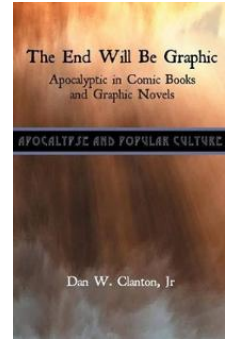


The End Will Be Graphic: Apocalyptic in Comic Books and Graphic Novels, edited by Dan W. Clanton

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The field of Bible and popular culture is one of the fastest growing areas of biblical studies today, as can readily be determined by looking at the programs of scholarly conferences and the new listings of publishers in that field. Although scholars have been studying relations between novels, films, or TV shows and biblical or other scriptural texts for some time now, attention has recently turned also to other categories of popular culture, and “comic books and graphic novels” is one of those categories. The scholarly writings of Dan Clanton have been at the forefront of such innovative studies.

The End Will Be Graphic, edited by Clanton, brings together seven contributors from the fields of religious and biblical studies, English literature, graphic arts, and popular culture studies. Following Clanton’s helpful and substantial introduction, the book is divided into two parts: “Independent and/or Creator-Owned Comic Books and Graphic Novels” and “Mainstream Comic Books and Graphic Novels.” Part 1 consists of Aaron Kashtan, “A Network of Lines that Intersect: Apocalyptic Imagery and Comics Form in Kevin Huizenga’s *Jeepers Jacobs*”; Emily Laycock, “Graphic Apocalypse and the Wizard of Grotesque: Basil Wolverton, the Worldwide Church of God, and Prophecy”; Diana Green, “The World of the End As We Know It: Alan Moore’s Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Apocalyptic Concepts in *Promethea*”; and A. David Lewis, “(Ir)reverence After Rapture: Mocking and Maintaining Christian Doctrine in *Battle Pope*, *Chronicles of Wormwood* and *Therefore, Repent!*” Part 2 consists of Terry Ray Clark, “Apocalypse Then and Now: *Kingdom Come* and the Tradition of Imagining Armageddon”; Gregory Stevenson, “Of Beasts and Men: The Book of Revelation and the Apocalyptic Superhero”; and Greg Garrett, “‘Now the Whole World Stands on the Brink’: Apocalypse and Eschatological Hope in Contemporary Superhero Comics.” Each entry is followed by its own bibliography; a combined volume bibliography would have been more helpful. In addition, the book includes indexes of biblical citations and of names.

Although the essays often speak of religion in general, the book's focus is almost entirely on contemporary forms of Christianity. All of the graphic apocalypses mentioned in Clanton's book are more-or-less Christian in orientation, even when their thrust is anti-Christian. For example, Green begins by talking about a "journey through all major faiths" (35), but the reader of her essay is taken on a journey from the Tarot by way of Teilhard (whom she calls "de Chardin"), noogenesis, and physics to Gnosticism. Later Green mentions "gods from a gamut of faiths" (41), but these gods all praise the crucified Christ. The death of Prometheus's pagan father at the hands of Christians is treated as "bias against the Christian ethos"; evidently Green is unfamiliar with the story of Hypatia.

Even the Superman stories are discussed in relation to Christian texts. However, a quick visit to the "Religious Affiliation of Comic Book Characters" webpage (http://www.adherents.com/lit/comics/comic_book_religion.html) reveals an impressively wide range of religious options in comic book stories. To be sure, those heroes are probably not all involved in apocalyptic stories, but if there truly were no non-Christian apocalyptic comics, then that lack would itself be an important topic for discussion. As it is, surely some apocalyptic comics or graphic novels reflect Jewish, Hindu, or Muslim beliefs, or tell stories and describe worlds more on the order of (for example) China Miéville's non-graphic novel, *Kraken* (2010), in which Revelation's apocalypse is at best just one of many revelations (and not the most pressing). If the book's contributors are only interested in discussing Christianity, then that should have been more clearly indicated.

Furthermore, this is not a book about the Bible, and although Revelation is by far the most often cited biblical text (out-numbering all other biblical citations combined), this is not a book about the Apocalypse of John. There is very little serious engagement with any biblical text, and no biblical scholars, apart from John and Adele Yarbro Collins, are cited more than once. This is not an objection to the Collinses, but this lack of more wide-ranging reference to biblical scholarship reinforces the mistaken idea suggested in several of the essays that "apocalyptic," as concept or as genre, is undisputed. Garrett even claims, citing John Gray, that Western apocalyptic traditions derive from "Jesus and his followers" (100–1). Only twice is it briefly noted (by Green, 38, and Stevenson, 82) that "apocalypse" is not equivalent to "story about the end."

Similarly, the Apocalypse of John is generally presented throughout this collection as though its meaning is undisputed, either by scholars or among readers in general, and the only disagreement that is noted (by Garrett, 101)

concerns the value of its symbolisms. Instead, the general understanding seems to be that the “themes or characters [of ‘the biblical text itself’] are ‘mediated’ through later interpretations” (Clanton, xiii), and the contemporary graphic stories are treated as though they are exegeses of a univocal biblical text. (Correspondingly, but on the other side of the coin, Stevenson describes *Spawn: The Armageddon Collection* as “decidedly unbiblical,” 87.) The fact that the old stories have been resurrected in so many different afterlives apparently says nothing to these contributors about the polysemy of those stories.

The book’s articles nicely demonstrate in a variety of ways how many traditional apocalyptic themes are played out, often in quite non-traditional ways, in modern comics and graphic novels. However, although these comics are often critical of the Bible, and they mock or parody traditional beliefs, texts, and images, the essays in the book acknowledge no point at which the biblical texts critique the graphic stories. Even whether or how the mockery or parody does anything more than simply deface the traditions, like drawing a moustache on the Mona Lisa, is not always clear. Only in the essays by Lewis and Clark is there any sense of tension between the modern rewritings of the old stories and the old stories themselves, or of differences that might imply important things about both the new and the old.

Clanton and various contributors note that biblical apocalypse has been “secularized” in these comics and graphic novels. This implies that the biblical texts are “religious,” and Garrett even devotes several pages to the matter. Despite this, the distinction is never justified. Instead, it seems arguable to me that Revelation is already “secular” (as are other apocalyptic materials in the Bible, such as the flood story in Genesis), as the story occurs primarily in this world, not in the realm of the gods. The biblical apocalypses may even call for ongoing secularizations (reading Revelation 22:18–19 as a challenge, a taunt). Indeed, what makes any story “religious,” except for the fact that many people already read that story as having religious significance? Surely no visual or verbal feature of “the text itself” could signify this difference. For example, are Wolverton’s Revelation images secular (as Laycock says, 28) or, as part of *The Wolverton Bible*, have they become religious? Laycock’s essay might have investigated such religious-secular transformations, but instead she spends many pages detailing the careers of Wolverton and Herbert Armstrong, and only a few pages on the images themselves.

Despite the negative tone of some of these remarks, I admire this book, and I regard it as a positive addition to the field. Study of biblical texts in relation to comic books or graphic novels is still a relatively new thing, and

the first efforts will be awkward at times. Nevertheless, Kashtan in particular does a fine job of exploring the material verbal/visual “mediation” offered by these cartoon books, and he is joined in this concern by Clanton, Laycock, Lewis, and Clark. Mediation is never transparent, and interference (Michel Serres’s “parasite,” 1982) is inevitable. In this regard, comics and graphic novels have features in common with film (especially animated film), with its continuous sequence of frames. However, important differences remain. Like the reader of any written text, including the Bible, the reader of the comic book can pause or flip back and forth at will without seriously disrupting the experience. She can even put the book down and do something else for a while before picking it up again where she left off. A film—even a film recording—is more all-consuming, more demanding of its viewer’s attention.

The seemingly inherent seriality of comic books is another important feature and is also noted by several of the book’s contributors (especially Lewis). Comics and graphic novels share this quality in particular with TV series, and it stands in profound tension with any eschatology, apocalyptic or otherwise. The story “wants” to go on. A third feature of comic books (this one not touched upon in Clanton’s book) is their deep roots in “pulp literature”—cheaply-made, easily recycled—which they share with dime novels, tracts, pamphlets, and perhaps even the earliest gospels. One wonders if the more recent development of the graphic novel, often printed on glossy paper and often more expensive than the traditional comic book, is not an attempt to escape from these roots, to become more serious and noteworthy.

I recommend this book, not because it thoroughly addresses all of the important questions, but because it is very good at provoking some of those questions, and at showing valuable directions for further study.

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