 1. While Brock and Parker establish that the image of the corpse of Jesus was not used until the tenth century, they do not comment on uses of an empty cross in symbolic gestures, which flourished with the rise of Constantine from around 312 CE.
to this practice were able to proclaim one of the most ignoble parts of the story of Jesus fervently as “God’s power and God’s wisdom” (1 Cor 1:24). Paul and Mark were able to rebrand the crosses that the Empire used to torture victims into what eventually became an image powerful enough to be the standard of Constantine’s empire and the pervasive and recognizable symbol of the Christian church.  

This “use” will be the focus of my close reading.

The Cross in the contemporary world has a markedly different set of obvious affordances than crosses in ancient Rome. Modern Christians often speak of the Cross or a cross that they bear as a synecdoche for the whole “Christian thing”—as a metaphor for the “complex set” of practices that go into forming their Christian identity. The Cross is a prominent symbol and rhetorical device for many Christians that still has persuasive and emotional power. The center of my close readings of comics will be to show the way weirdness functions in this understanding of the Cross in the New Testament.

Understanding the way the key terms interact in the following pages is necessary to the overall meaning of the dissertation. The terms “Cross,” “imagination,” “users,” and

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121 I take a “brand” to be a central identity, performance, or image usually claimed by a company or group. Here I use the concept of “rebranding” in a loose sense—that is, insofar as crucifixion can be considered a marketing tool of the Roman Empire that was eventually taken over by Christian associations, it can be considered part of a “rebranding.” I do not take the marketing metaphor much further here except as it applies directly to Black Jesus below, though it might be fruitful elsewhere. For an explanation of the reality of brands, see Wolfgang Grassi, “The Reality of Brands: Towards an Ontology of Marketing,” American Journal of Economics and Sociology 58, 2 (April 1999): 313-359. For a helpful exploration of brand communities or those communities that form around brands rather than geography, see Albert M. Muniz, Jr. and Thomas C. O’Guinn, “Brand Community,” Journal of Consumer Research 27, 4 (March 2001): 412-432.

“weird” form the statement of this project—*imagining* through comics how Paul and Mark *use* the *Cross* as *weird*.

**“Abundance” and Enlightenment Scholarly Problems with It**

Although biblical scholars and theologians constantly discuss the Cross in rising and falling waves in an ever-expanding ocean of ink, there is little theoretical engagement with the *character* of the weird there or even in the character of scandal Paul describes.\(^{123}\) Biblical scholars are part of a tradition that often fears to tread too close to the confessional. In the study of the Bible as elsewhere in the academy “especially intolerable are ways of being and imagining oriented to divine presence.”\(^{124}\) The Cross, as a gathering of people and attention toward the divine Messiah, is a particularly tricky case. A cross with a crucified Messiah hanging on it holds the ideas of divine power and human helplessness in dialectical tension. The Cross is not just a site of violent death, nor is it only a pure and holy divine act. Without the divine elements, the Cross does not make sense. The Cross creates a new metaphorical meaning from the combination of two elements that are not properly the same—a Messiah and Crucifixion. This combination does not describe the whole event of Jesus’ death. The Christian event is more than the sum of its parts, yet the whole can only be viewed one sliver at a time, from a distance.

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\(^{123}\) For the history of theologians views from postexilic times: David Bondos, *Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

The Cross is the center of what Orsi calls an “abundant event,” that is an experience “of radical presence or realness” that is “not exhausted at its source.” Christ’s crucifixion bursts open the barrier between this world and the supernatural. I have shown above how the Cross as abundant calls out to be imagined. The abundance of this event also affects the character of the study of the Cross; that is, because it is abundant, the Cross goes beyond the usual limits of study.

Orsi shows how “abundant events [are]…characterized by aspects of the human imagination that cannot be completely accounted for by social and cultural codes, that go beyond authorized limits.” The notion of abundance offers scholars the opportunity to recognize the limits of their own analysis and create more solid scholarship through this recognition. Rather than seeking to give a complete explanation of the Cross and all its meanings, I imagine only the aspects of this abundance that I can access through scholarly means. That is, I recognize from the beginning and throughout that my work is but one part of the difficult and polysemous meanings that make up the Cross and the way its meaning was made when Paul and Mark “used” in subversively in the first century and the way comic book producers use it in other subversive ways.

Comics Leading Toward Abundance

My initial “new encounter” with the Cross in comics form was Steve Ross’s *Marked*. However, the encounter was about more than his techo-dystopic image of the crucifixion. The story literally runs off the page. It is the breakneck speed of the art and


the text combined in the structure of the piece that highlighted a way to read Mark anew. Demons jump between frames and inhabit the interstitial spaces of the work. (Ross 2005, Illustration iv) His comics act as an “imagination helper” that shows just how much a traditional reading can miss when it does not imagine the physical presence of demons in the narrative. In a similar way, a comic that includes Jesus’s encounter with the Cross gives it a physical presence, a place in the imagination of the scene. The comic helps the reader do the work of making the scene, so that one thinks and acts accordingly. Of course, other works can help the imagination as well. Scholars do not operate in an exegetical vacuum. Visual art of all kinds, music, performance, video games, everyday experiences, lectures and conversations all also can aide the scholarly imagination in its work. Comics are only one interpretive possibility. The visual language that comics use is as adept as these other modes in expressing imaginative ideas, and at the same time shares key cognitive traits with verbal and signed languages that allow for meaning and grammar key to communication, understanding and expression.¹²⁷

I use comics in my analysis of the abundant event of the Cross because of the way they push limits, express tensions, and employ ironic distance by design. The tangle of effort this involves is worth the push. Comic book readers thrive on the weird and the subversive. Comic creators must push their boundaries all the time in order to maintain their readership. As a format, they must stay on the fringes of their readers’ fertile imaginations. The interpretation and reading of comics as narratives can open new ways of reading texts, including the Bible. Always the need for imagination around the Cross is

urgent. Violence against African-Americans is at a fever pitch; the strange and bitter crop is still being harvested all over the United States, not just the South. Seeing the Cross clearly might begin to heal the white Christian imagination. In the first chapter, I will explain what comics can offer the study of the Bible.
Chapter Two: Comics Affording the Weird

While the subject of this project is canonical scripture, the lens through which I approach scripture is that of comics. I use the plural “comics” with a singular verb, following the technical convention of comics studies. Here comics assists in imagining the weird. Some intellectual projects treat popular culture as a means to a theological or scholarly end with mixed results. Instead, I treat comics creators as creative “reality-seeing artists” who have access to information about reality that would otherwise be

128 Before more definitions, a further note on usage: I follow Scott McCloud that “comics” is a noun “plural in form, used with a singular verb” Scott McCloud (w, a). Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art (New York: Kitchen Sink/Harper Perennial, 1994), 9. This precedent is followed by the large number of authors influenced by his work. Robin Varnum and Christina T. Gibbons, eds., Language of Comics: Word and Image (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001). The added “s” helps differentiate it from the comic and comedy. The term “comics” is the American preference; the English often use “strip cartoon” (which has implications for drawing style that I am resisting). French may have the most accurate and least content-oriented term band dessinée” (drawn strip). German often uses the American term, but have the words Bilderstreifen or Bildergeschichte (picture strip, picture story) as well. Italian is no more accurate than English, as the term fumetto means literally a puff of smoke, referring to the speech balloon, which has never been a defining characteristic of comics. David Kunzle, The Early Comic Strip: Narrative Strips and Picture Stories in the European Broadsheet from c. 1450 to 1825 (History of the Comic Strip Vol. 1. Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California, 1973), 1. The Japanese term, manga, often used untranslated in English, for their distinctive, very stylized national technique, is made of two characters that literally mean “involuntary or aimless pictures” (OED online, Manga, n.2). I will offer a fuller definition of the American term shortly.

invisible to scholars. In particular, comics as a form is often adept at exposing and using irony, reveling in any tension between action and meaning or word and image. Comics is a way to read in new languages that opens up new possibilities.

I expect my readers to be more familiar with the tropes of biblical scholarship than with the tropes of comics. Bibles have their own set of peculiar reading characteristics and codes of signification. The often leather-bound covers, running heads, citation by chapter and verse rather than page number, pages printed in narrow columns, use of italics for various reasons, special significance of the name of the LORD, glosses and marginalia can intimidate first-time readers. Despite their often-lowbrow status and difficult-to-shake reputation for being juvenile or facile reading, comics and the study thereof can have many barriers to entry that I will introduce in this chapter. Comics has its own visual languages, its own “system of signification” that critics credit with the ability to “blur the distinction between literature and the visual arts.” Comics’ many visual languages afford the weird in this tension between word and image.

The complexity of comics means that this will only be a guided-study through the kinds of comics tools that this project will use, not an exhaustive study of the plurality of

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130 Cone, Cross and the Lynching Tree, xiii.
131 As explored in particular by Roger Ferlo, Opening the Bible (The New Church’s Teaching Series vol. 2; Cambridge, Boston: Cowley, 1997), 26-40.
meanings that comics can contain. My interest in explaining the nuances of comics to those unfamiliar with them distinguishes my work from the field of “Comics Studies” in which comics is “engaged by people who already know how comics are produced and consumed.” For my own study, I wish to use comics as a partner in meaning making rather than a popular means to a scholarly end. I will pay attention to the unique textual, cultural and social context of comics. I want to treat these works with respect to their form, not as simply an empty container for meaning. This chapter will explain the basics of reading comics in order to make clear the role they play in this project; that is, comics affords weirdness and so assists the imagination in conceiving of the Cross.

Comics assists the imagination “at work” in the sense of offering a way create novel relationships between disparate elements. In the most basic sense, it creates a novel relationship between text and image. Comics offers a way to re-describe reality distinct from other kinds of imaginative activities and art forms. Certainly, there are other 20th and 21st century popular illustrations of the Cross that are not in comics. Many evoke powerful emotions and do real imaginative work using their own tools. However, the

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136 For examples of many contemporary artists who have created provocative images of the Cross, Kittredge Cherry, Art That Dares: Gay Jesus, Woman Christ, and More (Berkeley, CA:
narrative structure and reading techniques required for comics adds a different dimension or at least a different path to the emotions and thoughts they evoke. Comics has the potential to be a complex narrative apparatus to “produce itself as a world.”

Comics affords both popular critical imaginations and engagement with the weird.

First, comics can be one site of popular critical thought and imagination, where non-professionals engage in broadly philosophical thinking. Comics has done solid social work. The 14-page comic Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story from 1957 is “credited with being one of the most influential teaching tools ever produced for the Civil Rights Movement.” Some comics ask their readers questions about the nature of society and their roles as individuals and groups. They delve into deep and often painful subjects like how to understand an experience of the Holocaust, the Iranian revolution, a loved one’s illness, family betrayal, or a heartbreaking first love. These


139 There are many examples in the idiosyncratic Alan Moore’s body of work, such as the anarchist classic V for Vendetta or the gory and sweeping social commentary of Watchmen. Alan Moore (w), David Lloyd (a), Steve Whitaker (a), and Siobhan Dodds (a), V for Vendetta (New York: DC Comics, 1989). Alan Moore (w), Dave Gibbons (a), and John Higgins (i), Watchmen (New York: DC Comics, 1987).

140 Respectively, for example, drawing only from the very diverse memoir genre: Art Spiegelman (w, a), Maus (New York: Pantheon, 1991); Gusta Lemelman (w) and Martin Lemelman (w, a),
are sophisticated stories that actively engage their readers with text and visuals. In the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Amanda Salter insists that work with comics “demands the conscious structure of visual and textual data with intention… remembering that a picture can be more than an illustration—it can illuminate something that complements, contradicts or otherwise engages with the text.”

Many educators point out the value of comics for encouraging reluctant readers; the prolific comics-educator James Bucky Carter focuses on the way comics images can help student’s grasp words. Educators have significantly expanded their use of comics in secondary, elementary, university and instructional classrooms over the past 10 to 15 years. What has been an uphill battle to convince authorities of the place of comics in the classroom seems to have been largely

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won by those who advocate for comics’ value as a site for critical engagement. Comics works have found a place in the classroom because they invite students to turn to deeper thinking with familiar visual tools.

Second, comics as a form is broadly comfortable with the subversive. Comics outside the mainstream often revel in their shock value and ability to unsettle the reader, to be a spectacle. Ole Frahm shows how these weird signs reveal a constant interplay with power and resist scientific explanation. As Frahm claims, many comics “haunt” the reader with a certain unforgettable “Umheimlichkeit,” an eeriness or weirdness. The interplay between certain words and images can cause what Frank L. Cioffi calls “a dissonance that can on occasion be actually disturbing.” Many comics are at home in the weird, even though comics creators do not always exploit this talent of the form. In fact, comics art is a rich and diverse form, although it “suffers from an extraordinarily narrow image.” Scott McCloud insists that comics is a language whose vocabulary is the range of visual symbols from visual iconography that includes the “full range of pictorial styles” and “the invisible world of symbols and language.” While I am

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144 Hebdige explores this idea of being “spectacular” in pop culture. Comics, especially as an outgrowth of youth cultures in America, “convert the fact of being under surveillance into the pleasure of being watched.” Hebdige, Hiding in the Light, 8.

145 As Frahm says of comics, “Ihre Unheimlichkeit ist nicht leicht zu vergessen.” Their weirdness is not easy to forget. Ole Frahm, Die Sprache Des Comics, 56.


147 Groensteen, “Why Are Comics Still in Search of Cultural Legitimization?” 3

148 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 202-203.
sympathetic to the implications of this view, in terminology, I follow Neil Cohn’s study of the cognitive and linguistic aspects of this language world when he insists that

“Comics are not a language!” and “rather, comics are written in visual languages in the same way that novels or magazines are written in English.”149 This is a more exact way of making McCloud’s earlier claim for comics as a language by insisting that it is in fact many languages. This claim also places emphasis on form rather than their cultural cache.

Cohn’s semiotic study does this with a more systematized recognition of the differences across cultures of visual languages that McCloud discusses but does not give scientific morphology.150 Cohn systematizes these languages into different categories; the one I am most concerned with here is the American Visual Language (AVL) and its dialects.151

No matter which dialect or visual language is being used, the act of reading comics invites the reader into the making of the story, asking them to participate by providing what McCloud calls “closure” to the frames as they are presented. This act of closure is an important way comics acts to afford the weird that I will address shortly.

The power of comics to put weird or ironic work in the hands of even young readers has been a source of mistrust. The influential elite and powerful systems are the most prominent target of irony. The sometimes-overweening insistence that comics can be both literature and art comes from a long history of abuse of comics by the media and


150 This difference in terminology between the two does not suggest a strong disagreement. Cohn uses McCloud’s study of panel transitions from Understanding Comics to discuss the relationships between narrative grammars of American, European, and Japanese visual languages. Cohn, Visual Language, 148.

151 Cohn, Visual Language, 139-146. I will briefly define each of these dialects as they come up in the chapters.
literary elite.\textsuperscript{152} This “symbolic handicap” is a real hindrance to their wide acceptance.\textsuperscript{153}

Mid-twentieth century American public disapproval of comics came not just from the sometimes socially unacceptable subjects they actually engaged, but from the “notion that the medium itself was transgressive,” that it somehow compromised the integrity of words and art by combining them.\textsuperscript{154}

Also, comics creators are often people on the margins of power. Comics is what in Japanese is called a “hungry” art— a term derived from the concept “hungry sport” (\textit{hangurii supōtsu}), meaning a sport where one comes from lowly circumstances and rises through the ranks by hard work and (despite dismal failure) achieves a position of fame and fortune.\textsuperscript{155} This mythic portrayal is not entirely accurate—most comics creators come from positions of gender and even middle-class privilege. However, even the most successful creators do not make the fortunes possible to their entertainment industry cohort without moving into other mediums or controlling the publishing itself. Many

\textsuperscript{152} As with the study of popular culture generally, comics are always struggling to be accepted in academia. There has been some obvious progress for comics, Scott McCloud (w, a), \textit{Reinventing Comics: How Imagination and Technology Are Revolutionizing an Art Form} (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 12. However, examples of a widespread assault on comics are everywhere. For a famous example that led to many others, see Fredric Wertham’s influential psychology-based diatribe on comics supposed ill-effects on children, \textit{Seduction of the Innocent} (New York: Rinehart, 1953).


ideas that were born in comics translate readily into film. The explosion of comics into blockbuster entertainment does not show signs of stopping.¹⁵⁶

Because of these changes in the dynamics of power in the industry, from teams of single-medium comics artists and writers to individuals who regularly delve into multiple mediums, the position of comics creators is in significant flux. Comics creators increasingly find their lives and personalities becoming fodder for mainstream culture.¹⁵⁷

Some comics themselves have broken through from comics industry fame to fame in the world of literature and art. Art Spiegelman’s work *Maus*—his own father’s Holocaust story told through talking animals—earned him both a Pulitzer Prize and a Museum of Modern Art show.¹⁵⁸ This acclaim is one of the many signs of a wide recognition of comics’ power to engage readers on a deep level. Comics is one of the places where both

¹⁵⁶ The extremely successful Avengers movie franchise, based on characters and stories first popularized in Marvel comic books over the last 80 years includes the highest grossing movie of 2012 and currently the third highest worldwide grossing movie of all time, *Marvel’s The Avengers* (2012), as well as the three Iron Man movies to date (2008, 2010, 2013), of which *Iron Man 3* (2013) is the seventh highest grossing movie of all time; two Thor movies (2011, 2013); two Captain America movies (2011, 2014); *The Incredible Hulk* (2008); and the television series *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013–), *Daredevil* (2015), and *Agent Carter* (2015). The momentum is still going; *Marvel’s Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) had the second highest grossing opening weekend of all time (May 1, 2015). The rights to characters from *Spider-man* and *X-men* Marvel comics are owned by Sony and 20th Century Fox, respectively, who have made several financially lucrative films with them. DC Comics has had success with their rebooted Batman franchise directed by Christopher Nolan, *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2005), and *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), the later of which is the twelfth highest grossing movie of all time. All film and television information from *The Internet Movie Database*, accessed May 16, 2015, http://www.imdb.com.

¹⁵⁷ Arguably the most famous man in comics, Stan Lee, Marvel’s “Generalissimo,” has made a career from his caché. Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (New York: Peter Lang, 2008), 32, passim.

the intellect and the heart-strings can get a work out. These image-text pieces do not simply tell the story, they create an interesting encounter with ideas that they could not be experienced any other way.

**Defining Comics**

My working definition of the term “comics” shows how comics assists the imagination and access to the weird, but relies on understanding the form of comics rather than the subjects. Certainly, there is nothing necessarily “comic” about comics. The further back one traces comics in history, the more political, religious or moral their messages. For a starting definition, I follow the work of comics scholar and creator Scott McCloud, because his work focuses on the use of the form rather than content. McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer.”\(^{159}\) His predecessor in comics theory, pioneer of the form Will Eisner (1917-2005) uses the phrase “Sequential Art” to expand his work outside the pages of the usual comic book.\(^{160}\) Eisner shows comics used in technical instructions, attitudinal instructions, and storyboards; he muses on the possibilities opened up by computer technology (particularly cutting-edge thinking in 1985 that has aged particularly well).\(^{161}\) Eisner’s term defines comics without reference to their content or style, but he limits Sequential

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\(^{161}\) Eisner, *Comics*, 142-6.
Art to only “instruction and entertainment” applications.\footnote{Eisner, \textit{Comics}, 139.} Although these are certainly broad applications, these categories blur significantly when applied to comics practice. Comics allow readers to explore imaginatively in ways that blur any single purpose. Comics can be frivolous and meaningful, educational and ridiculous, serious and disturbing. I have yet to sense a limit to the uses to which the form comics can be put.

McCloud tightens Eisner’s definition of comics but broadens the picture of their uses. His definition specifies that the Sequential Art images should also be “juxtaposed,” which eliminates film and animation’s images-in-succession from consideration.\footnote{McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 7.} He uses the word “images” rather than Eisner’s “art” to avoid any perceived value judgments about content. He adds the descriptor “pictorial” to distinguish comics from text.\footnote{McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 8.} After all, written words can also be defined as simply juxtaposed images in deliberate sequence. This definition does draw a border around the form that eliminates some familiar things usually called “comics”—the single-panel comic and children’s picture books, for example—but, it allows McCloud to expand the origins from the usual places and times.\footnote{Children’s books and single-panel comics are not small omissions. Without McCloud’s very severe border, many children’s books might be considered simply word-specific comics narratives. Popular single-panel comics include Gary Larson’s \textit{Far Side} single-panel comic (New York: Chronicle Features and Universal Press Syndicate, 1980-1995), Bill Keane and later Jeff Keane’s iconic \textit{The Family Circus} (New York: King Features Syndicate, 1960-), the staggering number of single panel comics featured over the years in \textit{The New Yorker} magazine (New York: Condé Nast, 1925-), and the worldwide and long-standing popularity of single panel political cartoons. (There is an interesting collection of political and activist single panels in Ralph E. Shikes, \textit{The Indignant Eye: The Artist as Social Critic in Prints and Drawings from the Fifteenth Century} to the Present, 1997.)}
McCloud’s definition has room for improvement. Robert C. Harvey insists that this definition relies too heavily on the place of pictures and does not account for the obvious importance of the interplay of text in comics. Rather than seeing sequence at the heart of comics, Harvey sees “‘blending’ verbal and visual content” as more important to comics function as a form.\textsuperscript{166} For my project, this interplay and tension between words and images plays an important role in creating the weirdness that I find useful in interpretation.

Finding more social boundaries for what counts as comics helps some writers narrow down the field of study to a more manageable (although still tremendous) size. David Kunzle defines the “comic strip” more precisely for his historical work on the medium with these conditions:

1). There must be a sequence of separate images; 2). There must be a preponderance of image over text; 3). The medium in which the strip appears and for which it is originally intended must be reproductive, that is, in printed form, a mass medium; 4). The sequence must tell a story which is both moral and topical.\textsuperscript{167}

\textit{Century to Picasso} (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). Also of use in this discussion is Horrock’s report on McCloud’s confrontation with R.C. Harvey in an interview for \textit{Comics Journal}, in which McCloud argues that picture books cannot be comics if they are dominated by text rather than pictures. Keeping with his definition, one would expect that as long as there are two pictures in sequence a work can be a comic. McCloud is not willing to conceded the point. As Horrock concludes, “In effect, McCloud has added an amendment to his definition: comics must not only contain pictorial narrative; they must be dominated by it.” Dylan Horrocks, “Inventing Comics: Scott McCloud’s Definition of Comics,” \textit{Comics Journal}, no. 234 (2001): 5, accessed May 12, 2014, http://www.hicksville.co.nz.


\textsuperscript{167} Kunzle, \textit{Early Comic Strip}, 2.
I hesitate to endorse his last criteria in full because of the difficulties in judging which stories are either moral or topical. I also resist the idea that any specific content be one of the requirements of a form, but these criteria are more or less the usual requirements of comic strips today. They are a sequence of juxtaposed images, dominated by images rather than text, part of a mass medium, and include some sort of narrative. The requirement of mass medium adds that the comic strip must be “mobile; it travels to man [sic], and does not require man to travel to it. Although it may be addressed to the public at large, it invites possession by an individual.”\textsuperscript{168} This criteria limits comic strips to existing only after the advent of mass media. However, following the advent of mass media, the idea is further complicated and expanded by the advent of internet technology, where “possession” might be more accurately qualified as simply private or personal access. Kunzle’s attention to the social position of comics is certainly warranted, but also reveals the complexity of positioning comics precisely over time in different social and technological contexts.

Despite his over-reliance on pictorial forms over text, McCloud’s separation of form and content allows readers to ignore the usual history of comics and people’s perception of them as “crude, poorly drawn, semiliterate, cheap, and disposable kiddie fare.”\textsuperscript{169} While this is a wonderful way to help comics escape the “cultural ghetto,” Dylan Horrocks has pointed out that it is also a highly polemical move.\textsuperscript{170} Taken to the extreme,

\textsuperscript{168} Kunzle, \textit{Early Comic Strip}, 3.

\textsuperscript{169} McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 3.

\textsuperscript{170} Horrocks, “Inventing Comics,” 1.
this definition leads to what Horrocks calls a sort of “logophobia.” In his fear of words, McCloud fights on the side of pictures in the long battle between words and pictures. It is this structural talent of comics—the “invisible art”—that I am most interested in accessing as an aid to imagination for reading the Bible. I am not interested in replacing words with pictures wholesale, but I am interested in how a mixture of words and pictures can influence and assist the reading of sacred texts. My definition of comics is essentially McCloud’s “juxtaposed sequential images” with a wariness of the ways his definition might erase the peculiar local origins of different comics around the world.

Origins of Comics

Questions of origins are often more useful toward understanding the researcher than the actual history of comics, but I will give a brief study of how origins can help track the way comics can afford the weird. The comics in this study are contemporary; the oldest I use for close reading was first published in 1961. However, the prehistory

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172 Hatfield points out that McCloud borrows the term “closure” from gestalt psychology. “Art of Tensions,” 135.

173 McCloud, Understanding Comics, subtitle.

of comics can show how the form functions, especially as religious.\textsuperscript{175} By applying his definition, McCloud traces the history of comics back to a 36-foot long, Pre-Columbian screen-fold depicting the military and political exploits of the hero “Eight Deer ‘Tiger’s-Claw’” (made c. 1049) and the Bayeux Tapestry’s presentation of the Norman Conquest (made c. 1070).\textsuperscript{176} He is reluctant to draw the roots of comics to Egyptian hieroglyphs, because “their real descendent is the written word and not comics.”\textsuperscript{177} McCloud entertains the idea of finding sequence in Egyptian painting but finally admits having no idea about the exact origin of comics—although he is eager to mention the possibilities offered by stained glass, Trajan’s Column, Greek painting and pottery, or Japanese scrolls.\textsuperscript{178} His primary concerns, like mine, are with the way comics function today. However, a brief background in the history of comics is important to understanding the tools that comics use to access the weird and religious.

McCloud’s interest in function means that his ideas about the first comics are concerned with ways they work, using juxtaposed images in sequence to convey meaning. The beginning of comics for other writers could have roots in the style, format, or the beginnings of the industry. Those interested in the beginnings of the style of art usually associated with comics trace the style from cartooning or even cave paintings.

\textsuperscript{175} The religious aspects are parsed more fully in the section “Religion/Comics” below.

\textsuperscript{176} McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 10, 12.

\textsuperscript{177} McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 13.

\textsuperscript{178} McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 15.
Their definitions rely on comics being folk art or simple line drawings sometimes filled in with bold colors. This can be a limiting way to understand the form.

Histories of the comic book often begin with the first time newspaper comics were stapled into a codex. This format allowed comics to go from the “open-ended dramatic narrative essentially without beginning and end on whom the reader is always dropping in in medias res” and then only for a moment, toward a more sophisticated narrative structure.\(^{179}\) Although strips like *Prince Valiant* and *Dick Tracy* continue their stories over several strips, the piece-meal delivery method of the daily newspaper limited their narrative possibilities.\(^{180}\) They could be weird over time, but the individual strips required careful construction to maximize impact in the limited space. Small space bred tight constructions.

With more space, there came opportunity for extended irony and metaphorical work. The Ledger Syndicate published a small broadside of their Sunday color comics on 7-by-9 inch plates in 1933. Later that year, salesman Max C. Gaines and sales manager Harry I. Wildeberg bound these into a 7 ½-by-10 inch book as a promotional premium for Proctor and Gamble.\(^{181}\) The result was *Funnies on Parade*, and the modern comic book was born. Gaines took the idea into several other early comics ventures. Hajdu

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\(^{179}\) M. Thomas Inge, *Comics as Culture* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), 3.

\(^{180}\) Although many adventure and suspense strips uses the constant cliffhangers made necessary by the format in the structure of their narratives. Harold R. Foster (w, a), *Prince Valiant*. 2 vols. (Wayne, NJ: Manuscript Press, 1982-4). Chester Gould (w, a), *The Celebrated Cases of Dick Tracy, 1931-51* (New York: Chelsea House, 1970). In collections such as these, these story-driven strips translate naturally from strip to book.

\(^{181}\) Inge, *Comics as Culture*, 139.
reports that he was an overbearing showman who claimed that his comics had a direct connection to cave paintings, Sumerian mosaics and Kozanji scrolls.\(^{182}\) According to him, Little Orphan Annie was a direct descendent of Nile women in hieroglyphics. His treatise on the subject, *Narrative Illustration: The Story of Comics*, was part of his promotional materials for the comic *Picture Stories from the Bible*.\(^{183}\) From these early days, comics was connected to reading and re-interpretation of the Bible, even if only to lend comics some of the Bible’s gravitas and respectability.

Another avenue along which to pursue origins would be to trace comics from the development of the industry in North America. The industry developed into workshops and houses that after some time have coalesced into a few major studios that dwarf their more independent competition: DC, Marvel and, lately, Image. DC Comics, first Detective Comics, Inc. and National Comics, published their first title in 1937. Quality Comics, DC Comics and Fawcett Comics dominated the booming Golden Age of the industry. Their contemporary Timely Comics prefigured the giant Marvel Comics of today. Seven Marvel superstar artists formed Image Comics in 1992.\(^{184}\) The steep fluctuation in profitability, nepotism in hiring, often strong personalities, and sometimes


\(^{183}\) Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 73.

\(^{184}\) Rhoades, *Complete History*, 15, 33, 268.
hard to explain turnover in staff has kept the industry lean and the history extremely
difficult to trace accurately.\footnote{This makes the project a fascinating one for historians and insiders, for example: Clifford Meth, \textit{Comic Book Babylon: The Real Villains and Heroes of Comics} (Rockaway, NJ: Aardworlf, 2013); Rhoades, \textit{Complete History}; Hadju, \textit{Ten-Cent Plague}, Nyberg, \textit{Seal of Approval}.}

Of course, accounting for the industry does not account for underground comics
(also called “comix” or, when more X-rated, “comixxx”). Much of the subversive
possibility of comics comes from the way they escape industry and market standards.
Self-publishers and independent creators still proliferate the field. In fact, web comics
and self-publishing programs like \textit{Comixology Submit!} have further lowered the barriers
of publication. What once was weird about comics slips into the mainstream, while new
weirdness constantly churns underground.\footnote{De Certeau, \textit{Practice of Everyday Life}, 34-39.} In these underground spaces, the limits are
only those imposed by the creator’s imagination, ability, and willingness to censor
themselves. Creators can play with sacred and revered ideas with near-impunity. The
exceptions to this freedom often circle around explicitly forbidden religious images—the
representation of God or Mohammed in Islamic circles, for example—but, still, “some
form of comics expression exists within the broad context of nearly every major
contemporary religious tradition.” Even in Islamic contexts where images of God are
treated with more suspicion, “comics traditions thrive.”\footnote{Darby Orcutt, “Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections” in \textit{Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels}, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 93. An editor of the collection that includes this claim, A. David Lewis, has been working to bring more of these comics traditions from the Middle East to the West. For a chronicle of this struggle see, A. David Lewis, “The Middle East Comic Anthology You’ve Never Read,” \textit{IslamiCommentary}, December 5, 2014, accessed January 13, 2015.}

Outside or on the fringes of the
industry and major publishing houses, comics can confront whatever the creator wants. They can operate independently from their origins and restrictions. Such a scattered and unruly form does not easily fit under any industry-driven definition.

There are a variety of possibilities available for tracing the origins of comics, each with its own polemical concerns. McCloud’s concise yet expansive definition fits the purposes of this project. It gives a broad understanding of what the form comics can contain. McCloud’s definition includes comic strips, not just longer comics works. He avoids single-panel comics because they does not contain the “juxtaposition” that his definition requires. Although I will not avoid mentioning single-panel comics or even single images as they appear in a larger context, my concern here is with the place of the images I study in the context of a narrative. I am primarily interested in comics that use images to tell a story using a sequence of juxtaposed images. Of course images by themselves can be weird, but my primary concern is how this weirdness works across narrative.

Further, my study is concerned with North American comics in the 20th and 21st century. Although the comics form in McCloud’s definition includes not only an amazing array of story-telling art from around the world and from deep in the past, my study is limited to a recognizable subset of comics for a more wieldy enterprise, interpreting a

http://islamicommentary.org/2014/12/the-middle-east-comic-book-anthology-youve-never-read. In the U.S. market in particular, where (according to 2013 Pew Research Center numbers) Muslims makes up about only about 1% of the population, comics about practitioners of Islam and about Islam in general (for better or worse) have been growing in popularity substantially since the early 1980s and 2001, respectively. The most famous Muslim creators in the U.S. are arguably G. Willow Wilson (Ms. Marvel) and David Sims (Cerberus). A. David Lewis, “What is the Muslim Comic Book?” IslamiCommentary, October 9, 2014, accessed January 13, 2015. http://islamicommentary.org/2014/10/what-is-the-muslim-comic-book
subset of biblical texts using comics that use their images. Before explaining how comics tell a story with their text-image visual language tools, I will explain the significance of the term “graphic novel” for my project.

Graphic Novel

One peculiar characteristic of comics is the plethora of formats in which they come. I define formats based on industry-standard terms that are largely based on unwieldy and changing categories. The exact same group of a few panels can form a comic strip; a part of a comic book in an issue, trade and digital format; and might also be classified or collected with other issues as a graphic novel. Bracketing the history opened up by McCloud’s expanded definition of comics, there are a limited number of formats that the modern, mass-produced comic takes. These commodities come in a limited number of formats whose boundaries are constantly being pushed by innovative creators, a changing market, and evolving technology. Understanding the larger context of formats will help navigate the formats in this project.

Graphic novels are bound comic books with a defined beginning and end (even if they are part of a larger story). They are usually longer than the approximately 25 pages of an issue and are considered part of the book trade rather than the magazine trade.

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188 My principle of selection for the comics I use will be treated later in this chapter.

189 Independent comics often follow these conventions if only to appeal to and fit in the market, but they are not limited to the formats outlined here.

190 Charles Hatfield, Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 153.
They are generally (although certainly not exclusively) marketed as the more ‘literary’ or ‘sophisticated’ comics form, but it is difficult to make these kinds of style and content judgments when dealing with a format issue. The economies of print-based mass reproduction influence the form around page count, paper stock size, print run or edition size, color, etc. However, meaningful content and serious skill can be packaged in even the most modest forms.

To make matters more complicated, there is no industry standard around the application of the term. As Hatfield explains, the term “can be almost anything: a novel, a collection of interrelated or thematically similar stories, a memoir, a travelogue or journal, a history, a series of vignettes or lyrical observations, an episode from a longer work—you name it.” Although it began as a name for a format, graphic novel is instead “an all-purpose tag for a vague new class or social object, one that, unlike the ‘comic book,’ need not be grounded in the exact specifications of a given physical format.”

This uncertainty about format points to a whole other set of factors around the use of the term.

The practice of using the term “graphic novel” for a particular format sprang from comics’ struggle for cultural legitimacy. Will Eisner used it to refer to his Contract with God trilogy in the first widely recognized example. Although others had used the terms “graphic novel” and “graphic story” before, “Eisner apparently believed that he had

191 Hatfield, Alternative Comics, 5.

192 It was when the phrase “a graphic novel by Will Eisner” appeared on the cover of A Contract with God that the term gained general use. Will Eisner (w, a), A Contract with God: A Graphic Novel (New York: Baronet Books, 1978).
coined a new term, out of desperation to market his book.¹⁹³ He used the term to claim a certain cultural capital for his work and to distinguish it from the simplistic, child-centric or playful fantasy fare that people associate with the comic book. Some authors balk at the use of the term at all for its often-inaccurate undertones and unfounded expectations. Underground comics guru Robert Fiore claims, “The term is essentially a reflection of the industry's yearning for unearned status. Rather than improving the image of comics by improving the comics themselves, it tries to enhance its status through semantic jiggery-pokery.”¹⁹⁴ Certainly, the industry and fans have not moved to create a more exact meaning to the term, making it almost always useless in determining what kind or quality of comics a piece might be.¹⁹⁵

I will outline the various types of comics I will use and my principle of selection toward the end of this chapter. Though most of the comics I use take advantage of the sustained narrative that graphic novels or collected works can present, I am also open to the creative possibilities offered in even brief narratives, as long as there is an identifiable

¹⁹³ Hatfield, Alternative Comics, 165.


¹⁹⁵ In this project, I might count five or possibly six of the works I close read as graphic novels. Marked, Blinded and The Action Bible are completed single-volume works; most straight-forwardly graphic novels. McKeever’s volume is complete as it stands, but started as a series of issues. Luedke’s work is also complete, but is made of four separate large volumes. Blondell’s work is a single volume, but certainly suggests that it might continue in another. Ross, Marked. Steve Ross (w, a), Blinded (New York: Seabury Church Publishing, 2008). Doug Mauss (w), Sergio Cariello (a), The Action Bible: God’s Redemptive Story (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2010). Ted McKeever (w, a), Miniature Jesus (Berkeley, CA: Image, Shadowline, 2013). Robert James Luedke [w, a], Eye Witness, vol. 1: A Fictional Tale of Absolute Truth (Flower Mound, TX: Head Press, 2004). Jimmy Blondell (w), David Krintzman (w), and Nicholas Da Silva (a), Black Jesus (Coquitlam, B.C., Canada: Arcana Comics, 2009).
narrative. I use the term “graphic novel” prominently in the title of this project in a self-conscious, playful way. My concern is with whether or not these comics offer something to imagination of the Cross, not whether or not they count as graphic novels by any definition. I am not making a claim about the sophistication, content or form of the comics that I am using. I am using the term to lend a certain cultural capital to my own work. I am striving to bring a certain cultural legitimacy to the work that comics are doing in interpreting the Bible. The slash in the title shows that my concern is with how comics gives visual (graphic) and new (novel) spark to the imagination for biblical interpretation.

None of the formats of comics is defined by subject matter. Rather, comics is made with visual languages with a vocabulary and grammar of their own. Since my project involves a close reading of comics alongside the Bible, I introduce the visual languages of comics with some rigor.

**Visual Languages of Comics and their Text-Image Tools**

Perhaps any definition of comics is overly labored; most readers claim to be able to identify comics when they see them, just as most readers would claim to be able to recognize a Bible in a stack of books. Comics on the fringe of McCloud’s definition like the Bayeux Tapestry, William Hogarth’s engraving series “A Harlot’s Progress” or Max Ernst’s collage novel *A Week of Kindness* would give the average reader pause; nonetheless, most people recognize the usual interdependent series of words and pictures
as comics. Modern comic artists have honed and expanded these tools over the last several years into recognizable formats. Every generation both relies on the conventions of comics and occasionally explodes these conventions to create new forms. There are stylistic tools that comic creators use to tell their stories using words and pictures. That is not to say that every comic uses these tools (as every piece of literature does not use every tree in the forest of rhetoric), but a definition of terms here will ease my graphic/novel readings considerably. Reading comics often relies on ease, so I strive not to overcomplicate with my definitions of the reading tools. In the following section, I show how these text-image tools basically function: the pictorial, the text, the narrative, and the emotional code that results. All these tools work together to produce the weirdness I seek to uncover in readings.

Pictorial Tools

In a definition of comics that strictly follows McCloud, comics are first of all a visual medium. The pictures, in their juxtaposed sequence, are all that are required to meet his basic definition of comics. The balance of power between word and image has fully shifted in favor of the image. Certainly, comics use images to their full communicative extent. Often, the artwork dominates the page. In a situation where the words and pictures in a comic do not agree, the resulting tensions create valuable subtexts. In an original typescript by Walter Geier for the story “Just Good Friends” in

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196 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 16, 19.

197 Varnum and Gibbons, introduction to Language of Comics, ix. For more on this view of a power balance between words and images, see Mitchell, Iconology, passim.
the romance comic *Young Love* #36 published in August 1951, the caption reads as a sedate scene: “Ellie kissed me… in a very sisterly fashion, of course.” However, the instructions for the art tell a conflicting story: “Ellie really plants one on Will… it’s anything but sisterly.” Here the art tells one story, while the text acts as the narrator to another. The interplay between image and word does complex work in creating emotion and impression, but the image begins this work first. As Ann Marie Seward Barry says, “The image is… capable of reaching the emotions before it is cognitively understood. The logical of the image is also associative and holistic rather than linear, so that not only does the image present itself as reality, but it also may speak directly to the emotions, bypassing logic, and works according to alogical principles of reasoning.”

Rather than simply acting as illustration to a largely complete text, “Artwork dominates the reader's initial attention.” What makes this domination or first-impression of art important to understanding comics is the way the art opens meanings. The art of comics allows for bundles of information that the reader interprets to his or her context and understanding of the story context. In comics,

images themselves carry clusters of meanings that are endemic to specific discourses. And when images are used in tandem with words—as they are in the

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198 Hajdu, 162.

199 More on the text itself in a section below.


Art opens the multiplicity of meanings in comics, although it is certainly not the last contributor to this discourse.

It is ill advised to make any general claims about the art in comics. The art can include any style of art. Generally speaking, comic book pictures are often by design more “iconic” than other images. Pictures in comics must often repeat over and over to convey a narrative. This repetition lends itself to simplification and symbolization, toward what is often practically called an *icon*. I follow McCloud, who uses icon “to mean any image used to represent a person, place, thing or idea” and understands *symbols* to be a sub-category of icons that represent *only* concepts, ideas, or philosophies. So, comics are in the habit of using icons to call to mind subjects that may resemble the subjects they wish to invoke more or less.

In comics, symbols can take on meanings that most readers recognize in the world of comics. For example, *emanata* are visual symbols that describe an action, like a light bulb over a character’s head suggests an idea. Some symbols come pre-loaded with real-world meaning rather than comics codes. Using a cross-pose for the savior

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202 Clanton, *The End Will Be Graphic*, xi.

203 Anyone tempted even to insist that comics art must be two dimensional would be wrong. For example, Chris Ware moves comic art into three dimensions in his *Building Stories* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

204 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 27.

205 The term *emanata* was coined by cartoonist Mort Drucker. Rhoades, *Complete History*, 279.
character in a pivotal moment layers that character with Christian meanings.\textsuperscript{206} Other comics-coded images have taken on new life in the real world. Real-life hacker-activist group “Anonymous” has adopted the mask of the anarchist “V” from Alan Moore’s \textit{V for Vendetta}. They wear the mask that appears in the comic at events around the world.\textsuperscript{207} Although it lacks a centralized mission, the group agrees on the V mask as their brand. These objects that subversive groups and people use “take on a symbolic dimension, becoming a form of stigmata, token of self-imposed exile.”\textsuperscript{208} How the reader interprets the symbol can have a real impact on how a comic is read or whether or not a challenge to the status quo registers. Pictures can work either to clarify or obscure the symbolic meaning of a comic. So, when interpreting, I will have to keep the activity of pictures squarely in focus rather than treating them as decoration for the text.

The pictures that comics use “seem more transparent than words, but often their transparency is illusory.”\textsuperscript{209} Comics-pictures are abstractions that can be used to highlight and suppress certain aspects of experience. Any style of comics picture—from the lifelike worlds of \textit{American Splendor} to the simple abstractions of \textit{Bone} or any of a thousand

\textsuperscript{206} As in, Alan Brennert (w), Norm Breyfogle (a), Lovern Kindzierski (i), and Bill Oakley (l), \textit{Batman: Holy Terror}, Elseworlds (New York: DC Comics, 1991).


\textsuperscript{208} Hebdige, \textit{Hiding in the Light}, 3.

\textsuperscript{209} Varnum and Gibbons, introduction to \textit{Language of Comics}, xii.
other styles that play in comics—are designed to convey meaning about the story-world and the real world.\footnote{Harvey Pekar (w), R. Crumb (a), Gary Dumm (a), Frank Stack (a), \textit{American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar and More American Splendor} (New York: Ballentine, 2008). Jeff Smith (w, a), and Steve Hamaker (i), \textit{Bone}, Columbus, OH: Cartoon Books, 1991-2004.} Characters can be “a blank slate” upon which the viewer is free to “\textit{mask} themselves in a character and safely enter a stimulating world.”\footnote{McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 43.} Once the viewer has entered this world, iconic pictures can help draw the reader along and leave them more susceptible to shock and dissonance and weirdness.

Comics images share the task with words of pulling and directing the reader through the narrative. Pictures and words must slow down the reader and urge her on to the next page. The task of employing pictures in a narrative is accomplished by “framing” these pictures.

\textbf{Framing Movement and Time: Splash Pages, Panels, Gutters}

To convey narrative, the pictures in comics must communicate movement through space and time. Eisner shows how important the “capture” of events in the flow of the narrative is to this communication, since “the work of the sequential artist must be measured by comprehensibility.”\footnote{Eisner, \textit{Comics}, 38.} Narrative is generally broken into sequenced segments. The juxtaposed images that make up a comic are generally called \textit{panels}. \textit{Panels} may be used as containers, narrative devices, or structural support. Generally, a panel consists of one unit of art in a comic. Although they are sometimes called “frozen
moments,” Saraceni points out that it “is in fact very rare for a panel to represent only an
instant of the story.” Rather, panels are a portion of the narrative where “something
actually takes place and takes time.”213 The way the panels fit together may be as routine
and regular in size and shape as say Nancy comics in their square boxes or as significant
and radical as a complex page in Testament that shows discreet panels of parallel action
of human characters in the near-future and biblical past while the gods fight in the gutter
to “to dominate the sequential action.”214

Panels might communicate say, a moment in time, the features of a character, the
details of a place, or almost anything about time and place that the creator wishes to
communicate. The width of a frame can sometimes indicate duration of time or an
expans of space. In western cultures, the reader is conditioned “to read each page
independently from left to right, top to bottom.” Most panel arrangements are designed
for this order. However, Eisner declares that readerly-practice does not always follow the
discipline: “The viewer will often glance at the last panel first. Nevertheless, the reader
finally must return to the conventional pattern.” 215 A skilled artist will use all her
composition acumen to keep the reader on the right panel path and slow her down. The
series of panels is a static, juxtaposed version of the frame in film. The eye compensates


214 Douglas Rushkoff, “Foreword: Looking for God in the Gutter,” in Graven Images: Religion in
Comic Books and Graphic Novels, ed. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York:
Continuum, 2010), x-xi. Rushkoff writes his thoughts on his construction of the gutters. For an
example of the long-running series, Ernie Bushmiller (w, a), Ernie Bushmiller’s Nancy

215 Eisner, Comics, 41.
for the multiple frames to create motion when it is viewed through a projector.\textsuperscript{216} This static border is the narrative device that allows the space between frames to mean.

Between each panel of a comic there is often some sort of space. This is what in comics is called the \textit{gutter}. Despite this undignified name, the gutter is a powerful tool in the language of comics. To take McCloud’s example, in a series of two panels, the image of a man raising an axe over another man is followed in the next by only a scream floating over a peaceful city scene. The “closure” of the scene is mostly left to the reader to decide, but the effectiveness of this closure to the story “stems from the artist’s ability (usually more visceral than intellectual) to gauge the commonality of the reader’s experience.”\textsuperscript{217} It is the reader with her particular knowledge of the form, her feelings, and her tastes who lets the axe fall or decides who screamed or why, but the artist who sets the limit. The blank space between is where the reader’s “imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea.”\textsuperscript{218} This space between pictures is where the magic of storytelling happens and where the reader directly participates in the crime. It can bring the reader directly into participation in the story, even if that story is,

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\textsuperscript{217} Eisner, \textit{Comics}, 38.

\textsuperscript{218} McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 66.
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say, the story of the two-thousand year-old crucifixion of a Messiah. Readers who are reading about characters or events with which they have prior experience will draw this closure naturally from their own background knowledge. Scott Elliott in his work with alternative Jesus comics has shown how this “guttural language” invites readers familiar with the text to apply their knowledge of biblical texts. These comics, Elliott says, “faithfully, if ironically, refract the subversive potential of both the biblical narrative and—at least potentially—the historical Jesus precisely by their infidelity to what might be loosely described as a more orthodox approach and disposition.”²¹⁹ By allowing the reader to act on the text, the frame’s invitation to reimagine gives a faithful rendition of the biblical narrative. Eisner explains that, properly used, a frame “invites the reader into the action or allows the action to ‘explode’ toward the reader. In addition to adding a secondary intellectual level to the narrative, it tries to deal with other sensory dimensions.”²²⁰ The gutter and frame work together to convey the story.

The frame in comics functions both to limit what the reader sees and to suggest more beyond the frame. Umberto Eco talks about these complementary yet opposing functions as “form” and “infinity.” On the one hand, the artist shows us a complete form in each panel with images and words; she “tells us about this scene and not about another.” In the panel, “the represented universe is limited to its form.”²²¹ On the other hand, the panel surrounded by the gutter shares characteristics of a Eco’s “list.” That is,


²²⁰ Eisner, Comics, 46.

the panel has selected one moment in time or image out of what the gutter suggests is an infinite number of possible moments outside the frame. The frame limits the picture, and so “conveys an ‘etcetera’, i.e. one that suggests it may continue beyond its own physical limits.” Often, comics are one of those works that “make us think that what we see within the frame is not all, but only an example of a totality whose number is hard to calculate.” The different types of frame convey movement through space and time, as well as asking the reader to join a “silent dance of the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible.” Comics ask the reader to make an effort in creating closure using visual tools.

**Borders** are the containers around panels. Panels do not necessarily need borders, but they are often used between panels. It is difficult to generalize, since borders communicate different ideas in different works. Eisner in particular advocates for the creative use of borders as part of the “non-verbal ‘language’ of sequential art.” He shows how different borders can be made to show different tenses. Straight-edged borders often imply present tense. The flashback or other shift in tense can be shown with a wavy or scalloped line. He also shows how a jagged line might show a shock or convey emotion. Eisner also often uses the “non-frame” which “speaks to unlimited space” to “encompass… unseen but acknowledged background.” When there are no containers,

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223 Eco, *Infinity*, 38.


225 Eisner, *Comics*, 44.
the content seems to be allowed to run into the outside border of the whole page or the margin.

Different comics have different size and shape to their margins. As with other printed books, margins are often used to give a buffer between the printed matter and the edges of the page. However, precise printing techniques do not require a margin for this purpose. Some artists use them out of convention or to give their pages a particular look. *Bleed* or *full-bleed* are terms used to talk about art that extends to the edge of a page.

Border or the lack of borders can be put to use in communicating all kinds of meanings to the savvy reader. Just like the margins and border of other texts, even the Bible, the place where the work touches the reader’s world can be used to great effect.

Not all pages are broken into panels. A *splash page* is a full-page drawing that can begin a narrative and set the stage, slow a narrative at pivotal moments by having the reader study one moment in time, or end a narrative with a bold artistic statement. A splash page serves as what Eisner calls a “launching pad for the narrative and… it establishes a frame of reference. Properly employed it seizes the reader’s attention and prepares his attitude for the events to follow.”\(^{226}\) An effective splash page shows the reader something affecting that gives her pause or engages her emotions. As with the other techniques, good creators carefully determine the moments that need that technique to communicate the desired emotion.

\(^{226}\) Eisner, *Comics*, 62.
Text in Image

After this emphasis on the art of comics, I should clarify with Harvey that “words are clearly an integral part of what we think of when we think of comics.” Especially in this project, studying how particular comics interpret the text, tradition, and symbols from the Bible, text plays a pivotal role. Harvey argues, against McCloud, that “the thing that distinguishes [comics] from other kinds of pictorial narratives—is the incorporation of verbal content.”

It is the juxtaposition of text and image that gives comics a unique voice. The ability to say one thing and do another in text and image forms the basis of comics the ability to unsettle their readers. Eisner reminds us that the “psychological processes involved in viewing a word and an image are analogous,” although he often favors art as the primary mode of reading his reader. Still, Eisner values the tremendous affect of a well-placed word and sees comics as a “successful cross-breeding of illustration and prose.”

In the rumored war between text and image, comics often come down squarely in the middle and play both sides off and against each other. Text can reinforce, explain, gloss or ironize images and deftly turn the reader one way or another.

In my example above in the Pictorial section, Geier’s typescript for the story “Just Good Friends,” I argued that the pictures began their work first for the reader. The picture begins its work first, but that does not mean it has the last word. In “Just Good Friends”

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227 Harvey, “Comedy at the Juncture of Word and Image,” 75.

228 Eisner, Comics, 8.
the text is unreliable, while the picture tells the real story. However, text and image can interact in other ways in comics, many of which can be made to exploit this tension.

McCloud has identified the major ways that words and images combine as: word specific, picture specific, duo-specific, additive, parallel, montage, and interdependent. Knowing these relationships will be of assistance in reading my analysis of the comics ahead. Although I will not have reason to highlight every one of these combinations, it is important to know the range of options that are in use. What the comics creators chose not to do is occasionally as illuminating as the word-image combinations they put to use. In word specific combinations, pictures merely illustrate a specific text that might be understood well alone. This relationship might happen in other sorts of relationships, but in comics words can become “welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages.” In picture specific combinations, words merely add specific sounds to pictures that might express a narrative well alone. In the rather redundant duo-specific relationship, words and pictures express the same meaning. In the additive relationship, words or pictures amplify or elaborate the meaning that already exists in the other element.

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229 Hajdu, *Ten-Cent Plague*, 162. In another example of such an “interdependent” relationship, Scott McCloud makes a panel that shows masked bandits working to open a safe with the narrative caption, “After college, I pursued a career in high finance.” The picture and words combine to tell a version of the story neither could tell alone. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 155.


McCloud calls parallel combinations those in which “words and pictures follow very different courses—without intersecting.” Rather, when words and images do separate things, the intersection is only in the reader’s view of the page. Frank L. Cioffi parses the parallel relationship further into what he calls the disjunctive relationship, “where words and images seem to follow a similar course yet in fact express opposing alternatives.”

McCloud’s next relationship is the montage, where words become part of the composition of the picture. Eisner is a master of this, skillfully blurring the lines between what is text and what is illustration. He claims and demonstrates how “lettering, treated ‘graphically’ and in the service of the story, functions as an extension of the imagery.” In his Contract with God graphic novel and Spirit series, he uses lettering to provide “the mood, a narrative bridge, and the implication of sound.” Eisner stretches this montage relationship to be a tool that could be woven into the composition to serve other relationships as well. McCloud’s last relationship is interdependent, where the narrative or idea is only fully understood when both words and pictures are present. Each of these relationships relies on words and pictures to be understood as well as their interaction. These relationships are useful in analyzing comics, but there is also a vocabulary of the tools of integrating words into comics.

232 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 154.


234 Eisner, Comics, 10.
The *balloon* or *bubble* around the words, qualified as *speech* or *thought*, is one of the most popular elements associated with comics. It is so inextricable from comics that Italian takes the word *fumetto*, literally a puff of smoke, but here referring to the speech balloon, as the word for comics.\(^{235}\) Balloons are often ovals or clouds, but can be many shapes and convey mood, character or tone. Saraceni notes, “In the case of adaptations of classics of literature, for example, the shape of the balloon is often square—this unusual shape is used in order to give more respectability to the publication.”\(^{236}\) The shape of balloons may or may not be significant in interpretation. For example, a square might simply be the most convenient shape for the space or it might communicate a “square” or official-sounding piece of text.

There are different visual ways to signal who is thinking or speaking, equivalent to the “he said” in reported speech. Often, the *tail* or *trail* of the balloon points to a character who is speaking, usually a “small pointed projection… but sometimes a simple line.”\(^{237}\) Also, color or texture might be used to indicate which character should be associated with a loose balloon. When characters in the story provide their own narration, the line between balloons and captions blurs.

*Captions*, sometimes called *narrative boxes* or *caption boxes*, are usually positioned outside the panel image elements. In most cases the content is “represents the narrator’s voice, very similar to the background voice [or voice over] that is sometimes


heard in films.” Much like in film, this information functions to add information not contained in dialogue or supplement image information. The classic “Meanwhile…” or “Back at the Ranch” are simple captions that indicate time and space, but they have fallen out of use in favor of visual cues as readers have become more adept at reading comics.

Sometimes captions serve as links between action in panels, “filling the gap represented by the gutter.” The narrator may or may not be reliable or named in the comic. The caption serves as another place where words and pictures are in tension in comics.

Narrative Imagination

My primary interest is in comics that advance a narrative. As literature can exist without plot, there are comics that do not tell a story. These are not my concern here. Comic strips boil narrative down to its most elemental form—set-up, advancement, and payoff—in as few as two panels. Art and text blend and play off of each other for some economical or drawn-out storytelling. In order for a comic to fit the McCloud definition I am using, there must be two pictorial images juxtaposed, but this juxtaposition might work in any number of ways. Panels can move a story from millisecond to millisecond in time or from millennia to unfathomable millennia. Panels can also move stories in space.

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238 Saraceni, Language of Comics, 10.

239 Hatfield, “Art of Tensions,” 138.

240 Saraceni, Language of Comics, 10.

241 For example, there are several comics meaningful comics without a narrative to speak of in Art Spiegelman (w, a), Breakdowns: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@&*!, 2nd ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 2008).
or allow a story to play in many places at once. A page that gives several simultaneous
reactions is difficult to communicate elegantly in a text narrative, but happens seamlessly
and usually without causing the reader discomfort in comics.

    Continuity in comics means “a set of contiguous events” that may be set in one or
more connected or separate universes.\textsuperscript{242} Effective continuity requires not only coherent
narratives but also cohesive characterization and a certain amount of reader credulity or
suspension of narrative critique. Dan Clanton argues that this sort of “imaginative
malleability” is what makes a medium appropriate to compare with biblical
interpretation. In a comparison of his own, Clanton suggests that

    if we compare the character of Moses in the pseudepigraphical Testament of
Moses, we will find a different character, different stories and different emphases
that reflect the different communities that produced, edited and transmitted these
texts. Similarly, if we compare Bob Kane’s original 1939 Batman with other, later
Batmen—such as those drawn and written by Neal Adams, Frank Miller, Jeph
Loeb and Paul Dini, to name a few—we will see some stark differences not only
in characterization but also in tone, themes, and morals.

    He goes on to explain how this comparison between Moses and Batman can be theorized
for biblical interpretation:

    Put differently, not only the interpretive potentialities inherent in the format of
comic books, but also the creative communal continuities—by which I mean the
web-like systems of meaning(s) that are constructed between (a) a character’s
history, (b) the story arc of a specific narrative, and (c) the knowledge and
reactions of the communities of ‘fanboys’—parallel the process by and through
which the biblical text interprets itself and has been interpreted in various
communities, discourses, genres, and time periods.\textsuperscript{243}

    It is with creative continuity, narrative flexibility, and attention to irony that comics lend
their most valuable talents to biblical interpreters. Comics allow readers to grasp vast and

\textsuperscript{242} Rhoades, Complete History, 277.

\textsuperscript{243} Clanton, The End Will Be Graphic, xvi-xvii
complex narrative situations, even (it is my hope) to grasp the scandal and weirdness of the Cross without bringing those sensibilities to the image. In a world constantly boiling ideas down to the pithiest idiom, comics challenges readers to expect and relish narrative complexity.

Especially in superhero comics, norms have made it natural for reader to expect multi-issue story arcs, crossovers between various titles, team-ups between characters from different narratives, reboots where a character turns out to have totally new origins that fit with a new story (that is, ret-con or “retroactive continuity”), and multiple universes (the *Multiverse*) with similar characters doing different things simultaneously. As Kendall Whitehouse explains, “The pinnacle of this expanding narrative form is the multi-title ‘event’ series… Here, the narrative extends beyond the titles in the main series, with the story spreading across additional ‘tie-in’ titles.” To be sure these complex structures are built on marketing techniques that sell more titles. In the process, comic books have made way for further complexities in story telling. “The story has now become a world unto its own that allows the reader to explore whichever dimensions are of the greatest interest… The series presents a nearly unbounded narrative universe for the reader to experience.”

This complex narrative form allows readers to come at a single narrative from many angles, not unlike a text story with multiple points of view, but expanded across many artists, writers and universes. This malleability and expansion shows that “the hermeneutics of reading comic books parallel those of engaging biblical

literature.”245 It allows for ironic distance. It casts the reader outside of the frame, but also breaks the barrier of the fourth wall. The reader lives in the gutter.

The comics I read here do not participate in a sweeping multiverse in the issues themselves. Jesus-story comics participate in a different form of alternate reality or alternate universe. They assume certain pieces of our universe, but not others. For most of them, Jesus was a historical and usually a supernatural figure. However, there is something that we do not know in our reality that makes the Jesus of that reality act differently than expected. There is an often weird or ironic twist to Jesus’s existence.246 He is never quite what he seems either in the text or the images. As comics, they have that freedom to stretch interpretive potential.

**Emotional Code**

Comics bend all these tools simultaneously toward communicating with a reader, intellectually and emotionally. Each element lends power. Pictures begin the process, and “as any student of advertising knows, pictures can produce powerful effects on viewer’s emotions.”247 A skillful artist can use perspective and his own understanding of the vocabulary of human gestures to produce various emotional states in an engaged

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245 Clanton, *End Will Be Graphic*, xvi-xvii.

246 For example, although Jesus has returned to a community that claims to love him, he is persecuted by them in *Black Jesus*. Blondell, *Black Jesus*.

247 Varnum and Gibbons, introduction to *Language of Comics*, xii. See, for example, Holly Metz [w] and Sue Coe [a]. *How to Commit Suicide in South Africa: A Raw One-Shot* (London: Knockabout Comics, 1983).
viewer.\textsuperscript{248} Even the “blunted sensibilities” of postmodernism can be caught here.\textsuperscript{249} Where pictures breed visceral reactions, words can lend specificity, honing or disrupting the pictorial narrative. Framing guides the viewer through these tensions. The frame “makes an effort to generate the reader’s own reaction to the action and thus create emotional involvement in the narrative.”\textsuperscript{250} The “unbounded narrative universes” that comics traditionally engage allow the reader to explore whatever engages them most. The idea that these tools can engage emotions and the rest of the senses is “vital to the art of comics.”\textsuperscript{251}

Although some comics are formulaic and predictable, this is not a tendency of the medium. Even writers within formulas find ways to turn the expectations back on themselves in ways that challenge their readers’ presumptions about not just comics and their appropriate subjects, but the world they live in.\textsuperscript{252} This code-switching often


\textsuperscript{249} Rita Felski, “Shock” Page 105-131 in \textit{Uses of Literature} (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 107. Felski defends the ability of postmodern readers to experience shock against Fredric Jameson’s world-weary historicism that dismisses the idea of the weird and intolerable for any true postmoderns. Jameson would have it that nothing can shock the postmodern sensibility. While she certainly agrees that we are not Victorian in our sensibilities, Felski claims that as long as we are prone to evasion or denial, shock will find a place in art. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in \textit{Postmodern Culture}, ed. Hal Foster (London: Pluto Press, 1983), 124.

\textsuperscript{250} Eisner, \textit{Comics}, 59.

\textsuperscript{251} McCloud, \textit{Understanding Comics}, 118.

\textsuperscript{252} John Cawelti suggests that the pleasure of some of these formula pieces is within their confirmation of boundaries as well as their transgression of these boundaries. A classic example of inverting both comic world and real life structures, is Alan Moore’s \textit{Watchmen}, where the realities of a world with superheroes have disturbing consequence, but can be found in Mark Millar’s \textit{Red Son}, where Superman lands in the USSR. Mark Millar (w), Dave Johnson (a), Killian Plunkett (a), Andrew Robinson (i), and Walden Wong (i). \textit{Red Son}, Elseworlds (New
happens in alternative realities, but the form of comics can accomplish this on a more structural level as well.

Comics try to “generate a reaction to the action” most often through tensions and relationships to the reader.\textsuperscript{253} Throughout, I have highlighted the tensions and interplay between readers and the art, words, frames and narratives. Together, these elements “haunt” the reader with a certain weirdness that sticks in the mind.\textsuperscript{254} Frahm stresses how such comics are able to unbind the reader from familiar epistemologies, to “undomesticate” the ideas of the reader, even to disturb her. Cioffi shows how comics can actually disturb the reader.\textsuperscript{255} It is art, but not high art; it is a story that may or may not end. It is a representation that bends. Comic artists can exploit the way that words and images take different amounts of time to be grasped; skilled creators can give readers “narratives whose tantalizing open-endedness resonates long after the reading has ended.”\textsuperscript{256}

Hatfield points out the way Julie Doucet’s “The Artist” uses repetition and visual cues in a story that “ultimately exceeds and beggars all expectations.” Doucet’s comic “uses successive panels to capture the methodical, step-by-step provocation of a striptease. This striptease implicates the spectator in an unnerving way, for the artist ends

\textsuperscript{253} Eisner, \textit{Comics}, 59.

\textsuperscript{254} Frahm, \textit{Die Sprache Des Comics}, 56.

\textsuperscript{255} Cioffi, “Disturbing Comics,” 97.

\textsuperscript{256} Cioffi, “Disturbing Comics,” 99.
by spilling her guts with a knife.” Repetition, closure and the narrative techniques of comics make this violent, self-destructive climax possible and emotionally evocative. When these emotional abilities are turned to religion, all manner of evocations are possible.

**Religion/Comics**

Comics has a weird language of its own, but how does comics and its weirdness relate to religion in general and Christianity in particular? If we understand comics as simply juxtaposed pictorial images, it is easy to see how religion has been using comics for millennia. Wherever pictures in a juxtaposed sequence are used to assist in telling a story, there are comics. Stained glass windows are a familiar Christian example. These windows in important church buildings are built by architectural necessity or design in a series, but the images are regularly employed by artists and their patrons to convey a narrative, familiarize congregants with important stories or figures, or create a certain mood using the way the light might interact with each element. As long as we understand comics by McCloud’s definition, the relationship to religion goes back to prehistory. Ancient peoples used comics in cave paintings to express supernatural ideas.

Series of images in Egyptian tombs express the living human relationship to the divine


and the dead.²⁵⁹ Comics are a medium that can deliver a particular message where text and images interact to create narrative and emotional results—something that religions of all stripes often strive to do and that comics can do to religious effect. In what follows, I will briefly explain four categories of relationship that comics and religion can have, modeled on the four relationships between religion and popular culture in general outlined by Bruce David Forbes: comics as religion, religion in comics, comics in religion, and religion and comics in dialogue.²⁶⁰ Those categories merit only a brief outline here, as this project is concerned with the fourth, that is, religion and comics in dialogue.

The first and most distant relationship from my project is *comics as religion*. Comics lend themselves to this sort of study, because they seem to often function like religion or religious texts for their devotees. The “fanboy” subculture with its rituals and festivals (like movie openings, comic conventions and Free Comic Book Day), moral and social codes (which when crossed cause “nerd rage”), temples (like comic book shops and gaming shops), and fetish objects (like certain first editions and everyday comics wrapped in protective layers) is ripe for scholarly investigation. Comics often confront moral issues and prescribe moral codes and attitudes particularly toward nationalism, race, and women. There are many divergent views in comics that play out in different

²⁵⁹ Although, hieroglyphics themselves do not count as comics under McCloud’s rule. He counts them as representatives of sound rather than as “pictorial images” and so includes them as part of the written word rather than comics. McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 12-13.

comics, from tolerance and openness to racism and misogyny.\textsuperscript{261} Studying this religious devotion toward comics has been valuable for scholars who seek to understand the United States and North American culture over the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{262}

The second relationship, \textit{comics in religion} refers to when religious groups produce or use comics or comics strategies for religious purposes. I center here on Christianity and comics, because I am using comics for study Christian scripture.\textsuperscript{263} Some of the earliest pulp and popular comics that are familiar as comics to the modern reader had Christian subjects. This back and forth between religion and comics cause and effect makes figuring out when to name a phenomenon \textit{religion in comics} and when to name it \textit{comics in religion} difficult. Kunzle’s work on the early comic strip shows the religious motives behind many of the earliest comics; comics might demonize the Pope, Martin Luther, or Jewish people, warn against the hellish consequences of various vices, or

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\textsuperscript{261} Values come from how the medium is used, not the form itself. It is perhaps a simple statement, but has been a consistent battleground for comics creators since Fredric Wertham first came on the scene in the 1950s. The way values play out in comics is also rehearsed in the field of video games. For example, while an overwhelming number of games have misogynist images and messages, there are games that push beyond to feminist and social progressive ends. For work on the revealing the misogyny in the industry and finding the most socially progressive games, see Anita Sarkeesian, \textit{Feminist Frequency}, accessed January 1, 2015. http://www.feministfrequency.com.


\textsuperscript{263} Christians are certainly not the only group that uses comics to tell their stories. For a grand example see, \textit{Amar Chitra Katha} (ACK or Immortal Captivating Stories), a comics series that has run in India since 1967 with the goal of educating Indians about their cultural and religious heritage. This work, begun by Anant Pai, is so pervasive that it has defined the popular understanding of gods and goddesses, historical events, and the canon of Indian myths and fables for whole generations. Fredrik Strömberg, “Chapter 5: Religious Rants” Pages 110-131 in \textit{Comic Art Propaganda: A Graphic History}. (New York: Ilex Press, St. Martin’s, 2010),128. For a wider look at a variety of religions in comics, A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer, eds. \textit{Graven Images: Religion in Comic Books and Graphic Novels} (New York: Continuum, 2010), passim.
simply extol or instruct in Christian virtues. This long history of evangelism through comics can be followed from stained glass windows to the illustrated Bibles and printed by religious presses in the present day. Tracts, such as those published by Jack T. Chick, are an example of comics used explicitly for religious purposes, but there are many other comics in Sunday School curriculum, other types of Christian training, confirmation, and evangelism materials. Particularly, material for children, youth and for less-literate communities often contain not just illustrations but narrative juxtaposed images and text that easily fit the definition of comics. Some comic books have been produced for explicitly religious purposes and with religious messages more or less out front. These moralizing and moralistic comics escaped much of the conflict and controversy around comics and the Comics trials. Although Fredric Wertham lumped most all comics into the same ultra-violent, morally bankrupt category, these comics were allowed a free pass. Educational comics, Archie comics, and Bible comics were able to slide by the Comics Code Authorities with little trouble. Although the Comics Code is less of a threat to the industry today, some comics benefit from the religious markets


266 “Chick Tracts”—now banned as hate literature in Canada—are illustrated pamphlets that aim to frighten readers into turning to true Christianity (and from particularly Catholicism and liberalism) with bombastic threats of hell-fire, damnation, and swift, violent death in a small-format, eye-catching design. Certainly there are other kinds of tracts, but with more than 500 million copies of Chick Tracts in circulation, they drown out any other Christian religious tracts that one might find. Strömberg, *Comic Art Propaganda*, 115.

opened by their religious content. *The Action Bible*, for example, sells quite well to a children and teen audience despite its depictions of violence, sexual situations and troublesome behavior. It is even endorsed by the conservative Focus on the Family.  

Other creative interpretations of biblical stories or other religious materials walk the fine line between being *comics in religion* or *religion in comics*. For example, Steve Ross gives us a distinctive interpretation of Mark that revels in not being a normal Jesus story, yet Seabury, an imprint of Church Publishing, the publishing house of the Episcopal Church, publishes his work. The marketing material revels in the “unexpected and startling imagery” that Ross has given them. His work is a strange piece for either a church publisher or a comic book. It does not fall clearly into Will Eisner’s two broad applications of Sequential Art: instruction and entertainment. *Marked* does not seem to be either instructing the reader in the story of the Gospel of Mark or strictly entertaining them with surrealist images. His publisher is quick to insist that, “Ross is a man of deep faith and abiding love for the Gospel story.” As Ross says, “I just wanted to see if I could receive the Gospel of Mark with a lover’s heart and then recount it with a troublemaker’s eye… Like Picasso stripping away layer after layer of preconceptions until he finally

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270 Eisner, *Comics*, 139.
arrived at a new way of seeing.” While an intentionally unusual work, Marked still forms part of a church-sanctioned interpretive tradition; therefore, it could be understood as either comics in religion or religion in comics.

The other part of comics in religion are comics that may or may not be intended for religious purposes by their creators but that religious people put to religious uses. Comics usually afford this use through subject matter or themes. Whenever the Bible is in view, the comic naturally lends itself to religious reading, even if that was not the creator’s intent. R. Crumb’s Genesis Illustrated, though created by a man who “emphatically does not believe that the Bible is the word of God,” nevertheless has been hailed in the Christian Century as an aid to reading Genesis. Despite his reservations about the sexuality of characters on display, the reviewer finds a “real thrill” in “rereading Genesis again with visual reinforcement” and even finds that Crumb’s work “manages to convey a message: God works through it all and enters into the thick of it to save us.”

Crumb’s opinion that “the idea that people for a couple of thousand years have taken this [book] so seriously seems completely insane and crazy, totally nuts” does not stop its potential for religious use. When comics are brought into religious uses

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273 R. Crumb (w, a), The Book of Genesis Illustrated (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), 1.
through whatever means by design or use, they participate in this category. Of course, one comic can be studied from different perspectives and fit into multiple categories.

The category *religion in comics* encompasses comics that contain expressions of religion. These are comics that focus explicitly on religion such as Osamu Tezuka’s eight-volume series *Buddha*, an imaginative retelling of the entire life of Siddhartha.274 Second, there are comics that contain explicitly religious figures without focusing on their religious significance per se. This especially happens when religious figures are used for their unique stories rather than to offer a religious message. For example, the character of Thor in Marvel comics is a “god” in the comics, but the character of his actual religious significance for neo-pagan or Norse peoples is hardly touched over the decades-long run. Some comic artists do a kind of act of “transvaluation”—that is, “demoting” the characters of the Bible from their religious “grandeur yet investing them with a ‘texture’ of common humanity” and putting them in a distinctly lowbrow format.275 For example, Jesus in the series *Battle Pope* is nothing more than the ne’er-do-well sidekick for the divinely super-powered, corrupt and lecherous pontiff.276 The creator Robert Kirkman is hardly alone in this practice; *Comic Book Religion*, a site devoted to tracking the religious affiliations of characters in comics, has identified 166 distinct comic book appearances of Jesus Christ to date across multiple publishers and


276 Robert Kirkman (w), Tony Moore (a), and Val Staples (l). *Battle Pope* vol. 1: Genesis (Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2009). Kirkman is now much better known as the creator of *The Walking Dead* comics series.
titles. Reactions to the transvaluation of deities are, of course, mixed. Comics also contain implicit references to religion. These might be more metaphorical than literal, in say for instance, the character of Apocalypse, whose name clearly has religious implications but whose methods do not include say, the use of Revelation necessarily. Superman, for example, has many narrative parallels with Moses. The most obvious and pervasive theme is the Christ figure in superhero comics. Many scholars mine these works for their religious themes whether the creators necessarily anticipated them or not.

Many comics use religious themes and characters in their narratives. Christian symbols and characters are used in U.S. comics to great effect. In 1983, Chris Claremont and Brent Anderson created an X-men graphic novel called God Loves, Man Kills that connected the crucifixion of the white male leader of the mutant X-men and the lynching of two African-American mutant children. There is no question that Claremont wishes the reader to recall Jesus and connect his suffering to both the children and Xavier; his caption at the start of the mutant leader Charles Xavier’s crucifixion is “And they bring


278 The pervasiveness of apocalyptic themes in comics is explored in Clanton, The End Will Be Graphic, passim.

279 For example, Knowles, Our Gods Wear Spandex, passim.

him unto the place Golgotha… and they crucify him.” Claremont (a white writer) made a connection between the Cross and the lynching tree that biblical scholars and theologians failed to imagine. It is these sorts of comics interactions with religion that this project focuses on. The position of religion here is ambiguous; the villain is a Christian leader, but the solution to the X-men’s problem ends up being religiously inspired as well. This is a moment when *religion in comics* begins to be *religion and comics in dialogue*.

Comics and religion cannot stay away from each other. By being part of an American subculture, they get away with questioning powerful religious mores and figures in a way that films with their large budgets and political studios simply cannot afford to do. This relative freedom of expression presents the opportunity for religion and comics to enter into dialogue. This back-and-forth is not always respectful on either side, but the conflict is fascinating. Religion can enter comics in a scandalous way—inspiring religious ire, pillorying mainstream religious mores or simply putting a twist on religious figures that are already established in the mainstream mind. When this happens, the comics reveal the limits of the religious imagination. While *Marked* enjoys the publication and marketing of a religion-affiliated press, the anti-Christ tale *American*

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281 This is a heartening, surprising rare, example of a white writer making a connection between lynching and the crucifixion. Clearly, one comic does not overturn Cone’s point that not making this connection is a defect in the white conscious and a failure of white imagination. This is an exception that proves the rule. Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 32. Chris Claremont (w), Brent Eric Anderson (a), and Steve Oliff (i), *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills. #5* (1983) Marvel Graphic Novels (New York: Marvel Comics Group, 2011).

282 Of course, this has not been without consequences. The United States comics industry has long suffered for its edgier elements. This struggle is well documented by Hadju.
Jesus, although an arguably better-constructed comic, languishes with only one volume completed. Frank Stack’s now-collected and published The New Adventures of Jesus: The Second Coming have hardly inspired a wave of protest, as he drew the comics for underground readers 40 years before on hot topics of the day and “knew that comics poking fun at religion were never going to be published anywhere, anytime, ever.” He used a pseudonym and published with underground comic maker Gilbert Shelton’s off-beat label, Rip Off Press. He defends what he now calls a “sort of chickenshit” decision to remain anonymous by insisting that if he had used his own name he might be “out of a job, disinherited, back in New York (not Texas fer sure) and dead by now.” The underground world offered him shelter from the storm of criticism and abuse that might have resulted from a larger publication. Small-press comics like Black Jesus tackle important racial and religious issues, if scholars would only pay attention. In this spirit, this project reads these comics in dialogue with religion in order to help religious imaginations find renewal. When other scholars use comics, it is usually either for the sake of sociological study, literary study of comics themselves, or most often, to make another scholarly point. This, respectfully, is something different: a biblical studies project that treats comics on their own terms as imaginative partners. Comics are not here to provide evidence for a point that I had before I began, but to reveal how scandal

283 Ross, Marked. Mark Millar (w), Peter Gross (a), Jeanne McGee (i), and Cory Petit (l), American Jesus. vol. 1: Chosen (Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2009).

284 Stack, New Adventures of Jesus, 15.

285 The Texas-inflected “fer” is intended. Stack, New Adventures of Jesus, 16.

286 Blondell, Black Jesus.
works. Comics help me imagine anew in order to find the scandal of the Cross. When comics “explores enough dramatic possibilities proceeding from a given set of circumstances, one or two such explorations are likely to be right on the money.” So, when comics explores the scandal of the Cross, the exploration can take me further than my own reading alone.

Graphic novels engage the violence and weirdness of the cross in a conversation with their own needs, both creative and practical. Creatively, artists and writers are eager to dip into the already highly charged conversation that religious subjects offer. Practically, Bibles and comics sell. In the current competitive market publishers are desperate for the new mediums that they can sell to new markets. Timothy Beal has discussed this phenomenon in relationship to Manga Bibles (a Japanese comic-style). Comic books fit the bill here (as they have in the past for other kinds of publishers from their Golden Age in North America).

Jesus Comics

In the world of Christian religious comics, Jesus is a prominent sub-category. In order to sort out the different ways these stories are told, I have drawn the language of Jesus-story and Christ-figure from film study by W. Barnes Tatum with some

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287 Savage, Commies, Cowboys, and Jungle Queens, 9.

modifications for this work and Dan Clanton’s use of Jesus in Elseworlds.\textsuperscript{289} My categories are Illustrated Gospel comics, Jesus-story comics, and Christ-figure comics.

First, there are explicit interpretations of the biblical text, which I call “Illustrated Gospel” comics. The \textit{Action Bible} and “Mark” storyline from \textit{Yummy Fur} fit this precisely.\textsuperscript{290} The parts of \textit{Eye Witness} that illustrate the story of Jesus’s crucifixion follow this more loosely, although the framing narrative is a Christ-figure story involving a modern hero.\textsuperscript{291} In most traditional Illustrated Gospel comics, the story of the Bible has a word specific relationship with illustrations meant to merely provide a visual companion to the words. Of course, these illustrations interpret the text, but they often loudly insist on their neutrality. \textit{Marked} is an interesting marginal case, as it does follow the gospel of Mark, but does not try to illustrate the actions of the Gospel precisely, rather it self-consciously interprets the gospel for a modern audience. It falls somewhere between Illustrated Gospel and Jesus-story comic.\textsuperscript{292}

Second, alternative “Jesus-story” comics use the character of Jesus sometimes in his own time or place and sometimes displaced into another time, place, and even body. These are the bulk of my comics, where Jesus acts in a new world, often in a new body:

\textsuperscript{289} I use the hyphenated constructions in deference to Tatum’s scheme and to keep the terms clear. W. Barnes Tatum, \textit{Jesus at the Movies: A Guide to the First Hundred Years}, rev. ed. (Santa Rosa, CA: Polebridge, 2004), 245.

\textsuperscript{290} Both are part of “Close Reading Mark” below. Mauss, \textit{Action Bible}. Chester Brown (w, a), “Mark” in \textit{Yummy Fur} #4-14 (Toronto: Vortex Comics, 1987-1989).

\textsuperscript{291} Luedke, \textit{Eye Witness}.

\textsuperscript{292} Ross’s \textit{Blinded} also falls somewhere between, although it is illustrating Acts and Pauline epistles rather than a Gospel. It’s somewhere between Illustrated Acts and a Paul-story comic. Ross, \textit{Blinded}.
Black Jesus, New Adventures of Jesus, Miniature Jesus, Jesus Christ in the Name of the Gun, and Jesus Hates Zombies. The first comic I address, Crossed, pushes the limit of this, using the symbol of the Cross with Jesus on it as a centerpiece for an issue in a very strange world. Dan Clanton calls this “Jesus in Elseworlds” after the DC Comic Elseworlds imprint. In the comics, established characters are dropped into new settings of various levels of similarity with their usual worlds and the readers’ world. The series makes sense even when stories start in medias res because the characters, like Superman and Batman, are so well established in the readers’ minds. The twist throws the character’s usual attitudes and situations into relief. Jesus in Elseworlds consists of stories that take Jesus, a well-established character in the popular imagination, and throw him into new situations with familiar characteristics tweaked, exaggerated, or excised.

293 Blondell, Black Jesus. Stack, New Adventures of Jesus. Ted McKeever, Miniature Jesus. Eric Peterson (w), and Ethan Nicolle (w,a), Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun, vol. 1: A Hollow Cost ([Unknown]: Bad Karma Productions, 2009). Stephen Lindsay (w), Michael Bartolotta (w), and Lauren Mohardo et al. (a), Jesus Hates Zombies: Those Slack-Jaw Blues (Levittown, NY: Alterna Comics, 2009). More examples of this type, of which more Jesus-work can be done: Sean Murphy (w, a), Todd Klein (l), Punk Rock Jesus, #1-6 (New York: Vertigo, 2013). Shawn French (w), Mortimer Glum (a), Peeter Parkker (i), Rachel Leon (l), Escape from Jesus Island ([Unknown]: Wisdom Publications, 2014- ongoing). Tim Seeley (w), Nate Bellegarde (p), Mike Norton (p), Mark Englert (i). Joseph Baker (i), Melissa S. Kaercher (i), Loaded Bible, Book I: The Jesus vs. Vampires Gospels (Berkeley, CA: Image Comics, 2010).


296 For example, Mark Waid (w) and Alex Ross (a), Kingdom Come. (May 1996), Elseworlds, New York: DC Comics. Brennert, Batman: Holy Terror.

297 Marvel Comics has a similar series called “What if?” that uses their own stable of characters.
These altered and adapted Jesus-story comics force “consumers of pop culture and perhaps even religious believers to develop…understandings of Jesus, either against them or in dialogue with them.”\textsuperscript{298} It is these tense spots of conflict between understandings of Jesus where I find my most fruitful imaginative partners for this project.

Finally, there are “Christ-figure” stories that use other characters, events, or images to “substantially recall, or resemble, the story of Jesus,” e.g. The sacrificial death of Superman fits this category.\textsuperscript{299} The interest in the phenomenon of Christ in spandex is widespread. This project, however, is focused on the Illustrated Gospel and Jesus-Story comics that engage imaginations explicitly around the Cross.

**Comics Choice: Principle of Selection**

I have chosen comics to assist my imagination in this project for their relationship to me and to their relationship to the crucifixion and Cross of Jesus. I have chosen comics that provide a narrative account of a sustained story that uses the image of the Cross in service of the plot. These comics are sometimes in issues and sometimes in longer graphic novel form, but they are all popularly distributed. The important point for my work is that they capitalize on the weirdness of the Cross to make their stories more effective, memorable, or shocking.

\textsuperscript{298} Dan Clanton, “Here, There, and Everywhere: Images of Jesus,” 57.

Comics from all over the world participate in this weirdness, particularly in the thriving comics scenes in Germany and Japan. Comics in strip form that used the Cross in their narratives were widely distributed in Europe from as early as 1450. To narrow the focus from all comics everywhere around the world at all times, I have chosen to work with comics published and intended for English-speaking audiences within North America (the United States and Canada) from about the mid-1960s underground “comix” movement (a moment and medium when weirdness truly flourished) until today. Certainly, there are plenty of cultural differences between Canada and the United States and infinite ways to parse regional diversity. However, these comics tend to share a common group of visual languages. In this way, I have focused my reading to a broad, yet culturally, temporally, and subject-defined group. In the tradition of cultural studies, I am grounding my work in one historical-cultural moment that I define in terms of time, culture, and subject matter.

These comics must include the character of Jesus (however he is defined by the creator) or an encounter with a Cross, rather than a cross. The Jesus in these comics must

300 For example, there is the Japanese comic following the adventures of Jesus and Buddha as modern roommates, Nakamura Hikaru, Seinto Oniisan [Saint Young Men] (Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha International/Tsai Fong Books, 2008); Also, there is a German comic retelling the Jesus story with all the newly-imagined gory details, Walter Moers, Jesus Total (Munich, Germany: Knaus Albrecht, 2013).

301 Kunzle, Early Comic Strip, 2,14.

be framed by his position as crucified messiah. Although the comic does not have to endorse a reverent view of Jesus, it should assume some significance to having Jesus in the story. Even though I engage both, I prefer the sorts of imaginative readings found in “Jesus story” comics over “Illustrated Gospels.” I choose more stories that play off the gospels rather than those attempting to do a strict translation. I do use both Jesus stories and Illustrated Gospels but leave Christ-figure comics for other analysis. In other words, I only discuss superheroes when Jesus is a superhero, not when Superman is a messianic figure. I do use comics that have a religious publisher and/or author, but I prefer comics that come from an outsider, subcultural, or subversive mentality. I am interested in comics artists that self-consciously make weird art and try to produce as much shock and scandal as they can in their medium and context.

The form of comics is able to expose and relish strangeness more than post-Enlightenment biblical scholarship has traditionally been. This is despite the fact that both fields have been dominated by white men—albeit of different class-standings in the

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303 Christ figure comics are practically innumerable and include a staggering number of messianic and sacrificial characters.

304 There are a number of women and people of color who do just this sort of exciting subversive work in comics on other subjects. I would love to include more women and people of color in my list of comics creators. Within the narrow range of ideas needed for this project around Jesus and the Cross, however, I have yet to find many creations by women. (The exceptions in my list are artists Lauren Mahardo and Stephanie O’Donnell in Jesus Hates Zombies.) The field is opening to women, but slowly. I have only one comic I am aware of in my list, Black Jesus, that explicitly has people of color responsible for its production. Certainly there is more to be said about this situation in the industry and in creative work around Jesus. Further work is certainly needed. In particular, creators Marjane Satrapi, Alison Bechdel, Lynda Barry, Julie Doucet, Carla Speed McNeill, Kelly Sue DeConnick, Becky Cloonan, Noell Stevenson, Fiona Staples, Gail Simone, G. Willow Wilson, Sarah Glidden, Charles Soule, Gene Yuen Lang, brothers Gilbert, Jaime, and Mario Hernandez have all produced comics I consider both self-consciously subversive and of superior quality.
culture. Their interpretations might allow for a new imagining of the powerful weirdness of the Cross, but only if biblical scholars allow them into their imaginations.

**Introduction to “close reading” with comics**

I support the right of comic creators to imagine the Jesus story using their powers as creative “reality-seeing artists,” but I am using their work to imagine the Cross from the New Testament. As I explained in the previous chapter, the main activity I do with these comics is “close reading” as modeled by those who practice “cultural analysis.” My analysis is a self-consciously critical form of literary study concerned with ways of imagining across cultures. To this end, I will be reading comics “for content”—that is, I will be evaluating them for their meaning, narratives, and communicative power. This distinguishes me from those comic critics who have evaluated comics for their  

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305 I am happy to report that both comic makers and biblical scholars are making solid, though unfortunately often torturously slow and painful, progress toward diversifying both the gender and race of their fields.

306 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xiii.


308 This is similar to Jeff McLaughlin's type of analysis but not the same. He uses comics (his hypertext) to “give an illustration (no pun intended),” highlight, and give examples of philosophical concepts (his hypotext), but I hope to use comics to inform my New Testament texts (my hypotext) and give additional insight into it. Jeff McLaughlin. “Philosophy: ‘The Triumph of the Human Spirit’ in X-Men,” in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, ed. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York; London: Routledge, 2012), 103-113. In the words of Gérard Genette, “Hypertexts, as is well known, generate hypertexts.” Here I take comics as the “hypertext” that takes the Bible as its “hypotext.” Although Genette does caution that not all arts can be called texts or hypertexts, I believe that comic arts unique combination of text and art makes it an obvious contender. Some comic artists do a kind of act of “transvaluation”—”demoting” the characters of the Bible from their religious “grandeur yet investing them with a ‘texture’ of common humanity” and putting them in a distinctly low-brow format. Genette, *Palimpsests*, 5, 384, 373.
production, context, or reception. These sociohistorical issues of comics will not be the focus of my reading, although they will not be completely out of view. Rather, I am thinking with comics as a heuristic device and a literary/artistic partner. In my reading, I will put comics and the New Testament in dialogue rather than reading comics for the religious content I might interpret out of them or the religious context in which they are produced. Rather, I am reading comics in order to be inspired and challenged by the ways they communicate the weirdness of the Cross to a modern audience and to understand what role weirdness plays in the subversive power of the Cross. Ironically, it is a form that often faces ridicule in the academy that has me seeing the scandal of Jesus’s Cross. Certainly, others have used more highbrow ways to find their Jesus—history, archeology, textual criticism—here comics are my imaginative tool.

In the following chapters, I use eleven different comics as a means to graphic/novel readings of the Cross. Each of these works uses different visual languages to comment on religious subjects. Their range of social positions and editorial freedom allow them to give unique insights into the weird Cross. Paul and Mark turned the symbolic embarrassment of the Cross—one of the most ignoble parts of the story of Jesus—into “God’s power and God’s wisdom” (1 Cor 1:24). Yet, the Cross was a violent part of their social world, not a site of power for the crucified. By taking a close look at

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310 Other comics have been evaluated for content by other biblical scholars. Clanton, *End Will Be Graphic*, 2012. Also, Lewis, *Graven Images*, passim.

scripture about the Cross in dialogue with comics that can graphically portray the weird, I
find a novel look at the Cross.
Chapter Three: Close Reading Paul with Graphic/Novel Readings

of the Scandal of the Cross

Something *weird* happens when Paul uses the Cross in his writing to his congregations. Something unusual happens, yes, but as I explained in chapter one, the source of that strangeness is *weird*—otherworldly, dealing with fate or destiny, uncanny, but also subverting authority and related to horror, terror, and the spectacle of the odd. There is a tension at the heart of using the Cross as an image for the Christian message that remains unresolved, which has travelled through the image so that it reaches audiences today. The image has more in common with weird comics and subversive politics than any staid establishment theology or systemic thought. Paul himself is not creating a theology that is a speculative system; rather he is drawing his thought in relationship to his fundamental or basic theological questions.\(^{312}\) He creates his thoughts about God for specific occasions and for actual audiences that he wished to act on them. Often comics use the “weird” to attract and titillate their audiences, but Paul uses the weird image of the Cross in his writings as a call to action. What follows is my exegesis of Paul’s “making do” with the Cross in Galatians and 1 Corinthians by applying the insights of comics that use the Cross in weird ways. These comics make clear how

graphic and emotional the Cross is for Paul, as his work gives layers of meaning to these comics and their invocation of the image of the Cross.

Paul’s writings bespeak an inflammatory and paradoxical sensibility; his letters include curses, aggressive language and incredibly uncomfortable symbols. He portrays the most ignoble piece of the Jesus story as “power” and “glory.” He takes up a cross, strips it of the power it already wields for the Empire and claims it for the impuissant Jesus movement. Crucifixion, after all, was order for the Empire that Paul reorders. Instead of power for the crucifier, Paul claims it as power for the crucified.

Paul is able to claim not just the fear that is obvious to modern observers, but also give the school of Roman execution a new subversive message. Brigitte Kahl reminds us that Romans considered those violent acts of death and torture the proper “school of civilizing the city, inspiring imperial piety, and celebrating Roman victory and the new worldwide family of Caesar’s offspring.” Constantine might have eventually been able to plate the symbol in gold and claim it as a new form of divine and sovereign power for the Empire, but Paul did it without an army at his command. The Cross might eventually be domesticated to the extremes we see today so much that it fits comfortably around a child’s neck, but Paul claimed the Cross before it was otherwise made acceptable. As Martin Hengel insists, “the particular form of the death of Jesus, the man and the messiah, represents a scandal which people would like to blunt, remove or domesticate in

313 Brigitte Kahl, Galatians Re-Imagined: Reading with the Eyes of the Vanquished, Paul in Critical Contexts (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 164. Kahl uses what she calls the process of “critical re-imagination” to explore the great “clash of images” in the ancient world to show the perspective of the Gaul/Galatians (28).

314 The way the Cross is domesticated is presented below.
any way possible.\textsuperscript{315} Paul’s writing itself does not shy away from scandal; it provokes it. Paul shows the Cross to be uncomfortable in and yet central to his good news.

My interest here is with comics that explicitly engage the Cross in the way Paul explicitly engages it—meaning, comics that engage the Cross as a brash, uncomfortable and violent object to have in a comic book. These are comics that self-consciously engage the irony of the saving Cross and hit the reader with a novel and shocking view of the Cross as full of power and foolishness.\textsuperscript{316} I place these comics in dialog with Paul. In this chapter, I engage comics that evoke and imagine the Cross for their own purposes. Each exploits a slightly different aspect of the Cross in their narratives, but they all use the Cross as a graphic reality. Comics by their nature can help the reader see how the Cross in Galatians and 1 Corinthians is a graphic and physical reality, that is, more than a metaphor rather than mere metaphor.\textsuperscript{317} The Cross is a physical reality, whose presence invites the reader toward an emotional response. The Cross affords the shocking,


\textsuperscript{317} I draw the phrase “more than a metaphor” from Davis’s reference to Gal 3:1, but use it here more broadly than he does. Basil S. Davis, “The Meaning of προεγράφη in the Context of Galatians 3:1,” \textit{New Testament Studies} 45, no. 2 (April 1999): 206. Wayne Meeks points out that metaphor “gets a bad rap”; modernists assume it to be mere metaphor, “as if metaphor were less than a literal description.” For Meeks, the substantive change of faith in Christ can only be expressed by metaphor, one of unlimited extension. I do not seek to undetermined metaphor here; I want to add physical realities to the already powerful activity of the metaphor. Meeks, \textit{Christ is the Question}, 85, 98.
ambiguous, real and visual work Paul does with the Galatians as well as the difficult message of reversals Paul built for the Corinthians.

**Graphically Reading Galatians: Seeing the Shocking Picture**

Paul’s weird imagery reaches a fever pitch in the letter to the Galatians. Critics often comment on his “angry tone.”\(^{318}\) Paul rails against his converts being turned away from the true gospel that he taught them (Gal 1:6). He does not want to have his good news confused with any other teaching, even from himself or a messenger from heaven (Gal 1:8). He calls them “foolish” and accuses them of being duped by magic (Gal 3:1).\(^{319}\) He bitterly wishes those who preach circumcision would castrate themselves (Gal 5:12). He graphically describes the arguments in Galatia as biting and devouring (Gal 5:15). The *anacolutha* in Gal 2:5-7 makes such a sharp turn from one thought and grammatical structure to another that it is difficult to translate. The argument to the Galatians uses this demonstrative language as a tool paired with an interpretation of


\(^{319}\) Dahl, “Paul’s Letter to the Galatians,” 123-4. On foolishness: “But even in Gal 3:1, 3 there is more irony than commentators usually observe… In Gal 3:1 Paul plays with a double meaning of the word [ἀνόητος]. By his time, the Galatians had been hellenized but had not completely escaped the ancient reputation that they were barbarians, uncivilized, rude and cruel people… Whether the Galatains are civilized is no concern of his. But he would not have expected them to be so stupid that they would let themselves be bewitched to turn away from the gospel he had preached.”
Abraham, blurring the distinction between emotional and exegetical argumentation, much as I have argued comics maintain their tension between visual art and literature.

Galatians is not traditionally an illustrated work, but it reminds the audience of what they have seen. Paul’s strategic letter relies on the audience being truly engaged and motivated by the message they have already received and seen when Paul preached to them in person. Paul reminds them that he brought them a visible revelation of the crucified Jesus Christ (Gal 3:1). As Hans Dieter Betz translates the moment: “You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes ‘Jesus Christ [the] crucified’ was so vividly portrayed?” Exactly what this “vivid portrayal” was is a matter of some interpretive difficulty. Basil S. Davis argues that in its relationship to Galatians “scholarship has failed to provide a satisfactory contextual explanation of the verb.” The NRSV has Paul remind the Galatians that “It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified!” (3:1). The word translated “publicly exhibited” and “vividly portrayed” is from προεγράφω, which is used only once more by Paul. In Romans 15:4, the NRSV translates that προεγράφη as “written beforehand.” Neither translation fully conveys the graphic reality of the expression.

Gerhard Ebeling argues that it “probably refers to a more vivid description than to an inscription or placard” while Ernest de Witt Burton shows that Greek writers used

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320 Crucifixion might have been employed by the Galatians themselves, not just the Romans.


322 Davis, “The Meaning,” 195. Davis also addresses and convincingly rejects interpretations that have προεγράφη refer to an earlier writing of Paul, a prediction in scripture, icons of the crucified Christ, or a theatrical portrayal.
προεγράφω most often to mean “write ahead of time” (as in Romans).  

However, Burton doubts Paul wrote a previous unknown letter to the Galatians, so he “settles for a placard.” Though Gottlob Schrenk debates the point, his Theological Dictionary of the New Testament entry still has “the surest translation” of the Gal 3:1 passage to be “set as the Crucified like a posted proclamation.” Simply comparing the Cross to a placard does not seem fitting in the context of Paul’s powerful message that has changed the course of the Galatians’ lives. J. Louis Martyn translates the phrase as “in my sermons a picture of Jesus Christ marked by crucifixion was painted before your eyes,” which makes clear that the experience is a visual one, though it attributes the display more clearly than Paul does to his preaching activities. Paul does not indicate the mechanism of the manifestation of Christ, either through his sermons or as a painting. Paul also does not hesitate to say that the vision was of “Jesus Christ crucified,” a more blatantly violent or at least more versatile idea than someone “marked by crucifixion.” Marks might be merely scars, but a crucified Christ includes the idea of a person in the moment of suffering. Whether it is as violent as this or not, Paul’s message lends itself to some sort of visualization, certainly appropriate to a reading that uses comics with their explicit visual appeal.

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324 Burton, *Epistle to the Galatians*, 144-45.


combination of words and images as a guide. The letter to the Galatians includes striking images to make his point.

If the activity of προεγράφω is simply a way of reminding the Galatians of another letter or a placard they had seen, it interrupts the flow of the emotional appeal he’s begun with “O foolish Galatians!” and tempers some of the heat of the intense probatio. It is the dramatic and emotional experience of the event that is that he calls to mind. The New English Bible tries to retain the spirit of the statement by making it a vague sort of display and exclamation: “You must have been bewitched—you before whose eyes Jesus Christ was openly displayed upon his cross!” (Gal 3:1, NEB). The Jerusalem Bible translation takes inspiration from 1 Cor 15:3f, but misses the graphic idea of Gal 3:1: “Has someone put a spell on you, in spite of the plain explanation you have had of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ?” (JB).\textsuperscript{327} There is nothing plain about this explanation! Betz reminds his reader “for the rhetoricians of Paul’s time, there could be nothing more boring than a perfect product of rhetorical technology.”\textsuperscript{328} Instead, Paul appeals to the emotions and even anger of his audience; he accuses them of being bewitched, duped by the power of another.

Paul alleges that Galatians have been brought under another power despite the power of the message: “Jesus Christ openly portrayed as crucified.” This powerful idea of

\textsuperscript{327} I am using the Jerusalem Bible from 1968 here; the New Jerusalem Bible translation from 1985 moves to the visual idea: “After you have had a clear picture of Jesus Christ crucified right in front of your eyes, who has put a spell on you?” (Gal 3:1b NJB) The clarity of the picture is in some question given the misunderstandings Paul goes over in the letter, but Paul understands it to be a strong impression.

\textsuperscript{328} Betz, Galatians, 129.
crucifixion flows through the whole letter as a consistent stumbling block to meaning (2:19-21; 3:1, 13-14; 5:11; 6:12-14). As Dieter Mitternacht shows, Paul pairs the crucifixion with his and his community’s own present and expected suffering:

We may have considered 3:1 as “simply” a forceful reference to the appropriation of the atonement (albeit prepared for in 2:19-21: “I have been crucified with Christ…”). We may still have been unsure as we read 5:11: “Why am I still persecuted. In that case the stumbling block of the cross has been removed.” But by the time we reach 6:14-17, the implications are plain. Being crucified with Christ and to the world must be taken as resounding assertions of the life conditions Paul is expecting for himself in this evil world.329

Paul’s suffering and Jesus’ crucifixion resonate together, each lending its power to the other. The resurrection, though prevalent in other parts of Paul’s apocalyptic writings, is present in Galatians only in 1:1. Instead, Paul’s focus in Galatians is on having his hearers see the crucified Christ.330 Hengel reminds us of the cruel clarity of the message that moderns often hedge, “When Paul talks of the folly of the message of the crucified Jesus, he is therefore not speaking in riddles or using an abstract cipher. He is expressing the harsh experience of his missionary preaching and the offense that it caused.”331

Crucifixion is a cruel and graphic event, so too will be the suffering of those who follow the Crucified One. Yet, as Mitternacht says, “Somehow Paul managed to portray his stigmatization as a charisma of Christ and with his presence, to enthuse new converts


331 Hengel, The Cross, 181.
with a similar attitude.” Paul makes a graphic, suffering death something to be imitated rather than scorned.

The placard or letter, the posted proclamation, serves as a shorthand for the emotional experience of the crucified Christ that happened before their eyes while Paul was with them. This experience drew the Galatians to the message and is that very moment that I want to imagine. Interpreters have understandable trouble expressing what this experience might have been like. Paul keeps the actor ambiguous with passive voice. He claims this emotive message of the Cross happened in such a way as to make it feel like it was happening in front of them at that time. His language shows the experience was visual in some way. Comics assists in showing how each of these factors (shocking imagery, ambiguous actors, presentations with a feeling of immediacy, and visual experiences) create an emotionally affective message with the image of the Cross. In what follows, I use the graphic presentations of the comics *Crossed, Black Jesus, Blinded* and *Miniature Jesus* to inform my interpretation of the Cross image as it is presented in Galatians. My descriptions and analyses of these unfamiliar works reveal the weird Cross at the heart of these portrayals. Paul’s Cross for the Galatians is weird in that it attracts with shock, comes from an ambiguous source, is unforgettable in immediacy, and makes the otherworldly visible in both his culture and the cultures of these comics. These flexible concepts travel through the image of the Cross and remain intelligible to modern readers.

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Choosing the Cross as More than a Metaphor

Paul treats the Cross subversively, holding it out as Christ’s power and glory while knowing that his audience could not help but be struck by the violence and imperial order contained in the image. Paul shows the Cross as an unexpected source of ironic power for the crucified, but the comics series Crossed takes the cross symbol to its most shocking extremes even for modern people used to seeing the symbol. In this series, the “Crossed” are humans infected with a mysterious virus that causes a cross-shaped, flesh-eating red rash across their faces and forces them to act in horrendously violent ways. (Ennis 2010, Illustration v) There are crosses everywhere, on these tormented and cruel faces, making it impossible to blunt or forget the significance of the cross to this story.

The infection spreads rapidly through contact with bodily fluid; the infected have stopped the normal functioning of human life on the planet within a matter of hours or days. Once infected, a “Crossed” will act out the absolutely worst things they can think of—usually rape, creatively horrible murder, torture, and property destruction. The uncontrollable urge to rape and cut themselves and others make the fluid-born virus spread at unthinkable speed. The Crossed share features with contemporary film zombies: they are blood-thirsty, non-communicative, totally unreasonable, run in hoards and present the risk of infection. These creatures also think, plan and use tools. The Crossed desecrate places they seem to deem most holy, sacred, or important to civil human

333 Certainly, there are several layers of fears other than violence or bodily harm explored in Crossed: epidemic disease, sexually transmitted diseases (AIDS in particular), and planet-wide destruction.
behavior. They do the things that they consider the most immoral in ghastly but puerile symbolism. The American Visual Language employed here shares much with action comics, but the horror style lingers on the most grisly scenes. As Ennis says in the text, “There was no great secret to the Crossed. I’d never seen one do anything a human being couldn’t think of doing. Hadn’t thought of doing. Hadn’t done. There were all the awful aspects of humanity magnified a hundred-thousandfold, but they were nothing more.”

In the process, the comic reveals what the creators of the series find the most horrifying: bodily mutilation, rape, torture, family betrayal, and the collapse of civilization. Foremost, the series seems to revel in the horrors that ordinary people perpetrate once marked with a cross.

The plot meanders to take in as much gore as possible: goals are regularly frustrated in this post-apocalyptic world. Uninfected characters make few lasting impressions, as they are mostly there to serve the violence and violation. What this comic book offers is shock—raw, unashamed shock. Shock is part of literary studies, but not often talked of freely, especially in the literary study of the Bible. Critics usually prefer the “more specialized language of transgression, trauma, defamiliarization, dislocation, self-shattering, the sublime.” Rita Felski reclaims the everyday word “shock” for literary

334 Apropos of a horror comic, they create spectacle to inspire the most terror in the victims, like any terrorist.

335 Ennis, Crossed, #9: n.p.

336 Although I am not a squeamish reader, certain parts of this story have caused me to have an unpleasant physical reaction. I am absolutely sure this is by design. One of the most memorable characters is a Crossed villain who uses a horse’s penis to flail his victims in issues #4, #7 and #9 (March 2009, September 2009, and February 2010).
studies to name “a reaction to what is startling, painful, even horrifying,” because a word
drawn from everyday usage can clear away some of our calcified and often under-
justified convictions about the impact and import of literary works.” 337 I chose to pair
*Crossed* with Galatians because it shocks particularly well. *Crossed* imagines the most
scandalous and weird interpretations of a cross possible and places it alongside the Cross.
This comic throws all of its energy into shock. Galatians has its energy directed
elsewhere, yet it *does* shock. Modern commentary writers are so mildly scandalized by
Paul’s language that this shock is obscured in most interpretations.
C
Certainly, commentary on Galatians can be exciting and provocative in the
refined, mediated atmosphere of biblical study. Even the most astute biblical scholars
seem forced to leave the emotion out of their commentary. Betz’s influential rhetorical
commentary has a great insight on Gal 2:20:

> ‘Crucifixion together with Christ’ implies not only ‘death to the Law’ (2:19), but
> also ‘death to the “I.”’ The ‘I’ belongs to the sinful ‘flesh with its passions and
desires’ (5:24), and thus to ‘the world.’ For Paul, ‘crucifixion together with
Christ’ also means ‘crucifixion to the world’ (6:14), and for that reason he can
declare the ‘I’ to be ‘dead.’ 338

The gratuitous quotation marks in this passage of Betz mark not only his perceptive sense
of the text as a whole, but also his distance from the act of crucifixion and the
emotionality of the statements; these are all *mere* citations. Crucifixion is more than a
means of death—it is an act of torture, humiliation and display. Sam K. Williams calls
the action of death in this passage “to sever relation” and calls crucifixion “preliminary to

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338 Betz, *Galatians*, 123.
his resurrection” without lingering on the significance of this particular means of death.\textsuperscript{339}

Frank J. Matera takes crucifixion in this context to be a direct and obvious metaphor for baptism.\textsuperscript{340} Martyn interprets being crucified with Christ as “experiencing mortal separation from the Law” and “the death of a soldier on the battlefield.”\textsuperscript{341} Martyn gives a great sense in his translation of what he calls the “high drama” of Galatians.\textsuperscript{342} His martial simile is as violent as the original and makes sense in the context of in Martyn’s analysis of the Spirit’s apocalyptic battle for the cosmos. He adds sense of honor to the death. While this honor might be a sense Paul might convey, it does not agree with what Martyn himself recognizes as a “vile and obscene death.” Martyn delineates Paul’s complex perception of crucifixion as both this-worldly and other-worldly, as both a “real death that was carried out with literal nails on a literal piece of wood, a gruesome spectacle” and a “cosmic event that cannot truly be seen by those who look only at human actors.”\textsuperscript{343}

Martyn shows the shock of the this-worldly act; however, the shock has little effect on his work with the other-worldly cosmic event. The layers of meaning in crucifixion are impossible to express in one simple phrase.

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\textsuperscript{339} Williams, Galatians, 75.
\textsuperscript{340} Matera, Galatians, 95.
\textsuperscript{341} Martyn, Galatians, 258, 102.
\textsuperscript{342} Martyn, Galatians, 13.
\textsuperscript{343} Martyn, Galatians, 277-8.
I do not think these commentaries are hampered by the blunted postmodern sensibility that Frederic Jameson talks about in his account.\textsuperscript{344} They are not immune to shock in the Bible, but they stand proudly in the “oddly fraught location” between methodological prowess and professional rather than confessional study described by Stephen Moore and Yvonne Sherwood.\textsuperscript{345} I mention these commentaries in particular because they are insightful and well-written, yet they do not mention the emotional and even shocking impact of crucifixion that \textit{Crossed} makes clear.

\textit{Crossed} shows with nauseating clarity how extremely graphic the idea of being “crucified with Christ” might be (Gal 2:20) as well as how difficult it might be for someone witnessing such an act to understand how one might find “glory” in it (Gal 6:14). In issue nine, the conclusion of the original story arc and the most instructive to an understanding of the place of the Cross (rather than crosses) for this series, the cover shows a crucifix with a terrified priest nailed with an obnoxious number of nails to the Cross on top of the figure of Jesus.\textsuperscript{346} The cover—where comics use the most provocative images to attract and titillate readers—shows that the creators want to communicate how they desecrate the Cross within. (Ennis 2010, Illustration vi) The priest has his back to the Jesus figure; he looks over his shoulder at Jesus’s face with a grimace. The Jesus-figure has a comically exaggerated frown. Perhaps the joke is sexual in nature. It is difficult to make the case given the immediate context. Jacen Burrows’s frog-face Jesus-

\textsuperscript{344} Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” 124, passim.

\textsuperscript{345} Moore and Sherwood, \textit{Invention of the Biblical Scholar}, xii.

\textsuperscript{346} Ennis, \textit{Crossed} #9, n.p.
figure, the cartoonish pain on the priest’s face and comparatively little blood make this almost light-hearted cover, when compared to others in the same series that feature more bloody and mutilated people. The sales-point of the cover might be called something like wacky horror antics. The image is echoed on the first page within: the uninfected protagonist Stan’s first words are “Oh, Christ.” The humor of his reference to the cover is blunted and made cruel; he’s reacting to finding the uninfected Cindy’s son’s desiccated body in a ditch. (Ennis 2010, Illustration vii) The image on the cover combines humor and cruelty.

Within the book, the graphic image of a priest nailed to a crucifix is a conversation piece for the characters. The protagonists encounter the scene from the cover image when the priest has completely lost his flesh. (Ennis 2010, Illustration viii) The skeleton hanging from the crucifix shows us we are in a different time than the cover. Cindy’s comment, fresh after burying her son, is “Bet that came as a shock.” The Jesus-figure is peaceful and the eyes are closed. The skeleton, with just a little black clothing and his collar still hanging on, is facing the Jesus figure. Over the next two-page spread of panels, while sitting in pews in front of the crucifix, Stan and Cindy have a rare meaningful conversation about their actions in the past issues, teaching the now-dead boy, murdering other children to protect him, thinking about the ethics of their own damnation. Cindy rants, “This f*cking world, it finds a way to damn us all…!” After a panel’s pause, Stan muses haltingly, “I think… Everything we did… Everything was for each other. And some of us got killed, but that doesn’t mean the things they did for them were wasted.” After a page-turn, the perspective switches to a high angle behind the
crucifix looking down at the characters. (Ennis 2010, Illustration ix) The reader catches a look at the gaping skull, framed by the Cross he’s hanging on. Cindy comments calmly, “I bet the look on his face was a picture.” These hardened survivors, even in a moment of particular crisis, find the way this priest has been murdered to be particularly creative among all the other murders they’ve seen. Crucifying a priest on his own crucifix is of note, even in the world of *Crossed*.

Ennis creates a world chock-full of the most gruesome horrors he can think of perpetrated by people with crosses emblazoned across their faces. The writers are not subtle about their hostility toward Christianity, both in concept and in the context of the fictional world they create. Its frank graphic violence makes whatever message it holds hard to appropriate, but it has inspired a passionate following. Official “C-Parties” take place at comic stores around North America; over 22 are reported in for “C-Day” in March 2013, where fans dressed up as infected characters. The “Crossed” are now regular, gruesome cosplay characters at comic and horror conventions. While much of the evidence of fans and popularity is self-reporting, *Crossed* is still a regular title from Avatar Press. The appeal seems to stem from the gruesomeness the title revels in. The audiences of this book shows the attraction of interrupted norms at the heart of this portrayal.

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Rather than confronting the difficulties of the church or of government or other institutions, *Crossed* simply defiles them. *Crossed* shows the violence the Cross affords in the context of a violent world. Reading Paul with *Crossed* highlights how Paul’s violent imagery heightens the stakes of his message. Claiming to be crucified with Christ is not some tired cliché; for Paul, it is a climactic claim about the fate of the bodies and reputations of those who follow the crucified Messiah. Crosses, already affording the psychological uses to which the Empire put them, are recast in Paul’s shocking logic as power for the victims rather than the victors. This concept of a shocking reversal stretches the imagination of a reader comfortable with the Cross as a part of everyday religious symbol systems into seeing the Cross as capable of the grotesque.

Ambiguous Place of the Narrator

Paul’s subtlety is perhaps most on display when he is being the least tactful. In the oddly framed Gal 3:1 mentioned above, Paul both insults the Galatians by calling them foolish and then alludes to the transformational moment when they saw Christ crucified while hiding the identity of the one who showed them this image. The passive construction of “προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος” (was openly portrayed as crucified) allows the seat of the power of the message to be ambiguous (Gal 3:1). Paul and God are two equally logical choices for the actor in this sentence who portrayed Christ crucified. Passive constructions distance the actor from the sentence and allow the writer to make points more effectively without naming an actor.
To treat the full meaning of this passive ambiguity around the presentation of Christ crucified, I present the ambiguities of the Cross in the one-volume comic *Black Jesus*. The high-gloss format, full color pictures and bleed-printing make the book feel of high material quality. The American Visual Language is action-oriented in the style of a number of on-going superhero comics. However, the story peters out after one volume and has not yet been continued. The book strives to hit racial and religious emotional notes, which it does with occasional tenderness, albeit with little of the sophistication other authors exploring Christ’s blackness in fiction attain. Certainly the goals of this comic are not as lofty as those authors who have famously treated the subject: Phyllis Wheatley, James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, or Toni Morrison, to name a few. The title makes no secret of the issues inside the book; the issues remain centered on the power of Jesus in black religious communities. *Black Jesus* engages the Cross as brand, icon and everyday symbol layered with an ominous flavor that the book hesitates to interpret clearly. The focus is on a central character designed to be more icon than personality.

349 Blondell, *Black Jesus*.

350 I am certainly not interested in faulting *Black Jesus* for falling short of great literature, though I think comics can treat this subject well. In the series *March*, Senator John Lewis has made a powerful, creative statement about the Civil Rights movement. Each of the authors mentioned above has made significant, though widely different contributions to the image of Jesus as and for black bodies, particularly in and against the African American Christian tradition. Their theological relationship both to each other and the Cross is outlined in Katherine Clay Bassard, “The Race for Faith: Justice, Mercy and the Sign of the Cross in African American Literature,” *Religion and Literature* 38, no. 1 (2006), 95-114. John Lewis (w), Andrew Aydin (w), and Nate Powell (a), *March*, 3 vols. (Marietta, GA: Top Shelf Productions, 2013-forthcoming).
The Cross in *Black Jesus* is a diffuse symbol without a single meaning, except perhaps something perhaps vaguely threatening to the main character. Issues of violence, rape, and bloodshed become associated strongly with the Cross as the book progresses. The back cover of this comic shows a red Apostle’s Cross dripping and splattered with red, suggesting blood. (Blondell 2010, Illustration x) The book within these covers is as bloody and violent as this dripping would suggest. The comic is rife with both incidental and meaningful Crosses. Blondell, Krintzman, and Da Silva do not avoid showing the Cross. The narrator throughout keeps himself distant and the interpretation of the story ambiguous, but shows the reader the Cross in ways that teach her to understand it as ominous.

The black Jesus figure of the title, Chris, though he has the supernatural powers of the piece, identifies with Jewish symbols rather than Christian ones. He wears no crosses or religious insignias at all, but only a plain black hoodie, blue cargo pants and black high-top sneakers. A rabbi, whom Chris only calls “Rabbi”, raised him. The art shows Chris’s reverence for the mezuzah at the home of his unnamed, adoptive father carefully, second-by-second, across panels. (Blondell 2009, Illustration xi) This slowed-down time shows the significance of this symbol to Chris. Although he may actually or spiritually be from an entirely different time and culture, Black Jesus is nevertheless raised in a Jewish household. Chris sketches various Hebrew words on paper and on surface of the tiles on the roof where he lives. He recites a traditional Hebrew blessing (*Baruch attah Adonai eloheynu melech haolam* / Blessed are You, our God, King of the Universe). It is clear
that Chris is sitting between cultures and is confused by crosses and his relationship to them.

The focus in *Black Jesus* is on the clash and development of cultures and political groups, not the character of Chris. Chris does have miraculous talents suited to the story; he can walk on water, resurrect the recently dead, and always make a basketball shot. He has a mystical connection to an African lion. He is compassionate to sinners (like strippers), the poor, and to animals (the aforementioned lion and his pet pigeons). Overall, he seems compatible with a sort of general North American understanding of a Jesus of the gospels without any sort of ministry to teach. He is something of what Stephen Prothero calls the “Sweet Savior” that embodies a confusing combination of masculine and feminine energies (“energetic and yielding, courageous and submissive”) combined with a reluctant place in the limelight as a sort of superstar figure.351

Chris never has a clear message or explicit identity. His wardrobe is only remarkable in its comparable plainness. He never articulates any good news, but finds himself the victim of circumstances. Chris speaks to his friends, but never teaches or tells parables. He never ‘thinks’ for the reader to see, even though the thought-bubble is a well-established tool in comics. Chris is instead an ‘iconic’ character. Comic artists (and animators) often use iconic characters to allow for viewer-identification. Such characters offer a blank slate upon which the viewers are free to “mask themselves in a character and safely enter a stimulating world.”352 This is a phenomenon akin to the function


352 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 43.
Elizabeth Struthers Malbon ascribes to minor characters, who stand in for the reading audience and who provide places to respond. Instead of the minor characters, though, this story places the reader at the center of the narrative in the person of Chris. This “iconic” character allows readers to become him. His black skin is a direct challenge to the images of Jesus that leave out people of color. His lack of message allows the reader to enter his world. Chris is a symbol of Jesus that frames reality. As theologian Austin Farrer has it: “exact prose abstracts from reality, symbol presents it. And for that very reason, symbols have the same many-sidedness of wild nature.” This Jesus is as many-sided as the reader. This is not a story about Jesus; it is about the reader-as-Jesus in the racist clash of ideologies.

There is a moment where Chris seems to contemplate his identity explicitly, but the narrator allows him to walk away in the same blank and ambiguous state. In a series of panels on a page, Chris goes to an unnecessarily labeled “Church” to pray and muse with the janitor about the white Jesus on the crucifix. (Blondell 2010, Illustration xii) In a brief conversation, they both claim never to have seen a Jesus that was not white. It is a strange sort of exaggeration to contrast with a conversation Chris will have later with a black militant named Rook, who shows him his first black crucifix. Rook calls this situation “The Great White Wash of Christ” and insists that Revelation 1:12-16 (“His hair was like wool” and “His feet the color of bronze”) proves that Christ was black. Although

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Rook is certainly correct that there have been “hundreds and hundreds of years of white men, white churches and white artists,” there are many black Jesus images—many of which can be found in black churches—and quite a few images of Jesus that give him all kinds of other ethnicities.\textsuperscript{355} The prevalence in North America, particularly the United States, of the light-skinned Jesus is well-documented.\textsuperscript{356} It is not the history of art that this conversation seeks to communicate. It shows a black Jesus, his musings, and the way he troubles over his place in the world. He has trouble accepting that he might be Jesus because of this representation.

The crucifix and the Cross laid out here has a profound power over him, to trouble his place in the world. The reader knows little of Chris as a personality and must piece together his backstory from interactions with others. Being Jesus and therefore aligned with the fate of the man before him, he should logically pay attention to the torture before him on this Cross. He might take it as a warning. Instead of imagining the pain of the dying man, he sees the hair and skin color. The white presentation of Jesus interrupts his identification with the figure. \textit{Although Chris is never crucified, he is made to suffer by all manner of people who have Crosses. He is a figure of black manhood made to suffer by the greed of a black televangelist, the deranged white killer that he sends to hunt Chris, the torments of a tempting woman, and the overzealous violence of the Black

\textsuperscript{355} Bassard notes that although black literature has “literary embodiments of Christ appear during the Pre-Emancipation period, it is not until the Harlem Renaissance that African American writers begin to identify Christ as a black co-sufferer, following the artistic representations of Jacob Lawrence and Romare Beardon.” The importance of art to imagination shows up in this context as well. Bassard, “The Race for Faith,” 100.

\textsuperscript{356} Prothero, \textit{American Jesus}. Virginia Austin, \textit{American Jesus} (Notre Dame, IN: Cross Cultural Publications, 2001).
Christian Gangsters (BCG). Crosses are associated with each of these groups that chase Chris, but the meaning remains ambiguous.

The first clear Cross in *Black Jesus* is a Latin Cross seen on television on the side of antagonist Reverend Canivean’s helicopter. A friend of Chris, black record-shop owner Tiny, describes Canivean as “half Jerry Falwell, half Donald Trump, dipped in chocolate.” The ostentatious Cross is the visual introduction for the antagonist. (Blondell 2010, Illustration xiii) Whereas Chris is an ambiguous iconic character that is hard to pin down completely, Canivean’s character develops cleverly by his association with the Cross. It is a deft and subtle move that Rev. Canivean’s Cross on his lapel is upside down during the “Action News” television interview (Blondell 2009, Illustration xiv) The symbol is certainly a reference to the upside down Cross of a Satanic cult, rather than a reference to St. Peter’s Cross. He insults other black leaders and role models. He makes a smug reference to a “rapper who nailed himself to a cross,” possibly a nod toward the Messianic claims of Kanye West.357 In this scene Canivean is betraying black people by conspiring with two white men to degrade black role models. The silent panel where all three men mug at the camera helps to underline the uncomfortable situation and drives home the disgust the reader feels toward the scene. The humor in the situation is clear, but it’s a humor built on the pain of betrayal. So far in the story readers know very little

357 *Black Jesus* predates the *Yeezus* album by four years. One version of the *Yeezus* album art has West in a crown of thorns; the track “I am a God” includes the lyric, “I just talked to Jesus/ He said, ‘What up, Yeezus?’/ I said, ‘Shit I’m chillin’/Tryna stack these millions’/ I know he the most high/ But I am a close high.” Kanye West, *Yeezus*, Roc-a-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings (June 18, 2013). Although this is one of his stronger claims to divinity in lyrics, West has strongly associated himself with Jesus since his first album’s “Jesus Walks,” *The College Dropout*, Roc-A-Fella Records and Def Jam Recordings (February 10, 2004).
about Rev. Canivean; this scene puts him clearly on the wrong side. Not only is he conspiring with white people against black people, the very Cross seems to rebel against him. As he turns the Cross on his lapel back the traditional position, his head is tilted down, while his eyes gaze up. He's smiling coyly as he adjusts his gold Cross. Alongside the accompanying text, his face creates a queasy, angry feeling ("Haven't my people evolved further than that?"). The way he talks about evolution here is insulting to "his people," evoking the horrors of eugenics and the disrespect for black bodies perpetrated by 18th and 19th-century anthropology. Having placed black people on an evolutionary scale, he now compares athletic role models to animals: "There is a seal at Sea World who can throw a ball into a hoop. He never misses. Should we make him a role model?"

The comics form works particularly well here: the words and text work together to create a single impression that neither could quite do alone. The upside-down Cross here tells us not to trust Canivean. In general, Crosses have an untrustworthy and changeable meaning in the book.

A Cross is associated with the trauma that creates the character Brogan, the ultraviolent white mercenary character charged by Rev. Canivean with finding Black Jesus without regard for bloodshed. His first scene takes place in a cross-adorned church. In an action that is never explained, he beats a priest tied to a chair and then shoots him in the head, before beginning his "investigation" into Black Jesus. In the course of his disorganized questioning of random people, he kills at least six, mostly uninvolved bystanders (and one poodle) and brutalizes a number of people: drags one man with his car, shoots two people in the kneecap, pistol whips several, gives numerous bloody noses
and mouths, and shoots Chris in the leg. In the end, Rev. Canivean shoots Brogan out of petty frustration after Brogan’s gun jams as he tries to execute Chris. Chris (despite the protests of the Black Christian Gangsters [BCG]) uses his powers to resurrect Brogan, after his Jesus-powers allow him to see Brogan’s childhood-self being brutally raped by a gold-cross-wearing priest. (Blondell 2009, Illustration xv) In Brogan’s case, the Cross is a sign of the terrible trauma that apparently influenced his development into a psychopathic killer. It haunts Brogan as much as it seems to follow Chris.

Before I address the way the Cross changes for the Maria, I must quickly address the strong, uncomfortable message about the duplicity of women in the two main female characters, Maria and Azeb. According to Rev. Canivean, his female assistant Azeb “gives new meaning to the word multi-tasker.” Before she worked for me she was a prostitute.” Until this pivotal moment over half-way through the story, the reader only sees her as Rev. Canivean’s accessory: unnamed, accepting of Canivean’s sexual advances, and once casually naked with him. After Canivean sends her to work with Brogan, she zips up her jacket and suddenly is able to fight. She becomes a different character.

The character of Maria, the tempting Latina of the story, begins the story associated with Crosses, but ends up without Crosses when her more “sinful” characteristics are revealed to the reader and Chris. (Blondell 2009, Illustration xvi) The daughter of Chris’ kind boss at a failing restaurant, she wears a large, but simple black Cross necklace perched just over her often-showcased ample bosom. She unsuccessfully tries to seduce Chris on the roof near the beginning of the story. The incident tells us
more about Chris’s reticence than it does about her motives. Everyone, including her father, thinks that she is going to law school, but after several incidents, it turns out she actually makes her money stripping at a nightclub.

The women here have double-faces, while most of the men are fairly flat characters. Rev. Canivean is deceptive to the public in the story, but Maria and Azeb are deceptive to the reader. After we see her as a stripper, she is not associated directly with a Cross again. There are no Crosses even at her religious father's funeral. The Cross in Maria’s case seems most associated with her stable facade. When she loses her cover and Chris knows she is a stripper, she no longer needs to wear the Cross. For Maria, it is a symbol of her feigned moral image that the revelation of her stripping job disrupts.

The Black Christian Gangsters (BCG) use Crosses to present their Christian image as well. There is a large black Latin Cross hanging in the headquarters of the BCG, but that’s not the cross that draws the reader’s eye. Instead, the eye gravitates toward the burning brand in the shape of the Celtic Cross being pressed into the stoic new recruit's neck. The leader of the BCG also wears a Cross prominently around his neck, which hangs, incidentally, beside his dog-tags. The Cross brand appears on the necks of all the BCG. The shape is striking, and matches the symbol of The Church in Wales (yr Eglwys yng Nghymru) nearly exactly, though this is probably unintentional. The symbol is striking. (Blondell 2009, Illustration xvii) The Black Christian image they are promoting is one that condones the murder of people, especially white people, who do not conform to their ideals of Christian behavior.
*Black Jesus* does not make it clear what the Crosses that surround Chris mean. It is provocative that characters who torment him, no matter their motives, are covered in Crosses: Maria when she sexually tempts him, the BCG when they try to use him to promote their violent message, and Canivean while he promotes his own selfish and evil interests. Canivean never loses his association with the Cross as Maria does. The Cross is in evidence when he tries to execute Chris. Later, when we see him in Africa, we learn he's gone there thanks to the Red Cross! (Blondell 2009, Illustration xviii) Crosses repeat several times in these final panels of the comic.

Chris is at the center, but he is not clear about his goals or direction. It is not clear who he is as an actor in the story. He is often a sort of babe in the woods, as the story gets out of hand, he is guided by each new character. He spends his time mostly running from harm. When Rook and the BCG take him on a vigilante raid of a meth lab, he finally takes a stand, “This isn’t God’s wrath… You’re murdering people!” Instead of staying to help or convince the BCG to change their tactics, he flees the scene and eventually, the country. Chris does not have any followers to whom he explains himself, even though the idea of “Black Jesus” takes hold of the crowds in the book—people buy Black Jesus t-shirts, paint Black Jesus graffiti, and at least one person gets a Black Jesus tattoo. Though we can see Chris, he is really nothing more or less than the Black Jesus brand. He is the central identity around which a community gathers, but by becoming the identity he loses something of his own. For better or worse, Chris has ceased to be himself and become an iconic image. The perhaps overly-detailed description of this book shows the ambiguity of the narrator at the heart of the portrayal.
By leaving the actor iconic and his character ambiguous in talking about the Galatians’ transformation, Paul allows the reader to decide who portrayed the crucified Jesus Christ—perhaps it is God in action or Paul in his presentation. In this way, Paul is able to fit himself and God into one character without claiming either. Black Jesus avoids claims as well, but with more developed results: readers are left understanding that the Cross is important, but not what it means. By avoiding specific meanings, Black Jesus invites readers to interpret freely around a racialized figure. Chris himself is frustrated by his lack of control over the situations or the Black Jesus image.

Paul claims “that his very person serves as a ‘rhetorical abbreviation’ of the gospel” just as “Jesus as the Messiah… sums up Israel in himself.”

Paul portrays Jesus “in the flesh” (Gal. 2:20). Black Jesus asks its readers to consider the color of that flesh but does not make clear what the person in that flesh is like. Instead, the book makes the brand a race and asks the reader to fill in the character. The added complication of this central character being a man of color, a black man in North America, offers more weight to an imaginative idea. The recent and historical horrors of state-sanctioned violence against unarmed black men should make the still-troubling situation of black men in

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Like many men of color, Chris struggles to have people see him as human, as more than an icon or a body.

*Black Jesus* shows how the ambiguous place of the narrator allows the reader to take control. For the passive phrase in Gal 3:1, this means that Paul has given over control of the understanding of who portrayed Christ to them crucified. Rather than simply making it unclear, Paul has given the Galatians the task of remembering the portrayal and deciding on the actor. *Black Jesus* reminds us that when an author leaves the task of determining the actor to a reader, it is open to interpretation. It takes pains to show its readers that a black Jesus means more than just a difference in skin color; it means uprooting an idea of a “white Jesus” before establishing a black Jesus. The speaker matters, and leaving it open to interpretation means risking being misunderstood in order to keep the actor carefully unclear. *Black Jesus* risks dehumanizing Chris to make him iconic. What Paul has to say is too dangerous to claim; he risks upturning the carefully constructed order. In *Black Jesus*, the order being disrupted is white privilege and preference in North American Christian imagery. In Paul it is Roman domination.

*Black Jesus* asks the reader to engage in their moral imagination. The reader must explicitly connect the sufferings of Jesus with the sufferings of black men in particular in urban America. Persecution from the state, the complicity of the churches in persecution

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359 I have already mentioned the obvious association between lynching and Jesus’s persecution. Here I am alluding in particular to the recent 2014 cases of Eric Garner, a man choked to death by police in New York and Michael Brown, a teenager shot to death by police in Ferguson, Missouri. Both call to mind the random violence of *Black Jesus*. The cartoon gore is not easy to dismiss after seeing this sort of violence in real life.

360 Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 1-2.
and the obvious parallels between Jesus and people of color are made clear. This fantasy, although it certainly does not do much for the imagination of women, has a powerful indictment of people who fail to connect the Cross to what they see in their lives. It is an opportunity to see reality that reveals the defect in white conscience.\(^{361}\)

*Black Jesus* lifts Jesus from the first century Mediterranean and drops him into a familiar version of urban North America. *Blinded* presents the adventures of Saul of Tarsus, but creates a whole different world for him to inhabit. While *Black Jesus* brings its racial agenda forward at the expense of a clear voice for the biblical character, *Blinded* is so bent on bringing the biblical story to the fore that it loses its own plot. The cost of creating a sense of immediacy in *Blinded* is often clarity, but still the concepts of tension and ambiguity shine through.

**Happening Before Our Very Eyes**

The open “in the flesh” portrayal Paul claims has been made to the Galatians might take many forms (Gal 2:20). Quintilian suggests several means of creating emotion and setting a scene, “whereby things absent are presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes.”\(^{362}\) The presence in the courtroom of impoverished people, children and parents of victims, blood-stained swords, bones from wounds, and other objects directly a part of the murder scene “bring the spectators face to face with the cruel facts” and elicit powerful emotions and

\(^{361}\) Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xiii, 13.

\(^{362}\) Quintilian, *Institutio Oratorio*, VI.2.29.
The sight of Gaius Caesar’s bloodstained purple-bordered toga generated fury from the Romans at his funeral procession: “his garment, still wet with his blood, brought such a vivid image of the crime before their minds, that Caesar seemed not to have been murdered, but to be being murdered before their eyes.” As with comics, the action, even action narrated in the past, is most powerful when it is happening before the eyes of the reader in the panels, rather than in narration. Quintilian even mentions, although he does not approve, the practice “of bringing into court a picture of the crime painted on wood or canvas, that the judge might be stirred to fury by the horror of the sight.” He calls these a “voiceless picture” called upon to speak for a singularly incompetent orator. But what if the pictures had text included? Pictures gain a voice in comics. By taking the Pauline ministry out of its first century Palestinian context and giving the reader familiar modern visual cues, Steve Ross tries to make the story happen “before our eyes” while adding a sense of the alien to a familiar story.

In his single-shot graphic novel Blinded, Ross transports the Paul story to a fantasy world with more familiar objects to help his reader connect with Paul’s foreign cultural and historical world. He uses the traditional Cross in the central action only once and very subtly in a reflection in Paul’s glasses; to Ross’s audience, such an image does not create the reaction that other images he chooses might. Readers unfamiliar with the biblical story would be lost in the disconnected narrative. As with many comics


365 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratorio*, VI.1.32.
interpretations of biblical events readers are expected to provide their own closure from familiar texts, and as such, become witnesses or even, as McCloud says, “a willing and conscious collaborator.” Ross is concerned with showing how Paul might change the lives of those he meets by presenting the Jesus story as happening before their very eyes.

*Blinded* is Ross’s second graphic novel to re-imagine the New Testament. His first was *Marked*, a re-telling of the Gospel of Mark. *Marked* takes place in a dystopic over-the-top mechanistic, demonic place, but *Blinded* is rooted in a more realistic, or at least demon-free, world. The American Visual Language at play in both is most closely reminiscent of Cohn’s Cartoony AVL or Barksian dialect, but Ross is firmly part of the independent comix style. Both stories are similarly surreal and access the weird in the biblical narrative quite well, while making decisions about how to tell the story that echo the original text with some reverence or respect. Seabury, an imprint of Church Publishing, the publishing house of the Episcopal Church, publishes both books. The marketing material revels in the “unexpected and startling imagery” that Ross has given

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366 McCloud, *Understanding Comics*, 65. Scott Elliott has already pointed out the way this closures acts in comics that engage the biblical texts, especially in alternative Jesus comics like the ones I engage here. Elliott, “Jesus in the Gutter,” 123-148.

367 Although more rare than gospel stories and certainly unusual in style, *Blinded* is not the only comic book to treat the story of Paul. Besides the inclusion of Paul’s story in larger Bible works, such as *The Action Bible*, there is the Japanese-style or manga comic *Manga Metamorphosis*. *Manga Metamorphosis* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale/NEXT, 2008).

368 I will treat *Marked* in more detail my exegesis of Mark below. Ross, *Marked*.

Ross understands his task as restoring a sense of the weird to the text. He said in an interview, “‘I fear that two thousand years of 20/20 hindsight have sucked the surprise, awe and sheer weirdness out of the Gospels,’” and *Marked* attempts to restore those qualities to the familiar story. He does similar work in *Blinded*. To represent his place in the established religious order, Saul at first wears a suit and works for a patriotic agency. (Ross 2008, Illustration xix) As the story progresses, he is characterized as a rogue agent or a troubled noir cop-turned-private detective. Top brass are convinced that the rumored “Kingdom of Heaven” is some sort of “doomsday device.” While these images serve to help modern readers get into the story, the disjointed and confusing mixture of biblical incidents and modern or dystopian imagery makes this a hard story to follow. There are a few unifying themes, but the plot is jumbled and the metaphors mixed.

The foreword to the book (by former Marvel president Bill Jemas) takes Ross’s Paul’s “paramount principle” to be “Nothing, not principalities or jails or presidents or rulers or rules not even religion can separate us from our love of God.” This is Ross’s fairly strong re-writing of Rom 8:38-9: “For I have been persuaded that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things coming nor powers nor height nor

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371 Wilson, “The Angel is a Clown.”

depth nor any other creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Ross clearly wants his version of Paul’s story to make a strong impression on a modern reader more familiar with presidents than angels. By taking the activity of the early church out of Paul’s ancient world and bringing the story of Acts into a familiar, even if fantastic, world, he can bring those events more squarely before his readers’ eyes. He bases the episodes or “verses” on the action in Acts. The story portrays what might be Paul’s understanding of himself before Damascus (Gal 1:13-14).

Ross is interested in bringing back the shock he feels certain is part of the text. He begins with a depiction of Saul having a dream about nuclear holocaust destroying the planet. The flippant narrative box “Hey Kids, what time is it?” is a sort of roguish nod to the comics format and children’s television as well as giving the reader an idea of the voice of the character. (Ross 2008, Illustration xx)“Hey kids” is a very different way to start than say, “Brothers and sisters” or “in the beginning” or even “Paul, an apostle.” We learn as the book goes on that this end of the world dream is the same one this Saul has had since childhood. The feeling that God wanted him and would drive away the “nightly visits to hell” made him “[renounce his] friends and family and [take] up the mantle” of service to patriotic religious authority. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxi) The series of images starts the book with a bang but does not set out clear motives or agenda for Paul. The world is going to end. He wants to “take out God’s trash,” people called “Flesh Eaters” who sin by following Jesus. Once he is thrown off this road on the way to Damascus, he never regains this clear sense of a way forward.
The supernatural Damascus experience is a surreal but plausible event. While driving toward Damascus, Saul is distracted by an off-panel voice, crashes his car, and has a load of dirt dumped on him by a backhoe. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxii) After dangling in a physically confusing space, he falls into the arms of a silhouetted figure. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxiii) It is an unlikely series of events, but not as supernatural as the incident of his actual “blinding” in Acts 9: 3-19, Paul’s retelling of the experience in Acts 22:11-13, or even the way God set him apart and revealed the Son to him in Gal 1:15-16. While unconscious, he protests against God going back on their “deal.” He only cannot see for two short panels, but his figurative blindness about the movement he’s a part of continues to reoccur throughout in symbolic ways. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxiv) His rescuer gives him glasses because his “eyes are fine...just a little weak.” These glasses and the vision they represent reoccur throughout the rest of the book.

By the climax of the book Ross shows that Paul’s blindness is not physical, but a “blind spot” in his vision of the world. The central traditional Cross in the book appears as a ghostly reflection on his glasses as Paul muses about sacrifice. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxv) In part because Ross is trying to revive the weirdness of the story, he shies away from using common modern religious symbols. The Cross and Jesus barely play in the story at all, and that is part of the point. Ross’s Paul has lost the thread of the story. “Christians” (the new name for Flesh Eaters) murder Peter in the closest thing to a crucifixion in the book. The glasses shatter dramatically in a splash page the last moment. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxvi) Peter’s murder at the hands of other Christians shatters
Paul’s belief in the movement. He spends the epilogue sitting in the dark until a resurrected Priscilla takes him on a ship sailing into the sunrise or sunset.

While Paul does not admit his true “blind spot” until the end, he has misgivings about the movement throughout. Ross makes Barnabas a failing Elvis-style showman (complete with pony-tail and poodle-skirt-sporting groupies); he’s healing the blind but not getting many donations out of his crowd. Paul comes in with his name change and touching Damascus story to energize his take. An unnamed boy reveals that he has cut off his entire penis because of a misunderstanding about Paul's teachings and then kills himself in front of him. Rather than react directly, Paul decides to “visit HQ” and finds no relief from Peter. No one in the movement has the “vision” Paul wants.

Ross wants his story to feel immediate and weird, so he decides not to use traditional Crosses to suspend victims of the Empire. Perhaps he senses that the familiar Cross is just not weird enough to today’s audience. Rather than seeing the Cross as the historical Paul did, Ross’s readers would see the Cross in their own world. Ross shows how much the shocking image of the Cross fails to spark his imagination, but gives images in its place for the Empire to use: machine guns, nuclear bombs, and crucifixion on another shape ending with a bullet to the chest. Some victims are shot while being suspended from X-shaped structures. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxvii) Ross shows the Cross to be analogous to the devices people use today to kill each other. For the story of Paul to happen before his eyes, Ross needs familiar devices so that his audience could recognize them, but also needs them to be disturbing.
Everyday objects contribute to more deaths than most weapons. Because they have other purposes they do not inspire fear outside of specifically constructed contexts. Cars, for example, cause far more deaths each year than guns. The image of a car does not afford fear in the way that, say, a picture of a gun aimed at the reader might. Because a car has a wide variety of uses that do not ordinarily include death, for most people, it affords transportation, freedom, or perhaps status more easily than it does death. The crosses and even some Crosses that recall Jesus in the modern world and in Ross’s dystopic world are an everyday part of the landscape that does not afford torture and death. Ross has crosses on the top of buildings and decorating ships. (Ross 2008, Illustration xxviii) These objects are not used to kill; therefore, they have lost the sense of menace. Rather, Ross uses visible guns, explosions, decimated cities and blood to show the danger that runs through his story. The details of Ross’s comic shows the repeated sense of immediate danger that he brings out in his modern interpretation.

The sense of danger that runs through Paul’s letter does not need such translation for the Galatians. Menace from Rome was a constant background note, seen in art, architecture and terror rhetoric. Because crosses were in use, the presence of the Cross afforded fear for these vanquished people. The cry about still being persecuted in Gal 5:11 and idea of being crucified with Christ in 6:14-17 carries with it a sense of

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373 Kahl, *Re-imagining Galatians*, 3, passim. Kahl gives a chilling account of the ongoing rhetorical presence of constant anti-terror campaigns against the Gauls/Galatians and the "unresolved past" that Paul is participating in. "Roman authors frequently used the Latin term terror when they discussed Gauls/Galatians. We should understand the Gallic war not as a singular event under Julius Caesar but as part of an ongoing, multistage Greco-Roman campaign against a Galatian 'global terrorism,' an archetype that has informed later occidental warfare as well."
immediacy that Ross struggles to capture. To the imaginations he is seeking to engage, young people in a North American Christian-influenced context in a post 9-11 world, the reality of gun-violence and mechanistic terror from a militaristic government in uniforms is a much more real terror than that of crucifixion. Ross draws on a sense of mistrust of government authority that Paul has in his weird view; that is, the weird deals in the troubling of governmental powers. As Weird Science writer Al Williamson claimed, to be weird in certain moments in United States history meant, “You were either a Communist or a juvenile delinquent.”³⁷⁴ Ross, a generation later, revels in his comics’ weirdness, nearly (though not quite) making it incoherent in the process. As weird as it is, though, it allows modern readers the sense of immediacy that Paul’s disturbing claims and presentation of Jesus Christ crucified was designed to give the Galatians.

Visual Portrayal of the Other-Worldly

In whatever way Paul’s open portrayal of the Cross to the Galatians is imagined, the experience is visual. The portrayal “addressed not only the intellect but also the eyes of his audience.” Something happened in front of their eyes that was literal as well as metaphorical, but this does not suggest the Galatians were present at the historical crucifixion of Jesus.³⁷⁵ In the context of the preceding verses (2:19-21), the presence of Paul is clear in the portrayal, even though its source is ambiguous a few verses later at 3:1. However, the “προγράφη” should be interpreted in the light of what has come

directly before in order to build Paul’s argument. The Galatians saw Paul after he was “crucified with Christ” (2:20). Paul came before their eyes, “in the flesh” (2:20). Despite the fact that Paul was not a witness to the crucifixion, the visual aspect of the Cross is partially brought about through the Galatians’ own sight of him, as a representative display of the crucified Christ “in Paul’s own person.”376 The Galatians were visually engaged in the experience of joining the Christian movement, and by this event were connected to an eschatological reality. Both the concrete and the fantastic had visual elements in the experience. The Cross and the death of Jesus is both starkly real and entirely cosmic; Paul has the Galatians seeing these dualities together. John M.G. Barclay, Martyn, Meeks and others have commented on the presence of these tensions in Galatians.377 Comics evoke that tension and make weird this element of Paul’s portrayal. As Crossed and Blinded elucidated the Cross as a physical reality, I will use Miniature Jesus to reveal or interpret the Cross as simultaneously a physical and a cosmic reality.

Ted McKeever’s Miniature Jesus tells a real-world story with layers of other-worldly participation.378 He presents the struggles of Chomsky, a recovering alcoholic in the throes of a period of abstinence he hopes will last.379 He finds himself in small town


378 McKeever, Miniature Jesus. Another comic that uses the medium creatively to show how supernatural forces play in a real-world story is Douglas Rushkoff (w), Liam Sharp (a), Testament, 4 vols. (New York: D.C. Comics; Vertigo, 2006-2008), passim.

379 The name “Chomsky” is probably a nod toward the linguist Noam Chomsky. The rest of the book certainly draws on complex symbolism drawn from what Chomsky might call a “universal grammar” of images.
that consists mostly of an abandoned motel, a convenience store, a bar, and a church. In this sparse setting, he encounters a number of supernatural forces that ambiguously try to help him or hinder him from remaining sober. He witnesses the forces at play and ends up finding himself at sobriety with his demon of alcoholism still yelling at him. It is a gorgeously drawn story of this struggle to become a “recovering alcoholic” that plays deftly with the language of Alcoholic Anonymous.

McKeever revels in weird images of Jesus, God, and demonic powers that have an effect on Chomsky’s world. The stark, frenetic black inks on white make the visual presentation the center of this powerful story. Comics allow their readers to hold both images and text together. In this case, they make possible the telling of two or more stories at the same time. In *Miniature Jesus*, the fantastic subject matter has the reader going back and forth between text and images to try and figure out what exists in the real world of the story and what (if anything) is solely taking place in Chomsky’s troubled mind. As much as the portrayal is visual, though, it is far from clear. Something happens to Chomsky in this story, to his own flesh and spirit, which the reader can see. McKeever presents a visually stunning story that is serious, but playfully confusing about reality. Paul, too, never makes quite clear what is part of the physical world and what is a part of the other world. This apocalyptic text sees all dimensions of reality simultaneously, as synchronic time.380 This is a confusion not meant to be untangled. Whether the Galatians see something that is of this or another world, it is all truly real in a profound sense.

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Miniature Jesus illustrates how such a tension between this-world and the other-world is possible to hold together, laid out across a page in text and image. This uniquely independent American Visual Language has a slow, deliberate pace of images that relies on glorious full-page scenes that draw the reader into this world. The story is a grotesque morality play with surreal demons that express simultaneously alternate realities. It is persistently unclear what the reader is seeing and the effect is beautiful. Chomsky muses about the value of a child-like sense of wonder, but is constantly trying to understand the fantastical things he is seeing in scientific terms. Within the first few pages, the reader sees Chomsky observe the desiccated corpse of a cat become animate, insult him, and then give him a brief lecture about Ninkasi, the ancient Egyptian god of alcohol. (McKeever 2013, Illustration xxix) Chomsky initially refuses to believe what he is seeing. After marking off twenty-six days alone in a dirty abandoned motel office, he doubts his perception in a thought: “The dead, rotting, now-talking cat is no longer… irrefutable.” The cat later explains himself to be a manifestation of a “Higher Power,” and the text henceforth refers to the character as “H.P.” He does seem to want to help Chomsky stay sober and navigate the supernatural forces around him, despite his mischievous and rude presentation. Near the end of the book, the cat is shown to be

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381 Apropos of the themes of this book, Alcoholics Anonymous typically uses the language of “Higher Power” (and even the abbreviation “HP”) to allow for a broader way of characterizing the “theism” at the core of the twelve-step programs and to encourage motivation for personal growth. This force is sometimes called “a power greater than ourselves.” The character H.P. here is a motivator for Pastor Button (to be addressed shortly) and a difficult companion for Chomsky.
visible to at least one human; a bartender tells Chomsky that his cat has to stay outside if he wants to come in to his bar. This is just before H.P. says farewell and completely disintegrates. The cat is only the first of a cast of supernatural characters that help or torment Chomsky and interact with the real-world cast and the physical world. Describing the presence of this animate cat corpse gives some idea of the context in which to read the presence of the animate miniature Jesus. Chomsky sees the otherworldly in this world in a vivid and life-changing way, but Jesus is not the guiding force.

Jesus holds a conspicuous place in the story as a part of the supernatural cast; the covers and title feature him prominently. Jesus and the Cross on the different issue covers act to advertise the book—readers might be curious about these odd portraits of Jesus. Without delving too deeply into reader motivations, seeing a familiar face like the sort of Jesus McKeever draws in weird situations might appeal to readers. Like other covers, McKeever gives a sense of what will be found within: a broken Jesus, grotesque demons and a struggling man. (McKeever 2013, Illustration xxx) It is hard to tell much about what Jesus the character will be like from these images, and it is clear that surprise is part of his function in the story.

The miniature Jesus is small in stature, has a reputation for being influential, but having limited supernatural power. Jesus’ grand entrance to the story happens in a nearly-empty and spare country chapel. A flushed “Pastor Button” is preaching a fiery sermon to a single young boy. His glowing nose suggests that his fervor might be fueled by alcohol,
and the reader later learns that he has a problem with alcohol. As his message reaches an angry peak, the boy hesitantly points out that something is happening behind the priest to the small crucifix hanging on the wall. “The little Jesus. He’s… um… moving,” he finally manages to say. The close-up panels of Jesus slowly removing himself from the Cross show him at life size, but once he jumps to the ground, the high angle and relative size and position of the pastor show him to be no more than around eight inches tall.

(McKeever 2013, Illustration xxxi) It is a visual joke of a close-up followed by a wide-shot to show perspective. Pastor Button’s startled and alcohol-influenced reaction is to step on him! Although the splash page of Jesus holding up the pastor’s shoe, Atlas-like, is heroic, the whole situation is simply fun. (McKeever 2013, Illustration xxxii) It is Jesus’s hero-moment from issue one.

After this heroic entrance, the story moves away from Jesus for a while. Instead it shows the finger of God destroying the country chapel perhaps in retribution for Pastor Button’s treatment of Jesus. Button flees. Then, a horrifying demon with claws, which Chomsky calls Satanus, takes over the story. After the destruction passes, Miniature Jesus awakens pages later, in a Renaissance-inspired close-up. (McKeever 2013, Illustration xxxiii) Despite his realistic look, he is made of plaster. His arm has broken off. The missing arm does not appear to hurt him but it also annoys him. Jesus seems unable or unwilling to heal himself. Once the reader accepts the idea that the plaster Jesus has come

382 Miniature Jesus is there to help him let go of alcohol, or at least the wordless exchange between them at the end of the book suggests this.

383 It would be unusual for a crucifix to be on the wall of a Protestant chapel, but the affiliation of the church and Pastor Button is unclear. The pastor (he is never called a priest) wears a cassock and collar.

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to life, she then discovers this Jesus is not very powerful. Jesus has what H.P. calls a “floaty thing” he can do; he literally just floats. When God comes down (in the form of a gigantic floating fetus), apparently at Jesus’s request, Jesus cannot explain what God does. Jesus cannot offer any answers at all. He just shrugs.

This Jesus is seen and not heard. Jesus never speaks. He communicates by playing charades. He is, like Chris in Black Jesus, an ambiguous Jesus, but not, in this case, the central character. The story follows Chomsky and H.P. most frequently, and they are loquacious enough to carry a conversation by themselves. H.P. says, “You Christs are always so gullible,” suggesting that this manifestation is not the first Christ he’s encountered. H.P. and Miniature Jesus are wholly apart from one another. Instead, H.P. and these Christs simply seem to run in the same circles, probably around troubled people.

Given H.P.’s experience of Jesus’ “solid rep,” he expresses surprise at the miniature size of this materialization: “And what is with the size thing? Look at you! You’re about as imposing as one of those G.I. Action figures sporting life-like hair.” Much like the “iconic” Chris in Black Jesus, this Jesus allows for a wide range of projections. The impression this Jesus makes depends heavily on whatever feelings or impressions the readers bring to the traditional image of Jesus. Since he never has words, the other characters interpret his actions. He has many shortcomings in power and impressiveness, but he seems to fulfill his purpose—helping “His own.” Chomsky indicates that Pastor Button is Jesus’s “own.” The Pastor does seem to begin to work through his own alcoholism by the end of the story. The story closes with Miniature Jesus
just beginning his work Pastor Button by pulling his fingers away from his shot glass.

The Cross hanging high over the bar in the Romeo Bar does not seem to have another Jesus on it. Miniature Jesus ends the story with the Cross over him. Perhaps he will return to the Cross when this next mission with Pastor Button is over, but the story leaves him to help Pastor Button.

Despite his top billing on the cover, Jesus is a part of a cast of largely supernatural characters and not even the most featured in the narrative. His ultimate aim is not really to help the main character, but to be helped by him. He needs Chomsky to glue his arm back on. Chomsky encounters several other supernatural characters including: the Higher Power in the form of a decaying cat, the hooded demon of Chomsky’s alcoholism, a clawed demon of drug addiction, and God in the cosmic-fetus form. Alongside these others, Jesus is silent, tiny, and relatively helpless. We only see the very first move he makes toward helping Pastor Button. Visually, he is not nearly as impressive in context; miniature Jesus relies on his reputation and one impressive entrance from the Cross to contribute to his impact. His reputation makes way for the concept of his power. The entrance from the Cross impresses and appropriately shocks the reader. McKeever has us imagine Jesus as a tiny creature with mysterious power in the context of a whole pantheon of powers.

In Galatians, there is a tension between what the Galatians are doing and what they have seen of the Crucified Jesus. Alongside the power and might of Rome or the traditional Celtic gods, Jesus’s visual presentation might been equally underwhelming without Paul building his reputation. Already there the attractions of the mystery
religions that offer the chance to receive secret information in initiation ceremonies shrouded in mystery and esoteric training. The competition was fierce for supernatural beings in this culture and a crucifixion is not a central visual that we might reasonably expect to be attractive.

Further Insight for Galatians

Now that I have read Galatians closely with these comics, my reading has become more attuned to the physical within the text. These comics insist on the physical dimension of Paul’s imagery. After doing the deep descriptive work necessary to unpack these comics and their interaction with Galatians, my method takes these insights a step further. My reading of Galatians has changed: Instead of reading this letter solely with an angry tone, I now also see it as grotesque and capable of eliciting dissonant and uncomfortable feelings. All four of these comics unsettle me with Jesus-related or Cross-related bloody violence. The Cross is scandalous in part because it is unsettling for just that sort of violent reasons. Instead of allowing the Cross to slide across the reading, every mention of the Cross and crucifixion is utterly arresting to me now. I feel the build in intensity that Mitternacht shows to exist from 2:19-21 to 3:1 to 5:11 and reiterated in 6:14-17 as a movement toward the climax of being crucified with Christ. Now I also

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385 Mitternacht, “Foolish Galatians,” 430.
feel the horror of every mention individually. Crucifixion itself interrupts the flow of the argument.

I wonder if those who are crucified with Christ will be shocked at the moment they must be crucified, as in Crossed. Will those who crucify them with Christ use an obnoxious number of nails? I wonder if those who see them so crucified will be generally nonplussed by their suffering in Christ’s name, or what others are struggling through at the time will make crucifixion-suffering seem foolish in comparison.

I have tried to share the struggle of Chris as violence permeates his community. I cannot hear about a vivid portrayal of Christ’s public exhibition as crucified now without seeing the widely distributed images of so many African American men killed in the last year by state-sanctioned violence. Black Jesus has helped me more explicitly connect the viral videos showing the murder of these men and Christians’ struggle for an appropriate response. Paul is angry that showing the Galatians the public exhibition of Christ crucified did not have the affect he wanted. It is difficult to say if showing these videos, public exhibitions of men killed by police before our eyes, has had the desired effect on its audience. I certainly would understand an angry tone addressing those who watch a video showing the callous murder of a black man by police and do not demand change in police policy, for example.

Now instead of just wondering about the type of portrayal that Paul chose, I wonder if he himself was Blinded by his vision of the Cross. I wonder if his own portrayal of the Cross obscured his vision of the Galatian community. I wonder if they were able to see his vision as clearly as he thought.
Rather than treating the Galatians’ endeavor to be Christian in isolation, I wonder what it would look like in the context of a whole collage of visual portrayals of supernatural events. I am not only referring to cultural context, but the whole weird picture of a life, which includes personal struggles with various kinds of demons that demand attention. What if Paul’s portrayal was just a small piece of one’s life, a *Miniature Jesus* rather than singular, larger-than-life event? What if in trying to find an appropriate religious commitment, like a mystery religion, the Galatian church could not reconcile the mythos that Paul presents? Paul includes a horrific historical event in his act of initiating the Galatians. What if they could not fit it back into their lives?

After having read these comics, I now wonder if the ancient Galatian readers with modern categories would be fans of horror if they initially responded to Paul’s portrayal of the Cross in his initial visit. Although I am primarily interested in the modern reader, the ancient people who saw the visible portrayal of Christ crucified are the subject of the letter itself. The comics I have used here have portrayals of exhibitions of crucifixion that are vivid enough to cause the audience to respond in ways analogous to the ways people respond to horror comics or even horrific situations. Perhaps instead, the Galatians were *not* fans of horror, since Paul thought they were not living as if they had seen his portrayal but as if they had been bewitched by someone else (Gal 3:1). People certainly do not respond in the same way to common experiences of horror.

I already knew that Paul seems unhappy with the way the Galatians are interpreting the gospel, particularly their supposed lack of response to his visual message. What does it mean to be a person living properly as one who has seen Christ openly
portrayed as crucified (Gal 3:1)? After reading these comics, I am more disturbed by the possibilities. Given the sorts of experiences and situations in these comics, perhaps living appropriately is to live as a person who has witnessed a horrible tragedy or experienced a traumatic event. What would it mean for Christians to live purposely as people traumatized by the crucifixion? This is an open question that I had not considered until I read and fully engaged my reading with these comics. The outcome of my study of Galatians is just this set of questions about what it means to take the physicality of Galatians seriously.

After taking these imaginative partners on a dance through the text, the vision of crucifying with is disturbed, as in Crossed. The meaning of the Cross itself is hard to place, as in Black Jesus. Paul claims that his portrayal is even vivid enough to make it seem to have happened in his reader’s world, as in Blinded. Without the elements of both the other worldly and saving power that Paul gave it, the visual portrayal of Jesus crucified would not have made the impression that it did, as in Miniature Jesus. Without the weird to give these grotesque images an outlet in the supernatural, the Cross as a saving power cannot even be imagined. As comics’ vision of the Cross fits comports well with the overall tone of Galatians—it is shocking, visual, and visceral. It allows for the ambiguity that Paul wrote into his letter. Paul’s weird message of a crucified Messiah requires much imagination, even when the tone is not as shrill as these bloody comics. In the next section, I use comics to imagine the Corinthian correspondence as well.
Graphically Reading 1 Corinthians: Bringing the Cross in Too Close

Comics can assist the imagination we bring to the Corinthian correspondence by helping readers to recognize its discomfort for other readers and those readers in Corinth. The Cross is not such an obvious bludgeon to this audience; as this chapter will show, it is a certain sort of indirect weapon. Paul founds his correspondence with Corinth on his understanding of the Corinthian church as community with different concerns and values than Galatia. Still, he uses the Cross to communicate the core of his ideas for them. Instead of using it to shock the audience, Paul acknowledges in 1 Corinthians that the message of the Cross is a difficult one to hear. One of the central images in the Corinthian correspondence is the body and its functions: Paul’s body (1 Cor 5:3), the body’s relationship to food and sex (1 Cor 6:13-19), the body’s glorification of God (1 Cor 6:19-20), married bodies (1 Cor 7), the body of Christ in the eating of bread in remembrance (1 Cor 11:24-27), members of the body of Christ (1 Cor 12), the resurrected body (1 Cor 15), and even confusion about whether one is in the body or out of the body (1 Cor 12:2-3). However, the body at the center of the correspondence is the broken Jesus on the Cross, the “lynchpin of a redefinition of the ultimate authority, God,” who is “now defined by reference to the cross.”386 Paul shows the body of Christ turning the values of the known world inside out. The crucified Christ is the “central icon” of Paul’s good news for Corinth.387


Scholars have argued for a more partitioned reading of the book that places other emphases each section. Conzelmann insists that “there are certain sections which are more or less independent of their context” that are better read individually.\textsuperscript{388} However, Margaret Mitchell finds a different central theme. She argues convincingly that a plea for unity in the community runs through the whole letter and shows how the “specific appeals, terms and images for concord and an end to factionalism run throughout the entire letter, (such as the body metaphor).”\textsuperscript{389} Richard Horsley points out how the discussion of crucifixion frames the whole letter from the first argument (1 Cor 1:17-2:8) to the resurrection as the last argument (1 Cor 15).\textsuperscript{390} I concentrate my comics close reading on the way Paul juxtaposes his end to factionalism alongside the Cross and how the Corinthians and later readers might interpret such efforts.

Even with the apparent overall success of Paul’s message through time, 1 Corinthians itself is an “unsuccessful document” in that it does not seem to have reconciled the community at Corinth.\textsuperscript{391} Mitchell shows this failure to be on two points: first, from 2 Corinthians it seems that Paul’s using himself as an example was seen as a “self-recommendation” that was not appreciated (2 Cor 3:1, 4:2, 5:12, 6:4, 10:12, 18) and


second, instead of uniting the factions with his deliberative rhetoric, he seems to have alienated both factions and not guarded against the incursion of outside agitators seen in 2 Corinthians. 392 Galatians seems to have produced some of the desired results, or at least progress is being made there from the report of 1 Cor 16:1. 393 It bears mentioning that 1 Corinthians seems to have failed in its intended historical setting. However, the letter became immensely popular in the early church and circulated for the purpose of reconciling divided factions. 394 Certainly, reading the Corinthian correspondence is an important part of many modern understandings of Christian community.

I argue that the failure in the first venue and the success for later audiences has to do with proximity to the Cross, in addition to Mitchell’s two points. Paul’s use of cross or Cross terminology is concentrated in 1 Cor 1:17-2:16; six of his eighteen total uses of σταυροῦν and σταυρός in his entire correspondence in the New Testament occur here (“crucifixion” and “cross”). 395 Tom Stuckey gives a nod to negative feelings that those close to crucifixion might have around these terms when he says that Paul “adds insult to injury to the Corinthians by suggesting that the wisdom and power of God are revealed in

392 Mitchell, Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation, 303.


394 Mitchell, Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation, 303.

395 For σταυροῦ (the verb): 1 Cor 1:13, 23; 2:2, 8. Also, 2 Cor 13:4; Gal 3:1; 5:24; 6:14. For σταυρός (the noun): 1 Cor 1:17, 18. Also Gal 5:11; 6:12, 14; Eph 2:16; Phil 2:8, 3:18; Col 1:20; 2:14. From Thessalonians to the Corinthian correspondence the focus shifts from Christ’s coming to Christ’s crucifixion. Todd Still suggests this shift was inspired by a pastoral motive to prevent the preoccupation with the coming of Christ that this preaching inspired in Thessalonica. Todd Still, “Why Did Paul Preach ‘Christ Crucified’ in Corinth? A New Answer to an Old Question from an Unexpected Place,” Perspectives in Religious Studies 39 (2012): 5-13.
the lunacy of the cross (1 Cor 1:18-25).”\textsuperscript{396} Paul is Jewish; his audience might hear an added layer of ideological horror to his exaltation of a glorified crucified Jesus.\textsuperscript{397} For whatever reason, the original audience was not convinced by Paul’s appeal to Christ’s crucifixion.

For later audiences, the appeal of the letter changes. As Mitchell makes clear, “once established as an apostolic document, the rhetorical strategy of self-appeal [which led to its original failure was imbued with effectiveness.” The Corinthians interpreted the living Paul using himself as an example in a negative way, but the later Christians could see Paul’s “be imitators of me” from beyond the grave as an inspiration (1 Cor 4:16, 11:1). The first readers seem resentful of Paul placing himself as the figure they should imitate. Yet, later Christians had an apostolic vision of Paul that made his self-aggrandizement seem justified due to his position as Christ’s chosen messenger to the Gentiles. As further distance from Paul made his example of himself more palatable, perhaps distance from crosses served to make the message more popular in the same way. As Christians moved further in time and space from actual crucifixions, they were able to hear the message more symbolically than physically. Modern detachment from the

\textsuperscript{396} Tom Stuckey, \textit{The Wrath of God Satisfied?: Atonement in an Age of Violence} (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 8.

\textsuperscript{397} As David W. Chapman shows, Judaism shares negative perceptions of crucifixion with the Gentile world and adds additional negative exemplars from the Tanakh. Also, there were some positive associations with the death of an innocent sufferer and sacrifice that are not always sufficiently sorted from Christian perceptions. David W. Chapman, \textit{Ancient Jewish and Christian Perceptions of Crucifixion} (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebek, 2008), 94-94, 259-262. I hope I am sufficiently careful to note that I read acknowledging Paul’s religious identity and never simply pay lip service to it. Following Pamela Eisenbaum, \textit{Paul Was Not a Christian} (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 5 and passim.
violence of the broken body at the center of the message to the Corinthians only compounds this difference in interpretation. The comics I imagine with here keep their distance from the bloody or actual activity of the Cross much more than the comics I imagined with Galatians, but they find violence there, too.

Rather than simply continuing the comics close reading of Paul in the same vein as the curses in Galatians, this Corinthians reading takes into account its more sarcastic tone. He shies from direct language and even hedges his disapproval. Although Paul never directly addresses decency of language directly, in this letter he includes λοίδοροι (revilers) among those who will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:10) and urges that Christian revilers should be shunned (1 Cor 5:11). Here he seems to follow his own advice. As Meeks insists, “It is significant that the anathemas of Galatians are absent from 1 Corinthians. In their place are only particularly pointed examples of the sarcasm of which Paul was master.” Meeks attributes this gentleness to Paul acknowledging the parentage of the Corinthians’ new ideas, even if Paul strongly rejects their conclusions.

In the comics to which I turn in this section, there is tacit acknowledgment of something of value in the Jesus character, though they roundly reject the conclusions of mainstream Christianity itself. That tension between word and image to which I make frequent reference lends itself well to this irony. It is just a short step from establishing irony to using it to mock. The comics I use to close read 1 Corinthians share sarcasm at


their core, but they direct this sarcasm toward different aspects of Christianity. They all have Jesus or a Jesus-figure as a central character that they treat with widely varying levels of respect and contempt. As a group, they find something in Jesus to be explored or even admired. However, they find certain Christians, whom comic creator Frank Stack calls “Serious True Believers,” and church authorities to be worthy of derision.  

They inject a heightened awareness of Paul’s sarcasm and the difficulty of the Cross at the center of the message into my reading of 1 Corinthians.

Each comic offers a different insight into aspects of the process of telling the Jesus story to an audience that has at minimum a first-order understanding of that narrative. Paul directs the Corinthians, who have received the gospel, by means of his approved form of the message. His letter here is not an introduction to Christianity, but a second-order riff on the original message. It requires previous knowledge of the Jesus story, especially the crucifixion and resurrection, to make sense. The comics that I use to treat 1 Corinthians make similar assumptions. They take a base-level knowledge of the Jesus of U.S. popular culture for granted. Although each has its own character of Jesus, *The New Adventures of Jesus: The Second Coming, Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun,* and *Jesus Hates Zombies* all start with the assumption that their audiences will be interested in a story about Jesus that goes distinctly off-book. There is a more or less recognizable Jesus at the heart of these stories, but the comics develop his character into something different than the Bible story in order to make their own stories.

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400 Stack, *New Adventures of Jesus,* 16.
These comics rely heavily on sarcasm and broad humor. They are funny, but that is not to say that they are not violent. *Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun* and *Jesus Hates Zombies* in particular use gore as a regular part of the story. However, this gore is used in an impudent way, rather than the hard core shocking material of *Crossed* or the serious social issues addressed by way of violence in *Black Jesus* or *Miniature Jesus*. These comics are sometimes serious at their core, but they keep the tone fairly light. In this reading, I will highlight the way each of these comics elucidates Jesus, “and him crucified,” from 1 Corinthians (1 Cor 2:2). As I present *New Adventures of Jesus: The Second Coming*, *Jesus Christ: In The Name of the Gun*, and *Jesus Hates Zombies* I will show how each offers insight into the Cross and presents concepts that travel to a reading of original text. Paul’s message to the Corinthians stresses that the wisdom of the Cross is foolishness in *New Adventures of Jesus*, the Cross has a place at the table that might be unsettling in *Jesus Christ in the Name of the Gun*, that misunderstanding resurrection is a serious problem in *Jesus Hates Zombies*, and that these moments of discord and off-kilter weirdness of are the key to imagining the Cross as present in the Corinthian correspondence.

**Wisdom in Foolbert Sturgeon**

Frank Stack took the pseudonym Foolbert Sturgeon for his series of *New Adventures of Jesus* comics in order to protect his reputation as a university professor...
hoping to achieve tenure. He used his own initials (F.S.) and made up a name that sounded a little like his cartoonist friend Gilbert Shelton. He thought writing comics in general might be frowned upon by his colleagues on the art faculty at University of Missouri at Columbia, but he felt certain that underground commix about a dearly-held Christian religious figure with a suggestion of sex, drugs, and a hippy lifestyle might get him run out of town on a rail. The comics themselves seem quaint by today’s internet-inundated satiric standards, but in 1969 when his Jesus confronted the armed services and the academic community it felt risky. His consistent lampooning of the Vietnam war is a classic source of trouble. The first appearance of Frank Stack’s Jesus comics came around 1961 in the form of Xerox-copies, which were hand-stapled by Gilbert Shelton and other friends. There were about 50 copies with “only 8 pages, as I remember,” according to Stack. These originals have all since been lost. Although it was not a momentous start, this was the beginning of a long-running series of Jesus comics, easily the longest-running series represented in my project. Stack wrote a number of these Jesus titles over the next thirty or so years in the haphazard fashion that is usual with underground press.

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402 Stack, New Adventures of Jesus, 16.

403 Stack, New Adventures of Jesus, 15.
These Jesus comics generated interest some 45 years after their original publication when Fantagraphics books compiled the extant comics into *The New Adventures of Jesus: The Second Coming*. Cartoonists R. Crumb and Gilbert Shelton both wrote introductions for the substantive collection. The comics evolve over the years but all have Jesus as a main character with a signature halo (except when he has to send it out for repairs). Most of the early comics in the collection are simply retellings of Jesus’s part in Bible stories called “Stories from the Good Book.” (17-35) In the second phase, Jesus keeps trying to come back to earth for the second coming, but keeps dying in various ways and having to come back three days later (36-45). The third phase finds Jesus, in his usual tunic and halo trying and failing to fit in at the movies, in the old West, with the armed services, and with the academic community (46-107). Eventually, these comics begin to morph into a more disjointed set of vignettes as Jesus tries to pay his bills, fit in with his girlfriend, visit hell for a respite from the Midwestern winter, and stay out of trouble with thuggish intellectual property lawyers (108-150).

In all of this the tone remains consistently sarcastic. The Independent American Visual Language he uses skillfully highlights the cartoony expressions and emotions of his characters. Jesus is a lovable goof with a mission, trapped in a world with ridiculous authority figures that simultaneously want to take advantage of him, keep him

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405 Cohn, *Visual Language of Comics*, 143.
quiet, and dismiss him as a lunatic. The art strongly supports the tone, as reviewer Richard von Busack says, “every face in this book has that essentially mirthful quality, both the sinners and the sinned-against.” The lines are loose and frenzied; the physics of the space are comical and inexact. The dialog is silly and impudent. On his way to his first miracle, his mother leads him by the beard as he complains, “But, dammit, momma, I don’t want to go to Solly’s wedding feast.” (19). The background props and actions are usually as entertaining as the main characters. His arrest in the garden is because he failed to heed a comical “Keep off the Grass” sign. (31)

What makes this book contribute to my project, though, is the treatment of the Cross. Here is a book for which clearly “The message of the Cross is foolishness” without further qualification (1 Cor 1:18a). Stack is sympathetic to Jesus’s peacenik attitude, but Jesus’s attempts to enter the modern world are pathetic. Jesus is an observer of the world as it is, telling stories about his biblical adventures and getting kicked around by whatever forces he runs across: God, the army, the police, employers, bill collectors, university faculty, or college students. His crucifixion is just another example of his being exploited—just another sign of his ineffectual ministry.

Stack treats the Cross in a silly way throughout the book; in the title page image for the collection, Jesus uses the Cross to bonk the head of a spear-wielding man. The whooshing lines of the cross arcing over the piece signal a clear comedic effect, as do the stars and lines radiating out from the struck man. The Cross cracks in the middle from the impact. (Stack 2006, title page; Illustration xxxiv) Through the book, Stack keeps his

comedic distance to show the violence of the Cross as slapstick. Stack does a few things to show the foolishness of the Cross: makes fun of the wounds themselves, shows how Jesus was bullied into the crucifixion, shows other ways he might die, and finally, in one of the best comics in the book, shows a detailed look at how modern movies provide a window into ways to perceive the Jesus story and exploit the crucifixion.

First, Jesus’s wounds from the crucifixion are a source of comedic fun rather than sympathy. In an odd undated one-page piece, when a doubting Thomas figure touches the wound in his side, his hand goes all the way in. (Stack 2006, 35; Illustration xxxv) When his arm is in up to the shoulder, he gets a shocked look on his face and pulls back a mousetrap. The Cross and wounds are a joke, maybe even a trap, but primarily a joke. No one can take them seriously, especially not the army. In the 1970 “Jesus Meets the Armed Services,” the wounds are not nearly enough to keep him from going to Vietnam. Of the holes in his hands the doctor checking him for basic training says: “What’s with the holes in his hands? That’s the worst case of nail biting I’ve ever seen!” (Stack 2006, 67) He thinks these scratches are a bit too obvious of an attempt to avoid service, “And holes in the feet and side, too. Boy, there’s no lengths to which these creeps won’t go! Okay, buster, go see the headshrinker.” (Stack 2006, 67; Illustration xxxvi) The man who finally approves him for service insists of the holes in his hands that, “Everybody in Vietnam has them” (Stack 2006, 67) Of the gaping hole in his side he says, “Oh, that just means you’re tough. Most people with a hole like that would be dead.” (Stack 2006, 67)

suffering. The shock for the reader is Stack’s lack of shock about Jesus. His “blunted sensibilities” fail to be moved by Jesus’s suffering when his “world-weary historicism” compares it to the sufferings of soldiers in Vietnam.\footnote{408}

Stack’s Jesus does not think the crucifixion was an effective move for his mission or a good idea for himself. In another jab at the Vietnam War, Jesus compares his being bullied into being crucified by his heavenly father to young man being bullied into war service by his father. “Dad says I oughta take it like a man” cries the young man, and Jesus decides to tell him the story of some “advice of dubious value from my old man.”\footnote{409}

God, whose giant foot is all the reader can see, booms on about Jesus not being concerned enough about the cause, being overly frivolous: “Bad show! Boy! In cold statistics what do you have to show? Twelve converts! John the Baptist was doing better!” (Stack 2006, 30; Illustration xxxvii) “I think you’re right about tricks, but not cheap miracles, we need something with sock! To show you’re serious I think I can arrange to get you crucified!!” Jesus, with his hair standing on end, returns, “You mean dead serious, huh? But how will that help?”/ “Just let me worry about strategy, boy! I do rather hate to resort to such tactics, but…”/ “You are just kidding, aren’t you, dad? Couldn’t you just cut off my allowance or something?”/ “No, I’m not kidding! You know I don’t kid! I can see it now… ‘He so loved the world, he gave his only begotten son…”(ellipsis in original). Jesus mutters as the conversation winds down, “Zuk, what a religious fanatic!”

\footnote{408} Felski, “Shock,” 107.

Stack puts his argument in the mouth of Jesus, while the war-hawk, religious fanatics, or his “Serious True Believers” take on the role of God. Here he asks what good the crucifixion did for any holy mission and wonders what need God had to sacrifice a son. Why the divine parental abuse? In more political than theological terms, he is using his objections to atonement theology to protest the Vietnam War. What good does the sacrifice of so many young men to the American cause do? What need had the military to sacrifice their sons? Why the national parental abuse? In comparing Jesus’s suffering to the suffering of soldiers, Stack finds Jesus’s sacrifice instructive only insomuch as it, too, was a piece of dubious advice.

Because Jesus’s crucifixion comes across as unremarkable in Stack’s view, he offers several other deaths of Jesus in his work. In “Some Other Comings,” Jesus keeps trying to come back to earth, but because he has been out of circulation so long, he is not familiar with the hazards of modern life. Rather than a dramatic death on the Cross, Jesus finds his life snuffed out in mundane ways: by car, police violence, and world-ending nuke.\textsuperscript{410} (Stack 2006, 40; Illustration xxxviii) In each case, Jesus dies in a way that highlights modern problems. He’s smashed first by uncaring, distracted, George Wallace-voting motorists. No one even seems to notice he’s been hit. The police care so little for bystanders that Jesus is caught in a barrage of cross-fire. The nuclear bomb, presumably, takes out everyone else, too, so Jesus is in no way unique. Even in a later story when Jesus is lynched for his part in holding up a bank in the Old West, it’s made clear that

\textsuperscript{410} Stack 40-42, originally from “The New Adventures of Jesus” Jesus Comics #1.
such acts are quite normal to the characters; they have their noose all ready to go.\textsuperscript{411} The manner of Jesus’s death ceases to be significant in Stack’s world of other sufferings.

While such references to Vietnam and suffering in the modern world may risk casting a dark shadow on the \textit{New Adventures of Jesus}, it is overall a light-hearted romp with humorous situations and goofy, comedic characters.

While the real world of the comic is full of abusive systems, the Jesus story itself is given a light and memorable treatment. The real highlight of the collection and underground comix in general is “Jesus Goes to the Movies,” where Jesus goes to see an epic CinemaScope production of his own life.\textsuperscript{412} The square-jawed, muscle-bound John the Baptist and Jesus (now “Babs” and “Jee”) trade blows before becoming best friends to fight Pontius Pilate. After a huge battle scene, where these heroes show bravado worthy of the most farfetched one-man-army, Jesus is captured and the road toward crucifixion begins. The weasel Pontius Pilate tries to get movie-Jesus to join his army with promises of jewels and satin. Jesus resists with a “Get behind me, satin!” [sic] Pilate rejoins, “Well, I guess we’ll just have to crucify you, then!” “You get to carry your own cross, meathead,” jeers a solider.\textsuperscript{413}

A great crowd lines the street as movie-Jesus carries his cross toward Golgotha. (Stack 2006, 59; Illustration xxxix) Here, the burden of the cross is relatively light for


\textsuperscript{412} Von Busack calls it “one of the 10 truly essential moments in the underground comix.” Von Busack “Second Coming.” Stack, 46-60.

\textsuperscript{413} Stack, \textit{New Adventures of Jesus}, 58.
this overdeveloped, clean-shaven Jesus. Stack’s scrawny and bearded real-life Jesus weeps along with the movie audience. They are beside themselves as a group. Just as the movie seems to be reaching some emotional depth, a solider speaks to Jesus, “Don’t get any smart ideas about making a break for it! Remember what happened last time you tangled with the Roman legions!”

“Last time YOU chose the time and place, but this time the choice is MINE!!!... Nobody’s crucifying me without a fight!” (emphasis in original) From there, he uses his cross as a weapon, laying waste to legions as they approach. The movie-version of the crucifixion, which the previously mentioned stories never portray, finds Jesus finally in control of his destiny. Whereas Stack’s Jesus fell victim to his father’s religious fanaticism, this Übermensch Jesus takes his Cross into his own hands. This foreshadows the quintessential hypermasculine Jesus of The Action Bible, which I will address in more detail the next chapter. The piercing accuracy of this satirical play on Jesus shows Stack’s skill and insight.

When the tide of battle turns in Jesus’s favor, the crowd joins him. Jesus continues to use the cross as a bludgeon, while the narration reports in an lightly punctuated stream: “The King is dead the people are revolting the slaves are free the city’s burning! The people up in arms the dam busted volcano erupting army routed Rome over thrown!” (Stack 2006, 60; Illustration xl) The breathless hype and confusion of the ending of the movie gives an over-blown Hollywood version of Paul’s cosmic story of Jesus’s significance in 1 Corinthians.

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414 Mauss and Cariello, The Action Bible, 545-744.
The movie crowd loves it, too. The film ends with a heroic shot of Jesus leaning on his Cross, with a smiling Mary Magdalene clinging to him while the words “The Savior of Mankind” loom large on the screen. As the approving movie crowd leaves the theatre, one patron comments, “The end’s not like the book.” Jesus, whose wide smile indicates how genuinely he enjoyed the movie says, “Believe me it’s better!” (emphasis in original).

The film’s treatment is the “better” version of the Jesus story—one with action, intrigue and a beefcake star. The Jesus in the audience could never command the crowd like his John Wayne-style silver screen counterpart. The exaggerated movie highlights the difference in values between the perceptions of Jesus and the actual Jesus in the audience. The crowd wants John Wayne, but all they have is a hippy they constantly reject. Rather than revealing the ironies of the Jesus story itself as in previous stories, Stack here reveals the ironies of Christian treatments of the story. The crowd cheers an actor while Jesus sits with them in the audience. Even Jesus is caught up in his own hype, and finds a better version of himself in the appealing movie portrayal.

Rather than being the crucified Jesus, the movie-Jesus takes up his Cross as a weapon, putting right the modern order of things with force and giving his enemies a drubbing. The Cross in its original context in Stack is neither impressive, effective nor unique. In the ancient world, how could the Cross be a unique cross? For the Corinthian community, the everyday struggles of their lives, which Paul catalogs and dissects in his letter, overshadow the Cross. Their concerns over their own bodily conduct take precedent over the body on the Cross. Paul certainly has the Cross take center stage in
chapters one and two, but are folded into the rest of his ministry discussion. Talk of community replaces talk of crucifixion. The concept that travels between Paul and this comic is the idea that audiences are primarily concerned with their own crises.

The conflicts in the Corinthian community are roughly the Vietnam crisis for Stack. A hapless, even helpless Jesus pales in comparison to many real life struggles. His hippy look is assumed to be too out-there to the modern, mainstream audience to be heard. Whereas Stack’s Jesus struggles to find a way to blend in, Paul wants to present a scandalous Cross akin to the scandal of having a hippy Jesus in the 1970s. In other words he wants the countercultural Jesus that the Corinthians have trouble accepting. The “real” Jesus in Stack is analogous to Paul’s Jesus that does not appeal to his original Corinthian audience. The way Stack has to change Jesus to make him popular highlights the ways the “real” Jesus falls short of the presumed ideal for the mainstream. The contrast between movie Jesus and real Jesus shows the contrast between Paul’s scandalous Cross and a domesticated Cross.

For Stack, only the movie Jesus can capture the attention of the masses. Stack acknowledges that the movie version of Jesus is not the “real” Jesus. Regardless, the majority of people find him more attractive. It takes movie magic to make the Cross seem enticing. Paul certainly does not use this sort of tactic to make his Cross appeal to his audience. Such a move would be counter to his whole mission of reversal.

In addition to having a traditionally masculine Jesus on the big screen, having the Cross as a weapon rather than an instrument of torture makes it a much easier sell. Jesus in control of the situation makes for a more appealing leader and savior, rather than a
savior who cannot seem to save himself. Stack is not the only Jesus-comic creator to have a Jesus use the instrument of his destruction to inflict harm on others instead.

Bad Manners and the Cross

Writer Eric Peterson began *Jesus Christ: In The Name of the Gun* as a web comic in 2008.\(^{415}\) The independent comic uses the Independent American Visual Language but leans very closely to the Kirbyan or Action AVL. The style suits the action-packed narrative well. Peterson insists that the web comic attracted a sufficient “cult following” to indicate a receptive audience exists for a violent, time-travelling Jesus adventure story.\(^{416}\) This Jesus himself is a cigar-chomping, foul-mouthed grump. This is a Jesus ready to turn over tables and then bash some heads with them. At the outset, Jesus has been bored, languishing in heaven with vacuous cherubim as his only company for the

\(^{415}\) Petersen has since printed runs of two of the three volumes of the limited series through now-defunct Bad Karma productions and then Harper Comics. Happily, all three volumes are currently available digitally through Comixology, under the Revolver Comics label. The whole epic saga was first released on the website, although they have since taken most of the material down to support the print funding campaign. Peterson attributes the failure of the campaign to the whole project being free online. In a hopeful comment at the end of the campaign, Peterson promises, “You have not seen the end of this though. Whether we use Indie Go Go, or something else, we will try to get these out there.” After an unsuccessful Kickstarter campaign that closed in December 5, 2013 without meeting the funding goal necessary to print the third volume, the project momentarily stagnated. Peterson and his company Epic Digital has been successful with a Kickstarter campaign for their new comic, *Space Bastards*. As he commented after the failure of the *Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun* campaign: “On Space Bastards, I felt we really benefited from the fact that there were new pages to post every day.” “Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun Series,” *Comixology*, October 1, 2014, accessed October 2, 2014, https://www.comixology.com/Jesus-Christ-In-the-Name-of-the-Gun/comics-series/27165; and Eric Peterson, blog post. *Kickstarter*, December 5, 2013, accessed January 5, 2014, https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1159742006/jesus-christ-in-the-name-of-the-gun-final-graphic/comments.

last century (or several). When God (appearing as the giant, floating head of Superman-era Marlon Brando) returns to heaven for his “centennial visit” he offers no satisfying answers for the tragedies that have happened in his absence: “Pol Pot. The Plague. 2 World War’s. [sic] Holocaust? Did you catch that Holocaust?” (Peterson 2009; Illustration xli) Jesus feels guilty over the failure of what he calls his “salvation thing” and decides to return to Earth to set things right, this time with guns blazing. His first idea is to kill Hitler. He goes to right human wrong, but finds that humanity’s major problems are mostly supernatural in nature. Jesus eventually finds out Hitler is a werewolf; the ultimate evils are not humanity’s fault. This Jesus is sincere about his disappointment in his father and the vulnerability of humanity and his mission to save it. The overall voice of the comic is mocking and humorous.417

The primary insight of In the Name of the Gun for my project is the way it shows an alternative grotesque side to Jesus’s efforts at salvation and the “indelicacy” of humanity’s treatment of him.418 It gives a wildly imaginative take on the sort of concerns the Corinthians might have about the Cross without going to the extremes taken by

417 Although Jesus here has a serious gun and is almost by definition an action hero, it is important to note how tongue-in-cheek the whole comic is. These are not the action heroics of The Action Bible analyzed later. This book is having fun with an over-the-top violent Jesus, placing the ridiculous hypermasculine Jesus alongside hypermasculine Ernest Hemingway in a swashbuckling time travel escapade for mature readers, not (as with The Action Bible) an educational tool for young Christians.

418 Peterson, Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun, vol. 1. This reading will focus on volume one, rather than the two volume series. The second volume continues the story with a new artist. Eric Peterson (w), and Ryan Cody (a), Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun, vol. 2: Temporal Death Punch (New York: Harper Comics, 2011). The third volume has a third artist. Eric Peterson (w), and Gabo (a), Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun, vol. 3: The End of the World (New York: Revolver Comics, 2014).
Crossed. Here, the disgusting parts of the story make it far less serious than it might be otherwise. Whereas Crossed magnifies the shocking elements of the crucifixion in order to see them in a more physical and therefore more real way, In the Name of the Gun shows a ridiculous side to physicality, especially in the encounter with the supernatural. I am not suggesting that the farcical details that Peterson gives are anything like what the Corinthians would have thought (at the very least, guns are obviously out of the picture), I am merely showing that the closer an audience gets to the human Jesus doing divine things, the more opportunity there is for something basely human to show itself. Because the Corinthians are closer to crosses in their everyday lives, the more likely they are to see the idea of a man returning from one to be ludicrous or even see a certain gallows humor in the whole process. This book takes the idea that heavenly miracles have earthly consequences to an uncomfortable, but crudely amusing, extreme.

Whenever the divine and human meet, something disgusting happens. Jesus decides to return to earth via another virgin birth. In a clever wordless, one-page shot, Peterson gives us a new birth narrative, this time, set in “Russia, Earth 1910.” (Peterson 2009; Illustration xlii) Peterson keeps the narrative recognizable, using an angelic announcement, Joseph’s confusion, and his birth in a stable with peasants and animals, carpentry, and even a descending dove to mark Jesus’s identity. This page highlights a few details that are missing from the other accounts: the mother’s exaggerated morning sickness, the shouting of the holy couple over Mary’s round belly, the umbilical cord attaching the sullen newborn to his mother, and Jesus as a hard-eyed young Russian man. The John the Baptist figure who recognizes him in the last panel seems to be clad in some
sort of fur (whether it is camel is impossible to see) and his followers seem absent. He’s ridiculous. Where ever the divine touches the world, there is something ridiculous there.

The most direct moment of contact between human and divine comes with Jesus’s miracles. The comic takes a humorous delight in the puerile and disgusting possibilities of them—both as juvenile jokes and weapons. The first miracle in the comic is Jesus walking, or rather running, on water down a Berlin canal on his way to kill Hitler. But, he does not just run on canal water. He steps up a Nazi soldier’s urine stream to kick him in the face, offering a ribald action-movie-style quip while standing over his bloody face. Peterson turns each of the miracles into gross weapons. By “multiply[ing] the shit out of the loaves” Jesus is able to burst a group of Nazi soldiers. (Peterson 2009; Illustration xliii) As intersection between divinity and humanity, Jesus feels the brunt of the ridiculous consequences. His blood has the power to resurrect dead people, animals, and even bring to life inanimate mutant Nazi beasts, but at a cost—every time he resurrects something Jesus succumbs to what he calls “fecal incontinence.” Most of the comic after this revelation is dominated by a series of battle scenes with poop jokes. There are any number of comments made about the smell, the pain, and the sounds of his defecating. Jesus runs to the bathroom, squats awkwardly and evacuates his bowels in Hitler’s face. This is not sophisticated humor, but it brings an element of fleshly consequences to supernatural powers. The book consistently favors considering scatology over soteriology.

The Cross is a moment of first failure and then triumph in this book. First, Jesus talks about his crucifixion briefly with God. This is not a moment of the meeting of
divine and human, but a proof of human cruelty. After God offers some platitudes to comfort a Jesus in the midst of a theodicean crisis, Jesus shouts:

For the love of—Dad! Every year the world gets worse off! You sent me to earth once—once!—and after hearing a message of love they hung me on a fucking tree!/ I’d say mankind is anything but delicate/ And what did my death do for the world? Anything? I’ve got a headline for you Dad! You failed at this salvation thing

Then, dramatically, at the top of the next page, he concludes, “… I failed.” (ellipsis in original). (Peterson 2009, Illustration xlv)

The Cross is not only proof of human cruelty, but also a banner of divine failure to save humanity. Jesus wants to turn this divine debacle around and does so in the climax of the story with the very symbol of his original inadequacy. After being chased by werewolf-Hitler into a graveyard, Jesus uses a handy cross gravestone to bash his skull until “liquefied.” (Peterson 2009, Illustration xlv) The Cross here turns from unappealing torture device to weapon. In the first instance, it shows a lack of control on Jesus’s part—Jesus is its victim. In the second, Jesus takes control. The comic clearly wants the reader to cheer this Jesus who takes control of his Cross and of history. As the volumes progress, this responsibility proves heavy for Jesus as he travels back and forth in time, but it creates a bold and audacious protagonist.

The miracles and the Cross (as failure and later weapon) show the uneasy physicality of divinity. Jesus’s struggle to go from being the victim of his circumstances both in regard to God and humanity to a hard-eyed (though ridiculous) warrior shows
Peterson striving to make him appeal to his action-oriented audience. These concepts illustrate a way of seeing the failure and later appeal of 1 Corinthians. The uneasy physicality of the Cross is put on graphic, puerile display in this comic. The Corinthians have bodies, with which they do all manner of unapproved activities (1 Cor 5, 6:15-19, highlight sexual immoralities particularly). The body that Paul puts at the center of his message is a broken body on a Cross. Instead of power and glory, the Corinthians might be excused for seeing blood and suffering. As William Barclay is reported to have said, the Corinthian correspondence “takes the lid off the New Testament church.” In Paul’s reprimands and sarcasm, we catch a glimpse of a concept that he dealt with that has travelled to us in this comic—the uncomfortable possibilities of a divine and human body. These possibilities are uncomfortable for the divine because they are all too human and uncomfortable for the human because they are all too mundane and boorish for polite company. I pursue these possibilities further with the next comic.

Jesus Bodies and the Unpleasant Revivification

The possibilities of a physical body lead to a range of interpretations. Because comics almost always insist on illustrating the main character, having Jesus star in your comic means making basic decisions on how he will be physically portrayed. Black Jesus highlights the suffering of black Americans by having its Jesus be black. Adventures of Jesus portrayed Jesus as a hippy to highlight the hypocrisy of the Vietnam-era Christian

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419 Again, this clever satire prefigures the hypermasculine Jesus in The Action Bible that I treat below. Mauss and Cariello, Action Bible.

420 Dunn, 1 Corinthians, 9.
right in America. *Jesus Hates Zombies: Those Slack-Jawed Blues* experiments with this concept by having the faces of Jesus change throughout the series. I use this comic to show how its visuals illustrate the variety of Christological interpretations from a single text and to give insight into a literal reading of texts. Corinthians eventually enjoyed a change in interpretation that raised its influence from being an unsuccessful letter that did not change the Corinthians’ behavior to being a hugely influential guide for later church communities. This changed reading bears exploration in this comic.

The change in Jesus’s face follows from the unique approach of *Jesus Hates Zombies*. While the whole series is written by Stephen Lindsay and co-written by Mike Bartolotta, a different artist draws almost every one of the 17 stories in the book. As Lindsay says in the book, “Jesus Hates Zombies, but He Loves Variety! And so do I.” Most of the differences in Jesus portrayals are subtle, and the common threads make Jesus easy to recognize in each story: his long hair, trim beard, and eventually an “I’m with Stupid” t-shirt. The black and white art and variety of styles makes race and ethnicity perhaps slightly more ambiguous than in a full-color book, but it is not hidden from an observant reader. Jesus seems to be racially white, often blonde, in almost every artist’s interpretation in this *Jesus Hates Zombies* collection. Jesus is one of the few human characters, as most of the creatures he meets through the book are zombies at various stages of decay.

Though they share the loose tropes of the Independent American Visual Language, the artists choose their own distinguishing features and draw in their own styles, altering the tone of the book and the character of Jesus with varying degrees of
subtly with every issue. The length, color, and luxuriousness of his beard change. Stephanie O’Donnell’s illustrations have an emanata halo (that no characters comment on) always floating over him in “We Need a Hero.” (Lindsay/ O’Donnell 2009, Illustration xlvi) Anthony Summey gives Jesus a heroic curly blonde mane in his art for the issue “Adventures in the Far East Part II: A Final Lesson.” (Lindsay/ Summey 2009, Illustration xlvii) Various artists give him a nimbus at dramatic moments or in splash pages. There is little comment on what makes Jesus physically notable in this zombie-filled world. In “Jesus Hates Zombies… And Sasquatch” a cryptozoologist on the hunt for Big Foot takes offense when Jesus suggests he might have “lost a little bit of touch with reality.” “How would you like it if I assumed you were Jewish based on the size of your nose?” he retorts. Jesus replies in a small speech balloon, indicating a quiet aside, “But I am Jewish.” (Lindsay/ Monardo 2009, Illustration xlviii) It’s worth noting that this Jesus’ nose is not any larger or more notable than any of the other characters’ noses. Lauren Monardo perhaps exaggerates the bump at the bridge, but sharp-featured heroes against soft-featured non-heroes are standard depictions in comics. The joke is there purely in the text as a wink to reader’s knowledge of Jesus. Knowing Jesus is Jewish and connecting Jesus to physical stereotypes of Jewish people requires at least basic knowledge. What makes the joke a joke (however feeble) is the dissonance that Lindsay presumes his readers will feel around the idea that Jesus is Jewish. That is, readers are thought to presume the Christ of Christianity in any conversation about Jesus, but the writer takes a moment to highlight his human Jewishness as a part of his identity. Here

Cohn, Visual Languages of Comics, 143-4.
the writer takes a moment to give some information about Jesus and how other characters see him, but the majority of the information about Jesus in this action comic comes from the art.

The multiple artists take assumptions about Jesus and explode them—showing not only how the writer changes the story, but how much control the artist has over interpretations. There is both high and low Christology at play in the different artistic interpretations of “Low Income Housing,” a single issue with multiple artists interpreting the same script. Lindsay explains how he was left to find an artist at the last minute and appealed to the “ComicSpace community”—a comics gallery, sharing space and promotion website that ran from 2002 to 2012. He asked for art for his script in a two-week timeframe. “What I received far exceeded my expectations,” reports Lindsay:

The stories were so different, yet each one was perfect for the book. And the thing was, they all followed the exact same script. What I was seeing was how a group of artists could each interpret something in their own way- bring their own ‘flavor’ to the piece.

As well as their own artistic flavor generally, each artist brings her/his opinions to the character of Jesus and uses the flexibility of the comics’ script to express an interpretation. The plot is simple: Jesus wakes to the sound of gathering zombies outside the door of a derelict high-floor apartment where he is squatting; after battering many of them with his baseball bat, he escapes out a window where he has an interaction with a bird; and, after clinging to the side of the building, eventually finds a way back into the building in order to escape. The bearded Jesus character almost always smokes, always fights zombies with skill, and has dialog with an irritable mood. Before showing the

422 The now-defunct ComicsSpace.com.
Cross in *Jesus Hates Zombies*, I will show how artists create high and low Christologies with the same script in “Low Rent Housing.” Each artist chooses a different physical appearance for Jesus, introduces him in a different way, and distinctly interprets Jesus’s interaction with a bird.

Michael Zhansson draws Jesus in a stylized body, with loopy hair that suggests a nimbus. It’s a simple style, but the Jesus is dignified. Straight lines and a cool posture under pressure create a sense of power. (Lindsay/Zhansson 2009, Illustration xlix) He is consistently the center of panels of rays or dramatic lines and lighting. His cover Jesus is standing on one foot, poised for martial arts action in a doorway. This angle and framing suggests that his Jesus’s nature might be divine, but his interpretation of the bird as the Holy Spirit further suggests divinity. He has the bird descend upon Jesus’s baseball bat with dignity and flare worthy of a scene of Jesus’s baptism. (Lindsay/ Zhansson 2009, Illustration 1) This high Christology is by far the most successful with the joke. The art elevates the bird to iconic levels, and Jesus’ reaction in the speech undercuts it comedically: “Not funny, bird. Today ain’t the day to be fuckin’ with me.” Besides having the highest Christology, Zhansson is able to do the most with this joke, while joking the least with Jesus’ appearance, even while having him smash zombies, mouth-off and smoke as the script requires.

A very human and fallible appearance is not my only criteria for naming these Jesuses as having a low Christology, but it is a contributing factor. Felipe Cunha has his Jesus run around for the entire issue in his spotted boxers. His first appearance has Jesus scratching his belly in his underwear. Although his Jesus defeats the zombies and says
the same words, Cunha’s Jesus never gains the dignity that Zhansson’s had. Divinity is not necessarily dignified, but this Jesus also does not interact with the bird as a part of the divine. The panel is well-designed and the approach is nicely timed, but the joke falls flat because there is nothing higher for Jesus’s low words to undercut. (Lindsay/ Cunha 2009, Illustration li) He is simply annoyed at a bird, like a human might be. He is not part of the divine, underwear notwithstanding. Costuming is not all there is to forming an opinion of Christology. Russell Runion draws Jesus with the body of a comic book hero and shows off his muscular chest for the whole issue. However powerful this Jesus is, he makes no sense as part of the divine. He is not even as in control as perhaps a super hero might be in a similar situation. The drafting is skillful, but the interaction with the bird in this art simply does not give me the interpretive payoff that Zhansson’s does. The bird appears and is gone without making much sense. Runion, Gary Gabbard (layouts), and Tomm Gabbard (inks and letters), spend their pages on showing off the gore of the zombies, rather than the dialog. It is certainly a fair way to make a comic about Jesus fighting zombies, but it ends up throwing away the jokes in the script in favor of more zombie shots and odd close-ups of Jesus that do not explain much about him. Perhaps the most telling show of Jesus is his first panel, an aerial shot of Jesus asleep, curled in the fetal position and sucking his thumb. (Lindsay/ Runion, Gabbard and Gabbard 2009, Illustration lii) This is not a Jesus in control.

Having a high Christology is not the only way to interpret the bird successfully. Micheal S. Bracco has a thin almost emaciated Jesus. Although he is still strong, the emphasis in the art is on the huge desolation and Jesus’s smallness in the crowded pages.
Jesus is introduced drooling on his mattress and then yawning hugely. Certainly no sign of control here. Instead, Bracco makes the joke about a total lack of Jesus’s control over the situation. Even the bird makes sense in this situation. The audience sees the bird squawk at Jesus on his approach and then “plop” drolly on the end of his gore-covered bat. Jesus says the line in a squinting, serious close-up, his lined face contrasting sharply with the fluid goo on his bat. Bracco gets the humorous contrast from control versus lack of control rather than Zhansson’s ill-timed divinity. Each artist pulls his or her own ideas about Jesus out of the same script. Beyond a potent illustration of how different points change a story in general, this comic does work to reveal attitudes toward Jesus. The artists did not require detailed character descriptions, nor did the authors offer them. They knew that their assignment was to draw a Jesus killing zombies, and that is all they needed to know to produce their work.

I use this ready comparison of four versions of “Low Rent Housing” to lend caution to the following discussion about the Cross in the issue “House of Worship.” The artist and the script contribute to the overall message. It is not my goal here to parse out where the influence lies, but to make sure that it is clear how much each changes the story. There can be no univocal understanding of the Cross in Jesus Hates Zombies. Although the writer of each script is the same, the artistic interpretations vary so widely that any unambiguous interpretation would be misleading. In the case of “House of Worship,” part of the joke of the script is how easily misunderstandings of Jesus’s gospel happen. Certainly Paul is concerned about all sorts of misunderstandings of the message in his letters.
In Corinth, Paul wants to make sure that his teachings are interpreted as a paradoxical reversal of values rather than a dualism that allows them to say “Ἀνανθέμα Ἰησοῦς” – “Let Jesus be cursed!” (1 Cor 12:3). To create this conceptual reversal, “specific events, deeds and actions also have to be reinterpreted, most notably the cross of Christ. That, too, is tensive in meaning and can be perceived in two opposing ways.”

“House of Worship” takes the idea of reinterpreting events to another place. It does not give the reader an idea of the reversal that Paul wants, but it does show how wrong these dualistic interpretations can be and has Jesus answer them with snark worthy of Paul. Paul answers the slogans and questions about resurrection that he puts in the mouths of Corinthians with derisive sarcasm: “I die every day!” “Do not be deceived” “Fool!” (1 Cor 15: 31a, 33a, 36a). On the cover of the issue, Mark Lauthier has the members of a cannibalistic group Jesus encounters gathered behind a pulpit with the slogan “Eat, drink and be merry” (a catchphrase found in Luke 12:19 and even in Paul’s tirade in 1 Cor 15:32). On his travels through the zombie apocalypse, Jesus is lured to a church. Immediately upon entering, he finds a huge pile of bodies with a human Bacchanal about to feast. Jesus learns he is the entrée and begins to explain the confusion:

Look folks, I know everybody thinks I said to take my body and eat it at the Last Supper./ But it was all a misunderstanding, okay?/ Johnny B. made a crack about my dipping into the wine again, and I told him to eat me./ The writers just kind of ran with that line.

While the reference to “Johnny B.” suggests that Lindsey and Lauthier are confused about the timing life of the life and death of John the Baptist, who is dead long before the

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423 Cornelia Cyss Crocker, *Reading 1 Corinthians in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: T & T Clark, 2004), 82.
Last Supper, they are interested in making reference to Jesus’ life as recorded in the New Testament part of their book. The sloppy use of the story shows they are not bound by accuracy to any other text, but make reference to misunderstandings of the story themselves. No author makes claims to accuracy to the Bible, so these are not critiques of the story. The story portrays their impressions, not a direct reading.

They are using the impressions they have of his story to give some depth to their work, but the traits that make Jesus interesting and useful in the New Testament do not make him useful in a post-apocalyptic zombie-infested world. Besides his dramatically being sent from heaven by God in issue #1, there is very little indication of Jesus’ power being supernatural. He can dispatch zombies with his baseball bat with perhaps extra-realistic aplomb, but hardly manifests characteristics of miraculous power with it. Only one part of his story has anything to offer in the zombie-world: the crucifixion.

In his struggle with the cannibals, a hulking man gets the upper hand and pins Jesus by the hands to the church door.424 (Lindsay/ Lauthier, Illustration liii) He pants for a moment and then says, “…Man… you should really read your bible./ This crucifixion schtick…/It’s old hat…/ I’ve been there, done that…/ Bought the t-shirt!!” He then rips the stakes from the door and uses them to dispatch his attacker. In a post-apocalyptic era of total mayhem, Jesus treats a near-crucifixion as a reminder of a bad memory and uses his experience to make an action-hero escape.425 The comic and the character

424 I see a suggestion of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses, but I certainly do not wish to suggest authorial intent.

425 Here, the action-hero Jesus is played for laughs, not seriously as it is in The Action Bible. Mauss and Cariello, Action Bible.
acknowledge that although notable, his crucifixion is not his most useful trait. It is “foolishness to those who are perishing” but nevertheless, a paradoxically useful experience for him to have (1 Cor 1:18a). In this situation in the zombie world, this Jesus does not necessarily have to draw on his previous crucifixion to effect the dramatic escape he does as it is shown in the art. (Lindsay/ Lauthier, Illustration liv) However, the lines suggest that the previous experience has some part in the story, if merely as iconographic suggestion. The art shows a physically powerful Jesus overcoming the crucifixion by force, while the text gives us slight suggestion of a psychological toll. The juxtaposition of the art and the text allows Jesus Hates Zombies to keep up the tension between the crucifixion as a significant event and as just one of many violent events this Jesus is made to endure.

Further Insight for 1 Corinthians

After reading 1 Corinthians in dialogue with these comics, I am more attuned to how the Corinthians and Paul grasp at power over bodies. These comics have plugged me more closely into this struggle. Paul’s takes pains to explain the crucifixion to the Corinthians. He hopes to drive the Corinthians from assigning one meaning to concepts to living in the paradoxical reality of his kingdom of God. To do so, he must not just transform a concept, but fashion “reversals.” As Crocker explains, “Fashioning reversals is a way to assign new meaning and new values to old concepts and well-established ideas as one seeks to mediate the tension that is created by living in and between the
reign of God and the realm of human affairs.” Creating these new meanings requires keeping both the old and new meanings together. One does not simply forget the violence of the Cross or of crosses when Jesus becomes the first fruit of the resurrection. In 1 Cor 2:2, Wolfgang Schrafe takes the καί τούτον to mean something more like “especially” having been crucified rather than “even though he was crucified.” Paul is eager that the crucifixion be the starting point for his correction to the Corinthians. Paul plants the Cross first, but, perhaps in the interests of the unity the letter serves, abandoned the specific subject for the remaining message. He uses the Cross as a starting point, not unlike the way these comics use Jesus as a point of departure. Rather than simply restating these reversals, the comics have taken Jesus and changed him in response to what they perceived as his “regular” image.

All three comics I pair with 1 Corinthians hold their tongues firmly in their cheeks about the whole Jesus story, and in a telling recurrent motif, all three end up having a Jesus use the Cross as a physical weapon. In a way I did not expect, I found that the most common way they made the Cross fit into an otherwise light story was to have Jesus turn the Cross on his persecutors. In order to sustain their light-hearted approach, they have to

426 Crocker, Reading 1 Corinthians, 78. Paul does this is two ways: sets of antitheses and by assigning new meaning to concepts.

427 Wolfgang Schrafe, Der Erste Brief an die Korinther, vol. 1 (Zürich: Benzinger Verlag; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukircher Verlag, 1991), 228. Schrafe’s emphasis is: “Jesus Christus, und diesen gerade als Gekreuzigten.”

428 Crocker, Reading First Corinthians, 54. Crocker points out that “references to the cross or crucifixion occur six times in chapters 1 and 2 — is indeed remarkable “ However, the Cross is not mentioned again in this letter, though the ideas are used in Galatians, as we have seen above, and Philippians, especially Phil 2:8.
have Jesus “take up the Cross” for his own violent use. Neither divine purpose nor suffering servanthood can remain heroic and hilarious if the Cross is simply the instrument of Jesus’s death. The broken body of Jesus on the Cross cannot stay there for long. It is a hinge about which the stories must pivot if they are to move and create the character the comics creators wish to make. Even though Stack’s real Jesus never takes up the Cross, he humorously admires the movie Jesus who does. I am not suggesting that Stack actually prefers this movie Jesus as an image of Jesus. Rather, Stack is acknowledging what is enacted for laughs in *Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun* and *Jesus Hates Zombies* is what the public prefers: a Jesus who takes control of his own body. I was certainly not expecting comics determined to poke fun of Jesus at every turn to show him in control more than Paul even suggests. In addition to the way the Cross is brought in too close, Paul risks that the Corinthians would not be attracted by a Jesus who lost control of his own body. In trying to reel in the Corinthian body, Paul shows a crucified Jesus—a Jesus who does not have control even of his body. This reversal was perhaps too hard to take.

I already knew about the reversals common to Paul’s thinking in 1 Corinthians. What I know now is the way these comics seem determined to make a hero out of Jesus in new ways, rather more indelicate and unexpected than making Jesus act like a white, liberal Protestant, for example. As a countercultural hippy, Jesus is the ideal for Frank Stack’s underground comix community. As a gun-toting stoic baddie, he is the ideal for Peterson’s action hero comic. For every artist in *Jesus Hates Zombies*, there is a slightly new twist on his image that makes him more to their taste in hero—whether that means
giving him a cheery nimbus or impassive Kung Fu master fighting skills. The drastic
reversal that these comics play out—that they cannot stand to have their hero defeated by
the Cross—sheds light on the Corinthian problem for Paul and the difficulty in planting
his reversals.

Paul is interested in reversing the Corinthians ideas about symbols and practices
in their community. In reading these comics, I see a new version of foolishness. Paul is
asking the Corinthians to forget human standards and to act foolishly (e.g. 1 Cor 2).
Paul’s “milk” message still contained a solidly difficult portion—the Cross (1 Cor 3:2).
Perhaps their “arrogance” was not inflated by ego, but rather as a means of self-
preservation (1 Cor 5: 1-2). I have always wondered about Paul’s sarcasm and surprise at
the Corinthians’ use of their own bodies. After reading these comics, I wonder if the
Corinthians blunders with the body were not more a way of taking up whatever weapons
that they could grab in their own defense. Even with the solid bookend of the resurrection
(1 Cor 15), there is still a great deal to fear from the physicality of crucifixion (as I have
explored in Galatians). The Corinthians were not in touch with this Cross reality; Paul
tries to drag them back to it by instructing them about their bodies. These comics do not
solve the problem of why the Corinthians have been acting as they have or why Paul
characterizes their activities this way. These comics do not raise a new question for me about
what these activities do for the Corinthians: I do not see them as simply falling back into
an established cultural pattern. Rather, I wonder what it is about these cultural patterns
that holds particular value for the Corinthians. Being a countercultural hippy or as action
hero assumes a person with some control over their position in the world. Each gains
something from creating this sort of image for themselves. Thanks to these comics, I think it would be interesting to explore more fully what the Corinthians might have gained from their behavior.

**An Experiment Reading Paul with Comics**

Without comparing the psychologies of modern U.S. comics artists and first century peoples, comics reading still makes it easier to see how Paul’s Cross caught attention and held it—even if in horrified fascination! Without even respect for the sanctity of the human body to say nothing of church authority or tradition, these comics revolve around Jesus or an idea of Jesus. They keep him at the center of their works, however scattered the message of these works might be. Together, these comics highlight how well the Jesus and the Cross bend to the will of the modern creator, and also how easily the message can feel uncomfortable and strange. The weirdness of the Cross is on display at every turn. Whereas the focus of this chapter has been on how comics can help us see how Paul uses the Cross to make an impression on his hearers, the comics in the next chapter show how the Gospel of Mark uses the Cross as a narrative element.
Chapter Four: Close Reading Mark with Graphic/Novel Readings
of a Dying Messiah

Imagining the scandal that a Cross provokes through comics interpretations is an exercise in affective impressions rather than precision. This chapter moves from comics that help imagine the impression of the Cross in Paul to the more concrete gospel stories. The gospel narratives lend themselves to a more precise interpretation into comic book form than Paul’s epistles even if comics still freely interpret the hypotext. Most comics, like most popular literature, deal with narratives. With the exception of Blinded, none of the comics I put in dialog with Paul in the previous chapter explicitly address Paul himself. They all used the scandal of the Cross in the context of their own narrative. In this chapter, the comics Marked and Yummy Fur’s “Mark” explicitly tell the story of the gospel of Mark. The pieces of the longer The Action Bible and Eye Witness: A Fictional Tale of Absolute Truth that I close read present a harmony account of the crucifixion that deals directly with Mark in the context of other gospel accounts. All the comics here have the narrative of the gospel as a central piece of their plot. This chapter moves from the more abstract study of how Crosses are used in comics to the ways comics tell the narrative of the crucifixion itself. In particular, this chapter shows that comics grant access to further interpretation of the crucifixion in the gospel of Mark by creating a weird image of the Cross even in the context of interpretations of the gospel itself.
Since the 1950s, Mark has been a proving ground for theories and readings of biblical texts. Willi Marxsen pioneered ideas of authorship that later blossomed into redaction criticism of Mark’s rich material. Mark has a history of supporting experimental readings—from Marxsen’s first efforts toward what became redaction criticism to contemporary investigations of empire by postcolonial studies. Jesus’s Cross looms large in Mark, making it the ideal gospel to place alongside my readings of the scandalous Cross in Paul. Mark has a reputation for having a clipped, rushed narrative style. The “immediate” movement in the English translations and the rich visuals make it the ideal gospel to read alongside comics. Although comics can, of course, express all kinds of abstract ideas visually, an action-packed narrative allows those comics working in the American Visual Language to shine. As proving ground for other literary reading styles, a natural companion to Paul’s Cross, and a narrative lending itself to visual storytelling, Mark works well with the imagination-work I do in this interpretation.

Mark’s grim crucifixion and shocking ending at 16:8 are elements ripe for readers, comics creators, and scholars to interpret. Scholars have done some beautiful

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430 Cohn, Visual Language of Comics, 139-146.

431 Ending the gospel at 16:8 is a common practice for scholars: Codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus stop at 16:8. Shorter and longer endings are noted in many manuscripts. I do not see the need to argue the point further here. See Bruce M. Metzger, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament (London: United Bible Societies, 1971) 122-26; Kurt Aland, “Der Schluss der
work in this area, colored by theologies and cutting-edge theories. The abrupt ending with a dangling “γαρ” leaves the implied reader the task of interpretation. As David Rhodes and Don Michie say in their analysis of the ending of the narrative:

This abrupt ending, which aborts the hope that someone will proclaim the good news, cries out for the reader to provide the resolution to the story. The reader alone has remained faithful to the last and is now left with a decision, whether to flee in silence like the women or to proclaim boldly in spite of fear and death. The implied reader will choose to proclaim.

This urge to proclaim is characteristic of the design of the narrative. By leaving the door open at the end of the text, the author of Mark has allowed the reader easy access to a role as interpreter. Scholars find it difficult to maintain their neutrality around the crucifixion


432 The collection in honor of Donald Juel is a showcase of this work, and Juel’s work itself is a worthy inspiration to it. Beverly Roberts Gaventa and Patrick D. Miller, eds. The Ending of Mark and the Ends of God: Essays in Memory of Donald Harrisville Juel (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Donald Juel, A Master of Surprise: Mark Interpreted (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1994).

433 Lincoln, “The Promise and the Failure—Mark 16:7-8,” 283-300. For Lincoln, this ending at 16:8 can only be appreciated if both 7 and 8 are given full weight and their juxtaposition is appreciated.

434 David Rhoads and Donald Michie, Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 140.
and ending of Mark. This emotionally engaged part of the gospel story almost forces an emotional reaction, as it deals not only with the end of Jesus but with the most human, painful part of his story. The dramatic suffering and the lurch of the abrupt flight and fear of the women can easily carry away even a mildly sympathetic reader.

The weirdness of the Cross and the abrupt ending of Mark easily carry the interpreters away, too. Certainly, each of the comics I interpret here are in some way emotionally engaged in the story they present. The art lends emotional flavor to the prose that cannot be disguised by seemingly objective reading. The affect of the characters—whether it is interpreted by the artist as flat or extremely moved—allows the reader access to the emotive possibilities the comics creators show. These creators put the “emotional code” I discussed in chapter two to use. The already haunting crucifixion and ending of the gospel of Mark can, through comics, be unbound from familiar epistemologies. These comics can use even domesticated ideas the reader brings to the text to disturb her. They separate the reader from any established images of the text and force her to encounter the text in a weird way—even if she goes away unmoved or unconvinced by the ideologies.

In addition to being disturbing, these comics strive to be vivid retellings of the crucifixion. Like the ancient orators, who had the goal “to deliver his speech so vividly and impressively that his listeners imagined the matter to have happened right before their eyes,” each of the following comics give vivid impressions of the events. The

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435 Frahm, *Die Sprache Des Comics*, 56.

miracle stories in Mark are vivid and before the eyes (2:12, 4:12, 8:18). The great value placed on supernatural events being seen to be true is still present in the telling of the crucifixion and end of Mark. Comics gives the creator the opportunity to show as much as tell.

In the following readings, I show how these comics interpret the narrative of the crucifixion. *Marked, Eye Witness, The Action Bible*, and *Yummy Fur* all depict the event of the dying Messiah, drawing emotional cues from the story. The scandal of the Cross is its lack of resolution, but each of these comics addresses the scandal differently. When faced with the open ending they allow it to remain open with images, or close it with more information from a constructed history, or close it with other gospels and a heroic sensibility, or leave it hanging open off the edge of the page, respectively.

*Marked* Making an Effort to Make the Cross Strange

The gospel narrative has been treated as a harmony so often that a single gospel is rare in creative interpretations. In a move counter to this norm, Steve Ross’s graphic novel *Marked* directly addresses the gospel of Mark. However, the telling is riddled with odd images and weird narrative styles designed to make this reading as strange as possible. Ross places Mark in a dystopian setting where demons can comfortably exist

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437 For an important exception, see the film *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini (Arco Film, 1964).

alongside frightening technologies in an occupied land. The odd technology, sparse words, and disconcerting (though hardly gruesome) art serve to show Ross’s readers that this Cross is weird.

Although both Blinded and Marked share Ross’ artistic style—heavy, cross-hatched lines, cartoonish people and irregular sizes, “somewhere between ‘Doonesbury’ and Mad magazine”—they show different worlds. Although both make an effort to put the gospel in a relatable—if unpleasant—world, this telling revels in the demons, miracles and intrigue that make the world of Mark alien. The world here is an occupied land controlled by sinister Dr. Seuss-style machines and riddled with bulbous, surreal creatures that invest bodies and move between panels. Clues to the Markan hypotext are scattered throughout in background illustrations and the framework of the events, although there are no precise verses marked on the pages. The situations are not called out and named for the reader; there is no narrator guiding the story. Jesus is never called by any name. Ross rarely names any of his characters, but the story follows the path of the book of Mark so that a careful insider can recognize the hypotext, even through the purposefully weird images and dialogue. However, there is no one-to-one correspondence. This book cannot be read as an illustrated bible. This is no “word specific” art with explicit narrative boxes. Rather, the words, pictures, and Mark’s gospel

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440 Beal, The Rise and Fall of the Bible, 67.
story have an interdependent relationship. One without the other has a less clear or full meaning than all three taken together.

The clues that Marked is not an illustrated bible begins on its stark cover: a shadowy cross-hatched figure (Ross’s clean-shaven Jesus-figure) in black and white stands against a brick wall, caught in a glaring light that obscures more than it reveals. (Ross 2005, Illustration Iv) The audience has a worm’s eye view of the figure’s outstretched palm, marked with a bright blood-red cross. The title is in the same red, and the text is jagged and rough though it communicates clearly. The figure’s gesture almost seems to warn the reader away. This image never appears in the book, except when the book itself appears in the text. (Ross 2005, Illustration lv) Ross created an image that suggests what the reader should expect; this is not a normal Jesus story. This is not Mark’s “standard of the good news of Jesus Christ/ Ἀρχὴ τοῦ εὐαγγελίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ” (Mk 1:1). This is not the “beginning” or the “norm” “Ἀρχὴ” of the gospel of Jesus Christ that the writer of Mark established. Instead, Ross announces an unconventional reading of his hypotext. The ‘splash’ page that opens the story serves as a “launching pad for the narrative and… it establishes a frame of reference. Properly employed it seizes the reader’s attention and prepares his attitude for the events to

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441 McCloud, Understanding Comics, 154.

442 For more on the worm’s eye view see, Eisner, Comics and Sequential Art, 99.

443 It has strong visual echoes of Frank Miller’s ultra-violent neo-noir series Sin City, although Marked is more darkly whimsical than as grimly violent. The cover of the first Sin City story “The Hard Goodbye” bears a strong resemblance—a lone figure in black and white with stark red accents. Frank Miller (w, a). The Hard Goodbye, Frank Miller’s Sin City, vol. 1 (Milwaukee, OR: Dark Horse Comics, 1992), cover.
Helicopters and skyscrapers warn the reader that she is not in first-century Palestine, while jagged barbed wire reaching out of the page indicates an unfriendly place. The text of a prominent sign ironically proclaims “Annual Thank Your Liberators Day,” but the tents in an urban center, barbed wire, and ominous “Have your ID ready for inspection” tell us that not everyone here is “liberated.” The first lines of dialogue are all but lost in this visual information.

Ross does not design *Marked* to replace a reading of Mark; in fact, it would make little sense to an uninitiated reader. The Jesus-figure is never named; the reader follows a demon-possessed boy and his father first, then a wild-eyed and disheveled John the Baptist. Only after the reader is immersed in the dystopic world does Jesus enter the story. Other than the fact that after the first two episodes the reader follows the Jesus-figure through many of the rest of the pages, there is nothing to guide the uninitiated reader to believe that this story should center on the Jesus-figure. It is more of an ensemble book, except that no characters are as consistent as the Jesus-figure. Even in the crucifixion scene, Ross draws attention back and forth from the suffering Jesus to other characters’ reactions. The way *Marked* bounces from the Cross to the incidents around it draws attention to how much Mark does the same; attention is on the ones crucifying and their reactions as much as it is on Jesus himself (15:24-39). The background of the other characters allows Jesus to shine even brighter. The awe and fear of those around Jesus helps to move the audience.

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444 Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 62.
The focus throughout *Marked* is on the world and the people in it, not the character of Jesus. The writer of Mark makes sure throughout that his reader knows that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. He is the focus of the story even when he is not directly speaking or acting (cf. Mk 1:1, 8:29, 14:61-62). Ross’s Jesus seems to wander from panel to panel without an explicit identity. Jesus’s message is never articulated in text. Ross’s Jesus hardly speaks at all and never teaches. He never even thinks, even though the thought-bubble is a well-established tool for comics. This is a Jesus of action and few words—an iconic character. The tempting Devil, who drives up in a limousine, says he is “Simply Perfect. Not too white, not too ethnic. Young. Strong. Male, though slightly androgynous. Working class yet intellectual.” One reviewer finds his hairless appearance “powerfully similar to Morpheus in *The Matrix.*” I think the comparison is apt but much too limiting a reference. This Jesus, similar to the Jesus in *Black Jesus,* is a blank slate upon which viewers are free to “mask themselves in a character and safely enter a stimulating world.” This is not so much a story about Jesus, as it is a story of the reader-as-Jesus in a dystopian and fantastic world. Demons, represented as living creatures that participate in the physical world of the story, drive much of the plot. The demons lead the reader through most of the first part of the story and the Galilean ministry. I have discussed these creatures and their value for reading Mark elsewhere, but I must stress that they do not instigate the crucifixion itself. Demons do not participate

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445 Tintera, “Review of Marked by Steve Ross.”
446 McCloud, *Understanding Comics,* 43.
in the crucifixion in *Marked* or in the Gospel of Mark. Ross makes it clear that the demons are not the cause of Jesus’s suffering and death. Two figures that look like people with demon heads or demons with human clothes do run the betting on Jesus’s death, but humans—representatives of the dystopian government—kill Jesus. (Ross 2005, Illustration lvii) The event has many supernatural elements, signaled by dark birds, a mysterious explosion, a clown, and a sunflower. Though mundane in themselves, the way these elements are placed shows the story to be reaching a supernatural climax. These elements come from outside the immediate or visible world of the comic. These symbolic elements reach their zenith in the last page, but the crucifixion represents a slow build toward this ending.

When the story reaches the climax at the Cross, Jesus is still distanced from the reader through most of the scenes. This distancing begins when Pilate stages a viewer-call-in game show called “Ultimate Decision” to condemn Jesus to death. The Jesus the viewers have followed through the book appears blindfolded and anonymous on a television screen, while the murderer Pilate places against him in the contest is the traditional image of Jesus—long-haired, bearded, and with plaintive eyes (a twist on Mk 15:11-15). The comparison here serves to emphasize the different between this Jesus of *Marked* and the traditional version of the story being told. It also shows how the people of this world react to Jesus more than something about Jesus himself.

Once the executioners get the call that Jesus is ready to be killed, the crucifixion begins in earnest. Hesitant soldiers lead Jesus away to have “a little party.” They give him a “Birthday Boy” crown, but there is one of the last glimpses at an up-close Jesus here. “I’m going to die, aren’t I?” the wide-eyed Jesus asks. (Ross 2005, Illustration lviii)

After the page-turn comes the chilling reply “Not at first” on an ominous splash page. This “forced” bird’s eye perspective interrupts any sense of normalcy. Eisner says the technique, “removes the reader from direct intimate involvement,” but here it appropriately throws the reader into the broader view.\(^448\) Rather than thinking just of Jesus and the Cross, the reader is presented with the many crosses that have been and will be used. A group of several crosses are hung over Jesus’ head. The point of view wildly swinging from close-up to wide shots makes this scene disconcerting to the viewer. (Ross 2005, Illustration lix)

The literal and figurative change in perspective on this crucifixion emphasizes how the terrifying the Cross is for someone who is condemned to die on it. Ross has said in an interview, “I fear that two thousand years of 20/20 hindsight have sucked the surprise, awe and sheer weirdness out of the Gospels.”\(^449\) This is one of those places where surprise, awe and weirdness are given a full display to show both how unfamiliar the Cross is to the reader’s world and how normal they are in the world of the story.

The number of crosses hanging in the workshop and the number of anonymous people shown crucified with Jesus emphasize the everyday violence of the Cross. The

\(^{448}\) Eisner, \textit{Comics and Sequential Art}, 99.

\(^{449}\) Wilson, “The Angel is a Clown.”
crosses from which Jesus’ Cross is chosen are all hang from chains in the ceiling in the original room, anticipating the next crucifixion. The chains efficiently allow the soldiers to tie Jesus to the Cross for his walk to Golgotha. Crosses are so numerous that people hardly notice them. The reader can see at least five crucifixions going on at the same time, but knows nothing of the other victims. (Ross 2005, Illustration lx) Businessmen in suits rush by without looking; a miserable-looking pregnant woman pushes a child by the scene. This is nothing notable for the people in the occupied, dystopian world of Ross’s comic. Instead, what is shocking for the reader is too conventional for the characters in the story to note. Jesus’ mother waits forlornly at home by the phone for the call for his pardon that never comes (a world-appropriate twist on Mark15:40). Pilate and his cameras pay Jesus’ death special attention, but his body language shows him relaxed in his reclining office chair. He is watching, but he is also bored until the moment of Jesus’ death. Until that moment, Ross takes pains to show us the automated process. While apparently commonplace to the characters, the odd apparatuses the dystopian occupiers use in the process are unsettling for the reader.

Ross changes the shape and mechanics of the Cross to excite unfamiliar feelings around its use. He makes it strange and surprising, changing even its basic workings to keep the reader engaged. Rather than being supernatural or even grotesquely violent (although it is violent) Ross shows the Cross to be a technological or mechanical horror. The crosses that hang from the ceiling in the chilling splash page that

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450 These uses of industrial-coded materials are what Jacques Ellul would call the tools and instruments branch of technology that give humans the ability to act more efficiently. In the case of the cross as tool, this means making spectacular human death more efficient—an unsettling
introduces them are made of some sort of machined material. Rather than rough crosses of lumber, these are smooth, precise instruments of death, each one as unsettlingly perfect as the last. They are efficiently outfitted with brackets that attach them to the ground and clamps at the top that the reader learns are remote-operated devices that nail the victim’s arms to the top bar. Once the Cross is affixed to its base behind barbed wire, there are a series of close-ups on a faucet filling a bucket with dark blood. The flow of blood from this tap is heavy at first and then slows to a trickle. The importance of Jesus’ bleeding and his blood is highlighted in these panels without being shown coming from his body. It is a disturbing image, certainly, but clinically removed from actual violence upon his person. The horror is in the precision, not the act. Jesus says, with head bowed, “Eloi, Eloi…/ …Lama Sabachthani?” a quote, one of the only direct quotations in the book, from Mark 15:34. (Ross 2005, Illustration lxi) Cameras on long comically-hinged poles crowd around Jesus from every angle. There is no cry or violence to the text; the words are simply said. Pilate watches Jesus die on a bank of television monitors via the cameras swarming Jesus. He wonders if this statement of dereliction is “a code.” Here, thought. Jacques Ellul, The Technological System, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), 24.

451 In a post-Holocaust world, the efficient mechanical horror here is inevitably reminiscent of the concentration camp, the banality of the evil behind the extravagant horrors found there, and the most hopeless visions of the technological society. This banality must not be misunderstood to mean that the ordinariness of the crosses I point to here, rather banal evil relies on cliché from outside oneself. In this case it is difficult to make a larger argument about the motivations of those crucifying this particular Jesus at all. It is possible the cruel guards are motivated by banal forces (like an ordinary desire for promotion or rather that an ideological conviction), but it is impossible to theorize from the available images. Rather than hiding the mechanisms of death from the intended victim, Ross shows the spectacle made of each step. For the banality of evil, see Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil (New York: Penguin, 1963), 90, 287-88, passim.
though, the efficiency breaks down and the world reverses. The technology that symbolizes governmental control (or even control by natural reality) breaks down.

While the technological horror of the Cross is being enacted on Jesus, the supernatural elements of the story build slowly in the background until they take over at the moment of Jesus’s death. The readers hear the last of Jesus’s final words (“… Lama Sabachtani?”) from Pilate’s bank of televisions. Pilate has time to wonder if the words were a code, and then a violent explosion blasts him back from televisions with a huge “Kra Boom”—the largest text in the book. Even government technology is destroyed by the shockwave from the death. From the floor of his office, Pilate receives radio confirmation that Jesus is dead, “Sir, cleansing complete for prisoner 5082.” He’s clutching his eyes and his ordinarily sharp suit is ragged. There is a sudden rainstorm soaking everyone at the site of the crucifixion. As represented by Pilate, usually so sure of itself and ready to put everything on screen, the government is in disarray. The government has been in control with and as a technology; now the technology is fried. From here to the end of the story, the supernatural symbolism that has been running throughout the book bears the weight of meaning. In order to interpret what Ross does in the ending of the book, we must understand the various elements and objects that drive the ending: the women, the clown, the crows, and the flower.

An unnamed Joseph character takes the body and locks it in a basement storage room that serves as the tomb in this world (cf. 15:45-6). He lets Mary know where to find the body in order to prepare it for burial. She goes to dress her son in his traditional suit, but instead finds two frightened women in front of the broken down door of the “tomb.”
A clown steps out from the dark room behind the door, folds the burial cloth neatly, and explains that Jesus is now alive. Mary says nothing. The clown hands her the burial cloth. The women leave the clown, walking, hardly fleeing, to encounter the last supernatural element—a blooming sunflower has suddenly grown through the rapidly decaying skeleton of a dark bird. There is not the explicit fear of Mark 16:8, but I hesitate to say that this last page blunts the sudden departure. No one is saying anything—neither the characters nor any narrator offers commentary on this ending. The story ends on a splash page of the sunflower blooming through the decomposing crow. It’s not quite an ending on a “γαρ,” but it is silent and abrupt.

The clown that greets the women at the tomb sets up the strange ending. A dramatic reviewer insists that a clown is “for many people, one of the scariest images there is.”452 Certainly the clown is disconcerting here: he is introduced in a silent splash page after the women tell Mary that “Something…broke out.” The full-on portrait of the clown with his blank eyes, spare Auguste makeup, and costume drawn from the tragic Pagliacci-tradition peering out of a cracking hole in the wall does not instill comfort.

452 Karen A. Keely, “Graphic Gospel: Steve Ross’s New Take on the Gospel in Marked” Witness Magazine, August 15, 1996, accessed October 12, 2011, http://www.thewitness.org/article.php?id=1113. Although it finds conversational value in the book, this review is not attentive to the details of the piece. First, as evidence of how the book frames the abuse by the Roman soldiers as “police abuse of prisoners” the review identifies a picture of the file of evidence against Jesus as having “an X-ray of his crushed hand, the fingers clearly broken” when the image is actually of the gnarled hand of a man that Jesus is accused of having healed on the Sabbath—the second image is of a whole hand. Second, and more puzzling, the review insists that the Judas character is “a recognizable stereotype of an aging gay man” and “the only identifiably gay character in the novel.” The reviewer claims to have “tested this hypothesis” by showing the page to people and asking them to characterize the figure. Judas does have a large, bushy mustache, but there are many other possible interpretations. I am not willing to make this claim, because it is a generalization of style.
(Ross 2005, Illustration lxii) His flat affect does not alter in the following pages; this is no joyful messenger. He recalls instead the wretched clowns of French Expressionist painter Georges Rouault (1871-1958). Rouault painted the tension he saw between the joyful amusements of the clown’s craft and the impoverished condition of these transient laborers. As he said, “I saw quite clearly that the ‘Clown’ was me, was us, nearly all of us.... This rich and glittering costume, it is given to us by life itself, we are all more or less clowns, we all wear a glittering costume....”453 This disconnect between appearance and reality gets at the heart of Ross’s climax and conclusion. What has appeared to be the Jesus story and the gospel of Mark to many who hear it is not the story he wants to tell.454 Ross draws attention to the trappings and glitter than his own comics telling puts on the story in order to point at the uneasy center of the story—what Rouault called, “Sunt Lacrymae Rerum”—“There are tears at the very heart of things.” There is a death at the heart of the story that is an unresolved chord that still hangs in the air.

The clown does not end the story, however, he simply moves the women toward the final image. Again, as with the rest of the book, the characters around Jesus, not Jesus


454 Frederick Buechner recalls the crashing, almost stammering end of King Lear: “The weight of this sad time we must obey/ Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” (V.3.324-325). He uses this cry in the midst of death to show how preacher might respond to the tragedy, comedy, fairy tale of the gospel. He calls on those who preach to “use words and images that help make the surface of our lives transparent to the truth that lies deep within them, which is the wordless truth of who we are and who God is and the Gospel of our meeting.” In this climax, Ross does this almost precisely, expressing a “wordless truth” in these final pages. Frederick Buechner, Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1977), 5, 24.
himself, are the focus. In one page, he folds the clothes that wrapped Jesus’s body and recites an acclamation “Your son died/ He was buried/ And now he’s alive.” (cf. Mark 16:6, 1 Cor 15:3-4). The art makes the tone of this clearly solemn—the movements are staid and smooth, the expressions, grim. No one is overjoyed to hear that Jesus is now alive. The women climb the stairs from the dark basement and into the light.

As Mary trudges toward the tomb to prepare her son’s body for burial, there are three dead black birds in the middle of a road. Crows are ominous signs throughout the book. They notably first appear in a flock when the devil comes to tempt Jesus at the start of his ministry. While Jesus considers the bitter cup before him at the Gethsemane Gardens apartments, these dark birds attack and kill a white bird. The small white bird recalls another white bird at Ross’ Jesus’s baptism. This giant white dove did not just descend to Jesus; it lifted him up and carried him all the way home. The same black birds that killed the white bird swarm around the crucifixion. The final page has one of these birds of ill-favor so decomposed that there are mere skeletal remains.

Something evil has been defeated, allowing something else to grow. The sunflower of the final page is the only sunflower in the book. In fact, it is one of the few plants in the story and certainly the most cheerful. The flower, both in the story and as a story element—springs from nothing to interrupt the ending. I do not wish to close off the interpretive door the image opens. Ross has used the visual strengths of comics, held together by only a thin thread of story.\(^{455}\) The ending leaves open an interpretive door that the reader must walk through herself. Sunflowers recall the “Son.” They bend toward

\(^{455}\) Eisner, *Comics and Sequential Art*, 123.
light; perhaps this particular one is turned toward a light just in the gutter that the reader must imagine for herself. Further exploration of the symbols might make for interesting play, but misses the point. As Donald Juel says, “Endings are important more for what they do than for the ideas they include.” This ending does not pull together the loose threads of the story; rather it is one of those endings that “can resist closure, refusing to answer burning questions posed in the course of the narrative.”

The final image is weird—connected to destiny, otherworldly, but also untrustworthy, outsider, and related to horror, terror, and the spectacle of the odd. It’s not a proper way to end a gospel story, not a conclusion with characters or a setting that connect to the rest of the story. It is not unambiguously good news at all. It subverts the authority of the story that has so far come from the flow of the plot. The plot stops, it does not end. What little that is traditional about it—the splash page ending with the hopeful sunflower and the defeated enemy—is undercut by the juxtaposition with the rest of the story and its absence of tools with which to interpret the sunflower. The scandal of the Cross here is the scandal of its lack of resolution. The odd ending gives a sharper edge to the weirdness than even the mechanistic Cross itself. The jolt in the comic from more dialogue-driven narrative to largely wordless dénouement brings the whole to a dissonant close. After the Cross, after the tomb, Ross shows us he has no words, but distorted images.

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The Cross is clearly a scandal in *Marked*. Ross shows clearly how this scandal lives in the Markan narrative, even though he layers the story with his own weird images. His interpretation of the text highlights how weird Mark actually is.

**Eye Witness: Mixed Narrative**

Whereas Ross works hard to put the Bible in a strange world, Robert James Luedke pulls the world of Jesus into his vision of the modern world as clearly as possible.\(^{458}\) His *Eye Witness* series takes Quintillian’s idea of things “presented to our imagination with such extreme vividness that they seem actually to be before our very eyes” to heart.\(^{459}\) The art and structure strives to present a view of reality supported by documentation and research. While the characters often have exaggerated expressions, the overall look of the art is toward a comic book reality in American Visual Language, particularly in an action comics reality or Kirbyan dialect.\(^{460}\) Despite its inspiration for style in the pages of superhero fantasy, the stated goal of the text is quite serious. Luedke wishes to present the death of Jesus in such a way to appeal to people of many faiths and especially young people. He is faced with a problem similar to that Paul faced and that any Christian preacher ultimately must face—how to present a crucified Messiah so as to

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\(^{458}\) Luedke, *Eye Witness*, volume 1: A Fictional Tale of Absolute Truth. I have tried to keep Luedke’s spelling and punctuation intact as it is written. I have indicated spelling mistakes with [sic] but the punctuation errors are too subjective and numerous to label.

\(^{459}\) Quintilian, VI.2.29.

\(^{460}\) Neil Cohn calls this particular dialect of the AVL the “Kirbyian AVL” after creator Jack Kirby. The style was significantly influenced by Steve Ditko, Neal Adams, John Bryne, Jim Lee, and many others. Cohn, *Visual Language of Comics*, 139.
move an audience toward the reaction the preacher wishes. Luedke makes his argument for a Messiah to an audience with respect for scientific authority but little experience with biblical research. *Eye Witness* appeals to something like science as the ultimate means of proving the historical accuracy of the passion story, and therefore the “absolute truth” of the whole Christian thing. This book shows how irreconcilable the weird ending of Mark is to Luedke’s vision of Christian truth.

In brief, the comic is a four-volume saga of an American archeologist caught up in international intrigue. Both through the narrative he reads from a newly-discovered account of the crucifixion (“The Gospel of Joseph of Arimathea”) and through trauma-induced seizures that give him realistic visions of the past, he witnesses the birth of Christianity from Jesus’s crucifixion through the events of Acts. This experience inspires him to share his proof of Christianity and leads the world to a “new era of spiritual awakening and inter-faith cooperation.” With the proof of Jesus’s death in hand, world leaders band together to end hunger and poverty for good.

The framing narrative of the comic is a contemporary spy-thriller story centered on the adventures of “religiously unaffiliated” celebrity forensic archeologist Terry Harper as he tries to reveal the Gospel of Joseph of Arimathea to the world. The villains of the piece are part of a “Global Development Corporation” (GDC), led by Omar Al-Kahal. The insidious master plan is that the company saves countries based on something they call “Islamic economic principle” and actively suppresses and subverts Christian

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461 Robert James Luedke (w, a), *Eye Witness*, vol. 4: Unknown God (Flower Mound, TX: Head Press, 2010), 118. (Volumes two, three, and four all have page numbers, which I will use, but volume one does not.)
belief. They do not target Christians outright, but a “belief” that they hold.\textsuperscript{462} Through the whole four-volume series, the only thing keeping the majority of the world population from being Christian is lack of proper proof of Jesus’s life and especially his death. In a conspiracy Luedke tracks from ancient time to modern day, groups have been trying to keep this information from the public. Here the Romans conspired to destroy not just Christians themselves, but also the extensive documentation that they kept proving the “accuracy” of the biblical account. Muslim leaders continue the conspiracy in the modern world.\textsuperscript{463}

The offensive portrayal of non-Christians and Muslims as evil conspirators highlights the evangelistic mission of the work: the most important events for people to know and believe is what Jesus physically went through in his last 18 hours and that he did die. The way one might know this best is through a “first person, objective, eye witness” account that the book presents.\textsuperscript{464} In this view of the world, a document, once proved “genuine” by scientific methods—that is, to be by the person that signed it or at least at the time it claims—automatically becomes an object of faith and a certain proof

\textsuperscript{462} Robert James Luedke (w, a), \textit{Eye Witness}. vol. 3: Rise of the Apostle (Flower Mound, TX: Head Press, 2008), 28.

\textsuperscript{463} The racial and religious prejudice in the book is not undercut by the insistence that ordinary Muslims are perhaps good people being led astray by these leaders. Muslims here are either dupes or devils. The white protagonist is helped through the book by characters of different races, even a female member of the Israeli military. The inclusion of this diversity does not in any way mean that this book is not prejudiced. For more on the anti-Semitism and other design problems with this book, see Dan Clanton, “Scriptural Education and Entertainment: Evangelism, Didacticism, and Satire in Graphic Novels (Part 1),” \textit{SBL Forum}, May 2007, accessed March 20, 2015, http://sbl-site.org/Article.aspx?ArticleID=676.

\textsuperscript{464} Luedke, \textit{Eye Witness}, n.p. and back cover.
of Christian principles. There is no thought in the book about the way such documents are created, the different genres that might have been at play or the honesty of ancient authors. Once the world knows that Joseph of Arimathea wrote an autograph document that tells the crucifixion story, every human that hears about it will automatically become Christian. The Cross is rendered perfect for apologetics by ignoring the subjectivity and unreliability of the terms of the debate. Instead, the Cross itself is domesticated in the strongest possible terms by history and “science.” The scandal the Luedke highlights here is not the Cross, but what he identifies as the secrecy that has kept it from the rest of the world.

In order to prove the truth of the account, the first volume of the comic uses an unusual format—a mixture of panels portraying action and text pages that mimic the look of primary source manuscript documents. The manuscript documents do not resemble the often messy, tattered and cramped documents that biblical scholars usually encounter, but they are illustrating a clearer reality to which Luedke wishes to grant his readers access. Old documents suggest the value of original documents or documents more proximate to Jesus.465

Luedke opens his comic with two facing pages that introduce both a major theme and an important technique: on the first page a motif with a series of panels depicting a progressively more injured Jesus and a journal entry presented as if a photograph of a spiral notebook. The text is a printed font, not truly handwritten, but the first-person feel

465 Like other Christians, Luedke is here struggling with the idea of what makes a document about Jesus trustworthy. Other sources than Luedke have determined that origin was more important than orthodoxy, i.e. Eusebius. Gregory A. Robbins, “Eusebius’ Lexicon of ‘Canonicity,’” in Studia Patristica 25, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Leuven: Peeters, 1993), 134-41.
is established here. Dr. Terrance Harper’s personal journal entry is colloquial but specific, given that they are notes for a “keynote speech at the American Archeological Society Gala.” (Luedke 2004, Illustration lxiii) Pages set up the elements of the archeological find that the head of the Israeli Ministry of Antiquities has asked Harper to analyze: a few human remains, a scroll in a jar, and some “curious iron fragments” that are nails from the true Cross. Some comment is made on the unusual step of asking an outsider from popular television to analyze the find, but the books do not adequately explain why this person is uniquely qualified.

Whatever the purported reason, the blonde, white, American protagonist enters the fray. He does prove to be miraculously proficient. Harper stares at the manuscript from 7:30 pm to 3:26 am one night without saying anything to any of the many people standing around or writing anything. At precisely 3:27 by the timestamp on the caption, he cracks the problem. The “unusual script” that has stumped everyone in Israel is “from Qumran… the untranslated Dead Sea Scroll fragments.” He confirms its “from the Herodian Period” and “combines elements of the Hebrew script with that of the Koine, which we all know was a mixture of many languages, but mainly Greek in origin” (emphasis mine). Even with this confusion of scripts with languages and Koine’s mixture of Greek dialects with a mixture of different languages, it remains unexplained how one can combine alphabets from different languages that run in opposite directions to make any sort of sense.

In calling on something “we all know,” Luedke throws serious doubt on his claims for the reliability of his work. If this book made fewer claims about its own
accuracy and research, it would be a forgivable fantasy. If it was a work of pure imagination, such interesting possibilities would be a fascinating sidebar. However, Luedke claims in the “About Eye Witness” section at the end of the first volume that “The book you are holding in your hands is the culmination of over 4 years of research, plotting, drawing, painting and camping out in front of a computer keyboard.” He further claims that in 2001, “I began to research everything I could get my hands on, which would help me recreate the people, the politics and infrastructure of this era.” While I am quick to defend imaginative creations and even fantasy variations on scholarly themes, Luedke claims his work has “documentary” features. He includes a glossary of terms and a map of Jesus’s travels through Jerusalem that suggests much more knowledge of scholarship and methods, but includes sparse information.

Certainly, Luedke himself is moved by scientific methods, even if he does not portray their results and terms as accurately as he seems to wish to do. He claims that his original inspiration for the book came in 2000 when a physician gave a talk about Jesus’s death on the Cross: “This was a detailed examination that verified many of the facts reported in the gospels, as viewed through modern medical scientific fact. As a lifelong agnostic who was wrestling with the question of whether there was any ‘evidence’, to support the stories of the Bible, I was enthralled.” Luedke is frustrated that this supposedly straightforward evidence was somehow kept from him, as if scholars had it

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466 There are many instances of comics that include extensive footnotes or endnotes to include additional information. Examples of detailed notes in comics include: the appendices of historical documents in Joe Sacco’s account of events around 1956 in Palestine and the notes and the documented sources that aided Derf Backderf reconstruct his memories of his childhood going to school with future serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. Joe Sacco (w, a), *Footnotes in Gaza* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 390-417. Derf Backderf, (w, a) *My Friend Dahmer* (New York: Abrams, 2012), 200-224.
locked away, like the Romans and Muslims do in his story, and are unwilling to reveal it. He writes as if certainty about the historical event of Jesus’s death and resurrection assures that a person would convert to Christianity and as if staring passively at a manuscript for several hours without taking notes, speaking, or otherwise working through a difficult text will allow an archaeologist to read it smoothly in English in an instant.

Of course, Dr. Harper cracks the script all at once. He even blames the eight hours it took to decode on “this author’s very unique quill strokes.” Harper concludes this is “not a scribe merely cranking out scores of transcribed documents,” but rather “a writer of original works only.” Harper begins to read the document aloud and the bemusing pseudo-scholarship is largely at an end. The rest of the modern story is more a pseudo-political drama that continues in the next three volumes. The bulk of the first volume is an illustrated version of the narrative that Harper reads from the manuscript. The story begins with Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem and concludes with Joseph of Arimathea’s last testimony, written as he dies of infected wounds in what he documents as the “Year 70 of our God.”

The documents that Harper reads are illustrated to make the bulk of the first volume. The most used style of narrative boxes are fragments from the “parchments” from which Harper reads aloud. Luedke sometimes calls the documents “papyri” as well, not recognizing the word to indicate different materials. Luedke gives his audience different means of approaching the text in dialogue, narrative and pictures in the historical section. The words and pictures have a combination of duo-specific, parallel
and additive relationship in the crucifixion narrative. Additional character development takes place in the pictures, while words either provide the extensive dialogue or narration in the supposed style of language found in the fragments. They offer a sometimes-conflicting vision of what might appeal to Luedke’s intended audience of those who need to be convinced of the absolute truth of the crucifixion.

The most unique feature is the first-person narrative found in the scrolls and presented as the fragments themselves. Luedke presents these fragments in the crucifixion narrative section on a generic tan background with a rough-cut look to the edges. The text inside is an italic typeface that suggests handwriting without looking at all like it was made by hand. It is not as if the artist wishes to trick his audience into thinking they are looking at actual ancient text; he is merely suggesting the authority of the scroll documents throughout the piece.

In the narrative boxes in the style of the found-fragments, the author gives the work a tone of historical authority. Joseph of Ariametha’s voice begins uniformly dry and earnest. The picture of Jesus is as a calming presence that is misunderstood by the authorities. As Joseph says “His message is still dangerous though, because it seems to trivialize the importance of strict adherence to Mosaic Law. And even more destructive, is the fact not only is he rumored to be the messiah, but the very son of our living God!” This awkward use of these terms begins the string of increasingly anti-Semitic pieces of the narrative. One reads the scroll fragments alongside the hooded, dark eyes and increasingly contorted faces of the Jewish characters in the story. Even in the words of Joseph the meticulous narrator, the reasons for killing Jesus are all due to the corruption
of Jewish authorities, who trick the Romans into believing Jesus is a “rebellious instigator and traitor to the Roman empire.” Luedke is clear that Jesus is neither and that the authorities are deceptive rather than mistaken. The cutting remarks are couched in vague compliments to specific Jewish figures. Joseph makes a “personal observation” that “Caiaphas clearly has a genuine interest in protecting the safety and sovereignty of Jerusalem” but then he “can’t help but wonder if his motivation for persecuting Jesus, is really over his disruption of commerce at the Holy Temple. It is not common knowledge, but those transactions are a main source of support for the lavish lifestyle for the entire priesthood.” This combination of accusations, personal opinion and secret knowledge makes the point hard to assail on the story level. In this story, all that he claims is that Joseph thinks that the Jewish authorities are corrupt. Of course, Luedke also claims that this story is the “absolute truth.”

He explains the physical and political process of crucifixion in great detail. A mixture of Hebrew and Latin words are peppered through the text. He says “Rabb” for teacher early on, but these more “technical” terms are concentrated around the act of crucifixion. The use of a cross to execute a person is where the fruits of Luedke’s research is most in evidence. The pictures and dialogue drop away completely and Luedke gives an entire page of narration on the subject of crucifixion when Jesus is led away. He characterizes it in superlative language—“cruelest,” “most humiliating,” “ultimate form of punishment”—alongside a mention of the punishment of the “Hebrew nation of Judea” and its supposedly contemporary practice of stoning people to death and hanging them on a tree until they were dust. While describing Roman methods of
“genocide” this page still puts the blame for Jesus’s death squarely on Jewish shoulders. Over the panels and pages that follow, the narrator goes through each step of the act of crucifixion. The traditional panels flesh out the story to an even greater degree that I will parse below, but the usually dry narration treats the act with gruesome relish. Before the full page of text on the crucifixion, the scourging is described in exhausting, although not exhaustive, detail in the parchment.

After a brief mention of its Roman origins and uses, the actual scourging is narrated over the course of six pages. Here is a sample, complete with original misspellings and punctuation:

In a scourging, the flagum, [sic] or whip, is brought down with force across the back, shoulders, and legs. /As the initial blows continue, the leather thongs begin to cut through the skin…/… While the small metal balls first create bruises, which are then broken open by further lashes. The damage to the victim than [sic] accelerates as the muscle is then rendered in the same manner. Finally, this leaves the back a mass of blood, tissue that become almost unrecognizable. The loss of blood through this kind of punishment is enormous!

That last exclamation mark charges the tone of the last statement with emotion. What might have been a sober comment of a reporter is now layered with what might be surprise, anger or perhaps pain at the thought of the great loss of blood. The exclamation point in narration is a common trope in Kirbyan AVL. At this moment, the parchment becomes more obviously a narrative box in an action comic, as it describes the tortures in fragmented pieces. (Luedke 2004, Illustration lxiv) This is an uncomfortable amount of violence in a work that Luedke claims to be an evangelical tool aimed at children.
The crucifixion is described with similar relish as the scourging over ten pages of comics and text from the moment Jesus arrives at Golgotha. Luedke describes the medical process, material Joseph obtained from “the physician Luke.” Given that “a physician giving a talk about whether Jesus really had died on the cross” first inspired his own conversion, Luedke takes an interest in this process. The physician gave what Luedke describes as “a detailed examination that verified many of the facts reported in the gospels, as viewed through modern medical scientific fact.” The moments on the Cross are filtered through this reflection. There is much specificity, medical language, and comparisons with details found in the New Testament.

The parchment narrative boxes are his primary means of adding in medical language and technicalities. The pictures and dialogue alongside give the story color, pathos and even a jarring humor, but the parchment continues in the action comics Kiryan-text style. Each moment is narrated: Jesus is stripped to his undergarment, laid on the patibulum, attached with iron nails through the bones of the wrists. There is an

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468 The humor in the piece, which seems intentional, comes almost exclusively from dialogue. In particular, the Roman soldiers have several comedy sketches they perform through the narrative. A grim bet over the precision of nailing Jesus to the cross, a riff on who should enter the tomb taken straight out of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (though I feel sure it comes from an older vaudeville number), and Pontius Pilate’s wacky sidekicks are the highlight. Jesus, the disciples, and the Jews are humorless.
aside about necessity that “the nailer” be precise, “since these joints would be supporting the body weight.” The parts of the body and their various pains are cataloged: wrists, feet, arms, shoulders, elbows. There are “intense waves of searing pain” alongside “fatigue and cramp.” The abundance of details makes historical oversight inevitable. Even the most generous historian could not know the details here that Joseph of Arimathea provides. Of course, this is part of the point of the narrative; this scroll provides all the missing pieces that researchers have not been able (or perhaps willing, in Luedke’s estimation) to provide. As with the other research in this work, there is a mixture of keywords and concepts with errors. The crossbeam or *patibulum* is named correctly, but the post or “*stipes*” is called a “stipe” over and over again. These errors seem to stem from a wish to use these Latin terms and perhaps unreliable or unguided research. Or perhaps it matters not so much Luedke’s intended audience whether or not the text is correct, but that it impresses them with its foreign, historical or scientific-sounding flourishes. It is verisimilitude that matters; greater numbers of details, especially gory details, give the further appearance of fact.

Luedke notices how gruesome the narration has become and has Joseph comment: “It’s almost like he wanted this to happen… but why? So, I feel compelled to record every detail.” Another whole page of narration comes after the death. Luedke turns to the more authoritative narrative voice to insist that Jesus meant to be crucified and die in this manner. The Sanhedrin was manipulated into causing his death in a sort of divine double-cross. It does not improve the characterization of Jewish authorities (or God). It simply makes the men dupes as well as greedy con-men and makes God a villain for both
causing Jesus’s suffering and using his own people as scapegoats. The longest series of narrative pages come after Jesus’s body is sealed in the tomb. The serious matter of the resurrection—the most difficult part of the story to use this kind of narrowly-defined science to prove—has three pages devoted to the matter. The last page of scroll-narration sets up how this scroll, the body and the nails will be lost and then recovered in modern times. The final hope in the scroll that it “will further reveal the light of God, to a whole new world, in a whole new time” marks the end of the past narrative and transitions back to the lab where Dr. Harper has been reading the entire thing, one assumes for many hours.

Alongside the narrative boxes, pictures and dialogue exist in a both duo-specific and additive relationship with the narrative boxes. Except for the six parchment-only pages, each of which does include a word specific illustration of the activity or writing described in the words, every action narrated in the parchment narrative happens in the pictures. The panels take the often dry political or technical story and add comedy, action and extra evidence. Here I treat the American-style traditional panels of dialogue, sound effects, and illustrations together as they characterize the act of crucifixion itself.

Jesus is presented as an action hero in the American action comics visual language; he’s white and virile even in suffering. Once Jesus’s clothes come off, his already masculine appearance is seen to full advantage: broad chest, muscular arms, well-defined abs. After three pages of seeing him attached, bit by bit, to the Cross, there is a dramatic splash page that shows the whole figure, under a dramatic parchment narrative box: “Jesus is now crucified!” (Luedke 2004, Illustration lxv) His position high on the
Cross shows his hypermasculine musculature to full advantage: muscle mass, symmetry, and definition. The tortures of the last several pages have artfully cut his skin in a pattern from his upper arm down to his feet along the side that is turned to the reader. Blood seeps from his sliced flesh, arms, and feet as if they had just been inflicted.

However, Jesus has been subjected to tortures and beatings for twenty-three pages or according to the timestamps from “Friday 2:30 AM” to “Friday 9:14 AM.” He has been pushed down a flight of stone steps, beaten with fists, flagrum, butts of spears, and finally nailed to a cross. Despite the comments on the amount of blood lost, this image has Jesus only artfully dripping blood. The splash page presents a nearly erotic spectacle of Jesus; even his neck, that required “thick, fluted column of muscle” in the hypermasculine male, is shown to advantage in the position of his cry of “Father…cough…forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Although the blood is cleared away for the hero-shot, Jesus spills blood consistently across the whole of the torture crucifixion narrative, spanning thirty pages. The gallons of blood across each page emotionally augment gruesome descriptions from the scroll. There is no hope of the blood being medically accurate, but there is no shortage of it. It simply never accumulates to interrupt the aesthetic of what Luedke has a Roman soldier call Jesus’s “dignity befitting a Roman.” Cuts and bruises are shown wherever convenient, but they move regularly without regard to continuity. The emotional build of the story is more important in the art, while the parchment text offers a


470 Moore, God’s Gym, 78.
“scientific” witness. The New Testament provides the guide for the action, but Luedke freely adds both character moments and extra-biblical facts.

In addition to illustrated grisly moments, the pages are covered in words. Early action comics are notorious for the often tiresome duo-specific relationship between words and pictures that made for pages crowded with narrative that was also expressed both in dialogue and illustration. Imagine a panel with an illustration of Wonder Woman punching a bad guy with the word balloon “I’ll punch you!” alongside a narrative box that reads “Wonder Woman punched the bad guy!” Luedke layers his pages with these elements, but he uses them efficiently. The art is often an illustration of the narrative given in the parchment, but often the dialogue will give many more details from outside the text. Whole pages of panels dominated by dialogue give the narrative character and color with extra-biblical asides, but also provide the means to have the New Testament and occasional Hebrew Bible texts run alongside the narrative given in the parchment text.

The whole “proof document,” which includes the parchment itself and the comics that expand it within the frame story, is a harmony of the gospels that includes Mark, though it relies most heavily on Luke and then John for New Testament story points. The occasional affinity for Mark has to do with style and by including events that go with the concern for “facts” portrayed with journalistic or at least spy novel-type precision. But of course Mark is not traditionally considered an “eye witness” gospel.\footnote{Traditionally, though without historical proofs, Mark said to be the record of Peter’s story of the gospel.} The decision to lean so heavily on Luke seems to stem from its more domesticated portrayal of the
That is, the Jesus here suffers and bleeds profusely but does not doubt (no Mark 15: 37-42 at all). The document makes Mark’s climax at 15:24 feel terse: “They crucify him.” The comic lacks Mark’s brevity and literary artistry, though it offers an experiment with text worthy of study in a Markan context. Though the narrative centers on a Lukan account, the shadow of the Cross is indeed long though dark in a different way, as it is in Mark. Though Jesus’s flurry of prayers from Luke are present, Eye Witness Jesus must suffer and the readers must be made to understand the depth of his suffering with illustration and explanation. The bulk of the comic centers on the bleak yet exciting murder on the Cross. The Cross and the nails of the Cross are magically effective, protecting the scroll that the story comes from and physically protecting Dr. Harper when attempts are made on his life.

My intention in reading this piece as another comic to accompany Mark is not to make a precise comparison of the comic to the hypotext, but to show the passion narrative used in a different context. The gospels offer different contexts and perspectives to the narrative of Jesus from different authors and communities. This story offers a single narrative directed by a single author that nonetheless pulls in different directions—toward scientific and historical accuracy and evangelical passion. The story has both a clear interest in the effect the story will have on readers and a desire to show scholarly neutrality with proof documents. Instead of redactions or editorial work over the centuries that give attention to different details, this conflict is found in one piece with one author.

\footnote{Anderson and Moore, Mark and Method, 2.}
Luedke’s “fictional tale of absolute truth” gives a mixed narrative that includes a modern frame story that shows his fantasy on how the story he is telling might act in the contemporary world. Despite the fact that once Dr. Harper finishes reading the fragment the primary source for this historical narrative is complete, the flashbacks continue. In the other three volumes, Dr. Harper has blackouts in which he has visions of a contiguous story from Acts, focusing heavily on the life of Paul, all the way through hearing Luke read his manuscript of the gospel. These visions include fantastic elements; in particular, there is a dragon-like physical manifestation of the demon Paul casts out of the oracle at Philippi (Acts 16:16-18).\textsuperscript{473} In the first volume though, no visionary elements are allowed to enter the story. The parchment narrative boxes give an “authoritative” anchor to the story, even as the dialogue and illustrations add a mixture of narratives to the book. Here, more than a harmony of the gospels, Luedke offers a vision of a of mixture of narratives of the crucifixion a reader can experience all at once. The reader can take in a linear first-person narrative account of the crucifixion while being engaged by a more character-driven illustrated story. This method combines an interest in keeping the reader rationally convinced of the accuracy of the account and entertained. As the original ending of Mark hangs in the air “to be completed in lives of its readers,” so this comic shows the adaptable gospel fitting into a very particular vision of history and the contemporary world.\textsuperscript{474} While I find this presentation likely offensive to many groups and the many

\textsuperscript{473} Luedke, \textit{Eye Witness}. vol. 4, 34-36.

\textsuperscript{474} Lamar Williamson, Jr. \textit{Mark. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching} (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1983), 7. As Gregory Robbins reports, Donald Juel would say to his classes, at the end of a reading of Mark at the hanging “γαρ” at the end, the performer could slam down the text and shout: “What is it going to be like for you, Reader?”
attempts at historical or biblical research dishearteningly poorly understood, this comic
does hold together a remarkable array of interests in science, faith, and history. It shows
an imagination simultaneously hampered by a poorly understood bit of scholarship
stretched around different means of proving the “truth” of Christianity. The dizzying
mixture of narratives present in any one telling of the crucifixion demonstrates a
flexibility of the imagination by presenting it in comics—a form able to hold several
threads at the same time.

However, the story cannot stay with an open ending of the gospel story. It closes
the story with extra information from history and a constructed science. Rather than
allowing for a scandalous ending, this book highlights the scandal of an open ending by
showing it to be untenable. It cannot possibly be as weird a moment as Mark has it, there
must be a historical document that ties all the loose ends together. Jesus cannot be as on
the loose as he is at the end of Mark; he must be contained in the documents that are
required to prove his absolute truth.

Action Bible: Cross as Part of a Whole, Manly Bible

From this mixture of narratives, I move to the The Action Bible, the only comic in
this study that professes itself to be a straightforward comics Bible-entire. It is a textbook
case of the American Visual Language in the action-oriented Kirbyan style and shares its
values. The colors are bright; the men, muscular; the women, shapely, and the violence,
bloodless but dramatic. The subtitle God’s Redemptive Story vaguely holds together the
whole narrative from Genesis to Revelation, but more consistent throughout are elements
of hypermasculinity: an emphasis on physical strength, hyper-sexualized women, violence and danger presented as exciting and manly pursuits.\footnote{Donald L. Mosher and Mark Serkin, “Measuring a Macho Personality Constellation.” \textit{Journal of Research in Personality} 18 no. 2 (1984): 150-163.} The Cross is a scandalous fit in such an environment, but editor Doug Mauss does all he can to blend it in with illustrator Sergio Cariello’s adept assistance. In Mauss’s preface he claims “God is the original action hero.” Mauss chooses material from the Bible for Cariello to present in comics form comprising 744 pages of material with carefully indexed biblical references.\footnote{At the end of the “Bible Book Index” Mauss notes his inclusion of “extrabiblical material” in two places: to connect the events of the Old and New Testaments in a section called “Years of Waiting” (516-519) that includes material on Alexander the Great, Maccabees, and the rise of the Herodians—violent times that serve to keep the “action” going—and to include a “historical background” (736-739) that illustrates Rome burning that linked to Paul’s execution. Both not only help to stitch the disjointed separate books together into one story, but also include violent action that are ripe for hypermasculine illustration.} Rather than hide an association with hero comics, Mauss welcomes it:

“Superman may save the day with his strength, but Jesus saves the whole world with his death.” Action comics are designed to showcase situations requiring direct physical strength. The Kirbyan dialect represents actions in poses that “stretch slightly beyond the full point of action” in “‘dramatic’ and ‘dynamic’” and not necessarily realistic ways.\footnote{Cohn, \textit{Visual Language of Comics}, 141.} The figures need only to suggest reality. The bodies are free to stretch physical limits to hypermasculine extremes—showing forms capable of more than human bodies can do. They present an often unattainable, anatomically impossible, physical ideal for men and women. Whereas the Bible shows situations where the supernatural enters the world, mainstream American comics show hyperstrength in their reality. When presenting an
action in the Kirbyan AVL, there is a tendency to rely on the most familiar tool. It is the law of the instrument. Like a person who sees nails when all they have is a hammer, action comics writers by and large see action because they have the tools to present it. Cariello has worked for Marvel and DC comics and attended the Joe Kubert School of Cartoon and Graphic Art. Kubert’s style of action comics fits squarely into the Kirbyan AVL, even though he does have his own unique stylistic elements. This style places an emphasis on even the most vaguely masculine and loosely heroic elements in the hypotext.

The harmony of the gospels presented in “Crucified!” claims to be “based on Luke 23:26-52; John 19:23-28; Matthew 27: 32-58; Mark 15:21-45,” but like any single narrative, there are choices that the artist and writer must make. In trying to present a harmony of all four gospels, it is not surprising that the artist and writer favors the synoptic trajectory. Whether intentional or not, it is appropriate that the author places Mark last in the “based on” list. The claim that “Crucified!” is at least in part based on Mark is misleading. Luke, Matthew, and even John outstrip the material that Mark alone includes. Of course, because Matthew and Luke both include Markan material, there is

Kubert also illustrated his own Bible comic that often goes by his name in casual discussion, i.e The Kubert Bible. Sheldon Mayer (w), Joe Kubert (a), and Nestor Redondo (i). The Bible. vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1975).

As satirically anticipated by The New Adventures of Jesus and even more broadly than the echoes of Mel Gibson’s Passion of the Christ in Eye Witness, The Action Bible internalizes the American values of many Hollywood portrayals of Jesus as action hero. I am keeping my focus on the comics format, but the back-and-forth between film and comics action heroes are certainly a fertile ground for study and further work. For the film-version of this American Christ, see the analysis of Stephenson Humphries-Brooks, “How Jesus Got a Gun” and “The Passion of the Christ: Jesus as Action Hero” in Cinematic Savior: Hollywood’s Making of the American Christ (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 101-116,117-132.
still plenty of material in this comic that is in Mark. But, this material is only included when it agrees with the other Synoptics. The claim that Mark forms part of the basis for this section is supported only by its synoptic material. Where Mark differs, Mauss chooses to follow another source. This presentation highlights how difficult it is to make Mark’s Jesus a traditional Western or masculine hero.

In this case, as in the case of *Eye Witness*, the narrative often favors Luke. In both instances, the writers are fitting their gospel narrative into a longer narrative arc which Acts, the continuation of Luke, will provide. Luke has a reputation for datable references in 1:5, 2:1-2, 3:1-2, and so fits both author’s need for historical connections. From a narrative standpoint rather than theological, Luke offers the authors of both a consistent vision for their whole story of Jesus’s life and the spread of Christianity. In other words, Luke has the advantage of continuing in Acts. However, neither comic consistently presents Luke’s lengthy prayers and hymns. Neither shares Luke’s focus on women; both have women pictured at the crucifixion, but neither gives them an active role. *The Action Bible* places its focus on action—that is, exciting events as defined by hypermasculine pursuits. The women, even in Luke, rarely participate in such action. They are, even at the crucifixion, participating “from afar” (απο μακροθεν, Luke 23:49; Matt 27:55; Mark15:40).

This comic highlights how little the gospels say about Jesus’s appearance and masculinity. It is a fascinating exploration of the territory from a Western imagination.

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480 In particular, “Herod’s stepdaughter” is featured dancing in *The Action Bible*, but her presentation as an object of masculine desire highlights the hypermasculine values of the piece. Mauss, *Action Bible*, 576.
that draws its own expressions and conclusions. The moment a reader visualizes the
events Mark presents, that reader must engage her imagination, even if only instinctually
or informed by historical study. In order to present Jesus and his crucifixion in a comic,
one must choose how to present him. As with all the previous comics analyzed here,
these choices affect the whole reading. Here, Jesus is the hero—a hypermasculine action
hero—and so he fits the physical requirements of that role. This Jesus is recognizable to
modern Christians. Its familiar tone shows how enmeshed an American audience is with
this imaginative landscape. Like all comics in this project making complete illustrations
of Bible stories takes an act of imagination, but this comic in particular demonstrates the
most traditional imagination at work.

In Mauss’s statement, “Superman may save the day with his strength, but Jesus
saves the whole world with his death,” death and strength are now functionally
equivalent. Both Superman and Jesus save, one with strength and one with death. In this
comic, strength is always physical. Since Jesus is strong, he must be physically strong in
the action-comics style. *The Action Bible* presents the crucifixion not just in the comics
style of a superhero comic, but with the hypermasculine values overlaid on this story. The
crucifixion itself takes place in the story section titled “Crucified!” (Mauss 2004, 635;
Illustration lxvi) Jesus carries a cartoonishly large Cross at the top of the page; the
perspective of the drawing shows the top of the Cross coming out of the page toward the
reader, intensifying the size of the beams. Jesus is not shown in the act of falling under its
weight, rather his bent back and extended muscular calf seem nearly up to the task.
Because this Jesus is a Kirbyan hero in the illustrations, his strength is largely physical.
His suffering or failure to perform a physical task does not really make sense in this American Visual Language. The captions have to tell the reader that “On the way, Jesus falls under the weight of the heavy cross. To keep the ugly procession moving, the Roman officers seize a bystander, Simon of Cyrene.” The scene illustrating this is in a smaller quarter-page panel and happens at a distance in the background of the picture. After the page turn, Jesus is already on the Cross, backlit, serene, and centered on a splash page. (Mauss 2004, 636; Illustration lxvii)

This Jesus displays muscle mass, symmetry, and definition even more clearly than Luedke’s. In this image the two thieves flank him, but their slight imperfections in the type serve to highlight Jesus’s perfection. They have the requisite muscular legs, chests and arms of all shirtless Kirbyan male figures, but the thief to the left of the page is balding and the thief on the right is grimacing terribly. Jesus’s stoic expressions throughout the crucifixion communicate only an impassive strength. His face is never shown in extremis—of the nine images of Jesus on the Cross, only four show his face at all. The tails of his word balloons waver in his comments from the Cross (“Father, forgive them. They don’t know what they are doing.” “Today you will be with me in heaven.” “John take care of my mother.”) His final remark, “Father, I put my spirit in your hands!,” does not waver and is larger than his body. It takes its performance cues from all three Synoptic accounts (Mark 15:37, Matt 27:50, and Luke 23:46), that is, Jesus

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481 Moore, God’s Gym, 77-80.

482 The thief on the right is subsequently shown to have missing or rotten teeth, but when he asks to come into Jesus’s kingdom, his face takes on a slightly more refined look.
cries out in a loud voice, but uses the words spoken “with a loud voice” (φωνήν μεγάλην) from Luke alone.

*The Action Bible* sells quite well to a children and teen audience despite its depictions of violence, sexual situations and troublesome behavior. It is even endorsed by the ultra-conservative Focus on the Family organization.\(^{483}\) Of all the comics here, it is the one I have seen for sale most often at booksellers both online and in brick and mortar stores. My anecdotal evidence is well-supported by sales numbers, as this book far outsells any other comic analyzed in this dissertation.\(^ {484}\) The biblical narrative and traditional feel sells the book widely. I am supportive of the way the artist has brought his own senses to the work, but troubled that this vision might be the dominant, ruling image of the Bible.

Because it is a harmony, the stories in this comic end with closure. The story “Crucified!” ends with Pilate agreeing to give Jesus’s body to Joseph of Arimathea for burial. The line “Yes. I’ll give the order to the officer in charge” transitions into “The Sealed Tomb.” Rather than Mark’s abrupt and uneasy close, this comic bends the gospel story not only into a harmony but into a single narrative—uncharacteristic of both the biblical form and comics. Comics would support multiple narratives or points of view, but the authors have chosen a single story arc. Rather than using the flexible narrative imagination of comics to give a new take on the story, *The Action Bible* wedges the Cross and comics strictly into the action category by rounding off the edges of emotional and

\(^{483}\) Focus on the Family. “*The Action Bible: A Book Review for Parents.*”

\(^{484}\) By so much that the comparison is ludicrous.
theological reversals. The Cross is an uncomfortable fit for action, since the hero does not triumph with a feat of physical prowess. The pain and suffering of the Cross are inappropriate for an action hero. The confusion and open-endedness of the first ending of Mark has no place here. The women do not flee from the tomb—rather, Roman soldiers are shown in terror over the earthquake that shifts the stone that seals the door (Matthew 27: 51, 54). Jesus’s followers are composed, readying themselves for their roles as action heroes in the subsequent narrative. Jesus himself is impassive through his crucifixion, comfortable in his role as action hero and eventually unwounded and whole at the close of the book. His hands and feet are healed.

The Cross has no place in the final moments of the redemptive story as presented here. The Cross here is as much scandal for the action hero as it is for the Greco-Roman world. By showing how obviously incompatible the Cross is with these values, the comic shows how scandalous it could be for a modern reader who shares the values of this action comic but reads the whole gospel rather than this harmony. By omitting the parts of the story that do not lend themselves to the heroic, The Action Bible highlights the very parts of the story that are weird. These are too weird for the modern victorious heroic Jesus image to bear. I move from this comic’s triumphalism to close with a comic more suited to a dissertation that strives to understand the ways comics are able to illustrate not only where modern imaginations have put Jesus, but also where those imaginations might go.

485 Note that the comic does not include the opening of the tombs, the resurrection of the saints, or the appearance of those resurrected to many in the city. Here Matthew proves too weird for the action comic (Matthew 27: 52-53).
Yummy Fur: Narrative in Context

The final comic I analyze has a fraught relationship with its material masked by a curiously straightforward visual style. The simple lines and layouts contain a bemused and surreal exploration of the Gospel. The scandal here in part is how the story fits in the author’s already weird oeuvre. Brown’s multi-issue “Gospel of Mark” title interweaves Mark’s story of Jesus through the Yummy Fur series (1983-1994) in issues #4 through #14. The curiously named Yummy Fur is an often crass and even disgusting independent comic in the vein of other underground comix that flourished in the 1980s. The Mark story ran as a second story primarily alongside the surrealist farce “Ed the Happy Clown” from April 1987 to January 1989. Brown strove to work against expectations in his Gospel interpretation:

People were expecting me to do something weird with Mark… I know that readers, when they started reading Yummy Fur #4, didn’t know I was planning on doing all four, but I knew I was going to. And so starting from a traditional view seemed like a good place to start. And I can get weirder as I go along, but . . .

This trailing thought is never completed, but then, neither are the planned four gospels. The adaptation begins with a very traditional reading, one verse per panel, six square panels per page, of an English translation of Mark. A certain off-book weirdness comes

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in where Brown inserts events from Morton Smith’s *Secret Gospel of Mark*. While certainly not a mainstream Christian tradition, the Secret Gospel is widely available. The flow of the narrative is not interrupted. If anything, this smooth telling might be a mild argument for the fit of the text.

The “Gospel of Mark” is a complete version of the whole text (including the longer ending through 16:20) but Brown has never collected or published it in any format other than the original issues. Brown has explicitly said that he has no interest in republishing them or completing the “Gospel of Matthew” adaptation that ran in *Yummy Fur* #15-#32. As he baldly states it, “I am reluctant to release it because it was poorly done.” Brown completed the “Ed the Happy Clown” arc in issue #18; Brown has since collected and adapted the material to what he names a “graphic-novel.” He was satisfied with his work on Ed, but not on his work on Jesus. His sense that he tried to get at something in his Mark comic and failed in the attempt makes this comic fascinating to analyze. It is a reading that reveals its own cracks, that deconstructs itself. I do not find it to fail in the way that reviewer Ng Suat Tong does, because I do not see the task to be creating a weighty study of the Gospels. Tong uncharitably insists that Brown’s comic

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488 Brown skipped putting Matthew in issues 18, 23, 28, and 30. Several other autobiographical or surrealist stories ran in these issues.

489 Evenson, 124.

has “the spirit of a student and not [that of] a person who has fully immersed himself in the subject matter.” Brown freely admits that his research was “half-assed” and never makes claims to a mastery of the material. He is doing this as an explorer, offering his talents for interpretation at his own risk. Rather than finding the threat to intellectual reading that Tong does, I insist that this spirit of the student can be instructive when handled appropriately. Appropriate handling means treating the comic not just as a clumsy or unsuccessful translation of a biblical text, but also as an interpretation by an author working in a non-biblical context. Brown reads the text, even if he does not find what traditional interpreters find there.

Brown’s comics are both widely praised and controversial for their portrayals of sex, violence, crass language, body parts (particularly penises in action), fecal matter, and religious figures. Many of his comics are personal and revealing, showing his own bodily functions, troubled relationships, childhood fights, explicit fantasies, and, in Paying for It, faithfully documenting his choice to hire prostitutes regularly rather than seek a more traditional sexual relationship. “Ed the Happy Clown” is one of his most

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492 Evenson, 115.

493 In Yummy Fur #4 and later Ed the Happy Clown, Brown attracted controversy when he depicted a fictional Saint Justin masturbating and ejaculating. His publisher, Vortex, had him cover the moment of ejaculation, but he used the overlay panel to offer free copies of the image to anyone who wrote him for it.

dreamlike texts, while Mark goes along in a soberly meticulous pace. I should note that Ed the Happy Clown is neither happy nor a clown through most of the circuitous story. Instead, the story veers wildly through two universes, the portal of which is through the rectum of a man who cannot stop defecating. Ed is a passive protagonist who suffers one horrible, farcical indignity after another. Most of the cast suffers some form of dark misfortune. The character Chet Doodley has his hand fall off without warning and murders his mistress, Josie. A religious story from his childhood convinces him that killing Josie will atone for his infidelity to his wife. Josie, who turns into a vampire after her death, hunts and kills Chet. They both end up in a fiery Hell. Ronald Reagan from an alternate dimension transforms into the head of Ed’s penis. Both of them suffer greatly from this misfortune. The whole plot of the story is nearly impossible to summarize, but these dark elements suggest the extent to which it is surprising to find a staid gospel story after each grim chapter. I hesitate to offer a closer read of the precise plot-relationship of the two stories. There are certainly Christian religious elements in Ed like atonement for sin, Hell, and salvation. Mark features a protagonist to whom a great misfortune occurs, but with none of close-up indignity or cock-eyed optimism of Ed. If there is more to this relationship, it is difficult to sort out of the dark and fantastical elements of Ed and the clipped presentation of Mark.

While Brown does not consider himself a surrealist, he cites surrealists and Freud’s writing on the subconscious as an early artistic influence. His working methods are often spontaneous and designed to be as unhindered as possible.\footnote{Brown, \textit{Ed the Happy Clown}, 205-206.} He works with
squares arranged in a regular pattern and insists that he doesn’t plan his pages in advance. Rather, Brown basically treats the gospel comic like a series of illustrations of individual verses that happen to end up telling a story. He uses the work of making Mark, and later Matthew, as a method of “trying to figure out what I believed about this stuff. It was a matter of trying to figure out whether I even believed the Christian claims—whether or not Jesus was divine.”496 It is a working document, produced by a working imagination in Paul Ricoeur’s sense— one that is active and schematizing.

Brown’s other narratives are consistently interrupted by sharp plot turns, character changes, distracting violence, and sudden gross-outs. No character is safe in his usual works. Despite his more disruptive intentions, Jesus ends up a stable character in his Mark interpretation. He is of course not “safe” ultimately; Brown’s crucifixion scene is the main subject on my analysis. Nonetheless, the parameters of Brown’s work constrain him to a more mainline version of Jesus than a regular Brown reader might expect. Brian Everson points out that readers “quickly switch gears in a way that can’t help but strip them, being confronted by a soberly Christian text on the heels of a murder committed for religious reasons.”497 The religious elements mixed through the “Ed the Happy Clown” story confuse the issue in a haphazard way that the straightforward gospel telling inherits.

The flat affect of the story makes it almost more shocking than something more crude or wacky. There is little humor in Mark, though Brown will work in some visual

496 Brown, Ed the Happy Clown, 213.

497 Evenson, Ed vs. Yummy Fur, 57.
jokes in his Matthew telling.\footnote{498 The disciples, ever bumbling, are the easiest target.} The weirdness in this imaginative retelling springs from the constraint and traditional portrayals, the distance, and the sharp edges of the work. The crucifixion is confined to the squares Brown squeezes it into, but the material seems to resist and bleed over into the gutters.

Brown planned to do all the gospels and to edge the format more and more out of the traditional vein as he went. The Mark he made is, by design, the most constrained that Brown felt he could do. It follows a narrative box style with slavish regularity. He started with Mark because he understood Mark to be the first written canonical gospel, but he did not expect to Jesus to be as angry as he often is in Mark. The anger took him by surprise and failed to fit the traditional blonde-haired figure he chose. Rather than taking the word of some biblical scholar, Brown discovered the affect of Jesus on his own with his work and attentive reading. While he did not come to the gospel without preconceived notions, the image he brought he found to be lacking by his own efforts. As he worked through the comic, verse-by-verse, he began to realize how angry the words were but did not change the figure. Instead, he kept Jesus the same, only offering some jarring facial expressions on the already established figure. Only when he started Matthew did he radically alter Jesus’s appearance. He made him balding and with a large nose and a glowering expression, but then realized that this more severe figure did not fit the tone of Matthew.\footnote{499 Brown, “The Chester Brown Interview with Steve Grammel,” 60-64.} (Brown 1994, Illustration lxviii) He brought a traditional Jesus figure to the work, and through his work on the comic found a disconnection between the character he...
was drawing and the character’s actions. Through his work, Brown found a non-traditional way of seeing Jesus that he felt matched more closely with the words he had been reading. Only, the text slipped away from him again in the change of tone in Matthew. His work shows both how far from the traditional Jesus Mark might feel with a close reading and how the different gospels can slide and change under a reader.

The comic also takes place at a great distance from the action. There are very few even moderately close images; most panels look like tableaus viewed from far away. The images that concentrate on one character usually have them in a waist-up panel, never too tightly focused. The distance in Mark contrasts sharply with the extreme close-ups through the Ed the Happy Clown story. There are large panels that focus on details of anatomy or very small pieces of action. In the installment of the Ed story that shares issue #14 with the crucifixion, the final page has a large panel that focuses on the false nose that has just fallen from Ed’s face. (Brown 1989, 9; Illustration lxix) The shoe and nose take up a full half of the page in the middle. No panel in the whole of the Mark story has such a place, nor does any detail get such close examination. The audience is held at arms-length from Mark, while Brown holds their faces close to the gory details of the Ed story. As such, Mark feels even more alien to the reader than a close-up view might make it. A close-up view brings the reader into the story, but Brown offers no such invitation with Mark. He and his readers view the story at a distance with little sympathy for the characters or investment. It is this coldness of the presentation that makes it weird—there is a creeping darkness in the panels and their position alongside a warmer, if weirder, comic makes them uncomfortably suspect. By bringing Ed up close and keeping Jesus
away, Brown subverts the authority of the gospel story or subverts the relationship between the two. It is an unbalanced relationship. Whereas Ed presses violent story elements closer to the reader, the Mark story is held away.

Often the distance is either from a bird’s eye view, placing the viewer high than anyone might be in the actual panel. It is clear that the viewer is not participating in these scenes. Brown presents the opening of the crucifixion episode Mark 14:53-54 in four panels where the actors are so distant in the bird’s-eye view that they are only around half an inch tall in any one panel. (Brown 1989, 78; Illustration lxx) On the page turn, Brown brings the view to a position at only slightly above eye-level and few feet away from the subjects, here Jesus and the chief priests. Jesus’ slumped shoulders, back, and curtain of hair are featured, except in the final panel where Jesus says, “I am—and you will see the son of man sitting and the right hand of power and coming with the clouds of heaven!” with a glowering, nasty expression on his face. (Brown 1989, 79; Illustration lxxi) This one quick middle close-up gives one of the few hints of Brown’s understanding of Jesus’s angry affect. He quickly pulls back and away, hiding Jesus’s face over the next page, almost reluctant to show the sudden anger again. (Brown 1989, 80; Illustration lxxii)

Brown is equally cool as the more disturbing actions begin. Jesus’s torture and humiliation are depicted at such a comfortable distance that there is hardly any gore at all. Brown, in his other works, is never shy about gore. He depicts fecal matter, close-up murders and disturbing surgery throughout his Ed the Happy Clown work. But here, the action is subdued. Jesus is placed on the Cross without much fanfare, with the viewer’s eye back from the action and often above the figures. (Brown 1989, 86; Illustration lxxiii)
Brown has the narration keep a reporter-like, almost objective tone that he illustrates with literal distance. The act of putting Jesus on the Cross is so weird as to distance the reader from it. By keeping the readers away from the subject, he keeps them removed emotionally.

However, Brown brings the crucifixion into focus when Jesus speaks. His method of illustrating each verse or piece of a verse as a separate panel without attention to the whole page means his attention follows the words, not his own interest. Instead of being below the Cross from a spectator’s point of view, the reader is on eye-level with Jesus on the Cross. (Brown 1989, 87; Illustration lxxiv) It reverses the usual affordance of a cross to hang something up high for display. Instead, the audience must suddenly confront Jesus as an equal, as a fellow sufferer. He shows Jesus naked, with none of the usual positioning that might hide his genitalia. Jesus is squarely in the middle of the frame suffering and dying as he cries out. His cry of dereliction comes while he is at an angle, with the text squarely in line with the caption box, so that the narrative text reads as it does in the biblical text: “And it is the ninth hour, [then out of Jesus’s mouth in a word balloon], ‘Eloi, Eloi, Lama Sabachthani?!’ and this means, ‘My God, my God, why have you deserted me?’” But, the “loud cry” (φωνὴν μεγάλην) is not so specific; if there are words even suggested in the Greek. In Against Celsus, Origen take it as a supernatural element, as people dying on crosses are dying of asphyxia and would not have the breath to cry out. Brown has this cry begin with large ragged “AO” and trail out of the panel to the top of the page. The cry goes on the gutter. The close up moment on the Cross is still relatively distant. And more, it is incomplete by design. It gives the work to the reader.
This readerly work in the gutter allows Brown’s interpretation to shine in the very
distance and admission of his inadequacy to tell the whole story. The ordinarily distant
framing makes the squared-off edges of the panels disruptive. Because the other panels
are set up in a tableau at a distance, many of them are centered and allow the viewer to
see the entire scene. However, the angles tend to be slightly off-kilter and allow some
slippage. It exploits the affordance of crosses to center by keeping everything off-center.
Pieces that might be all there are cut off. Brown allows the unknown pieces to happen in
the gutter.

Brown allows the gospel to go over the edges of his panels out of sight. On the
one hand, this might be interpreted as another example of his mistakes and inadequacies.
On the other hand, this might be a perfect metaphor for the ending of Mark. The final
words of 16:8 are the last words of action illustrated—it’s a high perspective looking
down on the three women fleeing the tomb with the narrative box translating the final
“γάρ” as “rather”: “And they go out and run from the tomb and they are trembling and
excited and they say nothing to anyone because they are afraid rather” (no punctuation in
the original). Brown continues with the longer ending of Mark, but the action drops
out. Instead of the activities, the last words (Mark 16:9-20) come in a word balloon from
the mouth of an ancient, wrinkled talking head. This unnamed character speaks the last
words directly to the reader. (Brown 1989, 90; Illustration lxxv) The words are crowded
into the top of the panel in word balloons that echo the style of the narrative boxes that
have been at the top of nearly every panel in the gospel. The expression on the face

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500 Brown, Yummy Fur #14, 90. See, for discussion of this ending, Lincoln, “The Promise and the
Failure—Mark 16:7-8,” 283-300.
changes subtly, but the portent is unclear. The figure addresses the reader frankly, body visible only from the chest up. The gender is vague. It is as if the comic truly drops out at 16:8, but Brown gives the stage to the later additions in the final panels. The solid ink behind the character offers nothing more—only empty darkness. It is a chilling end.

Brown declares his mistakes and inadequacies in presenting the gospel bother him in later interviews. “I hadn’t read the Gospels carefully enough,” he says. On the presentation of angry Jesus in Matthew and traditional Jesus in Mark he declares, “So that was a goof-up on my part, really.”

Whether he goofs up or not, he has presented something with a flavor of scandal not quite achieved anywhere else. He has created a cold gospel story that is reasonably true to the text, but it turns out with a different spirit. It is almost an anti-action version of the bible. In the hands of an independent comix artist, in the Independent AVL, this creator makes a Jesus with inexplicable motives that lurches from panel to panel. The audience is neither sympathetic to his plight nor asked to consider his mission. Here is an artist with an eye for scandal giving us a scandalous event in a flat style. By its off-kilter presentation, both in the panels themselves and in the context the type of independent comic it is, the straight-forward representation leaves the reader on edge, waiting for the weird to come. What Brown shows is that the weird is already there. By doing very little to the text, he reveals the material as well-suited to his type of work. The scandal already lives in the text.

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502 Cohn, Visual Language, 143
An Experiment Reading Mark with Comics

The women at the tomb end the narrative of Mark on the edge. They are afraid. The mystery and the power might die with them. The scandal of the Cross shocks them into messy fear and trembling. They hear the message and the order to tell it, but they cannot do anything but run. They flee in fear from the ignominy, the scandal. If they are the reader’s stand-ins, they show us in their reactions what it means to stand on the brink and be pulled back. The order to tell is too much to bear. They are not themselves, rather they are possessed by their trembling and ecstatic experience. Their extreme reactions and the slamming closed book leaves a gaping, breathless window into another world of a different order. Mark stops, because it cannot go on until someone else participates. Until another imagination comes into the picture and moves the vision on to the next moment, there is nothing more that Mark can do.

These comics step in at this moment. They all must show the reality of the Cross—the form forces them to make a decision about how to portray these events that biblical scholars do not ordinarily have to make. The result of doing these readings with Mark is a way to show how different authors make sense of the suffering on the Cross in their world. Marked shows a world where the demons and horrors are a mechanistic part of reality. Eye Witness struggles with the reality of a Jesus that does not have a direct historical proof by supplying it. The Action Bible adds the masculine elements to Jesus that the story requires to become heroic in an American action comic context. Meanwhile, Yummy Fur shows a stumbling and unsure narrator with only a partial view
of the action. Whereas the other comics fill in the contexts to highlight or blunt the scandal, Brown finally gives an out-of-place picture of a sorely out-of-place story. Each comic shows the reader an interpretation unabashedly colored by the creator and his vision for the gospel. They all take Mark and show what it means when it is played out in their own logic about the world.

Because Mark is a narrative in prose, these comics naturally have the chance to fill in the details of the story and to imagine for the reader. The change in my reading came in realizing how differently each of these comics chose to bring the reader into the story. *Eye Witness* closes the door on the discomfort of the uncertainty of history. *The Action Bible* wedges the values of the Cross into a hypermasculine world. These comics made me realize how easy it is to cut off the conversation by fitting the story into a familiar framework or prejudiced world view. In a world where religions other than Christianity are treated with mistrust, the story is trapped in the logic of exclusion. In a world where men and women are held to hypermasculine standards, Jesus on the Cross does not makes sense. The story does not open up; it closes down. They see the gaps in the story—the unreliability of history and the ambiguity of Jesus’s power—and fill them in with fact-finding and mainstream heroics. Before I began, I would not have expected the comics that seem the most concerned with spreading the gospel to do this. I did not expect that the gospel harmony comics would do this while the Mark comics did not. Now I realize, though, that the Cross is a more difficult message than I even suspected. It is difficult to reconcile with a world concerned wholly with stark ideas about “scientific” truth or masculine heroics.
Rather than stop with their fear, *Marked* and *Yummy Fur* give a reading of the text that opens it rather than closes it. They take seriously the idea that the story is uncomfortable, and because of that, are better able to handle its gaps. Ironically, perhaps, texts less interested in attracting new Christians are the ones that treat Mark as a more religious read. That is, they take it seriously as a text that does not just talk about a religious figure, but have it function religiously. *Marked* makes an effort to revel in the weirdness the text offers. In doing so it stretches weirdness further to show Mark in a world both outside our own and strangely familiar. The emotional climax to the story leaves the reader to decide which way the sunflower is turning. By giving the reader very little text, Ross allows them to walk away with an open interpretation they must bring in a sort of religious act of understanding. In doing so, he creates the feeling of the shorter ending of Mark for a modern reader who might otherwise not get that feeling from a reading of Mark that includes additional endings. *Yummy Fur* finally pulls out a weirdness that seems to surprise even its creator. The methodical process of plotting each square panel is perhaps the most religious act of comics creation I can imagine, though that is not what Brown seems necessarily to have intended. The weirdness that leaps out of the panels toward the gutters suggests that the message cannot be contained. Each of these comics afford the weird, subverting the text to find another way give the text closure. They end oddly, because Mark struggles as he throws his message to the world. The gospel does not cease, rather they are part of a group. The changes and subjectivity cannot hide. The imagination and its trappings are on display. There is no final closure available. The text is on the loose.
Chapter Five: From Domesticating the Cross toward Baring/Bearing the Cross

If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses.

—Lenny Bruce⁵⁰³

But when I took up the cross I recognized its meaning…It is not something that you wear. The cross is something that you bear and ultimately that you die on.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.⁵⁰⁴

Martin King’s perspective on the cross was not derived from reading theological texts in graduate school. His view of the cross was shaped by his reading of the Bible through the black religious experience, and his “personal suffering” in his fight for justice.

—James Cone⁵⁰⁵

I have done the graphic/novel reading I set out to do with the help of some unusual partners that have done as they pleased with the biblical text. The previous chapters have done the work of imagining the Cross and the Christian story as weird.

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⁵⁰⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Speech at Staff Retreat” (Penn Center, Frogmore, South Carolina, May 22, 1967, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Atlanta, Georgia).

⁵⁰⁵ Cone, Cross and the Lynching Tree, 86.
With the help of graphic reading, I uncovered examples of the novel ways that comics put the Cross on display and the text on the loose. The range of reactions to seeing this sort of art employed around the Cross and Jesus might be similar to the reactions that Colleen McDannell names around religious kitsch.\(^{506}\) That is, one reader might have a sort of cultural reaction; she might insist that the comics here are neither art nor interpretation. Another reader might have an aesthetic reaction. That is, these are readings of the text, yet they are inferior interpretations. Yet another reader might have an ethical reaction and claim that these portrayals of Jesus are immorally deceptive, they show a Jesus not sanctioned or mediated by the New Testament. This last reader might consider this sort of Jesus dangerous to hear, because such a Jesus might divert them from a moral path. These reactions may also take place in various combinations in a single reader.

I hope, instead of any of these reactions, to leave my reader sharing the sense of irony that is found in these comics. I treat these comics as interpretations of the text that bring something new to it. These interpretations may even be opposed to any original meaning that could be found in the text, yet they still reveal something of value. I hope this tension between word and image and hypotext can be even of religious value. McDannell claims, “Irony is not a religious value.”\(^ {507}\) I resist this limitation on what religious values can include. Irony can be a religious value when religious people, in this case Christians, treat experiences as multi-vocal and layered. For theologian Myron


Bradley Penner, irony is an essential characteristic of the religious prophetic voice.\footnote{Myron Bradley Penner, \textit{The End of Apologetics: Christian Witness in a Postmodern Context} (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2013), 92-96. Penner gathers support for his defense of prophetic irony primarily from the Gospel of John, Søren Kierkegaard, Richard Rorty, and Paul Ricoeur.} I hope in this chapter to lend biblical interpretation comics’ tension between word and image, comics’ narrative flexibility, and comics’ attention to irony.

Comics allow readers to grasp vast and complex narrative situations: a Jesus out of his own time, race or historical situation, suffering on a Cross or even using the Cross as a weapon against oppressors, cannibals, or zombies. If this Jesus is understandable, we can begin to grasp the scandal and weirdness of the Cross in a world without the same sensibilities around the image. In a world constantly diminishing the symbolic power of the Cross, comics challenge readers to expect and relish narrative complexity. I wish to give a broader sense of the potential of the imagination and possibilities that come when we allow this playfulness to be part of the scholarly vision, even as I offer caution to the ordinary and acceptable ways that the Cross is treated in North American culture.

This chapter explains the difficulties that biblical scholarship has accessing the weird and imagining the Cross that the readings have presented. Scholars must deal with the Enlightenment domestication of scholarship within their own academic home, the domestication from within the New Testament, the domestication after Constantine, and even the domestication of the Cross in a modern context. Modern writers can find real and active power by using the Cross as a metaphor or synecdoche of the “Christian thing,” but it is always a dangerous undertaking. The Cross holds a subversive power through its tensions that Christians can access to build alliances with struggling people.
The Domesticated Cross

Even given the range of impressions from the eleven comics I analyzed in the previous chapters, there might be an overall impression that the Cross is regularly understood as weird. However, the Cross is not usually seen in the ways these comics show it. It hangs innocently around the necks of Catholic schoolgirls, its gore invisible to the casual observer even when the broken body of Jesus is included on the crucifix. The Cross is domesticated; Christians have brought it into the *domus*, the home. Scholars, too, have lost the shock of the Cross that makes it the live wire, the dangerous element. When the Cross is domesticated, how can it do the work of a stumbling block or of foolishness? There is no power without scandal (1 Cor 1:18, 23). Before I head into the contemporary Christian home and the Cross there, I will first explain the uses of the Cross in scholarship, the New Testament itself, and during the early formation of Christianity that make the weird elements that comics bring to the Cross hard to imagine.

Domestication from Enlightenment Scholarship

Biblical scholars have trouble interpreting the weird primarily because most understand one of their basic tasks to be the domestication of the Bible. They are trying to make it intelligible and readable for non-specialists or to clarify something for other specialists. In the process of creating a readable text or explanation for the Bible, they create reasonable explanations for the differences and oddities that make the Bible powerful. Generally, the best reading of a text that a scholar can produce is one that accounts for the most factors and settles the most arguments. We adjust the oddities in
translation or history to fit a particular biblical frame. We adjust the text to fit the
methodology used. Some might accuse us of fetishizing method over text and of using
method to keep text and self separated. In the process, we might stunt the imagination
and sever the connection to the social world. Scholars can be shockingly silent on social
issues close to their work. Method can be used as a means to hide from public
responsibility. As Moore and Sherwood show, “Methodology is what is meant to keep
our discourse on the Bible from being subjective, personal, private, pietistic, pastoral,
devotional, or homiletical.” That this, rather than using method as a starting point for
work in the world, it all too often becomes the end as well as the means.

This present work of scholarship, the close reading method that I have applied to
the comics toward the goal of imagining the biblical text, is open to such criticism.
Perhaps my training has congealed exciting and weird comics into something dry and
over-explained. These comics only peripherally consider the biblical text by their own
design, yet I am using them to read a biblical text. The majority of them are not
concerned with propriety or interpretation. I have reined them in to my own use. The
most obvious problem with writing critically about domestication in a dissertation is that
the practice of writing a dissertation itself is a process of domestication. A dissertation

509 The connection between the Cross and the lynching tree, for example, seems obvious. “Yet
both white theologians such as Niebuhr and black preachers throughout African American history
either did not see the parallels between the cross and the lynching tree or else they were too
fearful of the dire consequences—loss of social status, work, or possibly life—to make the
connection. In short, they lacked imagination of the most crucial and moral kind.” Cone, Cross
and the Lynching Tree, 94.

510 Moore and Sherwood, Invention of the Biblical Scholar, 40.
allows me to show how well I fit into the academic sphere, and, as such, how well-adjusted I am as a scholar.

In studying the form, I have been fascinated by how the academy treats comics. On the one hand, I have had a wonderful experience with many excited scholars, ready to engage comics because they love them or because they have never considered them before. Many of these scholars are hungry for new sources of imaginative inspiration for their research or their teaching. Many are willing to look at comics for this inspiration. On the other hand, there are many who are not comfortable with resources from so far outside the academy. Perhaps they are still stinging from the attacks of Fredric Wertham and the Comics Code Authority, convinced even subconsciously by long-discredited data that comics are a corrupting force that ruins one’s ability to read. Such resistance, though, is a symptom of what Willie Jennings has diagnosed as the “diseased social imagination.” If one is engaged in what he calls the process of “dissociation and dislocation” of scholarship—something closely related to the Enlightenment process—then engaging things as weird as comics can only be a source of danger. Comics can find their place in traditional scholarship, but they are bound to disturb it.

Despite my qualms, I am not inclined to abandon traditional scholarship. Even as David Tracy’s subject as interpreter might “despise the tradition as a deadening force, a

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512 When comics submit to the process of recuperation that is already at work on them, they will no longer disturb academic ideas. Even as I welcome the entry of comics into the academic realm, I worry that the academy will be at work changing their character. I hope that comics are weird enough and spread out enough over the world to always find new sources of weirdness even as they themselves are domesticated.
bourgeois humanist hoax, an obscurantist fraud, a poisonous creature of ressentiment,” she is nevertheless forced to “interpret that tradition in the hope, and with the ethical demand, of exposing its fraudulence, suspecting its claims, denouncing its injustice.”

Although I find the overall attitude toward the Cross as mentioned in the scriptures I have interpreted in the previous chapters to be largely (though with some noticeable exceptions), curiously dispassionate about the suffering body placed squarely before it, I am not abandoning their insights. Rather, I seek to reacquaint this scholarship with the emotion that they find largely unthinkable.

The modern academy's discomfort with religion/religiosity has forced biblical scholars to have a split academic personality, where they must be objective scientists with one hand and careful protectors of the theological and ethical underpinnings of the text with the other. Moore and Sherwood have done an excellent job of outlining this long history in The Invention of the Biblical Scholar. As they tell the story, biblical scholars in the modern academy seem always under pressure to make sure their work can be judged as scientific and never as confessional. The Enlightenment study of the Bible is as an object of human culture. Only such objects of human culture are appropriate subjects for impartial analysis. The study of what they have named the “Cultural Bible” is “as locked as [historical criticism] into the Enlightenment project of biblical studies—the mission to ensure that the Bible remains relevant to the modern age.” This relevance for the Bible as only “Cultural Bible” to Enlightenment academia was bought at the price of the


514 Moore and Sherwood, Invention of the Biblical Scholar, 95.
mystical, the lyrical, and the para-rational. The items and characters discussed within the Bible are likewise studied as mere cultural objects, not mystical objects. The Enlightenment defined the appropriate uses of the Cross in the academy as a strictly historical-critical object that one may dissect and theorize, but not feel. This redefinition of appropriate use was so effective that it changed what the Cross could afford in the academy from something confessional to something wholly academic.

This allergy to the confessional is a direct reaction to Enlightenment values that have formed the modern academy. The European Enlightenment’s wish to eradicate superstition and its Protestant suspicion of religious relic and decoration has formed the broad academic environment. The urge to rid the humanities of their mystical elements comes from a felt need to save the place of the humanities in the academy. The sciences dominate academic funding, so their image forms a dominate image of scholarly pursuit. Humanities scholars fear they are loosing their place in the academy. Biblical scholars, faced with the dangers of a collapsing humanities and an Enlightenment crisis of authority for the Bible, struggle to show how their field could be a useful part of the academy. The danger is that in the process we lose the ability to imagine the weird and fraught place of the Bible in the lives of people. In the process of making the Bible comfortable in the academy, we risk characterizing the stories in ways that make it unrecognizable. The domestication of scholarship makes emotional and affecting stories

difficult to hear. However, the weird Crosses in the comics I have shown here make the emotional, affecting, and even impolitely gross parts of the story clear. Given the way these Enlightenment values have formed the academy, it is no wonder that biblical scholars find themselves in tense position when they are confronted with emotional or unreasonable content in the Bible. When the Cross comes up, scholars flee to science and history, rather than directly confronting the hard moment or even wondering at the incongruity of the presentation in Paul and Mark with the reaction of their contemporary audiences. Few muse on the way the story of the Cross drew people toward a divine presence when it might naturally be expected to repel them. Studies like this threaten both the ideological left and right: on the extreme left, pietistic attention to the Bible is intolerable; on the extreme right, questioning the moral centrality of the Bible is intolerable. In the study of the Bible as elsewhere in the academy “especially intolerable are ways of being and imagining oriented to divine presence.”\textsuperscript{516} In a later section, I will show the way that Robert Orsi has helped me see the limits of this view as well as his risky way out. For now, though, I will move from this modern mode of domestication for scholarly survival in an unfriendly academy toward two other moments of domestication for the Cross: the New Testament and the Christianization of the Empire. 

\textsuperscript{516} Orsi, “When 2+2=5,” n.p.
Domestication from within the New Testament

The overall process of domesticating the Cross happens in many stages, none of which arrive in a particular chronological order. When one kind of domestication happened in one particular time and place, it was not guaranteed to be followed by further progress or stages. The domestication process is messy and difficult to trace; it is much easier to see the Cross as being either an uncomfortable outsider symbol or a comfortable symbol in the home than the process by which it enters. In this section and the one following, I will present two moments from early Christian history that have far-reaching implications for domestication. These moments concern first the sacred texts of Christianity and second, the church. These are profound stages in the development of Christianity, yet this is by no means a comprehensive interpretation of either. Both historical moments are bent on a domestication of the Cross I call “recuperation.” I borrow and adapt the term recuperation from the Birmingham school of cultural studies, particularly Dick Hebdige, where it indicates the process by which the subculture is

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518 In fact, it would be natural to make directly opposite interpretations of what is going on in Christian thought at these particular moments—that is, that in some areas of Christian thought at these times and places the Cross is becoming more subversive rather than less. The act of domestication itself invites and contains traces of subversion within it. This is Jacques Derrida’s différence, which contains the meanings of both to differ and to defer, as a case in point—each concept contains within itself the trace of the other. Here I am focused on what makes the weird unthinkable. A further study might show how this subversion operates. Jacques Derrida, “Différence,” in Margins of Philosophy, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982), 3-27.
incorporated back into the dominant culture and “the fractured order is repaired.”

Recuperation, in other words, means the translation of an individualized style into a accepted social convention. The subversive and disturbing experience of the Cross is translated into an acceptable even unremarkable symbol in the wider culture.

The first moment is within the New Testament itself. Paul and Mark have these viscerally abhorrent images of Jesus dying in an ignoble way on the Cross, but other parts of the New Testament redefine the Cross into an acceptable “thing”—in Heidegger’s sense of having a range of meanings that concern humanity—with more widely acceptable affordances. The type of recuperation that Luke-Acts, Matthew, and the Pastoral epistles is what cultural theory labels the “ideological form” of incorporation. The ideological change happens in “the ‘labelling’ [sic] and re-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups— the police, the media, the judiciary.” The authors of these pieces of the New Testament are not quite the clearly dominant groups that Hebdige describes. Yet, because they come after and use the nodes of meaning they found in Paul and the outline of the passion from Mark, they can exercise authority around their

\[519\] Hebdige, Subculture, 94.

\[520\] The Gospel of John is also weird, but it goes a different direction for weirdness than Paul and Mark. For John, the weirdness of the Cross is not its violence and pain, but chthonic divine character. John consistently shows the in-breaking of the divine and supernatural into the world in miracles and divine claims. In another project, John’s method of making weirdness could play a prominent role. For one example, see the implied cannibalism, the disgusted reaction in the text, and the probable redaction to soften the disgust of the reader (John 6:52-66).

\[521\] Hebdige, Subculture, 94.
ideas. They have the power to interpret Mark and Paul. These parts of the New Testament take the part of the gospel that threatens the message and accounts for the ‘problems’ they find there—changing the meaning without changing the root activity. There is still a Cross at play in Luke-Acts, Matthew and the Pastorals; however, it is used in a different way from its weird use in Paul and Mark. Each softens the weirdness of the Cross with an ideological shift in its context and meaning.

For the later Synoptics (Matthew and Luke), the difference between passion narratives of Paul and the shorter ending of Mark comes primarily in the account of what happens after the crucifixion. The Cross is the moment that interrupts the story in order to set up the resurrection. Both Matthew and Luke follow the steps of the Passion narrative as outlined in the Gospel of Mark, whose nodes can be traced to Paul. However, the weirdness of the Cross is mitigated by the clear and differently weird experience of the resurrection, narrated not directly but by accounts of the empty tomb appearances. Both have accounts of Jesus’s return and his actual presence with the disciples. The shorter ending of Mark shows women fleeing the empty tomb at the sight of a shining messenger. Jesus does not appear to them; the reader is left to wonder. His absence ends the shorter ending (Mk 16:8). Matthew has Jesus appear in person and speak to the women and the eleven (Mt 28: 9-10; 16-20). Luke-Acts has Jesus return and speak to

522 For the idea of these narrative “nodes” and their movement from Paul to Mark to the Synoptics see L. Michael White, *Scripting Jesus: The Gospels in Rewrite* (New York: Harper One, 2010), 127-141.

523 Matthew also adds activities for the guards at the tomb and a bribing scene after that goes toward proving the death as legitimate (Mt 27:62-66; 28:11-15). See White, *Scripting Jesus*, 142-148.
disciples on the road to Emmaus, proving himself with the insight with which he interprets scripture and the magical way he breaks and blesses their bread (Lk 24:25-32). He proves himself to be real to them by appearing to the eleven and their companions and eating a piece of fish (Lk 24:36-43). Of course, the appearance of the resurrected Jesus is not a normal event. The experience of the resurrected Jesus takes the place of the Cross as the proper weird experience for Christians. The sting is gone, not just from death, but from the experience of Jesus’s death (1 Cor 15:55-56). The sting and the scandal allows the Cross to be weird, violent, terrifying, subversive of authority, and a human connection to the supernatural. The otherworldliness is shifted to a resurrected Jesus. The presence of a resurrected Jesus subverts the subversion of the Cross. The Cross is ideologically domesticated and safe for the home. Because the text has Jesus overcome the Cross, the narrative has overcome the scandal of the Cross. Rather than leaving the “overcoming” to the reader, these texts have already done it. This is not to suggest that the later Synoptics are not subversive in their own ways, they have simply moved the sight of subversion away from the Cross.

The Pastorals skirt the issue of the Cross altogether. There is not one reference to the Cross, the death, or the blood of Jesus in all of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. There are plenty of references to Jesus, yet not one to his death or the manner of it. The one mention of death at all comes in the midst of urging Timothy not to be ashamed of the gospel. Jesus is said to be one who “on the one hand abolished death and on the other hand brought to light life and incorruptibility through the gospel” (1 Tim 2:10b). Here death has been nullified, one might assume through the activity on the Cross. However,
the text does not bring up the means by which Jesus abolished or nullified death (the word used is καταργέω). There is no reason to think that the Cross would not be known in the communities that these letters served, yet it is conspicuously absent from the text of the discussion. In the polite company that the Pseudo-Pauline author or authors are trying to establish, there is no room to contain or reason to invoke the messiness of the Cross. In the midst of these communities, the Cross might be the source of the very embarrassment that Timothy is being urged to resist. Rather than subverting, the Pastorals ideologically incorporate the whole of the Jesus story into the household codes of the time. The task is not to make strange, but to make acceptable. They recuperate the Cross and the whole of the Jesus story in order to organize a church. It makes sense that they would not revel in the most subversive parts of the story when trying to normalize the homes and offices of the church.

The authentic Pauline letters I have presented above show that Paul was ready to revel occasionally in the weird Cross. However, I must also mention the total absence of Cross-talk in his letter to the Romans. The only mention of the act of crucifixion is in Romans 6:6: “our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” In the most theologically robust of his letters, Paul has old humanity (ό παλαιός ἰμων ἀνθρωπος) on the Cross with Jesus (Rom 6:6). By literally layering what is suspended on the Cross with ideological concepts, he takes the conversation about the Cross to a more ideologically acceptable place. Of course, it is still a subversive conversation; Paul has made clear in Galatians and in Romans that he expects “death with Christ” as part of his Christian experience.
Still, this is a far distance from the strong language of Galatians and crucifixion before one’s very eyes.

These New Testament texts make it difficult to imagine the weirdness of the Cross in the text. That is, by having Jesus seen to be capable of eating and talking after his last breath on the Cross, the text shows the Cross not to have the power ascribed to Roman crosses. The weirdness Christians run to overcome is the otherworldly nature of a resurrected Messiah, not the otherworldly horror of a dying Messiah on the Cross. These two difficulties ask different things from their converts: Mark and Paul ask the reader to die with Jesus on the Cross, while the later Synoptics and Pastorals ask the reader to live with him again. Of course, I do not wish to oversimplify the complex character of the activities asked of Christians. This “Christian thing” is made up of all of these desires. A Weird Cross theology puts the emphasis of imagination back on the scandal of the Cross and allows modern people who are distant from crosses to be scandalized by the Cross before they move on to the resurrected Jesus.

Domestication after Constantine and Canonicity

Domesticating the Cross in the New Testament centered on adjusting the presentation of the Cross so that Christians could be good members of a culture, society or the Empire. The second moment in history I wish to highlight is around the time of Constantine’s rule (306-337 ce) when Christianity began to be a part of the Empire also incorporated as a part of the Imperial structure of meaning-making. It is tempting to name the Edict of Milan as the moment when Christianity was co-opted by
the Empire; history is, of course, not nearly that straightforward.\footnote{Nor is the so-called “Edict” quite as favorable to Christians in particular as its reputation in Christian history would claim. Rather, religious toleration in general is the clearest subject of this agreement between Licinius and Constantine. Lactantius, \textit{On the Deaths of the Persecutors (DMP)}, 48. Eusebius, \textit{Ecclesiastical History}, 10.5. Jeremy M. Schott tracks how Lactantius stressed the victory of the Christian enterprise immediately after 313 in his Constantinian edition of the text. Jeremy M. Schott, \textit{Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity} (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 106-109. Ramsay MacMullen dismisses the supposed disruptive political effects of the Edict. “Its immediate effect on [the great majority of Constantine’s subjects] was nil.” Over time, the toleration decreed here along with the money and buildings he drove toward Christian projects had the largest effect. The general favor of the emperor did more for conversion than any one degree, though the complex story of this conversion requires many more layers of analysis. Ramsay MacMullen, \textit{Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 44-51, passim.} In cultural theory terms, this act of recuperation is what Hebdige calls the “commodity form” of incorporation. That is, this form is concerned with “the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects.”\footnote{Hebdige, \textit{Subculture}, 94.} Because I am talking about activities from the fourth century, I am not aligning this particular commodification with the advanced capitalism with which the concept is usually connected. Instead, I am taking Hebdige’s idea of “mass-produced objects” in a loose sense. Rather than actual mass-production on the modern scale, I am showing the Cross after Constantine to be part of the Imperial symbol-system and therefore reproducible all over the Empire. With Vincent J. Miller, I find that commodification of elements of religious tradition has the consequence of abstracting them from other symbols in their religious system of meaning-making. These fragmented “discrete, free-floating signifiers” are more readily put to whatever more shallow use.\footnote{Vincent J. Miller, \textit{Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture} (New York: Continuum, 2009), 3, 77-106.} While Constantine officially made the Empire
Christian, he in the process ushered in (at least symbolically) the imperializing of Christianity, putting it to use as authority in the interest of creating a unified empire.

In the accounts of Lactantius and Eusebius, Constantine had a vision at or before the Battle of Milvian Bridge (312 CE) that somehow involved a Cross-like shape. He saw either a staurogram or a chi-ro shining in the sky before the decisive battle. Eusebius describes the labarum that Constantine used as his military standard, the “victory-bringing cross.” Rather than the tool of execution that Jesus died on, this Cross is constructed by jewelers and goldsmiths in gold and precious stones. Instead of a mocking sign proclaiming “King of the Jews,” this Cross had a victory wreath interwoven with a chi and a ro, the first two characters of the Greek word for “Christ.” Instead of a bleeding, dying body, there was suspended on the cross-bar a tapestry which was “covered with a pattern of precious stones fastened together, which glittered with shafts of light, and [was] interwoven with much gold.” It is no surprise that instead of horror, this Cross produced “an impression of indescribable beauty on those who saw it.”

Constantine has taken one of the most scandalous and subversive parts of the Christian story and put it at the head of his army. He has made an ideological shift certainly; what makes this a commodity form is that he “commanded replicas of it to lead all his

527 Other accounts besides the one in Eusebius’s Life of Constantine, which I use here, disagree slightly on the shape of the vision and its timing. For this argument, it is immaterial. Lactantius has the staurogram, or a Latin cross with a rounded top. Lactantius, On the Deaths of the Persecutors (DMP), 48. Eusebius’s other account does not mention the vision. Eusebius, Ecclesiastical History, 10.5.


Constantine has taken the tactical symbol of a subversive group and turned it into a strategic advantage for the Empire.\(^{531}\) In the afterglow of his control over the entire Western Roman Empire in the year following his victory at Milvian Bridge, Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which treated Christians more benevolently and called for an end to their official persecution.\(^{532}\) Once he began the process of Imperializing Christianity, he had to normalize the oddities of the group. There were a number of historical factors that gave rise to the need for some sort of fixed Christianity that one might reproduce. Irenaeus recognizes the need for unification in response to Marcion. There is a desire to stop the uncontrolled Montanists’ new prophecy. The Gnostics threatened dominance with their new sacred literature. Diocletian had already burned sacred books that might have guided Christians. In the midst of these disruptive forces, Constantine makes a call for uniformity.\(^{533}\) This call for uniformity is a call to commodity. That is, in order for one to reproduce a doctrine *en masse*, there must be centralized doctrinal elements.

In the midst of persecution, Constantine stepped in and attempted steps to reshape Christianity into a group united by common doctrine and scripture. Because Bishops could not agree on the proper definition of the nature of Christ, Constantine held the

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\(^{530}\) Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, I.31.3.

\(^{531}\) I follow the language of Michel de Certeau, where a tactic is a way of making do on the fly with whatever is available to a subculture and a strategy is a form of action or policy made by a dominant group. de Certeau, *Practice of Everyday Life*, 29-30.


coercive Council of Nicea and set himself up as a universal bishop to unify the church.\textsuperscript{534} The ultimate act of commodifying authority in the church would be to decide on binding doctrines and to create a fixed, closed, and authoritative canon. “Canon” is a word from the Greek κανόν, taken from the use of a reed as a ruler, which indicates a rule or norm. Here, I take a canon to be a list of scriptures that is thought to be closed (and generally perceived to be fixed), whose closure adds more weight to the already-established authority of the scriptures that make it up. A canon is a list of scripture that establishes a “norm” that is more than the sum of its parts. The power of the scriptures as an established norm is far more concentrated and easy to direct if confined to a closed canon.

A strictly closed canon, if it were to exist, would be a “strategic” move by an authority. Some consider Constantine’s commission to Eusebius for “fifty copies of the sacred writing” a decisive step toward canonizing the Christian Bible, the New Testament or the four-fold Gospel.\textsuperscript{535} However, the common groupings of Gospel books, which might contain three or four books (plus or minus John), could not have had the

\textsuperscript{534} David L. Dungan, \textit{Constantine's Bible: The Politics and Making of the New Testament} (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 119-122. I do not doubt these acts drove the church toward a common scripture, but Dungan overstates his argument for the “closure of the canon.”

canonizing authority than they are thought to have.\textsuperscript{536} There is no evidence that the church was able to create such a strategic grouping of books.

Instead of a closed canon, we have evidence of a number of canon lists from around this time. Eusebius produced a canon table that signified a sort of commodity version of the gospels. This canon become reproducible in lists, like those of Eusebius or the Muratorian Fragment, and spread rapidly through the fourth century and beyond.\textsuperscript{537} These lists of books were powerful measures of the authority or at least perceived power of these texts as a group. However, it is important to note that church authorities were not taking power directly from the ontological “excess of meaning” in the scriptures themselves. Rather, they were only able to harness power that came from the people themselves. These were lists of what Christian people were \textit{already} reading.\textsuperscript{538} Even powerful leaders had to bow to the way people made use of the scriptures in the canon rather than completely dictating the acceptable uses of scripture or which scriptures they could use. Scripture continued to be used “tactically” by people even while church authorities began to try to make use of it “strategically.”

\textsuperscript{536} Rather, Eusebius's list in \textit{Ecclesiastical History} 3.25 is much more important to the history of canon. Gregory A. Robbins, “‘Fifty Copies of Sacred Writings’ (\textit{Vigiliae Christianae} 4.36): Entire Bibles or Gospel Books?” \textit{Studia Patristica} 19 (1989), 91-98.


In sum, Constantine attached the Cross to his own standard that led the empire, yet he did not close the canon. The Cross in the text was still and is still a weird thing that was not recuperated for generic use. However, Constantine created a commodity form of the Cross that traveled at the head of all of his armies. He reformed the imperial power exercised by crosses from the feared horrific sight of execution to the feared and beautiful standard at the head of his conquering force. Jesus moves from suspension in an ignoble place to powerful protection. Either way, crosses afforded this use in that they allow for something to be held high over head. Whether this position is of pride or shame is largely determined by the purpose of the spectacle. What Constantine helped to make difficult to imagine was the picture of the type of imperial cross upon which Jesus was killed. By reproducing his own standard all over the Empire, he tried to replace the image of the ignoble Cross with the bright, opulent standard. The shining labarum makes it difficult to imagine the subversion of the Cross and instead, aligns it with imperial authority. The Cross here makes a bold, singular statement about the power of those who hold it. A theology of the Weird Cross in comics imagines instead a Cross troubled by many different views, fighting the commodity Cross by using it in tactical, guerilla ways.

Domestication in a Modern Context

The machinery of commodification is much more suited to our modern capitalist context. As such, the commodity form of the Cross in our world has gained much more purchase. Rather than riding at the head of a conquering army, the Cross in a dizzying

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539 See above, “Uses and Affordances”.

array of beautiful, spectacular, powerful and even cute forms exists all over North America. The Cross is a fragmented “discrete, free-floating signifier” ready to be put to whatever use, shallow or profound.\(^{540}\) The lighted Cross on the mountain that I can see from my balcony or the wavy Cross at Broadmoor United Methodist Church in Shreveport that I mentioned in chapter one are just two examples of Crosses that cover the continent, from the largest and most spectacular to the smallest and most personal.\(^{541}\) There are giant roadside crosses scattered over the United States, including the 190-foot Cross in Groom, Texas and the 198-foot illuminated “Cross at the Crossroads,” at the intersection of Interstates 57 and 70 in Effingham, Illinois. Both of these are battling to be the biggest, to enact what Timothy Beal calls an act of Christian imperialism, to “stake property, mark territory, and express dominance.”\(^{542}\) For years, I have seen another enormous Cross at Edmond, Oklahoma off Interstate 35 and Route 66 just north of the junction with Interstate 44. It is such a looming spectacle I was surprised to learn that it is not even in the running to be the biggest in the country. In every case, these big Crosses claim the land they overshadow for whatever church or ministry erects them. They use the Cross because of its affordances in the culture; it is immediately recognizable as a symbol of Christian churches. In particular, these huge Crosses are comfortably established as the brand of a particular Protestant Christianity, usually non-

\(^{540}\) Miller, *Consuming Religion*, 3, 77-106.


denominational or evangelical. They announce the presence of not just Christians, but Christians well-funded enough and with the priorities that would create such a public display of power to everyone who drives by, regardless of their desires. Most such churches would describe their Crosses as an invitation. It is not quite Constantine’s standard announcing the imminent destruction of enemies, yet it is not terribly far removed. Here, the Cross threatens to become the imperial symbol of Christians’ perceived control.

Huge Crosses are not the only way Crosses cover the culture; there are Crosses on buildings, billboards, letterhead, uniforms, cheap t-shirts, high-end fashion, jewelry from the simple to the elaborate, tattooed on gang members and youth ministers, and in every conceivable place where a symbol might be displayed. The Cross is so pervasive that it is impossible to track. A more robust survey might be better suited to capture this phenomenon. Even a brief look in almost any direction reveals the ubiquity of Crosses: rappers with Crosses covered in “bling;” Crosses in Sunday School rooms made with smiling multi-cultural children’s faces, children’s fingerprints or melted crayons; Crosses covered with flowers for Easter, made of palm fronds for Palm Sunday, made of nails for Good Friday, made of precious jewels and metals, rusty iron, tin foil, rhinestones, vintage recycled jewelry, recycled soda cans, metal washers, seashells, plastic beads, buttons, clothes pins, pennies, string, burlap, matchsticks, toilet paper rolls, recycled magazines, vintage hymnal paper, glass, mosaic pottery, crocheted yarn, leather, silk, lariat ropes, barbed wire, wood of every conceivable kind from knotty pine to ancient oak to found twigs; patterned with animal prints, peacock feathers and the plaid or stripe of the current
style; advertising sports, teams, states, nations, and slogans of every conceivable sentiment. Crosses are even seen where they were not intended, as in the 17-foot crossed steel beams found in the rubble of the World Trade Center.\footnote{After a challenge in court by the American Atheists organization the “Ground Zero Cross” will nevertheless remain in the WTC memorial as what the federal appeals panel called a piece of “genuine secular interest in recounting the history of extraordinary events.” Created by the fire and destruction of the WTC towers, the cross was blessed by Rev. Brian Jordan, a Franciscan priest, as a point of refuge. See, Rich Calder, “Steel ‘cross’ will stay at WTC memorial: court,” \textit{New York Post}, July 28, 2014, accessed April 14, 2015, http://nypost.com/2014/07/28/steel-cross-will-stay-at-wtc-memorial-court/} As this incomplete list indicates, the Cross is a pervasive symbol that people seem comfortable putting to a variety of uses with any number of materials.

For one literal example of domestication, see the practice of creating Cross Walls to fit any taste or décor.\footnote{I’ve collected some examples of this practice and other Crosses. “Crosses” board, \textit{Pintrest.com}. https://www.pinterest.com/elizabethcoody/crosses/} Here, what are most often Christians gather various Crosses that they collect sometimes over years and cover prominent walls of their homes with these Crosses of various sizes in a collage. They take Crosses and recontextualize them as home décor that they might simply take as decoration or used as a part of private rituals. Many times these displays fall into the category of religious kitsch, yet I am not critiquing taste here.\footnote{McDannell, \textit{Material Religion}, 165-7.} Rather, I am trying to connect the history of the tradition to the theology of the Cross generally. If Christ was killed twenty years ago, would it be acceptable to decorate with electric chairs? Here the commodity form of the Cross is an acceptable way to decorate a home, whether the message is engaged or not. The Cross is loosed from its weird meaning to find its way literally into the home.
Many modern Christians have inherited this commodity form of the Cross that constrains the weird and tensions. Christians are haunted by both the need to be a part of the public world and the desire to be apart from it, so the Cross serves this tension by being both a sort of brazen marker of Christianity and a socially acceptable way to advertise one’s faith. As Walter Brueggemann cautions,

But suspicion is in order, for after the early church had insisted upon “Jesus Christ and him crucified,” the church has been endlessly busy with a theology of glory that acts as if all the wounds of Friday are easily countered by Easter, when in fact the wounds are not covered but instead live unsettled with continuing healing power. The covering of suspicion in the name of triumph is precisely what cuts us off from the Crucified One and makes us imitators of every trivialization.546

Rather than a sign of living “unsettled with continuing healing power” these Crosses that cover Christians are signs of their buying power. Christians have gone from being users of the Cross to its consumers. Marketers cover their products with Crosss in order to find an audience rather than unsettle it. It is a lack of imagination that has make this domestic Cross a dangerous and nearly-invisible resident in the Christian home.

If the Cross is cleansed of its horrors, it makes the Christians blind to its layers of meaning. As James Cone says, “The cross has been turned into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that Christians wear around their necks.” Cone has demonstrated that white Christians in America even have trouble seeing the obvious parallels between the cross and the lynching tree. As noted earlier this threatens the “credibility and promise of the Christian gospel and the hope that we may heal the wounds of racial violence that

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546 Brueggemann, Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope, 55.
continue to divide our churches and our society.” The Cross in Paul and Mark simultaneously holds the ideas of revulsion and of God’s breaking into the world to redeem humanity. The pervasive domestic Cross has made that Cross’s connection to the modern social world difficult to imagine. Crosses are domesticated and so cease to call Christians to look outside of their homes.

My argument, as I have shown throughout this project, is that although all these forces have been at work to domesticate it for various reasons both noble and selfish, the Cross has still remained weird. It is the process of imagining this weirdness that I have been seeking with the help of the comics I have read. Before I show the final theological fruits of that toil, there are a few words of caution in order about what it means to confront this Cross that is comfortably domestic in North American Christian homes and as imagine it as weird.

**Dangers of Imagination**

The basic goals of domesticating anything is to make it safe for the home. To “undomesticate” would be to make something wild that once was tame. That is not my goal for the Cross. Instead, I wish to reveal the wolf that still lies within the heart of the dog curled up by the fire. I wish to show that the Cross contains more than the theologies that it currently bears, that it is already ontologically weird. The danger here is in realizing that the Cross is not safe already. The Cross is more than either abuse to the suffering or comfort to the saved. It contains both and still more. It is has an excess of

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547 Cone, Cross and the Lynching Tree, xiv.
meaning that cannot be contained safely.\textsuperscript{548} It is part of what Robert Orsi calls “abundant event,” that is, “experiences of radical presence or realness” that are “characterized by aspects of the human imagination that cannot be completely accounted for by social and cultural codes, that go beyond authorized limits.”\textsuperscript{549} To reveal something to be abundant is an act of the working imagination—a dangerous act because it admits the event to be beyond control.

With Orsi, I want to push at the limits of scholarship in order to illuminate these limits and transgress borders. Orsi is not a biblical scholar, yet he points toward a rethinking of religious activities and studies that biblical scholars can tap into. The specific term of Orsi’s I wish to use here is “abundant history”—that is, history made up of abundant events. This abundance is the excess that spills over when the transcendent breaks into time. The Cross in the New Testament is an axis around which the story of the divine turns. Here the interpretation of the event as a saving even or even an event worth repeating is an act of abundance, of seeing more there than can be accounted for by social and cultural codes.

It is difficult for scholars to explain how the New Testament authors who use the Cross were able to communicate this to their original audience. How were early Christians convinced to follow or even able to make sense of a crucified Messiah? Nils

\textsuperscript{548} The phrase “excess of meaning” is from David Tracy in his address of the classic text. It “demands constant interpretation” and dies when readers are no longer “willing to be provoked by its claim to attention.” I think it is fair to say that the Cross still provokes and is such a classic with excess of meaning. Tracy, \textit{Analogical Imagination}, 102. See also, Frank Kermode, \textit{The Classic} (New York: Viking, 1975), 1-45.

Dahl made a paradigm shifting move in “The Crucified Messiah” precisely (in part) because he speaks of the biblical Christ as the operative figure in history. He explained the beginning of Christianity by taking seriously the eminent reality of the biblical Christ and the possibility of other non-biblical interpretations of the event.550 He anticipates Orsi by calling on historians to allow their interpretations to be “enriched and corrected by being open to interpretations that have been given to the events by men [sic] who share in them and have been shaped by them.”551 Explaining an event in historical context is a proper kind of task for a biblical scholar. Occasionally the event goes beyond the limits of history. The Cross is abundant in that part of what makes it difficult to explain is the way its influence surpasses expectations.

Acknowledging this abundance helps me recognize that there is a “more” beyond the limits that I as scholar can address. This project does not and will not attempt to explain the whole of the Cross. I am working within the limits of a dissertation project. Orsi allows my work push at those limits and warns of the dangers in this new space beyond the traditional limits. He cautions that in working with abundance where the sum of 2+2 equals 5, “the sum of 2+2 can also be cruelty and violence, cultural dissolution as well as cultural innovation. Any understanding of such events is going to be incomplete and frustrating, and any analysis has to be honest about this.”552 So, to be honest, when I imagine the scandal of the Cross with a graphic/novel reading what I come out with is

552 Orsi, “When 2+2=5.”
itself uncomfortably weird. The bizarre and the supernatural are not easy subjects.
Through this novel and graphic understanding of Paul and Mark and the weird Cross they evoke, I can begin to re-appropriate the weirdness of the Cross that Paul and Mark used. However, I come to the edge of what I can see in the text as a biblical scholar. At the edge of our imaginations, I hope to find more ways to relate our work to the real lives of people. While there are dangers in imagining, the dangers of ignoring the Cross strike me as more pressing.

A Theology of a Weird Cross

Claiming the Cross to be weird opens up layers of meanings rather than closes them off. As I explained in chapter one, I use the weight of the etymological history of the word “weird” rather than using it to redefine σκάνδαλον or the “scandal” of the Cross that Paul names (1 Cor 1:23). “Weird” shows that the Cross is dealing with fate or destiny, controlling fate, characterized as strange, uncanny, otherworldly, and also untrustworthy, outsider, and related to horror, terror, and the spectacle of the odd. In this project, I have found that in order to focus on the spectacle of the Cross, one must leave room for the marginal, take account of emotion, and never make bold, singular statements. That is what it ultimately means to find the Cross weird—to be unable to hold the Cross as one event, to see its own irony reading back into it like an image reinterprets text and text reinterprets an image.
From the Comics Themselves

Because I rooted this project in learning from a variety of North American comics that portray Jesus and his Cross, and in applying a particular message, the results of the readings are appropriately diffuse. I encounter them and allow them to stimulate my theological imagination. In order to make sure that I still allow the comics a guiding role, even in my conclusion, I would like to begin by offering a brief idea of a way each comic has contributed to my Weird Cross theology. What follows is not a list of each comics’ only contribution, rather, I try to name one of the primary ways that each has guided my thinking:

- *Crossed* shocks with the grotesque Cross, pointing out the distance between our perceptions of the Cross and its original disgusting use.

- *Black Jesus* shows the Cross an untrustworthy symbol rooted in white power, used to abuse the Black community even from within.

- *Blinded* shows the Cross as part of a dangerous and alien world that is difficult to navigate and misunderstood from the start.

- *Miniature Jesus* shows how the activity of the Cross participates in the other-worldly, sometimes with a good reputation, sometime not.

- *New Adventures of Jesus* shows how the Cross appears silly when compared to other suffering.
• *Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun* shows the Cross an indelicate weapon.

• *Jesus Hates Zombies* shows the Cross has psychological and physical consequences that must be seen through many different eyes.

• *Marked* shows the Cross as a commonplace technology of control and Empire.

• *Eye Witness* shows the Cross as violent, but constrained by documents and matters of truth.

• *Action Bible* shows the Cross cannot be made convincingly triumphant using hypermasculine tropes.

• *Yummy Fur* shows the Cross as off-center, slippery to portray, and always uncomfortable in its surroundings.

This list certainly feels herky-jerky, but I want to start my theology with this sense of the individual contributions. A smooth start to a conclusion would not be appropriate to the resources I have used or the weird feelings they have created. However, there are some themes that have created what I think is a usefully subversive theological picture of the Cross, even if it is not a smooth one. After all, this is the Weird Cross and the weird is rarely tranquil.

First, the Cross is multiple. Like most anything represented in sequential art, it must be repeated to be understood existing across time. This repetition of the Cross lends
itself to simplification and symbolization. Here the elements that make a cross the Cross
shift from a traditional symbol to something weird. A whole ceiling of Crosses in Marked
show the weight of the numbers. These repetitions do not just mean one Cross after
another, but also Crosses that bombard the senses with their repetition. Yummy Fur shows
how difficult it is keeping the repeating Cross at the center of the frame. There is an
emotional component: repetitions do not just simplify, they can also overwhelm.

Second, the Cross is obviously a weapon. These comics hasten to remind us that
crosses are not innocent; they are instruments of torture and death, like in Crossed.
However, the Cross is a weapon in other hands as well. For New Adventures, In the Name
of the Gun, and Jesus Hates Zombies, the Cross is a weapon of war that Jesus has taken
hold of against whatever or whoever attacks him. These comics area clear that the Cross
is dangerous. It is a weapon that affords destruction. It can be wielded by the dominant or
the oppressed, yet its power is often rooted in the dominant race or political entity. As
such, the Cross cannot be trusted to be always at work for the oppressed. This is
worrisome and certainly threatening.

Third, the Cross itself is outside modern experience. It comes from an alien world,
and it is at the crux of an otherworldly event. It is alien to human life (because it is a site
of death) and Enlightenment science (because it is a site of the supernatural). The form of
the Cross that enters the home is not this Cross. This Cross is not safe, as I have said
above.

Finally, the Cross is always uncomfortable in its context and in comparison. It is a
traumatic event. When placed alongside a companion story like “Ed the Happy Clown”
the discomfort is more obvious, yet in all these comics there is a consciousness of something risky being done when putting the Cross in a comic. It is brought into a different focus. It is not the greatest suffering when viewed in these comics. In fact, the Cross is not well described by any superlative at all. It is a site of abundant meaning, too much meaning, and yet not necessarily all meanings so that it comes out as the biggest, best, or most important. In order to focus on the Cross, one must leave room for multiple Crosses and take account of the emotional components without running too quickly to superlatives. The way these comics have treated the Cross has been a wild ride. The way they treated the Cross was a decision the creators made for each work. More than just the thematic content, the form itself has a contributed to my understanding of the Weird Cross, a realization to which I must return.

Contribution of the Form

The act of reading comics taught me much by the form itself. I have repeatedly mentioned the irony of the blending of image and text, but it bears mention again here. Comics show by their form how easy it is to have the image and text deconstruct one another. The image one has in mind or on the page of Jesus or the Cross itself undercuts and is undercut by the words one uses to discuss it.

These comics show that there is always a gutter where the real activity of reading happens. There is always a space between frames and panels where the reader crucifies Jesus again. What exactly happens in those gutters matters immensely to how the reader sees the text. This interpretation marks how the reader will then act in the world when
they make use of the text. The gutter suggests an infinite number of possible moments outside the frame that the Cross could encounter. Mark and Paul’s vision of the Cross limits the picture, and so “conveys an ‘etcetera’, i.e. one that suggests it may continue beyond its own physical limits.”\(^{553}\) However, this space beyond is difficult to write about in traditional ways. Comics access this etcetera to “make us think that what we see in the frame is not all, but only an example of a totality whose number is hard to calculate.”\(^{554}\) When comics ask the reader to make an effort in creating closure they ask her to crucify Jesus in her own mind and apply her own feelings about Jesus to make a complete emotional picture. Comics ask readers to engage their imagination to provide closure.

The comic creators here have creatively encountered the Cross as unashamedly subjective interpreters ready to play with their material. This attitude is a breath of fresh air for traditional academic reading. In this project such an attitude toward material common to comics is taken as a warrant and permission to read. Rather than have meaning blocked by “the particular presuppositions and patterns of theological thinking in our own day,” we should accept our location like we test the locations of other interpreters.\(^{555}\) Rather than be dissociated from our time, we should be conscious of it and even willing to apply it to the material at hand that we read closely.

These comics treat the Cross in relationship with their own times and communities without dissociating it from their social world. They treat the Cross in

\(^{553}\) Eco, *Infinity*, 37.

\(^{554}\) Eco, *Infinity*, 38.

\(^{555}\) Wiles, “Domesticated Apostle,” 208. Wiles cautions that we should not judge interpretations for their position as “children of their own time” before we have considered our own.
relationship to race (Black Jesus), technology (Marked), their encounter with pluralism (Miniature Jesus), their impressions of the text (Yummy Fur), the suffering around them (New Adventures), violence (Crossed), and a frustration with theodicy (Jesus Christ In the Name of the Gun). They do not ignore their location rather they connect their point of view intimately with the text. We are all children of our time. These comics own that heritage.

In locating themselves and their material, these comics have expanded their imagination with respect to the text. It was fascinating to see most of the artists work from their impressions of the text from childhood or the culture rather than the biblical text itself. However, it would have also been engaging to watch more of them encounter the text more directly (like in Yummy Fur or Marked, for example). Unmediated images might have been big and weird enough to engross them. The text could be even more strange than they might have thought. As in Donald Juel’s scriptural imagination, “When the Bible confronts us with images and stories of God that show our conceptions of the world and the divine to be too small or too self-centered, we can resist those words or allow them to expand our imaginations.” When the picture of the Cross is too small, it leaves out the abundant meanings it is capable of expressing. When it is too self-centered, it is a weapon in selfish hands. The need for imagination is urgent, because when there is not enough imagination there is a risk that readers could repeat the failures of the imagination that leaves scholars and theologians silent while real people suffer.

The sickening failure of imagination around the Cross has haunted this dissertation. To be stuck in this failure is what Theodore Jennings calls the biblical text’s “cloying confinement in the cultlike enclave of traditional religious reading.”\textsuperscript{557} We need fresh eyes whether we are traditional Christian religious readers or “card-carrying members of the Society of Biblical Literature… who need to unlearn as well as learn.”\textsuperscript{558} I have admittedly, from the outset, taken on much too large of a symbol than one project can hope to accommodate. On the whole, I have been striving to open the interpretive door that I find blocked by domestication even in my own mind.

When the door is open wide we can see a Cross enmeshed in paradoxical readings. James Cone shows one such place where this paradox acts:

African Americans embraced the story of Jesus, the crucified Christ whose death they claimed paradoxically gave them life, just as God resurrected him in the life of the earliest Christian community. While the lynching tree symbolized white power and “black death,” the cross symbolized divine power and “black life”—God overcoming the power of sin and death.\textsuperscript{559}

The Cross, although it is a sight of death, is also a sight of overcoming death. The close association of the Cross and the lynching tree both did and did not taint the power of the Cross. For Toni Morrison’s character Steward Morgan, the hatred of those associated with the Cross have hopelessly contaminated it; “A cross was no better than the


\textsuperscript{558} Anderson and Moore, Introduction, \textit{Mark and Method}, 24.

\textsuperscript{559} Cone, \textit{Cross and the Lynching Tree}, 18.
It is both intrinsically powerful and wholly fed by power from without. I hope that the paradox invited by reading in a graphic/novel way creates the same ironic power for those without power. While I can feel the danger inherent in the Cross, I also have permission to see it all over and in my own social world.

I am calling Christians “to see that ‘They are crucifying again the Son of God’ (Heb 6:6). Both Jesus and blacks were ‘strange fruit.’…He was crucified by the same principalities and powers that lynched black people in America.” To arrive at a moment where the Cross can truly accommodate a vision of both help and hurt, both imperial power and resistance, weapon for and against the oppressed, with each version ironically interplaying with its opposite like a text with an image, will be to arrive at a truly Weird Cross.

Beginning to Bear It Once It is Bare

Once I take seriously the idea, gleaned from comics, that the Cross is a dangerous, ironic symbol, I must take on the Crosses with which I began this study and the people that bear them. I want to return, for my final encounter, to those made “strange fruit” that haunt Crosses all over the United States and especially in Shreveport and Marilyn Van Derbur and the Cross on the mountain. Because the writings of Paul and Mark still play a vital role in Christian communities and are sought to provide a practical or constructive


561 Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.
theology that speaks to the Marilyn Van Derburs of these communities, we must come to understand better the Cross at center of these writings. To serve these people well, a practical reading of this symbol for Christian communities also demands we take account of the Crosses that play in the world. The Cross on the mountain is so large, so prominent. How can Christians bear it once its abundant meaning as a “thing” is bared? If I am to begin to move toward some new understanding, what can we do with this theological stance? This will take an act of imagination at work. Rather than concluding here, I hope this begins further dialog with more comics and more texts.

By providing a remix of Paul and Mark's messages concerning the Cross, I have provided resources for exegesis of what those messages might be in the biblical texts themselves. The domestication of the Cross blocks believers from the powerful message it can offer to the suffering. The weird Cross offers assurance that the Cross can contain both hurt and more than hurt, even help.

At Broadmoor United Methodist Church in Shreveport, there still hangs a wooden Cross—rugged, at least in suggestion, and run through with a ripple of elegant curves. It is still beautiful. The Cross needs to be understood as one would a double-edged blade. For white Christians to build an alliance with black Christians they must begin to truly struggle with the Cross and the lynching tree. To allow that the lynching tree can be read in the Cross and then to accept its possible horror are to attain a spiritual maturity that ironically rests in tensions. To accept this Cross is to allow the narrative multiplicity—to see Jesus with a black body, as a miniature Jesus come down from the wall, as willing to machine-gun those who have committed racially-motivated atrocities. The attitude one
brings to this Cross determines what conversations one can begin when the Cross is in view. That is to say, the church should be an obvious place to begin healing wounds of racial atrocities. At the head of the altar is a site of suffering and an opportunity to begin a conversation about how white people might confront the damage of the lynching tree. Those who inherit the pain of perpetrating these acts need help imagining their place in the healing process. A weird Cross that accommodates multiple meanings might be a place to start this dialog.

Marilyn Van Derbur begins her book about her long experience of incest by telling the story of the Cross on the mountain side that can be seen all over Denver the way her father did. Only after hearing about his control of his family by terror and then his nightly repeated acts of violation against his own daughter does the full horrible weight of the story take hold. Here is a weird Cross. For its builder, it was a sign of his own power, an aid to his ego, and evidence of devotion to his mother. For his long-suffering daughter it highlighted his revolting hypocrisy. A Cross constructed by someone who hurts is nonetheless a real Cross. These comics, however clumsy in the face of such real suffering, show that the Cross is always weird in this and other ways. Each shows a Cross as a source of violence, sometimes hopelessly grotesque in a wild variety of ways. While these comics might not be direct helps to survivors of violence, they show interpreters who see only the domesticated Cross the violence what many people also see. Instead of hiding the violence with objective readings that lack emotion, these comics show how obvious it already is. There is no hiding the violence of the

Cross; there is only unwieldy sublimation. Interpreters can confront the tension of the Cross rather than willing it away.

The Cross on the mountain is most visible when the night is darkest. The carpet of lights from the foothills does not reach the Cross. Rather, it appears to hover above the city. The unconscionable crimes of its builder are perhaps known only to a very few people who see it every night. There is no telling what people make of it. Its meaning is out of control. There it is—a still-glowing, even garish Cross on the mountainside. I have imagination to see it with eyes disturbed by the scandal. The message is off-center; how we’ve seen it is only one way. Because it is weird, it is hard to contain.

I have a conviction that comics can help us imagine more, that the Cross can be more than theologies so far have allowed it to be, and that the human imagination is a more abundant place. The imagination is not merely a place in the mind; it works in the world and directs action. Holding just a few ideas from a spectrum of people working in the comics form has given me a glimpse of the many ways that dissonant layers and tensions can be held at once. This is certainly not the end of the project of imagining the scandal of the Cross with graphic/novel reading. There are many more comics to explore and this project has only flirted briefly with the myriad images of the Cross that exist. There are abundant opportunities for new encounters with material if interpreters are willing to participate.
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Illustrations

i. In this panel, Jesus begins his Aramaic final words, “"Eloi Eloi” which continue, “Lema Sabachthani?” meaning, “O my God my God, why have you forsaken me?” The swarming cameras inspire me to imagine other perspectives.

Steve Ross (w, a), Marked (New York: Seabury Church Publishing, 2005), n.p.
©Steve Ross 2005


Photograph by the author.
iii. This Alexander Calder mobile is best viewed in person to show the movement and multiple angles possible in three dimensions.

Alexander Calder. *Lone Yellow*, enamel on sheet metal with steel wire, 1961 (San Francisco Museum of Modern Art)
iv. Here the demon both participates in the panels and runs around them. Jesus is shown to have the power to defeat the demon, even in the gutter of the page.

©Steve Ross 2005
v. The cover to the first issue sets an unsettling horror tone. It is a close-up of a white, blond man with the exposed red, excoriated mark of the Crossed across his entire face. His eyes are glassy and bloodshot; his mouth, stretched into a gum-exposing grimace.

Garth Ennis (w), and Jacen Burrows (a). “Crossed” Crossed #0 (July 2008). Rantoul, IL: Avatar, 2008.
vi. The cover of issue #9 features a priest nailed to a crucifix. Unlike the same figure inside, this priest is still alive, has his flesh, and is facing the same direction as the body of Jesus. Both have distressed looks on their faces.

vii. The first words in the issue (Oh, Christ.) follow a tense, silent page while the Stan and Cindy look for and then find the body of Cindy’s child.

Garth Ennis and Jacen Burrows 2010
In the first panel the words “Bet that came as a shock” float out of a church building just over the close up interior of the skeletal body of the priest nailed to a crucifix with closed eyes. The reply “Yeah. I guess it must have” comes in the final panel where we see Cindy and Stan’s rather blank reactions.

Garth Ennis and Jacen Burrows 2010
ix. The top panel shows a bird’s eye view of the characters over the slack-jawed skull of the priest in the foreground. They are silent; their postures, stiff. The bottom panel has a close-up of Cindy looking up from her reverie to say “I bet the look on his face was a picture. I guess we ought to cut him down, before we move on the morning.”
x. The back cover has a red, dripping Cross on a dark background. The color suggests blood, but the form could also suggest dripping spray paint.

Jimmy Blondell (w), David Krintzman (w), and Nicholas Da Silva (a). *Black Jesus* (Coquitlam, BC, Canada: Arcana Comics, 2009), backcover.
xi. Time slows when Chris reaches his adopted father’s door. The individual moves to touch the mezuzah, kiss his fingers, knock on the door, and wait thoughtfully are each illustrated in equal-sized, narrow panels.

Jimmy Blondell, David Krintzman, Nicholas Da Silva 2009
xii. The conversation in the church begins at a broad shot showing the whole sanctuary and Christ praying in front of a white Jesus crucifix in the distance. Several panels feature the conversation with the janitor, but the two panels that show the Jesus figure (one from a bird’s eye just behind the Cross and another from just below the figure) show this Jesus to have unmistakably blonde hair, blue eyes, and pale white skin.
xiii. Tiny points over his shoulder to a black and white television image of Canivean leaving his helicopter. Canivean is shaking hands with a row of white people. The Cross on his helicopter dominates the side of the craft.

Jimmy Blondell, David Krintzman, Nicholas Da Silva 2009
The Cross on Canivean’s lapel twist and turns through a full page of panels depicting his interview.

Jimmy Blondell, David Krintzman, Nicholas Da Silva 2009
Brogan’s crazed, wide-open eye is the background for a page of panels depicting Chris using his gift to see Brogran’s disturbing past. In the largest image on the page, a person wearing a cassock and gold Cross necklace molests Brogan as a child; the child shouts “AARRRGH!” in unusually large, blue typescript. No flesh is shown, but the image is disturbing nonetheless.
xvi. Maria’s Cross only appears before her exotic dancing is revealed.
The rows of black men in the BSG line up to receive a brand. As one man is branded, a leader says “Today another brotha gets one step closer to God.” The other gathered men raise their fists and say “God be with him” together in a dialog bubble with a ragged outer edge.

Jimmy Blondell, David Krintzman, Nicholas Da Silva 2009
xviii. Rev. Canivean’s arrival is again heralded by an abundance of crosses, this time all over the Red Cross trucks, worker shirts, and boxes of supplies.
xix. Paul arrives on the scene as an agent of the government forces.

©Steve Ross 2008

xx.
Paul has horrible dreams about the apocalypse before he begins his ministry.
xxii. Paul runs into hazardous construction on the road to Damascus.
xxiii. A miraculous catch or just good timing?
xxiv. Paul is blind, but only for a moment.

©Steve Ross 2008

xxv. One of the rare appearances of the Cross when Paul invokes sacrifice.

©Steve Ross 2008
xxvi.

©Steve Ross 2008
xxvii. Just because the methods of execution are different does not mean they are not appropriately disturbing.
xxviii. One last hint of Crosses as Paul rows onto a rescue ship.

©Steve Ross 2008

xxix. H.P. the supernatural cat-carcass starts talking after his first panel and hardly stops until the end. Here I show him silent at the beginning, as he begins to talk about Ninkasi, and a more typical look from the rest of the book.

I'd be lying if I said I was impressed.

You're an alcoholic. So, lying comes naturally to you.
xxx. The covers to issues #1-5 and some alternative covers to the collected edition. Only issue #3 does not feature Jesus in some way.

©Ted McKeever 2013

©Ted McKeever 2013
xxxi. Jesus comes off the Cross.

©Ted McKeever 2013
xxxii. Jesus, Atlas-like, holds up the pastor’s shoe.
The Renaissance-style awakening with a broken plaster arm show fascinating changing styles over these three pages.

©Ted McKeever 2013
©Frank Stack 2006
xxxv. Here an unnamed figure, one might assume Thomas, pokes at Jesus’s wounds.

©Frank Stack 2006
xxxvi. Jesus negotiates with the draft board.
xxxvii. God reads Jesus his pedigree.
xxxviii. None of Jesus’s comings end well for him.
xxxix. Movie Jesus makes a great impression.

©Frank Stack 2006
xl. The stirring climax of the film brings down the house.
xli. Cigar-chomping Jesus is frustrated by God’s inactivity.

Eric Peterson (w), and Ethan Nicolle (w,a), *Jesus Christ: In the Name of the Gun*, vol. 1: A Hollow Cost ([Unknown]: Bad Karma Productions, 2009).
©Eric Peterson 2009
xlii. Jesus arranges for another incarnation.
©Eric Peterson 2009
This Jesus is frustrated by his perceived failure.
xlv. The Cross is a weapon.
Arguably, this is the most heroic characterization of Jesus in the whole Jesus Hates Zombies collection; it’s certainly the most patriotic.

Stephen Lindsay (w), Michael Bartolotta (w), and Lauren Mohardo et al. (a). Jesus Hates Zombies: Those Slack-Jaw Blues (Levittown, NY: Alterna Comics, 2009)
Image: Stephanie O’Donnell, © Stephen Linsday 2009
xlvii.

Image: Anthony Summey, ©Stephen Linsday 2009
Hibbons. My name is Cole Gibbons. And don’t call him Big Foot! How would you like it if I assumed you were Jewish based on the size of your nose?

But I am Jewish...

And I haven’t lost touch with reality. I’m a cryptozoologist. This zombie business has finally given me a chance to search for Sasquatch without the ridicule of the so-called ‘scientific community’! So if you don’t mind...

Image: Lauren Monardo, ©Stephen Linsday 2009
xlix. This is another contender for the most heroic Jesus shot in the collection.
1. Perhaps the Holy Sprit arrives?

Image: Michael Zhansson, © Stephen Linsday 2009
AEC FORAH! SIRRE! TODAY, ISN'T THE SAY TO BE FLICKER WITH AFI?

Image: Felipe Cunha, © Stephen Linsday 2009
Here Jesus starts from a low point: on the floor, seen from a bird’s eye view, sucking his thumb.
liii. Crucified again:

Image: Mark Lauthier © Stephen Linsday 2009
liv.
Steve Ross (w, a), *Marked* (New York: Seabury Church Publishing, 2005), cover. © Steve Ross 2005
Ivi. *Marked* makes an appearance in the pages of *Marked*.

© Steve Ross 2005
lviii. These two panels fall on the right edge just before the page-turn that reveals the “Not at first” splash page in the next note.
lix. Here are examples of the distant and close-up images that pepper the crucifixion scene.

© Steve Ross 2005

lx.

© Steve Ross 2005
lxii. The inside opening pages begin with Jesus’s torture. Four small squares of different colors show drawings of Jesus in a progressive state of disrepair: in the first, blue panel his hands are bond; in the second, green panel his hands are bound and his face is beaten; in the third, yellow, panel he is beaten all over the body we can see and his clothes are torn; and in the final, red panel, his hands are not longer bound, but he is covered in markings and has on a crown of thorns. His expression remains passive.

Image permission denied.


Robert James Luedke 2004

lxiii. The torture scene includes tiny parchment scraps that help the reader track the story. The parchment narrative is dry and clinical. A guard’s steady speech bubbles count out the lashes: “That’s ten!” “Twenty one.” “Thirty two.” Jesus bleeds, he recites scripture interrupted with cries of pain in a wavering speech bubble.

Image permission denied.

Robert James Luedke 2004

lxiv. In the final crucifixion moment, Jesus is nailed to a T-shaped Cross. The parchment locates the exact time and the moment alongside Joseph’s musings about the horror of it
all. In a smooth speech bubble, Jesus says, “Father… cough… forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

Image permission denied.
Robert James Luedke 2004
Crucified! Title, Mauss 2010, 635.
lxviii. Brown’s Matthew Jesus has a furious brow.

Chester Brown (Yummy Fur #32) 1994 ©Chester Brown 1994
Brown’s other comic that shares an issue with Mark has various angles and perspectives in contrast to Mark’s regular and strict style.
And they take Jesus to the High Priest.

And all the chief priests and scribes are assembled.

And Peter follows him at a distance.

And he enters the courtyard of the High Priest and he sits with the servants.

lxxi. Jesus glowers from behind the curtain of his once-angelic hair.


lxxii.

Chester Brown (#14, 80) 1989, ©Chester Brown 1989
lxxiii.

AND THOSE WHO ARE PASSING BY CURSE HIM AND SHAKE THEIR HEADS.

HA! THE ONE WHO WANTED TO DESTROY THE TEMPLE AND REBUILD IT IN THREE DAYS.

SAVE YOURSELF AND COME DOWN FROM THAT CROSS.

AND THOSE CRUCIFIED WITH HIM ALSO INSULT HIM.

AND IT IS THE SIXTH HOUR AND DARKNESS COMES OVER ALL THE LAND UNTIL THE NINTH HOUR.

AND IT IS THE NINTH HOUR.

ELOI, ELOI, LAMA SABACHTHANI?

AND THIS MEANS, "MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU DESERTED ME?"

AND ONE OF THE PEOPLE THERE RUNS AND FILLS A SPONGE WITH VINEGAR...

AND THE CHIEF PRIESTS ALSO MAKE FUN OF HIM AMONGST THEMSELVES AND WITH THE SCRIBES.

IF HE WANTS US TO BELIEVE THAT HE'S THE CHRIST AND THE KING OF ISRAEL THEN HE CAN'T SAVE HIMSELF, LET'S SEE HIM COME DOWN FROM HIS CROSS!

lxxiv.

Chester Brown (#14, 87) 1989, ©Chester Brown 1989
SEE WHERE THEY LAID HIM? GO TELL HIS DISCIPLES AND PETER THAT HE'S GOING AHEAD OF YOU INTO GALILEE AND THAT YOU WILL SEE HIM AS HE TOLD YOU.

AND THEY GO OUT AND RUN FROM THE TOMB AND THEY ARE TREMBLING AND EXCITED AND THEY SAY NOTHING TO ANYONE BECAUSE THEY ARE AFRAID RATHER.

HE GOT UP EARLY ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK AND APPEARED TO MARY MAGDALENE FIRST (SHE'S THE ONE THAT HE'D CAST SEVEN DEMONS OUT OF) AND SHE WENT AND TOLD THE OTHERS WHO'D SEEN HIM AND THEY WERE ALL SAD AND CRYING AND WHEN THEY HEARD THAT HE WAS ALIVE AND THAT SHE'D SEEN HIM THEY DIDN'T BELIEVE HER.

AFTER THAT HE APPEARED IN A DIFFERENT FORM TO TWO OF THEM WHO WERE GOING INTO THE COUNTRY AND THEY WENT AND TOLD THE REST AND AGAIN THEY WOULDN'T BELIEVE.

AND THEN LATER WHEN THE ELEVEN WERE SITTING AROUND HE APPEARED AND SCOLDED THEM FOR NOT BELIEVING AND FOR HAVING HARD HEARTS AND NOT LISTENING TO THE ONES WHO HAD SEEN HIM RAISED.

AND HE TOLD THEM, "GO OUT INTO THE WORLD AND PREACH THE GOOD NEWS TO EVERYONE AND TELL THEM THAT THOSE WHO BELIEVE AND ARE BAPTIZED WILL BE SAVED BUT THOSE WHO DON'T BELIEVE WILL BE CONDEMNED AND THAT THESE SIGNS WILL FOLLOW THOSE WHO BELIEVE: THEY'LL CAST OUT DEMONS IN MY NAME, SPEAK IN NEW LANGUAGES, PICK UP SNAKES AND DRINK POISON WITHOUT BEING HURT AND PLACE THEIR HANDS ON THE SICK AND CURE THEM.

AND THEN AFTER SPEAKING TO THEM HE WAS TAKEN UP INTO HEAVEN AND SAT ON THE RIGHT OF GOD AND THEY WENT OUT AND PREACHED EVERYWHERE AND THE LORD WORKED WITH THEM AND CONFIRMED THEIR MESSAGE WITH THE SIGNS THAT FOLLOWED.