

Comics creator attempts a new view on the Book of Genesis

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PRINCETON, N.J. (RNS)—To millions of Americans fascinated by comic-book superheroes, Bill Jemas is an industry legend who helped breathe life into Marvel Enterprises by pushing the wildly successful Ultimate Spider-Man series that rejuvenated the company.

These days, however, Jemas, 51, finds himself engrossed in a task far removed from dialogue balloons.

Each morning before sunrise, for the last three years, Jemas has labored over the Bible— specifically the Book of Genesis—in the original Hebrew.

His goal is to write an English translation of Genesis that is truer to the Hebrew text than are widely used English translations like the famed King James Version. He already has completed the first chapter, available online and in his book Genesis Rejuvenated.

Bill Jemas, the former President of Marvel Comics, is now translating the Book of Genesis from its original Hebrew into English.
(RNS PHOTO/Matt Rainey/The Star-Ledger)

By presenting alternative English definitions for Hebrew words to those chosen by KJV translators in 1611, he hopes his Internet-accessible “Freeware Bible” will show readers that widely accepted Bible translations

are inherently imperfect.

Many of the differences between his and the King James Version seem subtle, but taken as a whole, they lead to different understandings of well-known passages.

He acknowledges that retranslating the Bible would be a gargantuan task even for a team of learned scholars, let alone a man like himself without any formal theological training. And he knows that news of his endeavor will baffle comic-book fans who associate him more with Spider-Man and Wolverine than with Adam and Eve.

“People are used to the comics guy, the guy whose ideas just popped into (his) head,” Jemas said recently. “This is a different discipline. ... This is scholarly and detail-oriented. I haven’t done really detail-oriented work since I was a tax lawyer in my 20s.”

Training for Bible scholars typically includes many years of studying ancient languages like Hebrew, Aramaic and classical Greek, and involves study of whether translations should be verbatim or “thought for thought” so passages can be better understood by modern readers.

Jemas’ language training, meanwhile, is restricted to basic Hebrew and Aramaic learned since he began the project.

Yet his work on the first chapter in Genesis has won general approval of some religion professors who view it as a worthwhile endeavor, even if it’s less groundbreaking than Jemas believes it is.

“There are already Hebrew dictionaries, and there are plenty of translations of Genesis,” said Bruce Chilton, a religion professor at Bard College in New York. “There are commentaries on Genesis. There are books on Genesis. But what Bill has done here that’s innovative is, he’s put the materials together in such a way that a beginning reader can see the

Book of Genesis as being filled with possibilities of meaning, and not just limited to a single meaning.”

Jemas was raised Roman Catholic, married a Jewish woman and now attends a Reconstructionist synagogue in Princeton. He said he makes no claim that his translation is more accurate than others. But he wants readers to consider the possibility that decisions of past English translators are not sacrosanct.

“This is really about a vision of divinity that is what I’ve been thinking about for most of my adult life,” said Jemas, who sent samples of his work to 200 scholars of religion.

Jemas now runs 360 Intellectual Equity, which he founded after leaving Marvel Enterprises in 2004. Besides project creation, the firm also brokers licensing and sponsorship deals in the sports and entertainment businesses.

Before his arrival at Marvel in 2000, the storied comics company faced a declining, aging fan base for its superheroes, who themselves had aged in storylines going back decades. Jemas pressed what became a financially lucrative effort to reimagine the superheroes as youngsters again, only with modern trappings.

For example, in Ultimate Spider-Man, Peter Parker worked part time as a webmaster for the Daily Bugle newspaper, rather than as a photographer as he did in the original Spider-Man series. Iron Man, the Hulk and X-Men had similar remakes.

Jemas likened the initial response to the Ultimate series to the responses by some readers of his Bible chapter who have been less than thrilled.

“When I announced we were going to turn the characters back into teenagers, the response was vicious. Horrible. Angry. Childish,” he said. “If

you pay attention to that, you lose sight of what you're supposed to be doing."

Each page of Jemas' "Freeware Bible"—so named because it is available to readers free online—lists, in chart form, the Hebrew words of the first chapter of Genesis from the oldest known copy of the Hebrew Bible; corresponding English translations and synonyms; the word selected for the King James Version; and the word Jemas picks for what he says is a verbatim English translation.