

【書評】

Son of God, Man of Steel

- Comparing Superman with Jesus Christ -

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Abstract

2013's *Man of Steel* and Jesus have some surprising similarities, but in the end are completely different heroes. The two stories have similar origins, where society has become too introspective, leading to cultural, societal and environmental catastrophe. The two heroes are raised in out of the way places, by humble fathers, who lead them into exile for their own safety. However, their missions are ultimately different. While Superman comes to defeat evil by force, Jesus comes to allow evil to defeat itself by exhausting its power on him, and to show humankind what it truly means to be human.

Keywords : Superman, Elohim, Jesus Christ

Introduction

At the beginning of their book, *Hollywood Heroes : How your favorite movies reveal God* (2022), Frank and Zach Turek begin with the story of US Navy Seal Michael Monsoor, who in 2006 lays down his life in combat by throwing himself on a grenade in order to save the lives of two of his comrades. This amazing feat of bravery and sacrifice is something most people today, including the Taliban, would praise. To lay down your life for friendship or a just cause is widely regarded as heroic and the highest form of human valor. The transition of Tony Stark from selfish playboy in the original *Iron Man* (2008) to savior of the universe in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) exemplifies this kind of self-sacrificing character.

A story of a US Marine laying down his life for those shooting at him is less likely to achieve Hollywood success. It would take an amazing backstory to get the audience to buy into such a crazy scenario. And yet this is precisely the Christian story, as told in the bible, as Tom Holland wrote towards the end of his New York Times Best Seller, *Dominion : The making of the Western Mind* (2020). "To be a Christian is to believe that God became man, and suffered a death as terrible as any mortal man has suffered. This is why the cross, that ancient instrument of torture, remains what has always been : the fitting symbol of the Christian revolution. It is the audacity of it – the audacity of finding in a twisted and defeated corpse the glory of

the creator of the universe – that serves to explain, more surely than anything else, the sheer strangeness of Christianity.” (p. 524) We still find it strange that God would choose “what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, 1 Corinthians 1: 27). The strangeness is what differentiates Jesus from Superman. While there a lot of similarities between the two, when it comes down to what their missions are, and how they choose to go about it, one hero comes across as very human, and the other seems to have come from another planet completely.

This paper will look at the similarities between the backstories of each story, the origins, early years, and exile of both characters, before closing with discussing the differences in their missions and their ways of going about reaching their ultimate goals.

Biblical backdrop

One parallel between the bible and *Man of Steel* (2013) is the overlapping back stories. Beginning with the Genesis account, God creates the humans and puts them in the middle of a garden that is in a place called Eden. The garden has everything that is needed for human flourishing. The waters in the garden nourish the land and allow life. The land has been separated from the destructive chaos waters. Likewise, the garden has been separated from the waterless wasteland surrounding it so that there are two potential sources of trouble, the chaos waters surrounding the land, and the chaos wilderness surrounding the land of Eden. Within Eden the balance is suitable from human flourishing. Outside of the garden, chaos (un-creation) reigns. God had started a project in which humans were called to partner with Him in extending peace and flourishing from within the garden, out into the surrounding wilderness.

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”

²⁷ So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

(*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Genesis 1 : 26-28)

The function, or purpose, of the people is to spread out and build societies and cultures that reflect the nature of the God who created them. After the fall, God allows the project to continue, except that people are cut off from His presence. He promises to make things right, and to bring about the reunion of heaven and earth, God and humans, by raising up a human from the woman, who would defeat the chaos agent (serpent) that led to their fall. Notice how a serpent is both a creature of the wilderness, but also the sea : the “perfect” chaos agent.

¹⁴ The Lord God said to the serpent,

“Because you have done this,
cursed are you above all livestock
and above all beasts of the field;
on your belly you shall go,
and dust you shall eat
all the days of your life.

¹⁵ I will put enmity between you and the woman,

and between your offspring and her offspring;
he shall bruise your head,
and you shall bruise his heel.”

(*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Genesis 3 : 14, 15)

So while the human vocation to ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it’ remains, they would now have to struggle in their vocation due to the result of sin and death. In the biblical story, life continues, but not as it was intended to be. People do whatever they think is good, instead of conforming to their image of the God who made them, violence and murder flood the land and things reach their worst at the tower of Babel. Michael Heiser argues that this “episode is at the heart of the old testament worldview” (Heiser, 2015, p. 112). The story is outlined below :

¹ Now the whole earth had one language and the same words. ² And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there. ³ And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar. ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.” ⁵ And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of

man had built. ⁶ And the Lord said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” ⁸ So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. ⁹ Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth.

(English Standard Version Bible, 2001, Genesis 11 : 1-8)

The humans had abandoned their vocation to spread out, to push into the chaos and to bring it to order. Instead they came together, focused on their own greatness (like God) and tried to replace the God who made them with their own, fallen, corrupt selves. However, by looking inwards instead of outwards, by looking to take care of their own pride and needs, rather than extending out to make room for other languages, cultures and creativity, God knew that this would only bring about their own de-creation. As a result, in mercy, God confuses them by giving them numerous languages (world views) so as to prevent them from bringing about their total destruction, as had already happened in the flood. It is remarkable how similar this story overlaps with the backstory to *Man of Steel* (2013).

The Kryptonians had extended their reach and influence throughout the universe over centuries of exploration and development. This expansion propelled their development of their technology and culture as they looked outwards, beyond their own planet. However, like the story of Babel, at some stage during the Kryptonian Expansion, a desire to manipulate and control the types of people produced was implemented. In a way, rather than allowing the culture to develop naturally through struggle with surrounding conditions and problems, the leaders sought to replicate their own ideas of the ideal people. The culture itself became something to preserve, rather than a creative process of adapting to new times and situations.

As a result of this inward shift in thinking, artificial population control was implemented on Krypton. The focus went from outward expansion and discovery to inward genetic control and introspective cultivation, and as a result of this change, the space exploration program was abandoned. The cost of looking inward, however, was twofold. First, the energy and growth that came from looking outward dried up, and the civilisation started to retract geographically. Secondly, looking inward to an idealised version of themselves lead to the exhausting of Krypton's natural resources. In order to fuel the genetic control of their population, the mining of krypton was required. Over centuries of downward spiral, the mining of Krypton's core desta-

bilized the planet and caused Krypton to implode, which is the scene of the initial battle and escape of Kal-El to earth.

In short, in both stories, the ideal for people is to expand their rule and care for creation. Through using their innate (God given) creativity, curiosity and intelligence, the forces of chaos and wild are to be overcome, in order to create a safe and stable environment for the development of society and culture. In the biblical story, once humans looked in on themselves, God, in His mercy, confused them and forced them to keep moving outwards. In *Man of Steel* (2013) the people of Krypton were left to their own devices and sadly this introspective self-worship led to the end of their civilisation and society.

Origins

While the back stories in both stories are similar, there are also a number of similarities between the origins of Jesus and *Man of Steel's* (2013) Superman. First, they are both sent to earth by their fathers. Kal-El is sent in a space pod as a means of preserving his own life. In a roundabout way, he is said to be sent to save humankind as well, however, initially he is sent to earth because it is out of the way and he will likely be able to grow up in peace there. Jesus on the other hand is sent specifically to save humankind from their own hell, and to show us what it means to be truly human, as in 1 John 4: 9, which says "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him." (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016). Thus, both were sent to earth, although their reasons for coming are different.

Another similarity, intentional or not I do not know, is in their fathers' names. Superman's father is called Jor-El, while God the Father is *El*. To distinguish El from other false gods, numerous other characteristics are added to El, such as when God introduces Himself to Abraham as El Shaddai (Genesis 17: 1) which means The Lord Almighty. Conversely, Hagar, in Genesis 16: 3, addresses God as El Rooi, or *God who sees me* after He appears to her and promises to save her and her child from the mistreatment of Abram's wife, Sara. In short, both have Fathers with some form of El in their name. If there is any connection, I assume it is a reference from the director of *Man of Steel* (2013) to the otherworldliness of Superman.

Exile

At birth, both Jesus and Superman are immediately exiled for their own safety. In the case of Superman, the first natural birth in centuries (Nolan, Roven, Snyder, Thomas, and Goyer, 2013,

1: 25: 45) , Kryptonian society had undergone centuries of eugenics in which every citizen was assigned a suitable role based on their genetic potential. This codex was hidden inside the genetic code of Superman by his father at birth because he wanted to prevent General Zod from gaining control of it. In order to keep the codex from Zod, Superman was sent to one of the thousands of distant planets scouted out by Krypton in its years of expansion. Similarly, Jesus was exiled to Egypt immediately after his birth. After the Magi had come to Herod to proclaim the birth of the new King, he plotted to find and kill the child who would have been deemed by the people to be a rival to his power. Fortunately for Jesus “an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Matt. 2: 13) Both Jesus and Superman were exiled to protect them from murderous, violent leaders.

Early Years

Another similarity is that both characters were raised in humble conditions, in out of the way locations by honorable stepfathers (and a stepmother in Superman’s case). Jesus was raised by his step-father Joseph. Joseph is only mentioned a few times in the gospels, and wasn’t around in the time of his ministry, but he was there for Jesus at the most vulnerable time of his and his mother’s lives. He stepped up and married the pregnant Mary. He took them both to Egypt once Jesus was born, and upon returning to Israel relocated to Nazareth as Herod’s son was deemed as dangerous as his father (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Matt. 2: 19-23). Nazareth was an unlikely home for the future King of the universe. In John 1: 46, Nathanael asks if anything good can come out of Nazareth, indicating it wasn’t held in high regard at the time, but that’s where he was raised by Joseph. We are not told any more about Joseph, but the fact that his son turned out to be the most influential figures in human history (for good reasons, not bad) suggests that he likely had a positive effect in his early years.

Likewise, Clark Kent was raised in obscurity – in rural Kansas by his step-father and mother, Jonathon and Martha Kent. His hometown is deliberately unremarkable, literally called *Smallville*. This seems to me a hat tip to small town America’s mythical status as the source of all that is good, down to earth and true – the heartland of America. Jonathan Kent embodies this slice of small town Americana as a hardworking man of the land.

He guides Clark wisely through his youth as he navigates learning to blend into his adopted world. He learns to deal with bullies by not retaliating, at his father’s insistence, as he needed time to figure out who he was and what his purpose in being on earth were, before the world

found out who he really was. He reminds Clark that people wouldn't understand him, and would fear him if they discover his abilities. By teaching him to remain out of sight, his wisdom protects Clark in his formation years. However, he also instils in him a sense of obligation to serving others which clashes with the need to stay hidden.

One day, while he is being goaded by his childhood nemesis on a school bus ride, the bus crashes off a bridge and into a river. Clark uses his strength to pull the bus out of the river, saving everyone on board, but also revealing to them his otherworldly strength. As a result, the mother of one of the children he saved (the bully) confronts the Kents about how his actions were unnatural. Yet, the fact that Jonathan died risking his life to save the family dog illustrates the value he placed in taking action to save others. Following his father's example, he couldn't help himself from saving others if it was within his power to do so. This highlights the tension of the values passed onto Clark by his father. On the one hand, Clark needs to stay out of the limelight, and yet on the other hand he senses deep obligation to use his gifts to help others. This tension is depicted in the following scene :

Clark Kent at 13 : I just wanted to help.

Jonathan Kent : I know you did, but we talked about this. Right? Right? We talked about this !
You have... !

[calms himself]

Jonathan Kent : Clark, you have to keep this side of yourself a secret.

Clark Kent at 13 : What was I supposed to do? Just let them die?

Jonathan Kent : Maybe; but there's more at stake here than our lives or the lives of those around us. When the world... When the world finds out what you can do, it's gonna change everything : our... our beliefs, our notions of what it means to be human... everything.

These values clash in real life, a foreboding sign of the tension to come in his future, public life as Superman.

Both Clark and Jesus are raised in small, unremarkable towns in their formative years. Their fathers go out of the way to love and care for their adopted sons at some risk to themselves.

Joseph risked social ridicule in a communal society due to the unusual nature of Jesus' conception, and danger from those who pursued him at birth. Jonathan risked association with an alien child that he knew would one day be the target of fear, and unrealistic societal expectations.

Missions

Having come from other worlds, or domains in the case of Christ, there are a number of similarities between Superman and Jesus in terms of their missions, however the way they bring about the change they are destined to bring is fundamentally different. In K̄ar-El's (Superman's Kryptonian name) case, he was primarily sent to continue his other worldly race, which had been slowly dying due to the Kryptonians' custom of unnatural selection in procreation. However, it was also his father's hope that he would be some kind of shining light to the people of earth.

Jor-El: You will give the people of Earth an ideal to strive towards. They will race behind you, they will stumble, they will fall. But in time, they will join you in the sun. Kal. In time, you will help them accomplish wonders.

Kal-El's sense of pacifism had its limits. After protecting a (strikingly beautiful) waitress from the unwanted advances of a drunk customer, Kal suffers public humiliation as the customer pours beer over his head. Kal resists the urge to retaliate in public. However, as the drunk leaves the bar, he is shocked to find his big rig wrapped around a telephone pole. It seems his pacifism is mainly in order to preserve his own anonymity, as opposed to principled way of life. This is seen in the change when his identity was out in the open. He had no problem seeking those who destroyed his love interest and mother. In fact, his attitude to violence seemed very 'human'.

On the other hand, Jesus taught pacifism during his ministry when he told his disciples "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Matthew 5: 38-39) And later "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you." (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Matthew 5: 43-48, Luke 6: 27-28)

He warned his disciples further to avoid the bloody rebellions that were the normal reaction to Roman occupation. He predicted that armed rebellions would lead to the destruction of the

temple and warned his followers to flee to the hills at the first sign of trouble (Mathew 13. His way was a new way. He put his principles into practice when he is arrested in the garden. When Peter takes up arms to defend him, he tells him to put his sword “back in its place… for all who draw the sword will die by the sword.” (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Mathew 26: 52)

In fact, he allowed himself to be publicly humiliated in order to show what the true calling of humans is – to die not just for friends, but even for your enemies. Paul reflected on this in his letter to the Colossians and called Jesus “The image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2016, Colossian 1: 15). For Paul, to be like God, is to live up to the highest human calling. To be truly human is to be like God, as exemplified in Jesus – anything less than that is sub-human. This is the difference between Kal-El and Jesus – Jesus came to show us what it means to be truly human from God’s perspective. Kal-El is a human depiction of a pretty good guy. While Superman came from another planet, it is Jesus who is truly from another place.

Conclusion

Jesus and the Man of Steel have a number of similarities, but ultimately, they reflect completely different versions of the ultimate human. The origin story of *Man of Steel* (2013) is similar to the chaos caused by the tower of Babel. Once people look inwards to an idealised version of themselves, they think of themselves as gods. This leads to self-destruction in both stories. Both heroes are raised in humble conditions, in obscure out of the way locations, by down to earth families. They are both exiled at birth for their own safety, and they remain hidden in their early years while they discover who they are, and what their purposes are. The main difference is in their missions. Superman came to help humanity out, and to show them what is possible if we use our talents and abilities for good. Jesus, on the other hand, came to show us that to truly gain life and our humanity, we must give it up. Jesus radical pacifism shows the limits of modern heroes, whose ultimate goal is to defeat evil by force. Jesus caused death and evil to exhaust all of their power in killing him – only to turn this defeat into victory. Jesus ultimate victory came in obedience to the father, unto death. His example, as King of the world, is what all Christians (should) endeavour to imitate today.

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