This article examines three texts of graphic novels each of which portrays biblical stories drawn from the book of Genesis: The texts are from Siku’s *The Manga Bible*, R. Crumb’s *Genesis*, and Iva Hoth’s *The Picture Bible*. Through a survey of each of these accounts with an examination of the choices of content, design and comic style, we will explore how artistic (image) and editorial (script) decisions create meaning, how the sequential art form acts as an interpretive layer allowing different theologies to emerge, and how these graphic novels might be positioned meaningfully among other critical readings. Just as the biblical text needs to be interpreted, these graphic novels do as well.

In a recent study on critical biblical method, Corrie Carvalho’s 2009 *Primer on Biblical Methods*, the author includes a section on cultural criticism which demonstrates its migration from the broader world of literature into the realm of biblical studies. Carvalho explains the method as one that is particularly interested in “the 'unofficial' or non-controllable vehicles for cultural expression: street art, music, paperback novels, sitcoms, and so on.” Its aims are to undercut the monopolization of culture by the elite and privileged and to make room for culture that is not usually the subject of elite study.

Thanks to cultural critics the study of both comics and graphic novels, known as sequential art, has been permitted into the arena of serious scholarly engagement and can be treated with the same seriousness and methods as other forms of art and literature.

The interplay between author, text, and reader, which is a foundation in the study of biblical literature, is an essential aspect of this article. Sometimes this is viewed as behind the text, within the text, and before the text, or pretext-text-context. There are many different iterations. This construction can also be applied to art criticism, as artist-art-viewer. At its core, the issue is that these provide for the interpreter three moments where meaning can be produced. What makes this interesting for our purposes here, is that we have additional complexity. When we examine these texts, which are themselves an examination of a text, with both the reader and the author engaging in this three-fold construction, we have increased complexity as we now have five interpretive points with an interpretive layer preceding our own. Thus our format becomes:

Author 1—Text 1—Reader 1 *cum* Author 2—Text 2—Reader 2

The crux is in the transition of Reader 1 into Author 2, which begins the process of separating us (Reader 2) from the original author and text. What we are reading is relevant as a text in its own right, but it is also an interpretation of the earlier biblical source material. This presents us with the opportunity to read for meaning emerging from two authors and two texts. So, to lay this out more clearly as an example, our construction in the case of the *The Manga Bible* might be,

Apostle Paul as author 1—Letter to the Romans as text 1—Siku as reader 1 *cum* Siku as author 2—Page 190 of the Manga Bible as text 2—Reader of Siku

One might ask how this is different from the interpretation of religious art such as a painting by Rembrandt or a stained glass church window. While there are, of course, similarities, it is different because of the complex nature of sequential art.

A good source to begin understanding these complexities is Scott McCloud’s now standard text, *Understanding Comics*. He writes that the reason sequential art had for so long been seen as low-brow is that it is commonly believed that art which has value is either visual or textual, and never the two shall meet. High art such as painting was wordless and serious literature was picture-less. Yet, the most obvious characteristic of sequential art is the interplay of words and pictures. This means that the artistic decisions
are not only visual, but editorial as well. These editorial decisions cover a wide range of issues such as script writing, script design, and the way in which the texts interact with the pictures. For example, the words may convey exactly what the picture is also conveying or perhaps the picture gives more meaning to the words or vice versa.  

The implications for interpretation is that reading sequential art is not simply reading a text or looking at pictures or even doing one then the other. The two aspects cannot be separated; they must be dealt with in the same interpretive movement.

Overview of Authors

The oldest text we are examining is *The Picture Bible*, a work of the David C. Cook publishing house. With a script by Cook editor Iva Hoth and illustrations by Andre Le Blanc, *The Picture Bible* was released serially as Sunday school curricula throughout the sixties. In 1978, the comics were collected and released as books of varying formats. It is estimated that more than 75 million of various editions have been sold or distributed as educational materials. Ms. Hoth, a Midwest Methodist evangelical, seems to have been the driving force behind both the text and visual design, directing LeBlanc who, otherwise, illustrated texts with no particular religious themes.  

Our second author is a contemporary artist and theologian working within a multicultural context. Ajibayo Akinsiku, who goes by the *nom de plume* Siku, is a British Nigerian who works in the Japanese sequential art form known as manga. Although born in the UK, he studied art in Nigeria. After returning to the UK for work, he also studied at the London School of Theology. In addition to his own projects, such as *The Manga Bible*, Siku has worked for comic publishers including Marvel and eleven years with the UK’s number one comic weekly known as *2000AD*. He is currently involved in the production of video games. The *Manga Bible*, which has not been particularly popular with critics who feel it has strayed too far from traditional forms, has been extremely popular with Christians in the United Kingdom and the United States. It is one of the best selling graphic novels of all time in the UK and has been openly praised by Archbishop Rowan Williams.  

The last of our artists is by far the most critically acclaimed. R. Crumb’s 2009 release of *Genesis* was met with significant media attention; interviews, reviews and even a multi-page reproduction in the *New Yorker* made it one of the biggest stories in the world of comics as well as biblical studies that year. A well-known comic artist who works outside of mainstream cartoons, Crumb has spent his career criticizing and satirizing American values and taboos through comics such as *Fritz the Cat*, *Devilgirl*, *Mr. Natural*, and *Keep on Truckin’*. His status as the most prominent figure of the 1960s Underground Comix movement accounts for the considerable publicity this book has received. His cartoons can be visually disturbing, and have been criticized for being misogynist and racist. An AP headline announces that Crumb ‘mocks’ the Bible, and various conservative Christian groups have opposed the book, claiming that it is exploiting the text for titillation. Unlike other comic presentations of the Bible, which use occasional images or omit or streamline dialogue, *Genesis* is unabridged.

Unsurprisingly, such diverse artists are going to have diverse styles. As a simple example of how different these styles are, we can examine the artists’ treatment of Genesis 3 where God blocks access to the Tree of Life with cherubim and “a flaming sword which turned every way.” The stylistic differences are apparent.

Hoth, the oldest text, presents us quite straightforwardly with a sword that is on fire; however, its size implies a mighty force. The two angelic beings flanking the sword, emphasizing its height and perhaps presenting the sword as a substitute for the deity Hoth never portrays. Siku’s sword, intense and frightening, brings a shadowy figure with it. The robed figure in the distance is not God since his voice is coming from a different direction. This heightened drama is characteristic of Siku’s style. In Crumb’s depiction, we see that his imagination was captured more by the fact that the sword “turned every

10. From interviews with David C. Cook representatives
11. Publisher’s biography of Siku at http://www.hodderfaith.com/authors.aspx
which way” than the fact that it was a sword. The result is a whirling vortex, with mythical menacing creatures conjured by this Gandolf-like Deity.

Taking from just a single frame in each of these narratives, it is clear that the diverse style and imagination of our three authors is going to provide for plenty of opportunity for comparison. It is important to remember, however, that the visual depiction is only one aspect of interpreting sequential art.

**Analysis of Three Scenes**

Having briefly covered the introductory critical issues, we are now going to examine a few passages common to all three texts to provide a few examples of the interpretive process and issues surrounding the presentation of biblical material in sequential art. Due to the limited scope of this article, certain issues, such as the categorization of frames, scenes, and sequences, and the material inferred between frames (so-called ‘closure’) as well as other issues of larger interest to readers of graphic novels are not fully discussed. But we are going to examine selected passages common to
all three texts to provide examples of the interpretive process and issues surround the presentation of biblical material in sequential art. Specifically, we are going to focus on the characters of Eve, Cain and Noah.

Hoth presents Eve as timid and naive in both text and image. As she continually gesture to herself with her hands, protecting herself, she seems vulnerable and uncertain. Her wariness however does not stop her from reaching for the fruit, because “just one bite won’t hurt.” When she eats it, Hoth clouds her in a shadow.

We cannot see her expressions, but her words show no remorse until after she calls for Adam and he finishes eating. Only then does she claim to be afraid, but her body posture is almost identical to what it was prior to eating the fruit. Adam weeps bitterly as God tells them to leave the garden but, again, Eve is wringing her hands. She looks confused at being tossed out of the garden, for she seems to have no idea of what she did that was wrong. That Eve should desire wisdom should not come as a surprise. She does not meaningfully consider her actions or understand their consequences.

This scene provides a good example of how the artist uses both image and words to create a character. There are very few words spoken or narrated which bear a close resemblance to the biblical text. It goes beyond paraphrase to really being an abridged version of the garden story, where theological assumptions or assertions are told through non-biblical scenes.
Siku’s Eve is much more in keeping with the common image of Eve as sexy, or a temptress. Yet, quite surprisingly, and non-biblically, Adam responds first to the serpent. As the serpent speaks, Eve’s coy smile turns to a fierce hunger at the idea that God is keeping something from her. She looks expectantly at the fruit as if it held a treasure inside while Adam is silhouetted behind her. While Eve seems to be adventurous, excited by the tree that brings knowledge, the knowledge she receives causes her to be afraid. The explicit announcement of emotion tells us that Eve is scared by the realization of their nakedness. When God confronts her, her eyes are wide and seemingly innocent to what she had done and she is astounded that he is punishing her for her actions. The reader is not given God’s full verdict. Eve’s role is metaphorically and, at times, literally shadowed by the man throughout the sequence.
Crumb’s Eve is wild, unabashed and intense. Her full figure is characteristic of Crumb’s work and her strong posture emphasizes her power. With her hand on her hip she interrupts the serpent and seems to be chastising his ridiculous idea. She emphatically notes that God has stated that death will follow if they touch the tree in the middle of the garden. But she is intrigued, and turns back, when the serpent tells her she will become like God. But what is perhaps most interesting is that, in the moment of decision, Crumb has chosen to have Eve with her powerful backside to us, dominating the tree. From our snake-like vantage point we do not know if she confidently headed toward the tree or if she is standing there frozen, nervous or scared. We must read our own impulses into her thoughts.

Confronted by God, her shoulders are slumped, but she does not fear eye contact, like a child trying to show her remorse in hopes of stilling her father’s anger; this is in contrast to the sweaty, nervous grimace of Adam. Eve and Adam do not deny that they have eaten from the tree, but they both offer reasons to justify the action. Eve claims that she was beguiled by the serpent, though there is no indication that the serpent was doing anything other than telling her the truth.

We can see something of the authors’ interpretations of the biblical material through this examination. In Hoth, for example, we see that Eve is simple or even vapid. She is alone, and acts alone, and perhaps without understanding. Siku’s sexy Eve is rarely alone. Adam is beside her, participating with her. Crumb’s Eve dominates almost every scene; She dominates both the serpent and her husband, who eats as he is told.
And the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this you have done?"
And the serpent deceived me, and I ate.

And to the woman He said, "On your belly shall you crawl, and dust shall you eat all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it beget for you, and you shall be in sorrow, and he shall rule over you."

And Adam He said... because you listened to the voice of your wife and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed shall be the ground because of you, in sorrow you shall eat from it all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it beget for you, and you shall be in sorrow, and he shall rule over you."

And Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.

And the Lord God made the clothing for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.

And the Lord God said, "Now that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil, he may reach out and take and eat from the tree of life and live forever!"

And the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden to till and keep the ground from which he had been taken.

And he drove the man out, and set east of the Garden of Eden Cherubim, and the flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life."
Next, we consider the account of Cain and Abel, which Hoth entitles, 'Jealous Brothers.' In *The Picture Bible*, Cain seems resentful and selfish from the start. Though the brothers look practically like twins, Cain’s sideways glances and remote stares as he hangs in the background betray his jealous nature even before God shows favor to his younger brother. Like Cain, Abel’s character is developed far beyond what the biblical text warrants; Abel asks questions, speaks of God, and is excited by the idea of giving gifts to God. Cain, however, is annoyed that he may have to give up some of his produce.

When it becomes clear that God favors Abel’s sacrifice, and does not accept what Cain has reluctantly offered, his posture becomes extremely hostile. After murdering his brother, the hateful wrinkles in Cain’s face transition into a fearful furrow. His pleas to God demonstrate fear of the punishment, not remorse. Though there is an expression of regret in his countenance, it is that of man thinking only of himself, an utter coward.
Siku moves immediately from the exile of the first humans to the fact that God favors Abel to his brother and he wastes no time in drawing sharp contrasts between them. Abel sits bathed in light with an open posture and reverent expression; his floppy hair makes him seem harmless. Cain, however, even from the shadows looks menacing. His outrage at God’s favoritism shows in his expressions, and becomes a visible entity praying upon his mind. His colloquial speech and profanity is easily seen by the reader as threatening, although Abel trusts his brother.

The brutal murder is done, and he stands over his brother with blood-drenched bone that was used as a club. When God questions Cain, he stoically answers with the famous, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” Not betraying a hint of sorrow or remorse, his firm expression is a challenge to God. The account moves so quickly that there is no opportunity for Cain to express fear at the thought of his impending exile, making him a tough guy from beginning to end.
Crumb vividly distinguishes between the peaceful life of a shepherd and the harsh labor of the farmer. Though both characters are sturdy in build, it is Cain’s hairy and larger frame that carries a heavy burden as he brings forth his offering. Sweat flies from his face while farming and delivering his offering to the anthropomorphic god. Abel puts in no effort, shows no emotion, but is favored. God speaks to Cain, seemingly in an attempt to reassure and encourage him, but the words cause his disappointment to morph into hostility, driving him to premeditated murder. The scene in the field is filled with the violence of repeated blows as Cain bludgeons his brother. Just as God’s earlier words drove Cain to rage, God’s words now drive him to despair. Distraught by God’s intervention and punishment, this is the only account in which we see him shed tears, and it is not over the death of his brother but of the fear of the dangers of exile.

The Cain narrative is actually quite confusing, for the biblical text gives extremely little information as to why God accepts one offering and not the other. Hoth feels the need to characterize the two brothers, almost as Goofus and Gallant, with one never wrong and the other never right. The Manga Bible also does this, but the characterization is simply shown, not explained. Crumb does depict a significant physical difference between the two, but it does not seem, from the looks of them, that either is good or bad. The reasons for the difference between the two is inexplicable, except, perhaps, that the life of a farmer is simply more frustrating that the life of a shepherd.
And now, we turn to our last character for analysis, Noah. Hoth presents Noah as overtly pious. His elevated position above the idolaters with their grand alters demonstrates his moral superiority, emphasized by his reverence in prayer as he burns his simple offering with his head covered.

Noah’s character then recedes in importance, deferring to the character of the ark. The ark is always imposing or the focal point of the frame in its temple-like position throughout the sequence. Still massive among the many waters, the ark demonstrates the tension between God’s power to destroy and preserve. Streaming into the immense vessel are pairs of clean and pairs of unclean animals. Though the floods are great, the ark is impenetrable. Noah emerges from the ark with his bald head bare, revealing his years, adding gravity to the effect the ordeal has had on him as well making him seem meek in reverence to the power of the flood.
WHEN THE ARK IS COMPLETED, GOD DIRECTS NOAH AND HIS FAMILY TO ENTER... AND TO TAKE WITH THEM SEVEN PAIRS OF EACH KIND OF ANIMAL AND BIRD THAT IS GOOD TO EAT, AND ONE PAIR OF EACH KIND NOT USED FOR FOOD.

The Great Flood
FROM GENESIS 7: 16-24; 8: 9-11

LOOK! THE GREAT DOOR OF NOAH’S ARK IS CLOSING!
YES... IT’S BEEN SHUT BY A GREAT INVISIBLE HAND!

THE RAINS POUR DOWN STEADILY FOR FORTY DAYS AND FORTY NIGHTS...

WATER FLOWS OVER THE LAND AND RISES ABOVE THE MOUNTAIN TOPS. ALL THE EARTH IS COVERED... ONLY NOAH’S GREAT ARK SURVIVES. THE FLOOD DESTRURES ALL THAT IS EVIL...

SO, A LITTLE OVER A YEAR AFTER THE FLOOD BEGAN, NOAH STEPS ON DRY LAND ONCE MORE. HE, HIS FAMILY AND THE ANIMALS IN THE ARK ARE THE ONLY CREATURES ON EARTH.

AT LAST THE WATER LEVEL DROPS AND THE ARK RESTS ON THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAINS OF ARARAT.

NOAH SENDS OUT A DOVE AGAIN, AND IT RETURNS.

I WILL SEND OUT A DOVE; IF IT DOES NOT COME BACK WE WILL KNOW IT HAS FOUND LAND.

AN OLIVE BRANCH THAT MEANS SOME LAND MUST BE DRY AGAIN.

SEVEN DAYS LATER, NOAH SENDS OUT A DOVE A THIRD TIME. IT DOES NOT RETURN BECAUSE IT HAS FOUND A PLACE TO REST.

HOW GOOD IT IS TO WALK ON THE GROUND AGAIN!
YES—TO FEEL GRASS UNDER YOUR FEET... AND WARM SUNSHINE ON YOUR FACE...

ALL THAT WAS EVIL HAS BEEN DESTROYED THROUGH US, GOD IS GIVING MANKIND A NEW START. WE MUST OBEY GOD... AND TEACH ALL WHO FOLLOW US TO DO SO.

AS SOON AS NOAH LEAVES THE ARK, HE BUILDS AN ALTAR, HERE HE THANKS GOD FOR HIS CARE AND ASKS GOD’S GUIDANCE IN HELPING NOAH AND HIS FAMILY TO MAKE A NEW START. THEN GOD MAKES A PROMISE TO NOAH AND TO ALL HIS CHILDREN, FOREVER...
As seems common for Siku, he begins in the middle of the story, with the animals being loaded into the ark. Noah first appears only as a voice, distant, at the entrance of the cavernous ark. Noah’s task is comical, and Siku notes this with a joke about counting the animals. When the storm is in full force, the ark does not dominate the flood, yet, the ark is not moved either; frame after frame, waves may lash at it, but the ark is a symbol of stability. Noah appears for a frame, a vague face among others, inside the ark. Positioned between two identical panels of the ark in the storm, Noah speaks for his family in expressing their anxiety as the flood waters surround them. Never presented in isolation, Noah is but a mere part of the grander narrative of the ark. In the last frame, it is not Noah’s face that we see, but the ark, radiating from the mountaintop. It is the story’s real hero.

Crumb’s Noah is wide-eyed and earnest. Sitting directly before God he is bewildered, and probably frightened by God’s plans. Not once does he speak; the direct speech comes only from God. One might think by the way he looks that he is going to run off in fear, yet the frame after God leaves shows Noah with his family diligently at work. God does not disappear from the scene, but continues to direct Noah’s activity. His family is thoroughly involved in the construction of the ark and the gathering and care for the animals. Crumb does not hide the harshness of the life on the ark. We see the family worry as they toss in the waves and their eagerness as they wait for the bird to return. Noah even sits on the floor as the dove flies in, looking as though his head is just rising after it had been hanging in despair. Just as God was present to close the door of the ark, when the family emerges through a hole cut in the side, God is there to meet them.
And God said to Noah...

And it came to pass after...
So who exactly is the star of this show? In *The Picture Bible*, the stage is shared by Noah and the ark, which is a stand-in for the power of God to protect amidst his judgment. Siku highlights the ark as a stable presence in the world so large that even the righteous Noah is only a minor presence. Finally, throughout the first eleven chapters of Genesis, Crumb has maintained an anthropomorphic Deity. Here, God is the primary focus. As he braves the rain he himself began to close the door of the ark and stands there waiting for the only living family to disembark.

**Conclusion**

As a way of conclusion, we would like to note the overarching tension that is created by the complication of the author-text-reader construction, as these readers *cum* authors/artists are simultaneously interpreters and open to interpretation. Their artistic and editorial decisions create meaning and interpretive layers which allow different theologies to emerge and place these novels meaningfully among other critical readings.

Many questions are raised regarding the extent to which the pictorial depictions limited, changed, or expanded the original biblical text. Often, we found, the visualizations created ambiguities in the narrative that were not present in the source text while at other times the ambiguities or difficulties of the source text were eliminated according to the theological proclivities of the artist.

It is clear that Hoth makes the more extensive use of non-biblical material, using dialogue to fill in gaps and speculate about motivations. Her narration is almost midrashic, expanding on the story and eliminating ambiguity. For example, the biblical text does not describe the character of Cain and his brother, nor does it explain why God accepted one offering but not the other. Hoth removes these questions by simply presenting Cain as a selfish and unloving boy. This renders it impossible to view God’s decision as capricious.

Siku’s editorial and artistic choices deliver a palatable text, often with little connection to the biblical narrative. If Hoth is explaining the story, Siku is almost telling a different story altogether. For example, the account of Eve is more the account of Adam, but with a significant change: Adam first addresses the serpent and is equally culpable. While this diminishes the possibility of sexist interpretations, it also denies the patriarchy present in the original text, far removing it from its historical context.

Crumb’s editorial decision to leave the text unabridged is unusual in graphic novel presentations of biblical material. This decision means that the place to look for his contribution is in the design of the words and the images. With Eve, Crumb chose to emphasize certain words and it gives the impression that she is yelling at the serpent. All the while he is raising her voice, he is sometimes hiding her face, obscuring clues to her emotional state as she approaches the forbidden tree. This raises questions of her character that would likely not be asked of the biblical text.

These novels can be understood as critical readings in their own, but they are also able to be read critically with methods common to biblical scholarship, such as postcolonial, queer, feminist and womanist criticisms. For example, it is not hard to imagine what a feminist critic might make of Hoth’s presentation of Eve, who seems to have revived the term, the ‘weaker sex.’ Crumb, on the other hand uses his oversized visualizations to enlarge the presence of the woman, a presentation which a feminist critic might find ambiguous; Eve is overpowering, but therefore all the more culpable. Siku seems to have already applied a feminist criticism and has attempted to eliminate the possibility of a sexist reading.

In these ways, the artists as reader *cum* author intermittently clarify and obscure our access to the original text, all the while providing new material for fresh interpretation.