

HOW SUPERMAN DEVELOPED INTO A JESUS FIGURE

CRISIS ON INFINITE TEXTS: HOW SUPERMAN DEVELOPED INTO A JESUS FIGURE

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LAY ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the historical trajectory of how the comic book character of Superman came to be identified as a Christ figure in popular consciousness. It argues that this connection was not integral to the character as he was originally created, but was imposed by later writers over time and mainly for cinematic adaptations. This thesis also tracks the history of how Christians and churches viewed Superman, as the film studios began to exploit marketing opportunities by comparing Superman and Jesus. This thesis uses the methodological framework of intertextuality to ground its treatment of the sources, but does not follow all of the assumptions of intertextual theorists.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the historical trajectory of how the comic book character of Superman came to be identified as a Christ figure in popular consciousness. Superman was created in 1938, but the character developed significantly from his earliest incarnations. This thesis argues that the connections between Superman and Jesus were not integral to the character as he was originally created, but were imposed by later writers over time and mainly for cinematic adaptations. There is a notable difference between how Superman is portrayed in the comics and the films because the films are aimed at a broader audience and have different marketing aims. Superman turned into a Christ figure for financial reasons in many ways. This thesis also tracks the history of how Christians and churches viewed Superman, as the film studios began to exploit marketing opportunities by comparing Superman and Jesus. This thesis uses the methodological framework of intertextuality to ground its treatment of the sources, but does not follow all of the assumptions of intertextual theorists because discussions of authorial intention are necessary for the narrative that this thesis pursues. The connection between Superman and Jesus was not inevitable and cannot be seen wholly as a byproduct of the changes in the surrounding American culture because this connection was a product of specific artistic decisions by particular creators—who were not necessarily Christians themselves.

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Chapter One: Allusion, Intertextuality, and Superman

Comic Book Heroes as an Object of Study

When future Superman editor Mort Weisinger was first hired as a comic book editor in the 1940s, he called his friend Otto Binder for a “crash course” on working in the medium.¹ Binder said it was “very simple,” because in comics, “you get a fight, the hero hits the villain on the head with a lamp and says, ‘*Lights out for you!*’”² Are comics so simple? In a 2014 interview, Academy Award-winning director Alejandro González Iñárritu said: “I think there’s nothing wrong with being fixated on superheroes when you are 7 years old, but I think there’s a disease in not growing up.”³ He added that “the problem” with comic book films “is that sometimes they purport to be profound, based on some Greek mythological kind of thing.”⁴ Bill Watterson (the creator of the *Calvin and Hobbes* newspaper strip) once wrote: “You can make your superhero a psychopath, you can draw gut-splattering violence, and you can call it a ‘graphic novel,’ but comic books are still incredibly stupid.”⁵ Conversely, in M. Night Shyamalan’s film *Unbreakable*, a character named Elijah Price (Samuel L. Jackson) owns a gallery of comic book art and points to an old comics image, saying, “This is an art gallery my friend ... and this ... is a piece of art.”⁶ Later, he says, “I believe comics are our last link to an

¹Will Murray, “Superman’s Editor Mort Weisinger,” in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006), 11.

² *Ibid.*

³ Mike Fleming Jr., “Birdman’s Alejandro G. Iñárritu and ‘Birdman’ Scribes on Hollywood’s Superhero Fixation: ‘Poison, Cultural Genocide’—Q & A,” *Deadline*, October 15, 2014, <http://deadline.com/2014/10/birdman-director-alejandro-gonzalez-inarritu-writers-interview-852206/> (accessed May 9, 2018).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Bill Watterson, *The Calvin and Hobbes Tenth Anniversary Book* (New York: Scholastic, 1995), 171

⁶ *Unbreakable*, directed M. Night Shyamalan (Burbank, CA: Touchstone Pictures, 2000).

ancient way of passing on history. The Egyptians drew on walls.”⁷ Price has a high view of comics, but he also turns out to be criminally insane.⁸

It is not hard to find silly Superman comics. In a 1975 issue, Superman’s metabolism is out of control, so at super speed, he eats hundreds of burgers from a fast food chain, while saying, “*More burgers! CHOMP! Keep them coming ... GULP ... or I’ll starve to death!*”⁹ Hundreds of female fast food servers in short skirts line up with platters of burgers to keep up with his appetite.¹⁰ In a 2000 miniseries, Superman met Elmer Fudd and Bugs Bunny when they came to life (though this plot was uncharacteristically silly for the era).¹¹ In a 72 page 1978 comic, without his powers, Superman is forced into a boxing match against Muhammad Ali, but Superman and Ali later defeat alien invaders.¹² In a 1987 comic, an alien named Slez uses mind control on Superman, not to turn him evil, but just to make him star in a pornographic film.¹³

Nonetheless, comic book heroes are culturally significant. They can also be moral exemplars and a source of great joy for those who love them. Former Superman artist Jon Bogdanove said that, in the United States, Superman was a “national icon” because

All you need to do is visit the Midwest, especially Metropolis, Illinois, to experience the nearly religious nature of people’s love for vast numbers of Americans he ranks somewhere between Elvis and Jesus. Many people overlay biblical parallels on Superman, drawing out the similarities in his story with the stories of Moses and Jesus.¹⁴

Superman is an influential figure in many different ways. Comics writer Mark Waid reflected that when he was a kid and went to see the first Christopher Reeve Superman movie,

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Cary Bates, “Superman’s Energy Crisis!” *Action Comics* #454 (New York: DC Comics, 1975).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mark Evanier, *Superman & Bugs Bunny* #1–4 (New York: DC Comics, 2000).

¹² Denny O’Neil and Neil Adams, *Superman vs. Muhammad Ali* (New York: DC Comics, 1978).

¹³ John Byrne, “The Suicide Snare,” *Action Comics* #593 (New York: DC Comics, 1987).

¹⁴ Michael Eury, “Superman Roundtable Discussion,” in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006), 230–32. Metropolis, Illinois, is the home of the annual Superman festival, a giant Superman statue, and a Superman museum.

“walking into that theatre I was a directionless, unhappy, borderline-suicidal kid with no one to look up to and with a real dearth of inspirational figures in his life. Walking out—after two consecutive showings—I was transformed.”¹⁵ Superman artist Karl Kesel observed that “Superman is the Ultimate Immigrant to America.”¹⁶ Marsha Boulton writes that Superman is “as globally recognizable as Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, and Elvis.”¹⁷

How should we understand heroes like Superman? In the 1970s, Mario Puzo (the author of *The Godfather*) was hired to write the first Superman movie and met with Superman comics writers Cary Bates and Elliot S. Maggin to learn more about the character, and Maggin recalled,

sometime during the afternoon of the second day Mario furrowed his forehead and looked at the both of us and he said, as if it were a revelation, “Well, this thing is a Greek tragedy,” and Cary and I looked at each other and then looked at Mario and one of us said, “That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you.”¹⁸

Many writers compare superheroes to gods or mythological figures; for example, in a 2016 review of the comic book film *Captain America: Civil War*, Matt Zoller Seitz wrote that

¹⁵ Ibid., 211.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Marsha Boulton, “The Man of Steel,” in *The Just a Minute Omnibus: Glimpses of Our Canadian Heritage* (Toronto: McArthur & Company, 2000), 480. Similarly, on the back cover of a book about Superman’s creators, comic artist Neal Adams said that Superman, Sherlock Holmes, and Tarzan were “the greatest fictional icons of all time.” See Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster—The Creators of Superman* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013). Author Harlan Ellison said that “every man, woman, and child on the planet knows Mickey Mouse, Sherlock Holmes, Tarzan, Robin Hood ... and Superman.” Quoted in Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle, preface, in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 11. Les Daniels writes that Superman “became perhaps the most widely known figure ever created in American fiction.” Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971), 11. Writer Grant Morrison states: “From his creation, Superman was as recognizable as Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, or Santa Claus.” See Grant Morrison, *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Krypton Can Teach Us about Being Human* (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 15.

¹⁸ Michael Eury, “Elliot S! Maggin Interview,” in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006), 144. His middle initial is sometimes written with an exclamation mark. See also, Glen Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 180. Otto Binder (the same man who made the earlier description of a comic book story with the lamp) wrote: “comics are modern fairy tales. The comics hero is just as fantastic and unbelievable as any classic fairytale character, but he has the one advantage of living in present times and dealing with on-the-spot crimes and evils. As such, the youngster can identify himself with the hero much more than he could identify himself with Prince Charming riding a white horse through some dank forest of long ago.” Quoted in Bill Schelly, *Otto Binder: The Life and Work of a Comic Book and Science Fiction Visionary* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2016), 124.

superheroes “are late capitalist America’s version of Greek gods, running, jumping and flying through stories that are as contradictory and self-defeating as the country that spawned them.”¹⁹

Comic book writer Mark Millar (a Roman Catholic) once said: “Growing up I had three moral guides: my family, Jesus, and Superman. The first Christopher Reeve movie was the Third Testament as far as I was concerned.”²⁰ Superman has many connections to Judaism and Christianity. Many of the most important Superman writers in different mediums were Jews of varying degrees of orthodoxy; however, the films deliberately connected Superman to Jesus.

¹⁹ Matt Zoller Seitz, “Captain America: Civil War,” review of *Captain America: Civil War*, Roger Ebert.com, May 5, 2016, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/captain-america-civil-war-2016> (accessed May 18, 2018). Actor Samuel L. Jackson—who played the criminally insane Elijah Price in *Unbreakable*—called comic book heroes “the Greek gods of American culture.” See *Comic Books and Super Heroes*, disc 2, *Unbreakable* (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista, 2001). John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett believe that American popular culture is pervaded by an inbuilt “American monomyth” which often secularizes Judeo-Christian stories. See John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, *The Myth of the American Superhero* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 6. They add that saviors in American movies and pop culture serve “as replacements for the Christ figure” (6–7). See also, Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble, “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? An Examination of the American Monomyth and the Comic Book Superhero,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 22, no. 3 (1988): 157–73. Richard Reynolds wrote a book identifying superhero comic books as “modern mythology.” See Richard Reynolds, *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, 1992). Comics artist Bob Layton said, “The struggle of ‘gods and mortals’ in comics is a theme as old as storytelling itself. Comics are the modern mythology that we, as a society template our fears and dreams onto.” See Jeffery Klaehn, “Some Real Shit Winds-Up Selling Like Hotcakes”: Bob Layton,” in *Inside the World of Comic Books*, ed. Jeffery Klaehn (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 2007), 45–46. *Superman Returns* director Bryan Singer called comic book movies “modern myths.” See Michael Dougherty, Dan Harris, and Bryan Singer, *Superman Returns: The Complete Shooting Script* (London: Titan Books, 2006), 10. For a study of Superman as an American myth, see Steven Harper, “Supermyth!” *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop, (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 93–99. See also, Peter W. Rose, “Teaching Greek Myth and Confronting Contemporary Myths,” *Bucknell Review* 35, no. 1 (1991): 17–39. For an old *Christianity Today* article on a similar theme, see Harold O.J. Brown, “Superman on the Screen: Counterfeit Myth,” *Christianity Today*, April 20, 1979, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/julyweb-only/128-14.0.html> (accessed June 29, 2018). Also, former DC comics president Paul Levitz said: “I don’t think Superman becomes a substitute for religion. I think he becomes a substitute for mythology.” See *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns (Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2006). For more on comic book heroes as modern “gods,” see Archie Bland, “Comic Book Superheroes: The Gods of Modern Mythology,” *The Guardian*, May 27, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/27/comic-book-superheroes-the-gods-of-modern-mythology> (accessed June 27, 2018). For an analysis of the “episodic” nature of Superman stories, see Umberto Eco, “The Myth of Superman,” trans. Natalie Chilton, *Diacritics* 2, no. 1 (1972): 14–22. Eco writes: “the stories develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all—where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy. The narrator picks up the strand of the event again and again as if he had forgotten to say something and wanted to add details to what had already been said” (17). For a study that builds on Eco’s work, see Federico Pagello, “The ‘Origin Story’ Is the Only Story: Seriality and Temporality in Superhero Fiction from Comics to Post-Television,” *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, 34, no. 8 (2017): 725–45.

²⁰ Quoted in Stephen Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), 1.

My research will examine religious symbolism in comics, films, books, and television about Superman. I will place particular emphasis on representations of Superman as a Christ figure, as well as the controversial history of such parallels. Marco Arnaudo observes that in the cases of Superman and Batman, it is unprecedented for one character's adventures to have been written about so "regularly and consistently ... without interruption for so long, resulting in such a volume of stories at such a fast pace, and with dozens of authors, each inserting himself into the collective work."²¹ Hence, this research is important because superheroes are a significant part of North American popular culture and there is a wealth of primary source material that has not been studied. This study will fill some gaps. After all, since the year 2000, superhero films have also consistently ranked among each year's top box office performers.²²

In a study like this one, it is also important to recognize that comic books have changed over time. The target audience changed. As author Tim Hanley succinctly puts it,

In the late 1980s, miniseries like Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* presented violent, often gruesome stories set in a world of superheroes. The violence was part of a critique of the genre, portrayed as a symptom of the insanity necessary to don a cape and fight crime in a world of superpowered beings. The books were very popular, and the rest of the industry tried to follow their dark lead, but in doing so they kept only the violence and forgot the critique. Massively muscular, gun-toting, homicidal antiheroes were soon all the rage, and this broader thirst for violence bled into previously wholesome mainstream titles.²³

Similarly, in 1997, a reviewer named James O'Ehley wrote a piece analyzing how the 1992 superhero film *Batman Returns* was controversial: the film's dark and violent tone reflected how comic books were not aimed at kids as much as they used to be.²⁴ O'Ehley observed:

²¹ Marco Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, trans. Jamie Richards (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 4.

²² Steve DiChristopher, "Is Superhero Movie Fatigue a Myth?" *CNBC*, May 15, 2016, <https://www.cnbc.com/2016/05/14/is-superhero-movie-fatigue-a-myth.html> (accessed May 18, 2018).

²³ Tim Hanley, *Investigating Lois Lane: The Turbulent History of the Daily Planet's Ace Reporter* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2016), 175–76.

²⁴ James O'Ehley, "Sci-Fi Movie Page Pic: Batman Returns," review of *Batman Returns*, May 1997, <http://www.scifimoviepage.com/pick3.html> (accessed May 18, 2018).

Comic book readership (along with literacy) has been changing in the past decade The demographics of comic book readers have also changed. Although kids still make up the largest chunk of comic book consumers, comics readers have become older. Why? Because kids aren't interested anymore and few new readers have come into the fold while the existing fans ... Well, they just turned 29, that's all ...²⁵

Although early Superman stories were also targeted at American soldiers during the Second World War, for much of the twentieth century they were for children. Now, comic books are aimed more at older audiences and have more violence and sexual content than they used to.²⁶ The writing style changed as well. Older comics have more expository dialogue, captions, and thought bubbles explaining what is happening. For example, on the cover of a 1959 story, Superman says: "Great guns ... I'm caught in a super-trap by super-villains from the year 2,000! Even my *Superman* powers can't help me escape!"²⁷ If that story were written today, Superman probably would not need to describe his experiences aloud so obviously. Now, extra exposition is less common and the art does more of the storytelling, in part because the audience has aged and the writing has matured along with it.

Superman changed over time, as this thesis will demonstrate. The first Superman comic, *Action Comics* #1 (by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster), was published in 1938.²⁸ Yet the years 1985 and 1986 were especially important. In 1985, DC Comics published a twelve-issue miniseries called *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.²⁹ DC had decided that they had too many characters existing in a multitude of confusing parallel universes; the *Crisis* miniseries ended with the universe being reoriented into one harmonious whole.³⁰ The aftermath of this miniseries allowed DC to "reboot"

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ If you pick up a 2018 Superman comic off the shelves, it will say it is rated "T" for "Teen." This is in stark contrast to the 1950s, where all superhero comics had to meet the strict censorship of the Comics Code Authority to be considered suitable for children.

²⁷ Bill Finger, "Superman Duels the Futuremen!" *Superman* #128 (New York: DC Comics, 1959).

²⁸ Jerry Siegel, "Superman," *Action Comics* #1 (New York: DC Comics, 1938). This study will list all issues as "DC Comics" even though the name of the company changed multiple times over the years.

²⁹ Marv Wolfman, *Crisis on Infinite Earths Deluxe Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2015 [1985–1986]).

³⁰ Ibid.

classic heroes like Superman and redo their origin stories without the baggage of decades of continuity—while also excising some of the more childish aspects of the previous continuity. In 1986, the Superman comics had new editors, writers, and artists. A writer/artist named John Byrne was tasked with rebooting Superman.³¹ There is a clear-cut difference in tone and content between “pre-Crisis” and “post-Crisis” Superman comics. Post-Crisis comics tend to be more serious. Byrne also made a major change to Superman: while before, Clark Kent was Superman’s clumsy, meek, and mild-mannered alter-ego, after Byrne’s reboot, Clark Kent became the normal, “real” person (and no longer meek and clumsy to an exaggerated degree), and Superman was the “act” and more like “a professional role, a career, like quarterback, trombonist, dental hygienist.”³²

Just as *Crisis on Infinite Earths* ended with one harmonious Earth (although the parallel universes eventually returned), this study will seek to find a unified, *harmonious* whole in Superman’s development into a Christ figure. This study will offer a historical survey of Superman’s development into a Christ figure, but also use “allusion” and “intertextuality” to ground its methodological framework for examining Superman’s interactions with religion.

³¹ See John Byrne, *The Man of Steel* (New York: DC Comics, 1986). Originally published as a six-issue miniseries. For more on the background of the miniseries and the reboot, see Les Daniels, *DC Comics: Sixty Years of the World’s Favorite Comic Book Heroes* (New York: Bulfinch Press, 1995), 188–89; 192–93; Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History: The Life and Times of the Man of Steel* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1998), 146, 148, 159–61.

³² Tom De Haven, *Our Hero: Superman on Earth*, Icons of America (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 38. Instead of portraying Clark Kent as a bumbling, clumsy character, in Byrne’s revamp, Clark tells his adoptive parents, “Superman isn’t *real*. He’s just a fancy pair of longjohns that lets me operate in public without losing my private life.” See John Byrne, *The Man of Steel, Book Six*, (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 4. This approach was picked up in the television shows *Smallville* and *Lois & Clark*. In the latter show, he says to Lois Lane: “Superman is what I can do. Clark is who I am.” See *Lois and Clark*, “Tempus Fugitive,” S02, E18, directed by James Bagdonas, written by Jack Weinstein and Lee Hutson *ABC*, March 26, 1995. In a 1995 comics storyline where Superman’s secret identity is threatened and he is concerned he will have to give it up, he tells Lois Lane, “I’m *Clark Kent* first and Superman second! Superman is the mask I’ve worn all along to have a private life! ... See, all my memories of life are as Clark Kent! It wasn’t Superman who went off to the first day of Kindergarten or graduated from high school—it was *Clark! Me!* Do you realize that it means more to me to win an award for a column or story I’ve written than it does to fly to the moon? One of my fondest dreams isn’t getting along with the JLA—it’s to write the great American novel! It’s because I can achieve those things honestly—without benefit of my powers!” Dan Jurgens, “The Death of Clark Kent,” *Superman #100* (New York: DC Comics, 1995), 28–29.

“Intertextuality” and “Allusion” as Methodological Frameworks

Julia Kristeva introduced the French word *intertextualité* (or “intertextuality” in English).³³ Mary Orr credits Kristeva with inventing the term in the 1960s, and adds that the term “enjoyed immediate and resounding success.”³⁴ However, Leon S. Roudiez observes that the term was “much used and abused on both sides of the Atlantic” and “has been generally misunderstood.”³⁵ As a representative example, in a study of intertextuality and rabbinics, Katharina E. Keim uses the term intertextuality to refer to simply “a significant narrative, thematic, or verbal overlap” between texts.³⁶ This sort of phrasing simplifies the theoretical background behind the term. In Roudiez’s words, intertextuality “has nothing to do with matters of influence by one writer upon another, or with the sources of a literary work; it does, on the other hand, involve the components of a *textual system* such as the novel, for instance.”³⁷ Kristeva writes that a text “is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.”³⁸ Judith

³³ Leon S. Roudiez, “Introduction,” in Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 15.

³⁴ Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), 1.

³⁵ Roudiez, “Introduction,” 15. Likewise, Tiphaine Samoyault observes that “le terme d’intertextualité a été tant utilise, défini, chargé de sens différents qu’il est devenu une notion ambiguë du discours littéraire.” See Tiphaine Samoyault, *L’Intertextualité: Mémoire de la littérature* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2008), 5.

³⁶ Katharina E. Keim, *Pirquei deRabbi Eliezer: Structure, Coherence, Intertextuality*, *Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity* 96 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 141.

³⁷ Roudiez, “Introduction,” 15. For more on intertextuality and its definitions, see Frank J. D’Angelo, “The Rhetoric of Intertextuality,” *Rhetoric Review* 29, no. 1 (2010): 31–47; Rama Kundu, *Intertext: A Study of the Dialogue between Texts* (New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2008); Graham Allen, *Intertextuality*, *New Critical Idiom* (London: Routledge, 2000); Judith Still and Michael Worton, “Introduction,” in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, eds. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 1–44.

³⁸ Julia Kristeva “The Bounded Text,” in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36. There are parallels between intertextuality and the writings of Harold Bloom. Bloom writes that “poems are not things but only words that refer to other words . . . any poem is an inter-poem, and any reading of a poem is an inter-reading.” See Harold Bloom, *Poetry and Repression: Revisionism from Blake to Stevens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1976), 3. Bloom writes that “there are *no* texts, but only relationships *between* texts.” See Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 3.

Still and Michael Worton write that the term “intertextuality” can now be understood more broadly than it was in Kristeva’s original work.³⁹ The creator of a text is first a “reader,” so the creation is made of

references, quotations, and influences of every kind. Rousseau, for example, does not entitle his autobiography *The Confessions* in ignorance of church practices or of St Augustine’s work of the same name. This repetition of past or contemporary texts can range from the most conscious and sophisticated elaboration of other poets’ work, to a scholarly use of sources, or the quotation (with or without the use of quotation marks) of snatches of conversation typical of a certain social milieu at a certain historical moment.⁴⁰

Likewise, in 2008, DC Comics began a comic book series called *Trinity* that starred its three most famous superheroes: Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman.⁴¹ This name carries intertextual associations from Christianity.⁴² Yet intertextuality theorists also think that the meaning of a text is affected by the *reader*’s knowledge; the reader can miss allusions or bring in interpretations foreign to the author.⁴³ For example, Still and Worton note how the term “confessions” could have a more salacious meaning *today* than it did in Rousseau’s day.⁴⁴

Mary Orr writes that the term was significant because “non-hierarchical and democratically inclusive notions of text in a vast mosaic of other texts could now be prioritized.”⁴⁵ The term challenged “the pre-eminence of high-cultural expression (as essentially white, male and European).”⁴⁶ The term “intertextuality” was meant “to replace and displace” the word “influence,” because the latter term was tied to “critical source-hunting and authorial

³⁹ Still and Worton, “Introduction,” 1. They also argue that the concept goes as far back as Plato (2–4).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Kurt Busiek and Fabian Nicieza, *Trinity*, vols. 1–3 (New York: DC Comics, 2009).

⁴² Greg Garrett writes that by naming an earlier miniseries *Trinity*, “DC Comics finally acknowledged that in the persons of Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman they had a fully functional equivalent of the Christian trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” See Greg Garrett *Holy Superheroes: Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film*, rev. ed., (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 42. The connection is a bit superficial though.

⁴³ Still and Worton, “Introduction,” 1–2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁴⁵ Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*, 1.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

intention.”⁴⁷ On a related point, in 1991, Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein wrote that younger scholars associated “influence” with “elitism” and “the old boy networks of Major Authors,” while intertextuality was either an “enlargement” or a “replacement” for “influence.”⁴⁸

Intertextuality goes beyond the term “influence” to “encompass unconscious, socially prompted types of text formation (for example, by archetypes or popular culture),” and it removes concern for authorial intention altogether.⁴⁹ Clayton and Rothstein believe that in the 18th century, the “originality” and “genius” of the author began to take on more importance and critics began to use the notion of “influence” to downgrade the value of authors.⁵⁰ While “influence” emphasizes authorial intention, Graham Allen writes: “intertextuality is not ... an intended reference by an author to another text: intertextuality is the very condition of signification, of meaning, in literary and indeed all language.”⁵¹ Furthermore, Judith H. Anderson writes that the term “intertextuality” has often been used to “demonize an *other*,” and that “other” seems to be terms such as “influence” or “imitation.”⁵² Anderson believes that the latter two terms are disparaged by certain intertextuality scholars more because they are hard to clearly *differentiate* from intertextuality.⁵³ John Frow concludes that

⁴⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁸ Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, “Figures in the Corpus: Theories of Influence and Intertextuality,” in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, eds. Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 3.

⁴⁹ Ibid. One can draw a parallel to Northrop Frye’s idea that literature relies on pre-existent recurring “archetypes.” See Northrop Frye, “The Archetypes of Literature,” *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 1 (1951): 92–110; Northrop Frye *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957). For another concept of “archetypes” that pulls heavily from Carl Jung, see Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934). For more, as well as a connection to the writings of T.S. Eliot, see Thaïs E. Morgan, “Is There an Intertext in This Text? Literary and Interdisciplinary Approaches to Intertextuality,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 4 (1985): 1–40. For a discussion of intertextuality and “tropes,” see also Michael Riffaterre, “Compulsory Reader Response: The Intertextual Drive,” in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, eds. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 77.

⁵⁰ Clayton and Rothstein, “Figures in the Corpus,” 5.

⁵¹ Graham Allen, *Roland Barthes*, Routledge Critical Thinkers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 82.

⁵² Judith H. Anderson, *Reading the Allegorical Intertext: Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 4.

⁵³ Ibid.

the identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation. The intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading ... Intertextual analysis is distinguished from source criticism both by this stress on interpretation rather than on the establishment of particular facts, and by its rejection of a unilinear causality (the concept of ‘influence’) in favour of an account of the work performed upon intertextual material and its functional integration in the later text.⁵⁴

Jonathan Culler argues that if the author’s original sources can be readily identified, one is no longer within the proper paradigm of “intertextuality” because “intertextuality is the general discursive space that makes a text intelligible.”⁵⁵ Some scholars exclude “allusion” from intertextuality, but Culler thinks that this move calls into question the validity of intertextuality.⁵⁶ The role of the “author” and the meaning of “allusion” in intertextuality theory deserve more probing, and those points must be understood with reference to Roland Barthes’s theories.

After Kristeva, since the 1970s and the 1980s, Roland Barthes became one of the most important proponents of intertextuality. Barthes writes that the text “is the phenomenal surface of the literary work; it is the fabric of the words which make up the work and which are arranged in such a way as to impose a meaning which is stable and as far as possible unique.”⁵⁷ Barthes acknowledges his debt to Kristeva.⁵⁸ He writes that any text contains “scraps” of other texts, and so, “any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations.”⁵⁹ He argues that intertextuality is not reducible to “sources or influences,” but instead, “the intertext is a general field of anonymous formulae whose origin can scarcely ever

⁵⁴ John Frown, “Intertextuality and Ontology,” in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, eds. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 46.

⁵⁵ Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2001 [1981]), 116–17.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, “Theory of the Text,” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, trans. Ian McLeod, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 32.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 36, 38, 43, 45.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 39. In a different essay, Barthes stated the text was “a tissue,” or “skein of different voices and multiple codes which are at once interwoven and unfinished.” See Roland Barthes, “Textual Analysis of Poe’s ‘Valdemar,’” in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, trans. Geoff Bennington, ed. Robert Young (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 157.

be located; of unconscious or automatic quotations, given without quotation marks.”⁶⁰ Barthes is able to write an analysis of an Edgar Allan Poe poem without thinking about the author directly or even the fact that Barthes himself was dealing with a translation.⁶¹ Indeed, Thais E. Morgan states that intertextuality “presents a special challenge to the positivistic sciences whose pursuit of knowledge of ‘truth’ is by definition grounded on ‘facts.’”⁶² In Barthes’s methodology, the reader is not a passive “echo chamber, but the *reagent* of the text.”⁶³ Barthes’s way of reading the text can encourage going against the grain in accordance with the reader’s subjective experiences and interpretations.⁶⁴ Just as Barthes emphasizes the role of the reader, he downplayed the role of the author in an essay called “The Death of the Author,” where he says:

We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning (the ‘message’ of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author.⁶⁵

Jonathan Culler writes that Barthes’s confident definition of the text (in distinction from the author) shows “that assurance that comes upon some writers in Paris.”⁶⁶ In any event, for Barthes, the text is not viewed as a unified creation constructed by one author, but is derived from other texts, and not limited to one specific reading. Hence, Barthes believes that

once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close

⁶⁰ Barthes, “Theory of the Text,” 39.

⁶¹ Barthes, “Textual Analysis of Poe’s ‘Valdemar,’” 137.

⁶² Morgan, “Is There an Intertext in This Text?” 34.

⁶³ Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*, 35.

⁶⁴ Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts*, 35–36.

⁶⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 146, 148.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Culler, *On Deconstruction: Theory and Criticism after Structuralism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 32.

the writing everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced In precisely this way literature (it would be better from now on to say *writing*), by refusing to assign a ‘secret’, an ultimate meaning, to the text (and to the world as text), liberates what may be called an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law.⁶⁷

Barthes says that trying “to find the ‘sources’ or ‘influences’ of a work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a text are anonymous, untraceable, and yet *already read*: they are quotations without inverted commas.”⁶⁸ Barthes compares the “text” to the words of the demoniac in Mark 5:9: “My name is Legion: for we are many.”⁶⁹ For Barthes, the text is like a “*network*.”⁷⁰ Yet Barthes may have overstated his case.

When it is possible to identify authorial intention, it would seem ridiculous not to do so. Indeed, William Irwin argues that a concept of intertextuality like Barthes’s theory merely transfers the power of the “author” to the “reader.”⁷¹ Irwin also criticizes Barthes and Kristeva for relying on obscure and pretentious jargon.⁷² Irwin offers a colourful and well-founded critique of the “death of the author” when he writes that

to treat a text as if its meaning were essentially independent of authorial intent is to treat the text as if it were not a text at all, but merely an entity like a monkey’s randomly and accidentally typed *Hamlet*. The truth is that we could not make use of such a text at all without making certain basic assumptions about the author and what he or she intended, for example that she was presenting a work of fiction in English ... Authorial intention is unavoidable; intertextual connections are not somehow magically made between inanimate texts but are the products of authorial design.⁷³

These points are well-made, but it is not always easy to separate “authorial intention” from the interpreter’s guesswork. As a parallel, the Pixar film *Inside Out* tells the story of the

⁶⁷ Barthes, “The Death of the Author,” 147.

⁶⁸ Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text,” in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 160.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷¹ William Irwin, “Against Intertextuality,” *Philosophy and Literature* 28 no. 2 (2004): 230–33.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 232.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 240.

mind of a schoolgirl with parts of her mind and emotions represented by the film's characters and places, and at one point in the film, some of the "facts" and "opinions" in her brain are haphazardly jumbled into one pile without differentiation.⁷⁴ Something similar can happen when the distinctions between "authorial intent" and "opinion" are not recognized. This study of Superman will endeavour to explain authorial intent as much as possible, but with the knowledge that not everything can be proven.⁷⁵ When authorial intent is ambiguous or hard to know, the language of intertextuality provides a backdoor to understand the relationships between texts. Granted, Jacob Neusner writes: "I find in theories of intertextuality somewhat less than meets the eye, because definitions of terms turn out to be few, applications of theory episodic and anecdotal, criteria for validation or invalidation pretty much absent."⁷⁶ Intertextuality invites subjective interpretations. Paying some attention to authorial intent addresses that subjectivity, even if intertextuality theorists would not approve (because subjectivity is part of the concept).

On a related point, in his study of Renaissance intertextuality, Raphael Lyne observes that "allusion and intertextuality are usually set against one another."⁷⁷ Lyne offers a useful distinction between the two: allusion "denotes an intentional appropriation and/or acknowledgement of another work which came before it in time," while intertextuality "typically

⁷⁴ *Inside Out*, directed by Pete Docter (Emeryville, CA: Pixar Animation Studios, 2015).

⁷⁵ Some examples of overconfidence in deciphering authorial intention are in New Testament studies when scholars claim that the hypothetical "Q" community did not know about the resurrection of Jesus, or that the author of the Gospel of Mark wanted to set his community against Peter and the apostles by portraying them unfavourably. For example, see Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus in Context: Power, People and Performance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 45; Theodore J. Weeden, Sr., *Mark—Traditions in Conflict* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971).

⁷⁶ Jacob Neusner, *Canon and Connection: Intertextuality in Judaism*, Studies in Judaism (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 150. For other uses of intertextuality and rabbinics, see Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990); Marianne Schleicher, *Intertextuality in the Tales of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav: A Close Reading of Sippurey Ma'asiyot* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

⁷⁷ Raphael Lyne, *Memory and Intertextuality in Renaissance Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 21. For applications of the concept to other spheres of Western literature, see also Sudha Shastri, *Intertextuality and Victorian Studies* (Hyderabad, India: Orient Longman, 2001). See also, Margery A. Evans, *Baudelaire and Intertextuality: Poetry at the Crossroads*, Cambridge Studies in French 38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

denies intention and chronology, emphasizing instead spontaneous interconnection as a property of language.”⁷⁸ Allusion “appeals to intuition ... and belongs to traditional and sometimes deeply embedded conceptions of what reading and writing are,” while “intertextuality is dynamic, deliberately dispensing with the key sites of authority.”⁷⁹ The term “allusion” affirms authorial intention; the term “intertextuality” does not. This study of Superman will use both.

The Use and Misuse of Intertextuality as It Pertains to This Study

The term intertextuality is often used in a way that contradicts the key theorists behind the concept. It is ironic that, in a book on the New Testament, Richard B. Hays uses the term “allusion” to refer to “obvious *intertextual* references” (emphasis mine).⁸⁰ He has melded two terms that have often been conceptually opposed! Even so, in a 2016 monograph, Külli Tõniste wrote that she would adopt Hays’s terminology “since it is widely used by a growing number of biblical scholars.”⁸¹ Is this valid? Thomas R. Hatina observes that “pragmatically, the term [intertextuality] is used as a substitute category for uncovering and investigating conscious or unconscious allusions to scripture in the New Testament.”⁸² According to Hatina, sometimes scholars use the term because it is convenient or fashionable to do so, but those scholars do not pay heed to the term’s theoretical background.⁸³ He concludes: “it is clear that the term ‘intertextuality’ cannot simply be bandied about as a synonym for allusion without regard for its

⁷⁸ Lyne, *Memory and Intertextuality in Renaissance Literature*, 21.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 29. He uses the term “echo” to refer to “subtler” references.

⁸¹ Külli Tõniste, *The Ending of the Canon: A Canonical and Intertextual Reading of Revelation 21–22*, Library of New Testament Studies 526 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), 24.

⁸² Thomas R. Hatina, “Intertextuality and Historical Criticism in New Testament Studies: Is There a Relationship?” *Biblical Interpretation* 7, no. 1 (1999): 28.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 43.

origin, its integrated theory of text, and its relationship to influence.”⁸⁴ To a different end, in a monograph on intertextuality and the Book of Zechariah, Michael R. Stead admits that by paying attention to authorial intent, he is—ironically—using the term “intertextuality” in a way different than the creators of the term intended.⁸⁵ His study does not ignore authorial intent, but draws other textual links beyond that.⁸⁶ Other biblical scholars have also used the term in a way different than Barthes’s theories. Brian C. Dennert uses the term “intertextuality” in a loose way

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Michael R. Stead, *The Intertextuality of Zechariah 1–8*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 506 (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 19. Stead’s use of the term focuses on three things: how texts are created from a mosaic of other texts, how textual meaning can be derived “from a ‘dialogue’ between texts,” and how the reader plays a role in the creation of meaning (20). For a study with some of the same features, see Suk Yee Lee, *An Intertextual Analysis of Zechariah 9–10: The Earlier Restoration Expectations of Second Zechariah*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 599, (London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015).

⁸⁶ Stead, *The Intertextuality of Zechariah 1–8*, 22. For more uses of intertextuality (that do not all reflect the theory of the term), see also, Lee, *An Intertextual Analysis of Zechariah 9–10*, 24–25; Timothy K. Beal, “Ideology and Intertextuality: Surplus of Meaning and Controlling the Means of Production,” *Reading between the Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 27–39. The remaining essays in this same book apply the concept in different ways. See also Timothy K. Beal, “Intertextuality,” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A. K. M. Adam (St. Louis, MO: 2000), 128–30; Andrew Wilson, “Kristeva,” in *Handbook of Postmodern Biblical Interpretation*, ed. A.K.M. Adam (St. Louis, MO: 2000), 144–50; Alison M. Jack, *The Bible and Literature*, SCM Core Text (London: SCM Press, 2012); Patricia Tull, “Intertextuality and the Hebrew Scriptures,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 8, no. 1 (2000): 59–90; Geoffrey D. Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” *Currents in Biblical Research* 9, no. 3 (2011): 283–309; S. Philip Nolte and Pierre J. Jordaan, “Ideology and Intertextuality: Intertextual Allusions in Judith 16,” *HTS Teologiese Studies* 67, no. 3 (2011): 1–9; Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, eds., *Reading Job Intertextually*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 574 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013); Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, eds., *Reading Ecclesiastes Intertextually*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 587, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014); Lesleigh Cushing Stahlberg, *Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation, and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 486, (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2008); Craig A. Evans and Jeremiah J. Johnston, eds., *Searching the Scriptures: Studies in Context and Intertextuality*, Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Early Christianity 19, published under Library of New Testament Studies 543 (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); Leroy A. Huizenga, *The New Isaac: Tradition and Intertextuality in the Gospel of Matthew*, Supplements to Novum Testamentum 131, (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Marvin A. Sweeney, *Form and Intertextuality in Prophetic and Apocalyptic Literature*, Forschungen zum Alten Testament 45 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005); Marvin A. Sweeney, *Reading Prophetic Books: Form, Intertextuality, and Reception in Prophetic and Post-Biblical Literature* Forschungen zum Alten Testament 89 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Sylvia C. Keesmaat, “Exodus and the Intertextual Transformation of Tradition in Romans 8.14–30,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 54, no. 1 (1994): 29–56; Michelle Fletcher, *Reading Revelation as Pastiche: Imitating the Past*, Library of New Testament Studies 571 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017); Kenneth Duncan Litwak, *Echoes of Scripture in Luke—Acts: Telling the History of God’s People Intertextually*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 282 (London: T&T Clark, 2005); Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zecharias, eds., *Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality*, vol. 1, *Thematic Studies*, Library of New Testament Studies 391, Studies in Scripture and Early Judaism 14 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009); Craig A. Evans and H. Daniel Zecharias, eds., *Early Christian Literature and Intertextuality*, vol. 2, *Exegetical Studies*, Library of New Testament Studies 392, Studies in Scripture and Early Judaism 15 (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

that refers to authorial intention in an essay about how Matthew 11:16-19 and Luke 7:31-35 link to Proverbs 1:20-33.⁸⁷ Geoffrey D. Miller notes that some scholars “use ‘intertextuality’ as a catchall term to refer to any relationship that can be established between texts.”⁸⁸ As one example of Miller’s point, Peter D. Miscall namedrops Barthes and Kristeva, but says that

“intertextuality” is a covering term for all the possible relations that can be established between texts. The relations can be based on anything from quotes and direct references to indirect allusions to common words and even letters to dependence on language itself. The effect of the relations can extend from support and agreement to one text’s rejection and attempted destruction of the other.⁸⁹

That is not what Barthes and Kristeva were saying! Likewise, John Barton writes:

it would be good if biblical scholars sometimes avoided “domesticating” ideas that come from Theory, and did not at once turn them into ‘helpful’ ways of deriving theological insights from the Bible. Intertextuality ... is highly challenging to any idea of the fixity, canonicity, and inspiration of the biblical text.⁹⁰

Nonetheless, is there a way to reconcile “intertextuality” and “allusion” (and by extension, authorial intent)? In the field of Latin poetry, Stephen Hinds wrote a book trying to do that very thing. He called it *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry*.⁹¹ Hinds notes that Romanists typically prefer to write about deliberate and clear allusions from one author to another rather than the broader “intertextuality.”⁹² Although allusion and intertextuality are set at odds, Hinds sees value in both. The term “allusion” emphasizes the

⁸⁷ Brian C. Dennert, “‘The Rejection of Wisdom’s Call’: Matthew’s Use of Proverbs 1:20–33 in the Parable of Children in the Marketplace (Matthew 11:16–19//Luke 7:31–35)” in *Searching the Scriptures: Studies in Context and Intertextuality*, eds. Craig A. Evans and Jeremiah J. Johnston, *Studies in Scripture in Early Judaism and Early Christianity* 19, published under Library of New Testament Studies 543 (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 46–63.

⁸⁸ Miller, “Intertextuality in Old Testament Research,” 283.

⁸⁹ Peter D. Miscall, “Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book,” in *Reading between the Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell, *Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 44.

⁹⁰ John Barton, “*Déjà Lu*: Intertextuality, Method or Theory,” in *Reading Job Intertextually*, eds. Katharine Dell and Will Kynes, *Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies* 574 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 16.

⁹¹ Stephen Hinds, *Allusion and Intertext: Dynamics of Appropriation in Roman Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁹² *Ibid.*, xi.

writer's intention to connect two texts, but Hinds observes that this emphasis contradicts "one of the most famous and broadly acknowledged impasses in twentieth century criticism: the ultimate *unknowability* of the poet's intention."⁹³ Hinds admits that the critic might still have to *construct* the intention of the poet to some degree, but he believes that scholars can use the term "allusion," along with its intention-bearing author, as a discourse which is good to think with—which enables us to conceptualize and to handle certain kinds of intertextual transaction more economically and effectively than does any alternative."⁹⁴ Furthermore, in a study of Superman, one can read interviews where the filmmakers or writers explain their intentions—while a Romanist such as Hinds does not have that luxury. Like Hinds's book, this study will examine instances of deliberate allusions and try to figure out authorial intention—with the understanding that sometimes it is not possible to know. In that case, the language of intertextuality is beneficial when authorial intention is uncertain. When discussing Hinds's book, Lyne observes that "an uncharitable point of view might see it as another attempt to have the critical cake and eat it," but Lyne believes that Hinds's "diluted" form of intertextuality is "a flexible and practical compromise."⁹⁵ Lyne argues that even people who support the concept of intertextuality would surely see evidence of authorial intention and deliberate allusion in some cases, and to act otherwise would be to ignore the way many readers intuitively interpret some texts.⁹⁶ However, Lyne believes that, rather than choosing between allusion and intertextuality, or even merging the two, there is still a way to see both terms as "coexistent and complementary aspects of a more broadly conceived property of literary texts."⁹⁷ Lyne theorizes that a scholar can conceptualize how a text deliberately recalls other specific sources, but *also* relates to the shared

⁹³ Ibid., 47–48.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 50.

⁹⁵ Lyne, *Memory and Intertextuality in Renaissance Literature*, 24.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 25.

tradition of other sources “automatically and serendipitously,” and that both processes can be put in dialogue; the author might not have known where a particular intertextual trope originated.⁹⁸ Likewise, Superman stories exist in a shared cultural heritage in the modern Western world, so both intentional allusions and intertextuality can be examined.

This study will acknowledge that some of Barthes’s theoretical underpinnings for the term “intertextuality” *will* be ignored—and in particular the disregard for authorial intention.⁹⁹ Not all scholars who have used the term have acknowledged its disregard of authorial intention, much less followed through on it. In this study, whatever insights can be gained when authorial intention *cannot be known* fall under the framework of intertextuality. Intertextuality changes how we look at texts, but it should not invalidate previous ways of thinking. For example, a 1975 edited volume called *Biblical Images in Literature* included essays analyzing a range of works—including *Moby Dick*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and the poems of T.S. Eliot—to explain and interpret the precise biblical allusions in the works.¹⁰⁰ The essays clarify the meaning of the texts, but they stem from an effort to understand authorial intention. If the author’s intended meaning *can* be understood, it should be; there is nothing inherently wrong with detecting allusions.

Although not identified as “intertextuality,” Dale C. Allison’s study of typology in the Gospel of Matthew provides a parallel for this study of Superman; Allison analyzes how the

⁹⁸ Ibid., 43. Lyne uses memory as an analogy for intertextuality (73–75).

⁹⁹ Kristeva became dissatisfied with her own term because she later wrote that “intertextuality” refers to the “transposition of one (or several) sign system(s) into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of ‘study of sources,’ we prefer the term *transposition*.” See Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. Margaret Waller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 59–60. Simon Dentith writes that intertextuality “denotes the myriad conscious ways in which texts are alluded to or cited in other texts: the dense network of quotation, glancing reference, imitation, polemical refutation and so on in which all texts have their being. At a still more profound level, intertextuality refers to the dense web of allusion out of which individual texts are constituted—their constant and inevitable use of ready made formulations, catch phrases, slang, jargon, cliché, commonplaces, unconscious echoes, and formulaic phrases.” See Simon Dentith, *Parody, The New Critical Idiom* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5. This definition suggests that intertextuality can be understood as both unconscious and reflective of deliberate intent. Yet it seems better to distinguish the term from “allusion.”

¹⁰⁰ *Biblical Images in Literature*, eds. Roland Bartel, with James S. Ackerman and Thayer S. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975).

author of the Gospel of Matthew used pre-existing texts from the Hebrew Scriptures to make Jesus into a “new Moses.”¹⁰¹ Similarly, parts of this study will examine how biblical connections have made Superman into a Moses or Jesus figure. Intertextuality provides a framework to understand how texts relate to one another even if *not all* connections were intended by the author. After all, it is possible that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew could have picked up Allison’s study and not even been consciously aware of every connection Allison made, but simply used them instinctively. The language of intertextuality offers a cushion when one cannot know authorial intention, but this study of Superman will prioritize authorial intention. For another example that has some similarities to this study of Superman, Marisa Gatti-Taylor wrote an essay noting the “intertextual” biblical echoes between Ignazio Silone’s Italian novel *Fontamara* and the story of Moses in the Book of Exodus; however, Gatti-Taylor acknowledged that one cannot be certain that the author had the Bible in mind for all these connections.¹⁰²

Finally, “intertextuality” is not limited to books. It can be applied to music, visual art, and films.¹⁰³ To that end, this study will examine books, comics, films, and television. It will analyze Christian symbolism in Superman, but also track how Superman came to be viewed as a Christ figure in the public consciousness and how Christians looked upon these connections with scepticism, but over time, saw the opportunity to use Superman/Jesus parallels for evangelism.

¹⁰¹ Dale C. Allison Jr., *The New Moses: A Matthean Typology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 185. This connection is not unique to Allison. See also Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1982), 78.

¹⁰² Marisa Gatti-Taylor, “Silone’s ‘Moses’ at the Bitter Fountain: Exodus as Subtext,” in *Intertextuality in Literature and Film: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Annual Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film*, eds. Elaine D. Cancalon and Antoine Spacagna (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), 61–73. For another application of the concept to cinema, see Keith A. Reader, “Literature/Cinema/Television: Intertextuality in Jean Renoir’s *Le Testament du docteur Cordelier*,” in *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, eds. Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 176–89.

¹⁰³ For example, see Wendy Steiner, “Intertextuality in Painting,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 4 (1985): 57–67; Robert S. Hatten, “Intertextuality in Music Studies,” *American Journal of Semiotics* 3, no. 4 (1985): 69–82; Elaine D. Cancalon and Antoine Spacagna, eds., *Intertextuality in Literature and Film: Selected Papers from the Thirteenth Annual Florida State University Conference on Literature and Film* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994).

Chapter Two: Superman's Development

Misconceptions about Superman and Jesus

When the 2013 Superman film *Man of Steel* was released in theatres, the film's director Zack Snyder said: "When we started to examine the Superman mythology, in the most classic sense, I really wanted to press upon the film the 'why' of him, which has been 75 years in the making,"¹⁰⁴ Snyder added:

The Christ-like parallels, I didn't make that stuff up. We weren't like, "Hey, let's add this!" That stuff is there, in the mythology. That is the tried-and-true Superman metaphor. So rather than be snarky and say that doesn't exist, we thought it would be fun to allow that mythology to be woven through.¹⁰⁵

Snyder said that the relationship between Superman and Jesus "has been talked about since the creation of Superman," and "probably was talked about more when Superman was created than it is now."¹⁰⁶ Snyder's words reflect some popular misconceptions about the character of Superman. Similar to Snyder's statement, Arno Bogaerts writes that the Christological representation of Superman probably is "the version of the character that non-comic book readers are most familiar with."¹⁰⁷ Snyder was not the first to portray Superman as a Christ figure, but it is wrong to treat this portrayal as an original and natural part of the character.

¹⁰⁴ Jennifer Vineyard, "'Man of Steel' Director Zack Snyder on Superman's Christ-Like Parallels," *CNN*, June 16, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/06/14/showbiz/zack-snyder-man-of-steel/index.html> (accessed June 27, 2018). In a different interview, Snyder called Superman "a Christlike figure," but admitted that they tried "not to make him so predictably morally black and white." One wonders why. See Noelene Clark, "'Man of Steel': Zack Snyder Says Superman 'Must Be Taken Seriously,'" *Hero Complex*, April 25, 2013, <http://herocomplex.latimes.com/movies/man-of-steel-zack-snyder-says-superman-must-be-taken-seriously/#/0> (accessed June 27, 2018).

¹⁰⁵ Vineyard, "'Man of Steel' Director Zack Snyder on Superman's Christ-Like Parallels."

¹⁰⁶ Ross McD, "Man of Steel: The Top 20 Reasons Why Superman Is Jesus," *Metro News*, June 11, 2013, <https://metro.co.uk/2013/06/11/man-of-steel-the-top-20-reasons-why-superman-is-jesus-3837465/> (accessed June 27, 2018).

¹⁰⁷ Arno Bogaerts, "Rediscovering Nietzsche's *Übermensch* in Superman as a Heroic Ideal," in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?*, ed. Mark D. White, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 92.

This paper will argue that the Jesus parallels are not organic to the original source material of Superman (the comic books) but were grafted onto the character in the films to appeal to a mass audience. Furthermore, this paper will argue that the comic book writers have—with some exceptions—been less willing to identify Superman as a Jesus figure, but more as a moral example that anyone can aspire to emulate. Contrary to the statements of someone like Snyder, this paper will demonstrate that Superman came to be associated with Jesus mainly because the 1978 film *Superman: The Movie* introduced that imagery onto the character. Then, Superman famously died and rose from the dead in the comics in 1992, and that storyline intensified the association between Superman and Jesus in the public consciousness. Later, the television series *Smallville* and the films *Superman Returns*, *Man of Steel*, and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* further exploited the Jesus imagery, but they were building on the 1978 film and the 1992 comics storyline. One of the core claims of this thesis is that Jesus imagery is not foundational to the character of Superman, but has been exploited by the studios for marketing purposes. Finally, this thesis will track how Christians perceived the application of Jesus comparisons to the fictional character of Superman. I will argue that—based on how Christian writers have engaged with the topic over time—many Christian writers have shifted from viewing Superman/Jesus comparisons as a blasphemous threat to seeing them as a springboard to evangelize to non-Christians, although this idea is not universally lauded.

In this study, when reference is made to Superman as a “Jesus figure” or “Christ figure,” that term can carry different connotations in different media and many of these connotations are surface-level parallels and allegories. Even so, some Superman media compare Superman and Jesus by placing Superman in narrative contexts or visual contexts that deliberately mimic the life of Christ and typical artistic representations of it—such as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* or the

crucifixion and resurrection. These parallels are direct *imitations* of Christ. Other comparisons stem from the fact that Jesus and Superman both *save* people, though one in a spiritual sense and the other in a physical sense (because it is an allegory). Finally, the original Superman films explore the idea that Superman was sent to Earth by his father for the specific purpose of saving it—despite the fact that these parallels fit uneasily into the surrounding narrative context.

Explaining the Origins of Superman

The core argument of this thesis is that Superman did not start as a Jesus figure, but became one in later representations to appeal to a wider audience. In order to establish the veracity of this claim, it is necessary to establish why Superman was created—if the life of Jesus Christ was not in fact an influence on Superman’s creators.

Gerard Jones writes of Superman’s co-creator that “all his life, in all the interviews he gave, all the talks he had with editors and peers, all the autobiographical sketches he wrote, Jerry Siegel never mentioned what happened to his father.”¹⁰⁸ What did happen to Jerry Siegel’s father? In 1932, in a poor area of Cleveland, three men robbed Michel Siegel’s used clothing store, and Michel collapsed and died of heart failure, leaving six children; the perpetrators were never caught.¹⁰⁹ Later Superman writer Mark Waid commented, “You can see how that would make you long for a father figure who was bullet-proof,”¹¹⁰ and six years later, Michel’s son

¹⁰⁸ Gerard Jones, *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* (New York: Perseus, 2004), 23.

¹⁰⁹ Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America’s Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2012), 6, 8; Ricca, *Super Boys*, 6–7; 301–10; Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 41. Gerard Jones portrays this death as a murder, when it was a heart failure at the time of a robbery. See Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 38.

¹¹⁰ *Secret Origin: The Story of DC Comics*, directed by Mac Carter (New York: DC Entertainment, 2010). Also, in the early Superman comics, it is also worth noting that in *Superman #2*, a criminal dies in a way similar to Siegel’s father, that Superman had a father on his home planet of Krypton who died young, and that in Superman’s

Jerry completed the first published modern “superhero” story about Superman, a hero with fantastic powers who could stop the sorts of crimes that happened on the night Michel died.

Larry Tye suggests that Superman possibly “embraced the vigilante justice that Jerry longed to mete out to his father’s robbers.”¹¹¹ Regardless of the motivations, the character soon became incredibly popular.¹¹²

It is important to emphasize here that if the death of Jerry Siegel’s father played a role in the creation of Superman, then that has a direct bearing on whether the character was created to be a Christ figure. This is significant because if Siegel created Superman in part because of his lost father figure, he may not have created him to be a replacement for Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, the death of Jerry Siegel’s father may have been one of *many* influences on Superman.¹¹³ Siegel said that the premise of Superman was influenced by his own frustrations as a shy high school

earliest origin story, he can be seen visiting the grave of his adoptive father. See Ricca, *Super Boys*, 306–10. The character of Superman had been created before 1938, but took some time to find a publisher. Before creating the hero Superman, Jerry Siegel wrote a story called “The Reign of the Superman”—about an evil superpowered being who is created from a science experiment, but appears to be defeated by intervention from God. For more on this creation, see Glen Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 10; Ricca, *Super Boys*, 65–79; Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 78–86; Tye, *Superman*, 8; Daniels, *DC Comics*, 21; Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History*, 14–15; Adam Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?*, ed. Mark D. White, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 111–13; *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns; Dennis Dooley, “The Man of Tomorrow and the Boys of Yesterday,” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 19–34. See also, Thomas Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah: the Prehistory of the Superman in Science Fiction Literature,” *Discourse* 2, no. 1 (1980): 84–112. A version of this essay can also be found as Thomas Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah: the Prehistory of the Superman in Science Fiction Literature,” *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*, ed. Donald Lazere (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 124–38.

¹¹¹ Tye, *Superman*, 34.

¹¹² In the 1940s, Superman appeared in comics, newspapers, cinemas, the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade, and the New York World’s Fair. Mark Waid said: “We have not seen anything like it in American pop culture since. Beatlemania was not that big.” See *Secret Origin*, directed by Mac Carter. See also, Daniels, *DC Comics*; Daniels, *Superman*; *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns.

¹¹³ Brad Ricca writes that Superman was influenced by Flash Gordon, Buck Rogers, and weightlifters, while being a form of wish-fulfillment. As originally drawn, Superman’s face was derivative of the actor Johnny Weissmuller, who played Tarzan in the 1930s and 1940s. See Ricca, *Super Boys*, 128. Clark Kent’s name was influenced by the actors Clark Gable and Kent Taylor. See Tye, *Superman*, 32, 106; De Haven, *Our Hero*, 36.

student who wished he could impress girls.¹¹⁴ Siegel said: “I was quite meek and I was quite mild. And I thought, ‘Gee, wouldn’t it be great if I was a mighty person?’ And these girls didn’t know that this clod here is really someone special.”¹¹⁵ Siegel said that in high school he “had crushes on several attractive girls who either didn’t know I existed or didn’t care ... It occurred to me: What if I ... had something special going for me, like jumping over buildings or throwing cars around or something like that?”¹¹⁶ Just as Siegel felt inadequate at times, co-creator Joe Shuster recalled that he was bullied when he was younger.¹¹⁷ These quotations from Siegel and Shuster are important because they demonstrate that Superman represented a sort of wish-fulfillment for his creators’ adolescent anxieties. If that is the case, again, it is less likely that Superman was created with a Jesus allegory in mind.

Brad Ricca writes that Jesus was a “modern, practical hope” in the 1920s and 1930s, but he can offer no direct evidence Siegel and Shuster were influenced by Jesus when they created Superman.¹¹⁸ Having said this, Ricca writes that the cover of the first Superman story in *Action Comics* #1—with Superman holding the car of some criminals over his head—is similar to “the pose of Christ, lifting the heavy cross with his legs.”¹¹⁹ There is nothing particularly Christlike about Superman smashing a car though, so any similarities Ricca spots are surely coincidental.

It is important to understand that when Siegel explained why he created Superman, he *did not mention Jesus*, but referenced

¹¹⁴ Jerry Siegel, “Happy 45th Anniversary, Superman!” in *Action Comics* #544 (New York: DC Comics, 1983), n.p. Les Daniel writes that “outside their worlds of fantasy, Siegel and Shuster were classic nerds, bespectacled, unathletic, shy around girls.” See Daniels, *Superman*, 12.

¹¹⁵ *Secret Origin*, directed by Mac Carter.

¹¹⁶ Otto Friedrich, “Up, Up, and Awaay!!!” *Time*, June 24, 2001, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,148856,00.html> (accessed June 28, 2018). The article is listed with a June 2001 date, but appears to have been written in 1988 to commemorate Superman’s fiftieth anniversary.

¹¹⁷ *Secret Origin*, directed by Mac Carter. Later in life, Shuster fell on hard times and was forced to draw pornographic comics. See Craig Yoe, *Secret Identity: The Fetish Art of Superman’s Co-Creator Joe Shuster* (New York: Abrahams ComicArts, 2009); Tye, *Superman*, 187; Ricca, *Super Boys*, 231–42.

¹¹⁸ Ricca, *Super Boys*, 131–33.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 356 n. 38.

President Roosevelt’s “fireside chats” ... being unemployed and worried during the depression and knowing hopelessness ... Hearing and reading of the oppression and slaughter of helpless, oppressed Jews in Nazi Germany .. seeing movies depicting the horrors of privation suffered by the downtrodden ... reading of gallant, crusading heroes in the pulps, and seeing equally crusading heroes on the screen in feature films and movie serials ... I had the great urge to help ... the despairing masses somehow. How could I help them when I could barely help myself? Superman was the answer.¹²⁰

Again, these quotations demonstrate that Superman’s creators did not have Jesus in mind when they invented their costumed hero. This point further establishes that Jesus imagery was grafted onto Superman later in the character’s history.

Superman’s character changed over time. In early stories, from 1938 to the early 1940s, he is called the “champion of the oppressed,”¹²¹ but compared to later portrayals, he was much more violent and intimidating to criminals. This point is significant because *even if* Siegel and Shuster intended to make Superman a Jesus figure (despite never saying so), one would expect their version of the character to emulate the moral character of Christ. Superman’s ethics in these early comics are the antithesis of the Sermon on the Mount and much closer to what Superman’s fellow hero Batman would become. For example, in the first Superman story in *Action Comics* #1, he harshly beats up a wife-beater.¹²² Later, Superman carries a thug over telephone wires, telling him: “Birds sit on telephone wires and *they* aren’t electrocuted—not unless they touch a telephone-pole and are grounded! OOPS!—Almost touched that pole!”¹²³ In another story, he tells a crook: “You see how effortlessly I crush this bar of iron in my hand?—That bar could just

¹²⁰ Quoted in De Haven, *Our Hero*, 68–69. This material comes from an unpublished letter by Siegel. Also, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster created the occult characters Doctor Mystic and Doctor Occult before Superman emerged, and “students of the history of comics heroes must regard the Occult-Mystic figure as a definite prototype of Superman, performing many of the feats, Superman later performed,” except with *supernatural* powers. See Dick O’Donnell, “It’s Magic,” in *The Comic Book Book*, eds. Don Thompson and Dick Lupoff (New Rochelle, NY: Arlington House, 1973), 157. See also, Daniels, *DC Comics*, 44. Occult also had strength, a blue costume, and a red cape for a time. See Daniels, *Superman*, 23–25.

¹²¹ Siegel, “Superman,” *Action Comics* #1.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ *Ibid.* Gerard Jones examines Siegel’s portrayal of Superman as a “practical joker” in this passage. See Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 125.

as easily be *your neck!*”¹²⁴ Superman *forces* a war profiteer to enlist in a foreign war to see the error of his ways.¹²⁵ Marco Arnaudo observes that people today “are sometimes shocked to discover that Superman ... killed people during World War II.”¹²⁶ Again, it is a misconception that Superman was intended to be a Christ figure from the start—even though the director of some recent Superman movies believed that to be the case. A Superman who brutally beats up and murders people can hardly have been created to mimic Jesus.

Superman was *not* a Jesus figure. When discussing the rough and tumble Superman from the early years, Glen Weldon writes: “He was impatient, given to anger, and prone to violence. He was a bully to bullies and a reckless one. He was, in point of fact, kind of a jerk. And he’d stay that way for a while.”¹²⁷ Arno Bogaerts observes that the Superman of the earliest comics was “a bit more morally ambiguous and more proactive toward tackling social problems and exposing Metropolis’s corrupt elite.”¹²⁸ One can find many examples in the primary texts that support these authors’ contentions that Superman was a bully (and therefore not like Jesus Christ). Superman was willing to hurt and threaten a woman to make her confess to a crime she committed.¹²⁹ In another early Superman comic, Superman is trying to stop a poisonous gas formula from falling into the wrong hands, and threatens a man to get it, saying: “Cracking your head like an egg shell will be a messy job, but if you insist on being stubborn ...”¹³⁰ In one story,

¹²⁴ Jerry Siegel, *Action Comics* #2 (New York: DC Comics, 1939), n.p.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 4. His steadfast “refusal to kill” did not develop in the comics until later. For more, see Peter B. Lloyd, “Superman’s Moral Evolution,” in *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop, (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 181–98.

¹²⁷ Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 20. As Bogaerts says, the Superman of the early comics “beats down ‘bullies,’ if you will, by becoming an even bigger one.” See Arno Bogaerts, “Rediscovering Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*,” 91. In 2011, Grant Morrison wrote Superman closer to his 1938 personality in *Action Comics*.

¹²⁸ Bogaerts, “Rediscovering Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*,” 91. Bogaerts also writes that Superman was “a social crusader and defender of the weak and oppressed” (91).

¹²⁹ Jerry Siegel, *Superman* #1 (New York: DC Comics, 1940), n.p.

¹³⁰ Jerry Siegel, “Superman Champions Universal Peace!” *Superman* #2 (New York: DC Comics, 1940), 8. In another story in *Superman* #4, Superman grabs a man named Gus Snide, and tells his criminal compatriots, “You

Superman intimidates a criminal by throwing him hundreds of feet into the air, saying, “Let’s play ‘catch’! You be the ball!”¹³¹ Later, he tells a criminal, “If you don’t confess, I’ll come back and dish out the justice you deserve with my bare hands!”¹³² These examples show that Superman was willing to hurt and threaten his opponents.

In early stories, Superman did not perform as many world-saving feats, but acted on the fringes of the law, and focused more on urban problems that seem quaint by the standards of his later adventures. As Danny Fingeroth puts it, “Superman himself, in his early stories, was a liberal, Rooseveltian do-gooder, battling corrupt politicians and wife-beaters, going up against forces large and small that threatened the average citizen in the days of the Great Depression.”¹³³ Fingeroth’s quote is amply demonstrated by the original comics. Superman deals with urban problems; at this time, “saving the world” is beyond his capabilities. For example, in an early adventure, criminals want to take over the city’s truck driver’s union by forcing a strike and paralyzing food distribution—so the criminals can get anything they want from the employers!¹³⁴ In *Action Comics* #3, Superman disguises himself as a miner who works in a dangerous mine, and leads the rich mine owner and a party of wealthy, well-dressed socialites into the mine to see its conditions.¹³⁵ When the owner of the mine sees it in person and watches a cave-in, he becomes so horrified at the working conditions of his miners that he promises to make his mine

can drop those guns, boys—or I’ll show you how to crack an egg-shell ... using Snide’s head to demonstrate with!” See Jerry Siegel, “Terror in the Trucker’s Union,” *Superman* #4 (New York: DC Comics, 1940), 6.

¹³¹ Jerry Siegel, “Superman and the Skyscrapers,” *Superman* #2 (New York: DC Comics, 1940), 8–9.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 16. Mark Waid described the early Superman as “a quick-tempered social activist” and one who might “gladly have bent the Miranda Laws with his bare hands.” See Mark Waid, “Introduction,” in *Superman in the Fifties* (New York: DC Comics, 2002), 5.

¹³³ Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 120.

¹³⁴ See Siegel, “Terror in the Trucker’s Union.”

¹³⁵ Jerry Siegel, “Superman Battles Death Underground,” *Action Comics* #3 (New York: DC Comics, 1938).

“the safest in the country, and my workers the best treated.”¹³⁶ In *Action Comics* #8, Superman encounters some poor boys in the slums who steal, he fights *against* the police to stop them from being arrested, and then tries to mold them into productive citizens.¹³⁷ In the story “Superman Declares War on Reckless Drivers,” in *Action Comics* #12, one of Clark Kent’s friends is hit by a car and dies; an angry Superman bursts into the studio of a radio show, seizes the microphone, and gives the city a tongue-lashing, declaring:

The auto accident death rate of this community is one that should shame us all! It’s constantly rising and due entirely to reckless driving and inefficiency! More people have been killed needlessly by autos than died during the World War! From this moment on, I declare war on reckless drivers—henceforth homicidal drivers answer to me!¹³⁸

Superman visits “the great lot where the autos of traffic violators are temporarily stored,” and smashes all the cars there!¹³⁹ Superman visits a used-car lot and smashes a faulty car before the salesman’s eyes.¹⁴⁰ He searches for bad drivers and, *shockingly*, he sees a car “on the wrong side of the road, weaving in and out wildly,” and the driver says, “Whoopee! (Hic!) **Some fun!**”¹⁴¹ Superman terrifies the reckless driver into submission; then, when another reckless driver hits Superman, but does not realize he is invulnerable, Superman catches up to the driver, and claims he is a ghost who will “haunt” the driver if he drives recklessly, and the driver is terrified.¹⁴² Superman visits the owner of a car factory whose cars get in the most accidents because the owner uses “inferior metals and parts so as to make higher profits at the cost of human lives!”¹⁴³ Superman destroys the factory with his bare hands (although one wonders if he

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 14. This story was “Siegel’s favourite story of this socially conscious type.” See Daniels, *DC Comics*, 23.

¹³⁷ Jerry Siegel, “Superman in the Slums,” *Action Comics* #8 (New York: DC Comics, 1939).

¹³⁸ Jerry Siegel, “Superman Declares War on Reckless Drivers,” *Action Comics* #12 (New York: DC Comics, 1939), 4. This is a better plot than at least a couple of the Superman films.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 6–9.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

could have given more thought to the workers).¹⁴⁴ In sum, while both Superman and Jesus had an angry side (as in the temple cleansing), there are no *deliberate* parallels in these early comics. In the examples already cited, Superman gets his way mainly by imposing his superior strength upon his opponents—and often in reckless ways. Superman’s approach is therefore far from the ethos of Christ.

After his first few years, Superman became less of a social activist, and devoted more time to simply fighting criminals.¹⁴⁵ Even in 1940, some more science-fiction elements began to creep into the stories as well, as Superman fights some dinosaurs created by Luthor.¹⁴⁶ Les Daniels writes that Superman’s adventures became “more impressive physically but less interesting politically.”¹⁴⁷ In the earliest Superman comics, “Superman is clearly the champion of the underdog displaying [sic] a sense of class consciousness virtually absent from later comic book stories,” anti-establishment, and willing to use his powers for radical ends for social change.¹⁴⁸ However, in 1942, “when the war effort demanded unquestioning loyalty to the state and increased collaboration between government and industry, Superman no longer operates outside the law but is made an honorary policeman.”¹⁴⁹ This point is significant because it shows that the war was the first step in the domestication of Superman. Although Superman would not be explicitly compared to Jesus for decades, the demands of wartime comics curbed Superman’s rebellious spirit and some of his morally ambiguous patterns of behavior. In other words, the writers had to make Superman’s ethics conform to authority during the war years, so the character stopped being as much of a brutal vigilante. This character change paved the way for

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 9–10. Ironically, at the end of the issue, Clark Kent receives a parking ticket (14).

¹⁴⁵ De Haven, *Our Hero*, 73.

¹⁴⁶ Jerry Siegel, “Luthor’s Undersea City,” *Superman #4* (New York: DC Comics, 1940).

¹⁴⁷ Daniels, *DC Comics*, 23.

¹⁴⁸ Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah,” 98–100.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 100.

Superman to eventually become a paragon of virtue, and from there, he could later be compared to Christ.

This domestication of Superman intensified and several authors have observed that Superman stopped being so radical. Unlike his early years as a “social crusader,” in the 1950s, Superman fought “to defend the status quo.”¹⁵⁰ As Glen Weldon writes, “he may have started life as a New Deal Democrat, but in twelve years of life, that reformist zeal had cooled to a normative breed of Eisenhower Republicanism,” and Superman began to be seen as a “big blue Boy Scout,” but in “a society that meant it as a compliment.”¹⁵¹ Superman “was what a nation of American men wanted to see themselves as—a coolly paternal presence who always knew best.”¹⁵² When discussing the Superman of the 1950s, Mark Waid says: “It’s a very conservative era. It’s very respectful of authority. And Superman therefore went from being a crusader of social causes to a symbol of the social order.”¹⁵³ Tom De Haven writes that Superman came to be seen as “dull-normal, middle-aged. Establishment.”¹⁵⁴

These continued changes to Superman deserve an explanation and I would argue that there are two reasons. The first reason that Superman’s adventures were sanitized is because the Comics Code Authority was created in 1954 to censor stories that could cause juvenile

¹⁵⁰ Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 90–91; *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns. For a study of gender in 1950s Superman comics, see Mark Best, “Domesticity, Homosociality and Male Power in Superhero Comics of the 1950s,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 1 (2005): 80–99.

¹⁵¹ Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 91.

¹⁵² *Ibid*; *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns.

¹⁵³ *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns. Elsewhere, Waid laments that Superman may not be as popular today is because he is closely associated with upholding a “status quo” that young people are disenchanted with. Waid thinks that young people today want heroes “who symbolize their rebellious spirit and understand their frustrations”—which is how Superman originally was. See Mark Waid, “Superman,” in *Superman: Birthright* (New York: DC Comics, 2004), 293. Although this example is from a later decade, Greg Garrett writes that the end of the film *Superman II*—where Superman carries an American flag to the White House—“is perhaps the iconic example of his conformity to the status quo.” See Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 53. In the late 1950s, Superman’s comics began to have more “situational” or “emotional” stories—such as having Superman travel back in time and fall in love on Krypton, or his college love affair with a mermaid. These changes were “a natural evolution for a god-like hero who had no real peers among his adversaries.” See Lynn Wooley, “Twixt Joe and Kurt: The Art of Wayne Boring and Stan Kaye,” *Comic Book Marketplace*, September-October 1998, 26–29.

¹⁵⁴ De Haven, *Our Hero*, 163.

delinquency.¹⁵⁵ In other words, all comics now had to be approved by a governing body that censored any plot element that could promote reckless behavior in youths. The Comics Code Authority could go to extremes. As a representative example, Les Daniels cites a 1956 *Plastic Man* comic where—for a lame throwaway joke—one character accidentally drinks a jug that contained a villain made of water.¹⁵⁶ The Comics Code Authority forced the scene to be rewritten so that the villain is spilled out of the jug—so as not to encourage cannibalism in children!¹⁵⁷ The creation of the Comics Code Authority is directly related to a sensationalist book by Dr. Fredric Wertham called *The Seduction of the Innocent*.¹⁵⁸ Since Wertham’s book argued that comic books could cause violence in children, like the other heroes, Superman had to be on his best behavior in his adventures. Hence, in the 1950s, it would have been unthinkable for Superman to battle cops or perform the sort of violent vigilante justice that characterized his earliest adventures. It must be emphasized again that these changes to Superman’s moral character enabled later writers to compare him to Jesus Christ, even if those connections were not yet explicit.

Nonetheless, there is a second reason why Superman was more of an “establishment” figure in the 1950s. Superman’s creator Jerry Siegel lost creative control of the character, and the character was thus controlled by corporate interests who wanted to appeal to the broadest audience possible. Siegel did not write any Superman stories between 1948 and roughly 1960 (when he was hired as a freelance writer). Thus, the original ethos of the character were gone. There may be an unintentional parallel with how the fiery Jesus of the Gospels could become

¹⁵⁵ For more on the history of comics censorship, see Daniels, *DC Comics*.

¹⁵⁶ Daniels, *DC Comics*, 115.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ See Fredric Wertham, *The Seduction of the Innocent* (New York: Rhinehart and Company, 1954).

identified with upper-class, respectable, mainline Christianity. By the 1950s and 1960s, Siegel no longer controlled his character, and, as Thomas Andrae puts it:

Siegel's original vision of Superman was radically subverted and a vapid, establishmentarian hero substituted in his place which the public, ironically, came to accept as the "real" Superman. The memory of Superman's existence as an outlaw and champion of the oppressed would be virtually extinguished.¹⁵⁹

Andrae's points are significant to my thesis because they identify a point at which the gap between Siegel's violent outlaw version of Superman moved closer to being identified with Jesus. Although Superman was never explicitly identified with Jesus in any of the comics in this period, the changes to the character in the 1950s laid the groundwork for him to become a Jesus-like character later. Having said this, while Superman was more conservative in the 1950s, even in the 1940s, Siegel and Shuster took

Superman seriously as a model for children ... he took the time to help young weaklings stand up against bullies, to lead poor boys back from gangdom to their mother's tables, to teach snotty urchins a lesson or two and send them on their way as humbler citizens. There wasn't a coherent political statement, but it was a New Deal Hollywood portrayal of a world where innocent people are hurt by greed and callousness and we could all use a primary-colored conscience to zoom in and knock us to our senses.¹⁶⁰

On a related point, Ken Schenck notes that "the fact that children have frequently dominated Superman's audience is one of the factors that has always pushed his character toward the straight and narrow."¹⁶¹ The creation of the Comics Code Authority intensified that emphasis. Granted, Schenck overstates the case when he says that the Superman of the 1950s was "a Christ-like moral example for 'one nation under god'"¹⁶² because Superman was not connected to Jesus in the comics themselves then. In short, Superman did not start as a Jesus figure, but became one.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 102. Andrae is overly negative in his portrayal of the 1950s comics.

¹⁶⁰ Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 174.

¹⁶¹ Ken Schenck, "Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah," in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. B.J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 37.

¹⁶² Ibid.

Influences on Superman

To analyze the question of whether Superman should be understood as a Jesus figure, it is necessary to analyze other influences on the character's creation. The traditional Superman story is that he was born "Kal-El" of the planet Krypton and his father Jor-El sent him to Earth in a spaceship; on earth, his ship was found by Jonathan and Martha Kent of Smallville, Kansas, who discovered that he had superhuman powers. He grew up as Clark Kent and works for the newspaper *The Daily Planet* under editor Perry White and alongside his love interest Lois Lane and young friend Jimmy Olsen. This section will analyze several commonly cited "influences" on Superman—including Nietzsche and Siegel and Shuster's Jewish background (encompassing the characters of Moses, Noah, the golem, and alleged parallels between Superman's planet Krypton and Jewish identity). I will reject most of these comparisons. The earlier discussion of Siegel and Shuster's adolescent frustrations is more relevant to Superman's creation than many of the deeper philosophical or religious influences some writers have detected. Finally, I will examine why writers and scholars find it attractive to compare Superman and Jesus.

The character of Superman can be linked to Nietzsche's concept of the *Übermensch*, which has sometimes been translated "Superman," and later Superman writers have used this comparison.¹⁶³ Nonetheless, the character probably did not get his name from Nietzsche because

¹⁶³ In an episode of the 1950s Superman TV show, a German-speaking villain calls Superman the *Übermensch* when he sees him. See *Adventures of Superman*, "Double Trouble" S01, E16, directed by Tommy Carr, written by Eugene Solow, ABC, December 26, 1952. Interestingly, *Superman: The Movie* producer Ilya Salkind said that the filmmakers wanted Superman composer John Williams to emulate Richard Strauss's Nietzsche-inspired *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. See Ilya Salkind and Pierre Spengler, "Audio Commentary," disc 1, *Superman: The Movie*, DVD, directed by Richard Donner (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures), 2001. When Lois Lane gives Superman his name in the 1990s Superman animated series, she describes him as "the Nietzschean fantasy ideal all wrapped up in a red cape. The superman." See *Superman: The Animated Series*, "The Last Son of Krypton: Part III," S01, E3, directed by Dan Riba and Bruce Timm, written by Alan Burnett and Paul Dini, *Kids WB!*, September 6, 1996. In the first episode of the television show *Smallville*, Clark Kent runs into his high-school crush Lana Lang and drops his copy of *The Portable Nietzsche*; Lana asks him, "So, what are you? Man or superman?" Clark replies,

Siegel did not read Nietzsche, “but most likely Siegel picked up the term from other science fiction writers who casually used it before him.”¹⁶⁴ Therefore, Nietzsche was not an influence on the creation of Superman. Ironically, Adam Roberts writes that Nietzsche scholars stopped translating Nietzsche’s term *Übermensch* as “Superman” partly in deference to the character.¹⁶⁵ If that is true, then Superman may have influenced how Nietzsche is written about more than Nietzsche influenced Superman. In any case, Superman’s traditional characterization is at odds with Nietzschean ideals. Adam Barkman writes that

Superman’s absolute devotion to the universal moral law and Judeo-Christian morality stands in stark contrast to Nietzsche’s morality of power. Where Nietzsche sees

“I haven’t figured it out yet.” *Smallville*, “Pilot,” S01, E1, directed by David Nutter, written by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, *The WB*, October 16, 2001. The issue *Action Comics* #800 begins with an epigraph quoting *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “He turns all of his injuries into strengths, that which does not kill him makes him stronger, he is superman.” Joe Kelly, “A Hero’s Journey,” *Action Comics* #800 (New York: DC Comics, 2003), n.p. *Superman* #203 shows a Kryptonian from Kandor acting as a caricatured version of Nietzsche’s ideal, complete with a desire “to cleanse the impure” and references to “man and Superman.” See Joe Kelly and Michael Turner, “Godfall, Part 6 of 6: Divinity,” *Superman* #203 (New York: DC Comics, 2004). For a comparison of the Nietzschean ideal with Superman, see Adam Roberts, “Is Superman a Superman?” in *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop, (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 115–25. For more on Nietzsche, see Harry Neumann, “Nietzsche: The Superman, the Will to Power and the Eternal Return,” *Ultimate Reality and Meaning* 5, no. 4 (1982): 280–95; Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, “Conventional Iconoclasm: The Cultural Work of the Nietzsche Image in Twentieth-Century America,” *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 3 (2006): 728–754. For the application of Nietzsche to superheroes, but more specifically Marvel characters, see Jason Bainbridge, “Beyond the Law: What is So Super about Superheroes and Supervillains?” *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* 30, no. 3 (2017): 367–88.

¹⁶⁴ Daniels, *Superman*, 18. See also, Ricca, *Super Boys*, 129. Barkman adds that the evil “superman” in Siegel and Shuster’s older “Reign of the Superman” story was closer to Nietzsche’s concept. See Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 111–13. In 1941, John Kobler of the *Saturday Evening Post* wrote an article that portrayed Superman stories as infantile fantasies, but nonetheless identified Superman as “the first authentic cultural hero since Paul Bunyan.” However, Kobler doubted that Siegel and Shuster really understood the Nietzschean philosophy linked to the character’s name. See John Kobler, “Up, Up and Away! The Rise of Superman Inc.,” *Saturday Evening Post*, June 21, 1941, 14–15, 70–78, quoted in Ian Gordon, *Superman: The Persistence of an American Icon* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 4. In a study of the prefix “super,” David B. Guralnik speculates that by making Superman a hero Jerry Siegel and Shuster might have been affected “even if only half-consciously, by Hitler’s perverted use of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* as a basis for the well-publicized Nazi pseudo-racial theories.” Guralnik thinks that as Jews, the two of them “could not have been entirely unaware of that propaganda.” See David B. Guralnik, “Superstar, Supermom, Super Glue, Superdooper, Superman,” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 105. Superman. Arie Kaplan writes that it is ironic that Nietzsche’s term later had Nazi connotations because “the most famous ‘Superman’ in history was created by Jews.” See Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 11. Many writers in comics, films, and television are Jews, and so Fingerioth writes that “Jewish-humanist—one could even say ‘Judeo-Christian’—ideals of the superhero seem to be consistent across media.” See Fingerioth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 147.

¹⁶⁵ Roberts, “Is Superman a Superman?” 116.

sacrificial love as a weakness because it conforms to social standards, Superman sees sacrificial love as a strength insofar as it conforms to the Highest Law.¹⁶⁶

Arno Bogaerts makes a similar observation when he writes: “like Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*, Superman is strong, creative, noble, independent, and life-affirming, but unlike him, Superman is compassionate and looks out for the little guy.”¹⁶⁷ Barkman and Bogaerts’s observations are consistent with Superman’s character. Elliot S. Maggin’s 1978 fictional novel *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton* even affirms a similar point directly because the reader learns of Superman that “in an apparent contradiction of his own condition, he held Hobbes and Nietzsche and their ideas of the natural superiority of certain members of society, in contempt.”¹⁶⁸ Conversely, Iain Thomson argues that, “under the influence of the comics Nietzsche unintentionally helped inspire, we tend to think of *Superman* as a type of superhero, but on Nietzsche’s view, it would be more accurate to say that all superheroes are variations of the superman archetype.”¹⁶⁹ Yet there is no positive evidence that Nietzsche influenced Siegel and Shuster’s character, beyond maybe suggesting the name, and even then, that influence is second-hand at best. In fact, Ian Gordon observes that after the Second World War, it was necessary to *disassociate* Superman from the *Übermensch* since that concept was tied to America’s enemies.¹⁷⁰ Indeed, a 1943 issue of the *Catholic World* claimed that “in a vulgar way this fantastic character [Superman] seems to personify the primitive religion expounded by Nietzsche’s *Zarathustra*. ‘Man alone is and must be our God,’ says Zarathustra, very much in the style of a Nazi pamphleteer.”¹⁷¹ This quotation testifies to the fact that in the United States,

¹⁶⁶ Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 116.

¹⁶⁷ Bogaerts, “Rediscovering Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*,” 91.

¹⁶⁸ Elliot S. Maggin, *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton* (New York: Warner Books, 1978), 73.

¹⁶⁹ Iain Thomson, “Deconstructing the Hero,” in *Comics as Philosophy*, ed. Jeff McLaughlin (Jackson, MS: The University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 113.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁷¹ Thomas F. Doykem “What’s Wrong with the ‘Comics?’” *Catholic World*, February 1943, quoted in Tye, *Superman*, 128. Fortunately, in the 1940s, the producers of the Superman radio show “reached out to experts on

Nietzsche was viewed with suspicion. Ultimately, Superman’s relationship to Nietzsche’s concept is easy to overstate because it seems that Superman’s character has little in common with Nietzschean ideals and because in the early years of the character’s creation, Superman’s writers had no need to emphasize any possible parallels between the two. Thus, I would argue that the relationship between Nietzsche and Superman should not be pressed too far.

Since Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were Jewish, many writers have argued that there are Jewish influences on Superman.¹⁷² Christopher B. Zeichmann argues that in early Superman comics, “Superman’s recurring title of ‘champion of the helpless and oppressed’ seems to be a loose translation of Psalm 82:3” (“uphold the cause of the poor and oppressed” [Psalm 82:3 NIV]).¹⁷³ That parallel could be unintentional, but it is impossible to know. Countless writers—both Jewish and Christian—have linked Superman’s Kryptonian name “Kal-El” to the Hebrew name for God “El” (and the many biblical figures who have this suffix in their names) and drawn many intricate conclusions.¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless, the earliest comics were not like this; George

child welfare and education, as well as religious organizations, to help them craft messages children would understand and respond to.” The series received praise and awards from The Veterans of Foreign Wars of the U.S. (VFW), the American Veterans Committee, and the Boy Scouts, but also “the Award of Distinguished Merit” from the National Conference of Christians and Jews. The show earned respect from the National Conference on Christians and Jews for an episode where Superman battled a group modeled on the Ku Klux Klan. See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 82–83. See also Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 242.

¹⁷² Michael Shapiro wrote a book ranking the 100 most influential Jews in history; Moses placed number one, while Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster claimed the one-hundredth spot via Superman. See Michael Shapiro, *The Jewish 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Jews of All Time* (New York: Citadel Press, 1995).

¹⁷³ Christopher B. Zeichmann, “Champion of the Oppressed: Redescribing the Jewishness of Superman as Populist Authenticity Politics,” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 29, no. 2 (2017): 140–41.

¹⁷⁴ Larry Tye writes that the suffix “El” is tied to some of “Judaism’s most cherished birthrights, from Israel to the prophets Samu-el and Dani-el. It means *God*. *Kal* is similar to the Hebrew words for *voice* and *vessel*. Together they suggest that the alien superbaby was not just a Jew but a very special one.” See Tye, *Superman*, 65. Gary D. Engle reasons that “El” is masculine singular for God, just as “angels in Hebrew mythology are called *benei Elohim* (literally, sons of the Gods), or *Elyonim* (higher beings),” while “el” appears at the end of many names in the Hebrew Bible. Engle thinks Superman’s closest parallel is with Michael the warrior angel who traditionally fights Satan. It may be something of a reach for Engle to link the *Kal* to the Hebrew for “swiftness” and Superman’s great speed, or to compare it to the Hebrew “hal” for “everything” or “all,” and infer that Superman represents “all that God is.” Engle even compares the name “Kent” to the Hebrew “kana,” and says that in the Bible, in the k-n-t form it means “I have found a son.” See Gary D. Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 86. Simcha Weinstein notes the parallels between Kal-El and other biblical names such as Samuel, Israel, and Daniel,

Lowther’s 1942 Superman novel renamed Superman’s parents from Lora and Jor-L, to “Lara,” and “Jor-el,”—with the latter eventually being modified to “Jor-El.”¹⁷⁵ While one could interpret the name of Superman’s Kryptonian father “Jor-El” as a pun on the Hebrew “God teaches,” it seems that Jor-El’s name (and by extension Kal-El’s) is not taken from God, but was an in-joke for the name of Superman co-creator Jerry (Jerome/Jor) Siegel.¹⁷⁶ Hence, these readings of “Kal-El” may not be helpful.¹⁷⁷ Other interpreters have noted a possible Jesus connection: the fact that Superman’s adoptive mother on Earth was named “Mary,” before having that name

but then compares the name “Kal-El” to “Michael,” who in Jewish tradition is the angel who battles Satan. Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey! How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Baltimore, MD: Leviathan Press, 2006), 27. Arie Kaplan argues that in Hebrew, Kal-El means “All that God is.” See Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 15. Harry Brod asks: “Can it really be coincidental that Kal-El’s original Kryptonian name spoken with a Hebrew pronunciation sounds like the Hebrew words for ‘all is God’ or ‘all for God’?” See Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 5. See also, Jason Cohen, “Bendis Signals a Welcome Return to Superman’s Jewish Roots,” *CBR*, February 2, 2018, <https://www.cbr.com/bendis-dc-superman-jewish-roots/> (accessed June 27, 2018); Marcy Oster, “DC Comics’ Newest Writer is Poised to Make Superman Jewish Again,” *The Times of Israel*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/dc-comics-newest-writer-is-poised-to-make-superman-jewish-again/> (accessed June 27, 2018); Lou Anders, “A Tale of Two Orphans: The Man of Steel vs. The Caped Crusader,” *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 75; Stephen Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2006), 50; Bogaerts, “Rediscovering Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*,” 92; Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 114; John Kenneth Muir, “Cult Movie Review: Superman: The Movie (1978),” John Kenneth Muir’s Reflections on Movies and Classic TV, August 7, 2012, <http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2012/08/cult-movie-review-superman-movie-1978.html>, (accessed June 23, 2018); Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 30; Schenck, “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,” 33–48; Friedrich, “Up, Up, and Awaaay!!!” For a non-serious article, see J.K. Brower, “The Hebrew Origins of Superman,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 5, no. 3 (1979): 22–26.

¹⁷⁵ See Roger Stern, “Introduction,” in George Lowther, *The Adventures of Superman* (Bedford, MA: Applewood, 1995 [1942]), xvi–xvii.

¹⁷⁶ Tye, *Superman*, 69; Fingerth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 45.

¹⁷⁷ Tom De Haven writes: “It was Lowther who changed Superman’s birth name from Jerry Siegel’s original Kal-L to Kal-el and his father’s name from Jor-L to Jor-el (later comic book writers would capitalize the e), which is why I’ve never put any credence into the argument that Siegel intended Superman to be a Jewish avatar, since the suffix ‘-el’ in Hebrew means ‘sent by God.’ All you can really argue is that *George Lowther* possibly meant Superman to be a Jewish avatar, and so what, right?” See De Haven, *Our Hero*, 194–95. Martin Lund thinks that scholars who find Hebrew readings in the name “Kal-El” are making too much of nothing, and points out that one could just as easily argue that the root *qal* has “the additional meaning of ‘insignificant, light,’—the radically different ‘translation’ ‘God is insignificant’ ... can also be constructed, giving Superman’s name a ‘meaning’ that fits far better with what is known about Siegel and Shuster’s views about religion.” See Martin Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel: Superman 1938—1941, Jewish American History, and the Invention of the Jewish—Comics Connection*, Contemporary Religion and Popular Culture (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 26.

changed to the now-canonical “Martha.”¹⁷⁸ It is impossible to prove if this is a direct reference to Jesus.

Dan W. Clanton Jr., writes that “from the beginning Superman stories have contained potentially religious or scriptural references or echoes, leading interpreters to suggest that there are religious/scriptural meanings or subtexts within ‘Superman.’¹⁷⁹ Clanton observes that the first Superman stories have little *direct* religious symbolism.¹⁸⁰ Even so, in early Superman newspaper comic strips, the spaceship Jor-El is making on Krypton is “an ark of space.”¹⁸¹ Clanton thinks that “given the context—an impending cataclysm initially known to and later only believed in by one man and his family that will prove fatal to all living creatures on a planet—and the specific use of the term ‘Ark,’” the story has resonances with the Hebrew Bible because Jor-El is like Noah in Genesis 6—9, but at the same time, the Hebrew word for “ark” in the Noah story is used in one other place in the Hebrew Scriptures: the vessel that carries Moses down the Nile.¹⁸² Clanton’s analysis is significant because he makes a good case that the story of Noah was an influence in how Superman’s origin story was shaped in the character’s early years.

Numerous interpreters have noted parallels between how Moses was sent down the Nile to be saved from the Egyptians just as Kal-El was sent to safety from Krypton in his rocket

¹⁷⁸ Dan W. Clanton Jr., “The Origin(s) of Superman: Reimagining Religion in the Man of Steel,” *Religion and Popular Culture in America*, 3rd ed., eds. Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017), 38–39. See also, Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 54; Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 114. Mr. Kent was named “Eben” in George Lowther’s 1942 Superman novel, but in a 1948 comic, the Kents were named “John” and “Mary,” before “John” changed from “Silas” to finally “Jonathan,” and “Mary” became “Sarah” and then “Martha.” See Tye, *Superman*, 106–7; De Haven, *Our Hero*, 160–61. Clark’s middle name is “Joseph.” This can be linked to the Bible. See Tye, *Superman*, 68; Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 54–56. Anton K. Kozlovic compares Jonathan Kent to Jesus’s father. See Anton K. Kozlovic, “The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts in Superman: The Movie (1978) and Superman II (1981),” *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 2, article 5 (2002): 12–14.

¹⁷⁹ Clanton, “The Origin(s) of Superman,” 33. Clanton believes that Superman stories are “*religious multivalent*,” meaning that Superman can lend himself to both Jewish and Christian interpretations (33–34).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁸¹ See Jerry Siegel, *Superman: The Dailies, 1939–1940*, vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 1999).

¹⁸² Clanton, “The Origin(s) of Superman,” 36–37. See also, Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 46. Grant Morrison’s modern reboot of *Action Comics* makes reference to an “escape ark” prototype on Krypton. See Grant Morrison, “Rocket Song,” *Action Comics* #5 (New York: DC Comics, 2012).

ship—and both Moses and Kal-El were adopted.¹⁸³ Martin Lund acknowledges the existence of parallels to figures like Moses, but downplays the Jewish aspects of such parallels and points out that “these figures have long been common to Western culture in general.”¹⁸⁴ Still, when *Action Comics* #1—the first Superman story—narrated the character’s arrival to Earth from Krypton, the narration says: “When the vehicle landed on Earth, a passing motorist, discovering the sleeping babe within, turned the child over to an orphanage.”¹⁸⁵ Glen Weldon writes that

with Siegel’s use of the phrase ‘sleeping babe,’ a biblical subtext forever becomes part of Superman’s creative DNA; the reader may think of Moses among the reeds or Jesus in

¹⁸³ Larry Tye writes: “much as the baby prophet was floated in a reed basket by a mother desperate to spare him from an Egyptian Pharaoh’s death warrant, so Kal-El’s doomed parents, moments before their planet blew up, tucked him into a spaceship that rocketed him to the safety of Earth. Both babies were rescued by non-Jews and raised in foreign cultures—Moses by Pharaoh’s daughter, Kal-El by Kansas farmers named Kent—and the adoptive parents quickly learned how exceptional their foundlings were Kal-El’s escape to Earth was the story of Exodus.” See Tye, *Superman*, 65–66, 68. See also, *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns; Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 9; Friedrich, “Up, Up, and Aaaaay!!!”; Anton K. Kozlovic, “The Unholy Biblical Subtexts and Other Religious Elements Built into Superman: The Movie (1978) and Superman II (1981),” *Journal of Religion and Film* 7, no. 1, article 7 (2003): 25–26; Christopher Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2007), 123 n. 102; Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey*, 15, 26; De Haven, *Our Hero*, 179; Morrison, *Supergods*, 15–16; Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 19; Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 14; Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 46; David Hopkins, “A History of Violence,” in *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 9–21; Schenck, “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,”; David Welky, *Everything Was Better in America: Print Culture in the Great Depression* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 133; Cohen, “Bendis Signals a Welcome Return to Superman’s Jewish Roots,”; Oster, “DC Comics’ Newest Writer is Poised to Make Superman Jewish Again.” Brad Ricca also notes the parallel with how Superman and Moses were both sent to safety in small vessels and adopted, but misrepresents the Moses parallel when he writes, “as a grown man he finally embraces his true background to save his adopted people.” As worded, it gives the impression that Moses may have saved the Egyptians! See Ricca, *Super Boys*, 131. To a different end, in the comic *Superman* #400 from 1984, the text compares Superman to a host of famous people from history—including Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, William Shakespeare, Joan of Arc, Abraham Lincoln, and *Moses*. See Elliot S. Maggin, “The Living Legends of Superman: Chapter One,” *Superman* #400 (New York: DC Comics, 1984), 2–3. To a very different end, Maggin’s novel *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton* alludes to Exodus when it compares Lex Luthor’s turn to evil to Isaac Newton discovering gravity under the apple tree, Franz Ferdinand’s assassination, and Moses killing the Egyptian slave master in Exodus 2:11–15. See Maggin, *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*, 145. Maggin concludes that Lex Luthor’s transformation was inevitable, just as Newton would still have discovered gravity, war would still have happened in 1914, and inevitably “Moses would have recoiled from oppressive Egyptian society even if he had witnessed one fewer act of wanton brutality” (145). In the film *Superman: The Movie*, *Daily Planet* newspaper editor Perry White tells his staff that whoever gets the first interview with Superman will have “the single most important interview ... since God talked to Moses.” See *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 1978).

¹⁸⁴ Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, 12. Lund argues that Superman’s task is more global than Moses and also downplays other Moses parallels (such as Clark Kent’s stuttering) (74–78, 182). Lund denies that having Clark Kent’s parents tell him to fight for good is comparable to Moses meeting God, as some have claimed (74). To see the case for these claims, see Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey*, 26–27.

¹⁸⁵ Siegel, *Action Comics* #1. Other versions of the character’s origin would skip the orphanage.

the manger. It's not something Siegel or Shuster would pursue ... but it's an element of the character that would inspire comics writers and filmmakers in years to come.¹⁸⁶

Weldon is right to say that Siegel and Shuster did not explore the biblical subtext in depth, but later Superman writers exploited a Moses connection that was—at the very least, latent. For example, in the 1990s Superman animated series, Jonathan Kent shows young Clark Kent the rocket ship they found him in, and prefaces this revelation by saying, “You know how some babies are found in baskets?”¹⁸⁷ In the afterword to Grant Morrison's 2011 retelling of Superman's origin, Morrison explicitly says that Superman's “rocket is Moses' basket,” and artist Rags Morales said that he deliberately tried to draw the *shape* of the rocketship “a little more basket-y.”¹⁸⁸ In the 1978 Superman movie, a scene where Superman first meets a hologram of Jor-El can be compared to Moses meeting God at the Burning Bush in Exodus.¹⁸⁹ There are good reasons to compare Superman and Moses. Indeed, Michael Uslan taught the first accredited college course on comics after convincing the dean of Indiana University “that Superman and Moses shared an origin story and a teachable moment.”¹⁹⁰ The comparisons between Superman's birth story and that of Moses are of great importance and close enough that it is not unreasonable to draw a parallel between the two.

Several writers link Superman to the mythical Jewish figure of the golem; the golem is a creature with miraculous powers that was supposedly brought to life from clay by a 16th century rabbi named Judah Loew ben Bezalel (or Rabbi Liva) in Prague to protect the Jews from religious persecution from a priest named Thaddeus and others who blamed the Jews for the

¹⁸⁶ Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 17–18. Tye is reaching a bit more when he writes that “the narratives of Krypton's birth and death borrowed the language of Genesis.” See Tye, *Superman*, 66.

¹⁸⁷ *Superman: The Animated Series*, “The Last Son of Krypton: Part II,” S01, E2, directed by Scott Jeralds and Curt Geda, written by Alan Burnett and Paul Dini, *Kids WB!*, September 6, 1996.

¹⁸⁸ Grant Morrison and Rags Morales, “Action Comics Sketchbook,” in *Superman in Action Comics*, vol. 1, *Superman and the Men of Steel* (New York: DC Comics, 2012), n.p.

¹⁸⁹ See *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner. For the comparison, see De Haven, *Our Hero*, 181. See also, Salkind and Spengler, “Audio Commentary,” *Superman: The Movie*.

¹⁹⁰ Tye, *Superman*, 211–12. He later produced several comic book movies.

death of Christ.¹⁹¹ Lund does not think Siegel and Shuster had the “golem” in mind when they created Superman because there is no evidence and “differences between the golem of Prague and Superman outweigh their one similarity; Superman, unlike golems . . . is born, not created; he is fully autonomous and a moral actor; he is capable of speech; and he is never put to rest, but is perpetually needed.”¹⁹² Lund adds that “the small but growing Jewish—comics connection library suffers from a paucity of textual, biographical, or historical support for its interpretations, which is likely a reason for why this literature has relied so heavily on internal, mutual referencing.”¹⁹³ Lund’s analysis effectively refutes a commonplace assertion in the secondary

¹⁹¹ Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 15–17; Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 29; Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 18; Tye, *Superman*, 73, 78; Robert Leslie Liebman, “Rabbis or Rakes, Schlemiels or Supermen?: Jewish Identity in Charles Chaplin, Jerry Lewis, and Woody Allen,” *Literature Film Quarterly* 12, no. 3 (1984): 195–201. Comic book writer Will Eisner said: “The Golem was very much the precursor of the super-hero in that in every society there’s a need for mythological characters, wish fulfillment. And the wish fulfillment in the Jewish case of the hero would be someone who could protect us. This kind of storytelling seems to dominate in Jewish culture.” Kaplan thus links it with Superman. See Arie Kaplan, “How the Jews Created the Comic Book Industry, Part 1: The Golden Age (1933-1955),” *Reform Judaism*, Fall 2003, vol. 32, no. 1 <http://reformjudaismmag.net/03fall/comics.shtml> (accessed June 6, 2018). The myth of the golem was used in another way in *Superman* #248, as the evil Lex Luthor created a creature called the “Galactic Golem,” because it was made of “galactic matter” from stars and other phenomena from space. See Len Wein, “The Man Who Murdered the Earth!” *Superman* #248 (New York: DC Comics, 1972). Luthor says, “like the legendary *golem* of old who was forged from bits of *clay*, I have molded a man-thing that’ll be *more* than a match for my old ‘friend’—*Superman!*” (4). While the original golem protected the Jews, Luthor says that his galactic golem “will free me from the yoke of my oppressor—*Superman!*” (5). Larry Tye notes that the story came out under Superman’s Jewish editor Julius Schwartz. See Tye, *Superman*, 209. In a throwback comics story, written in 1998 but set in the 1930s, Clark Kent’s newspaper sends him to cover the Nazi occupation of Poland, and a Jewish family tells him the legend of the golem; Superman thinks to himself, “I’m not a *golem* and I’m no *angel*—but it’s time *Superman* got busy!” See Jon Bogdanove and Louise Simonson, *Superman: The Man of Steel* #81 (New York: DC Comics, 1998), 10. As Superman fights many of the Nazis and saves many Jews from extermination, both the Jews and Nazis wonder if the “golem” is real and in their midst. See also, Jon Bogdanove and Louise Simonson, *Superman: The Man of Steel* #82 (New York: DC Comics, 1998). The Anti-Defamation League criticized DC Comics for not identifying the people in the ghetto as Jewish more clearly. See Danny Goldberg, “The ADL Vs Superman,” *Tikkun* 14, January/February 1999, 5–7. To read the myths of the golem, see Chayim Bloch, *The Golem: Mystical Tales from the Ghetto of Prague*, trans. Harry Schneiderman (Blauvelt, NY: Rudolf Steiner Publications, 1972); Yudel Rosenberg, “The Golem or The Miraculous Deeds of Rabbi Liva,” trans. Joachim Neugroschel, in *The Great Works of Jewish Fantasy and Occult* (New York: The Overlook Press, 1976), 162–225. For more on the golem myth, see Arnold L. Goldsmith, *The Golem Remembered, 1909—1980: Variations of a Jewish Legend* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1981); Elizabeth Baer, *The Golem Redux: From Prague to Post-Holocaust Fiction* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2012); *Golem!: Danger, Deliverance and Art*, ed. Emily D. Bilski (New York: The Jewish Museum, 1989); Nicola Morris, *The Golem in Jewish American Literature: Risks and Responsibilities in the Fiction of Thane Rosenbaum, Nomi Eve and Steve Stern*, Twentieth-Century American Jewish Writers (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

¹⁹² Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, 28. The myth is not as old as it has sometimes been portrayed.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 28–29. Lund says that writers like Harry Brod “find their own meaning in the comics they read, and promote their interpretations within a vibrant and multifaceted, but also contentious, contemporary Jewish

literature because so many authors uncritically regurgitate the claim that the golem must have been an influence on Superman's creation—with no evidence beyond the fact that both have Jewish roots and save people.

Superman is an “immigrant” who came to America with little—like many Jewish immigrants—and so Superman's journey from Krypton is sometimes compared to Jewish assimilation.¹⁹⁴ This comparison is sometimes misrepresented. Harry Brod compares the infant Superman's journey from his old planet of Krypton to Earth to how many Jews left an “old” world of Europe that was, in a sense, heading to a sort of destruction by the 1930s—and found

American order of discourse” (32). Lund is concerned that even “academic” works have uncritically cited these popular-level works by Jewish authors (34). He singles out Marco Arnaudo because Arnaudo “rehashes popular interpretations and gives them the imprimatur of academic writing” without engaging with early comics (38).

¹⁹⁴ *Secret Origin*, directed by Mac Carter. In this film, Mark Waid also observes that early superheroes like Superman were generally not invented by affluent people, while writer Dwayne McDuffie commented that the earliest immigrant comic book creators struggled to be accepted by mainstream America. Gary Engle believes “Superman is like nothing so much as an American boy's fantasy of a messiah,” who “protects the weak and defends truth and justice and all the other moral virtues inherent in the Judeo-Christian tradition” and “raises the American immigrant experience to the level of religious myth.” See Engle, “What Makes Superman So Darned American?” 86–87. Scott Raab sees a parallel between the Jewish struggle for assimilation and Superman's secret identity. Raab observes that “both Superman and Siegel have small homelands, Siegel's Eretz Yisroel and Superman's Kandor” (the city from Krypton that was shrunk small enough to fit in a bottle by the evil Brainiac before Krypton exploded and discovered by Superman decades later). See Scott Raab, “Is Superman Jewish?” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 166–67. This is not a perfect parallel. Knowles calls that the story of Superman's journey to Earth from a dying world “an eerie foreshadowing of the coming Holocaust, when parents sent their children out of Europe to save them.” See Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 123 n. 102. Danny Fingeroth writes: “Superman is never specifically identified as Jewish—or anything else, except Caucasian and male. The fact that he is an alien from space is forgotten in the general public's conception of the character—talk about an immigrant blending in!” See Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 37, 155. Fingeroth writes that Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were from families of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jewish immigrants (from Lithuania and the Netherlands), and interprets Superman as a wish-fulfillment assimilationist fantasy. See Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 54–56. Arie Kaplan writes that since Superman is his planet's last survivor, he is a refugee, who, “like many Jews ... came to America to escape the extinction of his people.” See Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 14. Tom De Haven calls Superman “the ultimate immigrant.” See De Haven, *Our Hero*, 5. Jules Feiffer compares Superman's arrival on Earth to Jews coming from the “old country,” and writes, “it wasn't Krypton that Superman came from; it was the planet Minsk or Lodz or Vilna or Warsaw.” Feiffer also says that “Superman was the ultimate assimilationist fantasy.” See Jules Feiffer, “The Minsk Theory of Krypton,” *New York Times Magazine*, December 29, 1996, 14–15. See also, Jules Feiffer, *Backing into Forward: A Memoir* (New York: Doubleday, 2010), 73; *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns. The comic miniseries *Birthright* exploits the angle of Superman as an immigrant, and how immigrants are not always perceived positively in modern America. See Mark Waid, *Superman: Birthright* (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

new life in America.¹⁹⁵ Clark Kent’s journey to the big city thus mirrors “Jewish immigration patterns” to urban centres.¹⁹⁶ Scott Raab notes a parallel between Superman’s relationship to his home planet Krypton and the concept of the “Diaspora” for Jews.¹⁹⁷ These parallels may work on a superficial level, but there is not sufficient evidence that Siegel and Shuster had them in mind; they are just speculation. To a similar end, Michael Chabon draws parallels to how Superman had to come from his homeland (Krypton) and change his Kryptonian name (Kal-El) for the more American name “Clark Kent” to blend in because that is, in effect, what Jewish immigrants had to do.¹⁹⁸ Although the parallel works on a superficial level, it ignores the fact that “Clark Kent” did not choose this name for himself but was adopted by the Kent family, who found

¹⁹⁵ Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 5. One can compare the destruction of Krypton to the Holocaust, and Superman’s journey from the dying Krypton to Earth has parallels with how hundreds of young Jewish children were evacuated from Nazi-occupied Europe in *Kindertransports*. Arie Kaplan, “How the Jews Created the Comic Book Industry,”; Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 14; Fingerioth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 44. However, this connection is chronologically late to be an influence on Superman’s creation. Lund suggests that Jewish-American comics creators were not *that* well-informed on the full horror of the Holocaust—at least in 1938. See Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, 101. Tye believes that Siegel was influenced by the Holocaust, as he and many other comics creators were Jewish. See Tye, *Superman*, 67; 72–75. Since “Krypton” means hidden, Brod confusingly suggests that this name is “a secret invitation to decode Superman’s encrypted secret identity as a crypto-Jew (Jews, who since the days of the Spanish Inquisition, have publicly given up their faith to escape persecution, but who remain Jews in their private lives and personal allegiance)” (5–6). Brod also argues that Superman’s alter ego, clumsy Clark Kent is a “nebbish” Jewish stereotype (7, 10, 11). Similarly, Weinstein says that the shy Clark is a Jewish stereotype. See Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey*, 23. It seems a bit of a stretch for Brod to say that “Superman sees ‘mortal men’ as the world sees Clark, which is essentially how the anti-Semitic world sees Jewish men. His wish for Lois to fall in love with Clark is then the revenge of the Jewish nerd for the world’s anti-Semitism” (Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 8). According to Brod, in the early Superman comics, “Superman’s values would have been recognized ... as very much those of a New Dealer,” and Brod says that that generation of Jews saw traditional Jewish ethics in Roosevelt’s New Deal reforms (13). Although Scott Raab says Superman himself is not Jewish (“the man has all the ethnicity of Formica”), Raab notes that Superman’s concerns parallel the Jewish concern for social justice. See Raab, “Is Superman Jewish?”, 166. Many comic book heroes were created by Jews (the list includes Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, and Captain America), and as Gerard Jones writes, “secret identity stories always reverberated with the children of Jewish immigrants ... because they were so much about the wearing of the masks that enabled one to be an American, a Modern, a secular consumer, but still part of an ancient society, a link in an old chain, when safely among those who knew one’s secret.” See Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 201.

¹⁹⁶ Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 9.

¹⁹⁷ Raab, “Is Superman Jewish?”, 167. Christopher Knowles writes that “the destruction of Krypton is an apt metaphor for the Diaspora, as well as for the assault on European Jewish communities that prompted their mass emigration to North America in the late 19th century.” See Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 122.

¹⁹⁸ *Comic Books and Super Heroes*, disc 2, *Unbreakable*. In Chabon’s novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, a character says: “They’re all Jewish, superheroes. Superman, you don’t think he’s Jewish? Coming over from the old country, changing his name like that. Clark Kent, only a Jew would pick a name like that for himself.” See Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (New York: Random House, 2000), 585. Kaplan writes that Clark Kent’s Kryptonian name “Kal-El” was turned to “Clark Kent” on Earth, like many Jews “Americanized” their names. Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 15.

him—and he did not even know his Kryptonian name until later in life. Therefore, that interpretation imposes a pattern on the Superman story that ignores the specificities of the story itself. Similarly, when discussing the Jewish background of Superman’s creators, Tye writes: “Superman was a refugee who had escaped to America from a world about to explode, just as the Siegels and Shusters did in fleeing Europe before the Holocaust.”¹⁹⁹ This is an irresponsible statement that Lund effectively refutes because it also imposes a pattern on the lives of Superman’s creators without giving due weight to their specific experiences. Lund is wary of interpreters who homogenize the cultures of different early 20th century Jewish communities, both in Europe and in their transfer to the United States.²⁰⁰ Lund says that Tye

erases the respective historical specificities of both the Siegels’ and Shusters’ personal migratory experiences and of the Holocaust: Siegel’s parents immigrated in 1900, to escape after conscription and attempts at conversion; Shuster’s mother left Russian insecurity and anti-Semitism for Canada in 1912, and his father, whom she met in Rotterdam en route, followed soon after, out of love.²⁰¹

For these specifically “Jewish” readings of Superman, Lund also observes that even though Jerry Siegel was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home, he did not regularly go to synagogue, dated non-Jewish girls, and that neither he nor Shuster showed any interest in groups for young Jewish adults in Cleveland.²⁰² Indeed, although this is likely a slight exaggeration, one

¹⁹⁹ Tye, *Superman*, 78.

²⁰⁰ Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, 19,

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 72–73.

²⁰² Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, 134. Lund believes that the subjective “eisegesis” of certain Jewish writers is “harmful” (184). Jonathan D. Sarna writes that from the years 1932 to 1935 in America—within the years Siegel and Shuster created Superman—most religious denominations experienced a notable decline in attendance, but synagogues especially. See Jonathan D. Sarna, *American Judaism: A History* (Yale, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 226. It probably makes sense to downplay what Tye writes of Superman: “He adhered to ethical guideposts as unbending as those of the *tzadik*, or righteous man, in the Old Testament tradition Even Kryptonite radiated with symbolism: It showed the influence his homeland still had over its Last Son, threatening to upend his life in the diaspora.” See Tye, *Superman*, 78. Some of these connections seem to be coincidental, based on when they appeared chronologically. Despite Siegel’s lack of interest in the rites of Judaism, the Nazi SS newspaper *Das Schwarze Korps* went after Siegel. In a lengthy rant, the magazine said: “Jerry Siegel, an intellectually and physically circumcised chap who has his headquarters in New York, is the inventor of a colorful figure with an impressive appearance, a powerful body, and a red swim suit who enjoys the ability to fly through the ether As you can see, there is nothing the Sadducees won’t do for money! ... Jerry Siegellack stinks. Woe to the American

of Jerry Siegel’s friends said, “I don’t think he ever went to the synagogue in his life.”²⁰³ These points are significant because scholars are sometimes guilty of overstating how much Siegel’s Jewish identity really influenced his life—and by extension his Superman writing.

In *later* decades, there may be more Jewish elements involving Superman’s identification with his home planet Krypton (including stories written by Siegel), but those resonances cannot be found in the earliest comics, where Krypton plays a small role.²⁰⁴ Nonetheless, by the stories of the late 1950s and 1960s, Superman’s relationship to Krypton was more like that of post-Holocaust Jews with “survivor’s guilt,” and Tom De Haven speculates that Superman’s guilt and

youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don’t even notice the poison they swallow daily.” See “Jerry Siegel Attacks!” *Das Schwarze Korps*, April 25, 1940, translated by Randall Byrtwerk, “The SS and Superman,” German Propaganda Archive, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/superman.htm>, (accessed June 5, 2018). Gerard Jones writes that Hitler and Mussolini both publicly “denounced” Superman for being Jewish, but is not specific. See Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 162. Ironically, while the Nazis had labeled Superman a Jewish pawn, after the war, a Jewish psychiatrist (Fredric Wertham) thought Superman was a corrupting Nazi influence for children and compared Superman’s S symbol to the Nazi SS! See Tye, *Superman*, 127–28; De Haven, *Our Hero*, 86; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 98–99; Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 274.

²⁰³ Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 84. Still, Fingeroth says that Siegel was at least exposed to the Bible and was from a Jewish part of Cleveland. See Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 28, 41. To a different end, Superman’s mantra of “Truth, justice, and the American way,” has attracted different interpretations. The phrase did not originate with Siegel and Shuster, but as the phrase “truth, justice, and the American way,” can be compared to *Pirkei Avot* 1:18, which says that “the world ... endures on justice, truth, and peace.” See Tye, *Superman*, 66, 320; Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey*, 28. Elliot S. Maggin calls Superman’s “truth and justice” mantra “Superman’s personal Torah.” See Tye, *Superman*, 262. Patrick L. Eagan writes of “the American Way” that “God is its author and Superman its guardian.” See Patrick L. Eagan, “A Flag with a Human Face,” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 89. Originally, Superman only fought for “truth and justice” on the Superman radio show, but the phrase “American way” was added during the war effort, although the full phrase was popularized more widely with the 1950s TV show. Andrew Terjesen, “Is Superman an American Icon?” in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?*, ed. Mark D. White, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 72. Even less convincingly, Greg Garrett links Superman’s fight for truth, justice, and the American way to Pontius Pilate asking Jesus “What is truth?” in John 18:38. See Garrett *Holy Superheroes*, 35. Superman is typically described as “faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound.” Weinstein compares this description to *Avot* 5:20, which says to be as “bold as a leopard, light as an eagle, swift as a deer, and strong as a lion.” See Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey*, 28. For another comparison between Superman and Judaism, some interpreters link the destruction of Krypton to the Kabbalah “where the divine vessel was shattered and Jews were called on to perform *tikkun ha-olam* by repairing the vessel and the world.” See Tye, *Superman*, 66. See also, Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey*, 20. Conversely, Lund argues that this particular social activist reading of the *tikkun olam* originated during the 1950s, became popular in the 1970s, and in any case comes far too late to have been an influence on Superman. See Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, 85. On a less serious note, Zeddy Lawrence joked that if “man” is “at the end of someone’s name you can draw one of two conclusions: a) they’re Jewish, as in Goldman, Feldman, or Lipman; or b) they’re a superhero, as in Superman, Batman, or Spider-Man” Zeddy Lawrence, “Web Master,” *Totally Jewish—Lifestyle Channel*, July 8, 2004. This idea is referenced in Tye, *Superman*, 66; Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 9.

²⁰⁴ Lund, *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel*, 72.

helplessness about Krypton's destruction might also connect to the religious background of Superman editor Mort Weisinger and his writers.²⁰⁵ De Haven writes:

Whether Mort Weisinger and his virtually all-Jewish cadre of creative talent were *consciously* using the Kryptonian adventures of the late 1950s and early 1960s as metaphors for the European holocaust of the 1940s is anybody's guess ... but there's no denying that ... those stories' subtext added a pathos to the character.²⁰⁶

One 1962 comics story is a good example of this phenomenon. In a story called "The One Minute of Doom," Superman, his cousin Supergirl, and Krypto the Super Dog all rush to Superman's Arctic Fortress of Solitude for a mysterious "special appointment," and the story builds the suspense as to what that special appointment might be.²⁰⁷ It turns out that it is a memorial day commemorating the destruction of Superman's home planet Krypton for survivors, and the residents of Kandor (Krypton's only surviving city, which was shrunk and put in a bottle by the evil Brainiac before the planet exploded) and even criminals in the otherworldly Kryptonian prison the "Phantom Zone" also observe this moment of silence.²⁰⁸ In a poignant scene, Superman decides to build a life-sized replica of Krypton's capital city on an uninhabited planet deep in outer space; he cannot rebuild what was lost of his old planet, but he can honour it with this monument in the stars.²⁰⁹ Given that the author (Siegel) and editor (Weisinger) of this story were Jewish, Arie Kaplan suggests that "Krypton Memorial Day could certainly be a metaphor for Yom Ha-Shoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day."²¹⁰ If that is true, an otherwise innocuous Superman story becomes a moving metaphor for the millions of Jews who died in the Holocaust and for those still living who tried to process the tragedy. Unlike some alleged "Jewish" influences on Superman, this one makes sense chronologically.

²⁰⁵ De Haven, *Our Hero*, 116. See also, Tye, *Superman*, 66.

²⁰⁶ De Haven, *Our Hero*, 116. Weisinger was responsible for many important aspects of the Superman mythos. See Murray, "Superman's Editor Mort Weisinger," 8–15.

²⁰⁷ Jerry Siegel, "The One Minute of Doom!" *Superman* #150 (New York: DC Comics, 1962), 1–4.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 4–8.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 8–9.

²¹⁰ Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 14.

In both *Superman* #61 (1949) and *Superman* #141 (1960), Superman visits Krypton in the distant past and sees his parents in the flesh (in the latter story, Superman even falls in love with a Kryptonian woman from the past), but Superman is helpless to stop the deaths of his people; the latter story is particularly gut-wrenching.²¹¹ Fingeroth writes:

a Holocaust survivor would long to go back to a time and place that could never be revisited. Previously, Superman's stories had never gone into the emotional ramifications of the Man of Steel being the last survivor of a doomed planet. But in a world where the Nazi genocide of Eastern Europe's Jews was so recent, Jewish (and gentile) Superman writers were moved—and encouraged by Weisinger—to explore territory that had previously been considered too deep for comics.²¹²

These stories provide further evidence that there may be links between the Jewish identity of Superman's writers and editors and the comics themselves. Nonetheless, these resonances do not appear until the character had existed for a few decades; they were not there in the first comic book stories.

In *Superman* #400, Elliot S. Maggin—an Orthodox Jew—depicts a day in the distant future (the year 5902) where Superman is honoured by a yearly meal with parallels to Passover.²¹³ This night “is different from all other nights,” and is a celebration of freedom.²¹⁴ The ritual includes lines such as “let all who are hungry come and eat!”²¹⁵ The family dips their

²¹¹ See Bill Finger, “Superman Returns to Krypton!” *Superman* #61 (New York: DC Comics, 1949); Jerry Siegel, “Superman's Return to Krypton!” *Superman* #141 (New York: DC Comics, 1961).

²¹² Fingeroth may be saying more than he can prove, but the writers and editors *were* Jewish. See Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 66–67. See also Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 82–83. Elsewhere, Fingeroth writes: “To the Jewish editors and writers of the stories—particularly Jerry Siegel ... there was a distinct yearning in these stories for things lost” (84). Fingeroth reads more into the texts than they contain when he writes that the introduction of living Kryptonian criminals posed questions such as why “the evil General Zod survived when Jor-El and Lara had not” and hence “the types of questions with which Holocaust survivors were grappling. Why had those who survived done so? What choice of fate had made them so lucky? And were they really all that lucky, having to live with survivors' guilt and the host of other psychological and physical consequences of having remained alive?” (84). Fingeroth compares Weisinger's Superman stories to “tales of the Old Jerusalem (or vanished Jewish Warsaw), expressed through Superman's longing for the glory and grandeur of Krypton” (89).

²¹³ Elliot S. Maggin, “The Living Legends of Superman: Chapter Seven,” *Superman* #400 (New York: DC Comics, 1984), 1–10. See Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey*, 20.

²¹⁴ Maggin, “The Living Legends of Superman: Chapter Seven,” 4.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

food in a dish.²¹⁶ When celebrating, the family leaves an empty seat for Superman in case he should appear (like Elijah), and in this story, on one of his adventures he accidentally time-travels to the future to this family's home without knowing that they are celebrating him!²¹⁷ Since Maggin is a religious Jew who also reveres Superman, it is clear that he was not parodying the Jewish Passover.²¹⁸ This story provides a unique connection between Superman and Judaism and was written by a Jew, although it came some forty-five years after Superman's creation.

A study of the history of the Superman mythos also reveals another intertextual biblical connection that has not gotten due weight in scholarship: the fact that Jonathan and Martha Kent (the elderly couple who adopt Kal-El after they find his rocket in a field) have parallels with many couples in Scripture who are blessed with a child in old age.²¹⁹ This idea developed over time. George Lowther's 1942 Superman novel says: "Destiny perhaps played a part in directing the rocket to the Kent farm, for the Kents were childless and desired a child above anything else on earth. And here, like a gift from Heaven, was the infant Kal-el."²²⁰ Martha is named "Sarah" in this continuity, and the story has parallels to another childless elderly couple—Abraham and Sarah.²²¹ In *Superman: The Movie*, Martha Kent tells the infant Clark, "all these years as happy as we've been, how I've prayed and prayed the Good Lord would see fit to give us a child."²²²

²¹⁶ Ibid., 6.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 6–10.

²¹⁸ Bruce Bachand interviewed him and he talked about religion. See Bruce Bachand, "Interview: Elliot S. Maggin," *Fanzing*, 1998, <http://www.fanzing.com/mag/fanzing09/iview.shtml> (accessed June 27, 2018).

²¹⁹ Stephen Skelton observes the parallels between the elderly Martha and the biblical figures of Sarah, Rebekah, Samuel's mother Hannah, Samson's mother Hannah, and Elizabeth. See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero*, 55.

²²⁰ George Lowther, *The Adventures of Superman* (Bedford, MA: Applewood, 1995 [1942]), 24. Before he dies, his father says: "Ye're a—a a modern miracle 'Tis not for you nor me to question the ways of God" (55).

²²¹ Anton K. Kozlovic notes the use of the name "Sarah" in Lowther's book, while also arguing that Martha Kent fits into this paradigm in *Superman: The Movie*. See Kozlovic, "The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts," 11–12. Michael Mautner believes that the name "Sarah" is intentional in Lowther's novel, and that her husband's name "Eben" is derivative of Abraham. See Michael E. Mautner, "From the Pit to the Peak: Superman and the Ascension of America," <http://ws.fortress.net.nu/americanway/thesis.php> (accessed June 23, 2018).

²²² *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner; Kozlovic, "The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts," 11–12. Marco Arnaudo compares this to the Virgin Mary receiving a child from Heaven, but Mary was a

Elliot S. Maggin's 1981 novel *Superman: Miracle Monday* makes the connection directly and describes Martha Kent's relationship with her husband as follows: "Middle-aged and childless, Martha Clark Kent wanted no more from life than to grow old in the company of this unshakably good man. Then, as happened to Abraham's aged wife Sarah, the Heavens gave her a son."²²³

These examples show that this element of the Superman mythos grew from being a suggestion to a definite reference. Then, in Grant Morrison's *All-Star Superman* comics miniseries, Jonathan Kent recounts to Clark how they found him as a baby, and says

we'd been married, oh, it must have been *ten* years we both bitterly regretted that we couldn't have a *child* I've never been much of a one for sitting in church, but what else could I *do*? I came right out here and prayed. I figured *nothing* would happen, but I had to try ... Then, one night ... *you* came. Makes you wonder, *huh*? A childless couple, blessed from *above* with a *miracle* boy from another world.²²⁴

The "childless couple" theme recurs, even if the Bible is not directly referenced. In John Byrne's version of Superman, the biblical theme is not explicit, but Jonathan Kent says: "We'd been trying for eight years to have a baby of our own ... and after two miscarriages and one stillbirth, our friends were just as thrilled as could be to meet little Clark Kent."²²⁵ Jesus's mother Mary was young and not sterile, but Abraham and Sarah, Abimelech and his wife, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, Hannah and Elkanah, and Zechariah and Elizabeth did have that problem—and God intervened. In a way, this is what happens to the Kents.

young woman and Martha Kent was older, so those parallels are not as strong. See Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 48.

²²³ Elliott S. Maggin, *Superman: Miracle Monday* (N.p.: Caveat Corner Books, 2017 [1981]), 17. Tom De Haven's Superman novel also dwells on how the Kents were childless, but Martha Kent saw Clark's arrival from space as "a miracle," and says, "*God is good. God is great. God has blessed us.*" See Tom De Haven, *It's Superman!: A Novel* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), 32, 34.

²²⁴ Grant Morrison, *All-Star Superman*, vol. 1, (New York: DC Comics, 2007), 133–34. The "otherworldly" aspect of the story might point to Jesus. Regardless, in another telling by Morrison, *Action Comics* #5 shows young Martha Kent lamenting, "I *lost* our baby. Our *last chance* at ... at a" But as her voice trails off, the rocketship arrives. See Grant Morrison, "Rocket Song," n.p.

²²⁵ John Byrne, *The Man of Steel, Book One*, (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 14.

Sholly Fisch's short 2012 story "Baby Steps" (a backup feature in *Action Comics*) shows Jonathan and Martha's wedding, their plans for future children, and gives some on-the-nose foreshadowing, as Martha says: "babies don't just fall out of the sky, you know."²²⁶ This story goes even further by using direct biblical quotations to heighten the parallel. The story shows Martha Kent failing a pregnancy test and their doctor telling them they are unlikely to have a child because of "low motility and endometriosis"; hormone treatments do not help.²²⁷ Martha and Jonathan visit a church and Martha asks if God is punishing them.²²⁸ The pastor quotes 1 Samuel 1:8: "And Elkanah, her husband, said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? Am I not better to you than ten sons?'"²²⁹ Before Hannah gave birth to the prophet Samuel, after a long struggle, Elkanah asked her this question (and could have been more tactful). The pastor says:

Hannah was *tormented* by her inability to have a child. Yet, eventually, with God's help, she bore *Samuel*, one of the *greatest* of the prophets. Scripture tells us that Sarah was *ninety years old* before she finally bore Isaac, and that Abraham was *one hundred ...* I don't know *why* the two of you have had these troubles. But I *do* know that everything is part of God's plan. And with two people as fine as *you*, I can't imagine it's a *punishment*. I'm sure it's because, when the time is right, he has something *wonderful* in store ...²³⁰

After Jonathan and Martha try in vitro fertilization, Jonathan jokingly quotes Elkanah's words ("Am I not better to you than ten sons?").²³¹ Yet the story ends with a glimpse of Kal-El's rocket in the sky above them; their child is finally coming.²³² Although in this case, Martha and Jonathan do not miraculously give birth to a child in their old age, they nonetheless receive one

²²⁶ Sholly Fisch, "Baby Steps," *Action Comics* #5 (New York: DC Comics, 2012), n.p.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Ibid. Although the television show *Smallville* deliberately made Martha and Jonathan Kent much younger than they are often portrayed, there is a scene in the show's pilot episode where Martha meets three-year-old Lana Lang pretending to be a fairy princess; Lana asks Martha to make a wish, and Martha wishes for a child. Their desire for a child is granted when Kal-El's rocket ship arrives on Earth soon after. See *Smallville*, "Pilot," directed by David Nutter. In the *Smallville* series finale, Martha Kent reflects to Clark: "Before you arrived, we wanted a child so badly. The day you found us in that field, you were the miracle we prayed for." *Smallville*, "Finale, Part 1" S10, E21, directed by Kevin G. Fair, written by Al Septien and Turi Meyer, *The CW*, May 13, 2011.

from above. Again, this biblical aspect of Superman's origin story started as just a vague hint, but later writers built on it. The connection has roots in the Hebrew Bible.

While this paper will demonstrate that Superman/Jesus parallels were applied to the character later, it is significant to note that Jewish writers are not always pleased by this development. Harry Brod has argue that over time, “treating Superman’s biography as the life of a saint, as the life of a squeaky-clean do-gooder, sacrifices the original Jewish sensibility that created a more human hero to a Christian sensibility of saintliness.”²³³ It was not Christians who were necessarily responsible for these changes though. Still, Brod observes that Superman’s powers increased from what they were in the earliest comics and he became more and more “divine.”²³⁴ By using the word “divine” here, Brod is referring to the expansion of Superman’s powers in the 1950s and 1960s; while the Superman of the earliest comics would have a hard time lifting up a train, the Superman of later decades was powerful enough to move planets or moons from their orbit. Danny Fingerroth admits that “there doesn’t seem to be much overt Jewish content in the *Superman* movies,” beyond the superficial thematic level of “identity” and “meaning.”²³⁵ A writer in the *Times of Israel* criticized the film *Man of Steel* for making

²³³ Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 15. Brod believes that Christians are more likely to understand Old Testament figures as exemplary saints, while Jews do not (14–15).

²³⁴ Ibid., 15. Brod concludes that the release of the 2006 film *Superman Returns* demonstrated Superman’s “deJewification,” since that film unashamedly presented Superman as a Christ figure (even though it was directed by a Jew) (17). In fact, as will be argued in this paper, that process started earlier than 2006.

²³⁵ Fingerroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 145. One exception: in *Superman II*, Superman saves a boy at Niagara Falls, and an elderly woman says of Superman, “What a nice man. Course he’s Jewish.” See *Superman II*, directed by Richard Lester (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 1980). Regardless, Fingerroth observes that both Jesus and Moses are identified as influences on Superman, but does not think they should be seen as “avatars of conflicting belief systems.” See Fingerroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent*, 44. Still, Fingerroth thinks that the Jesus imagery was not applied to Superman much before the 1992 Death of Superman storyline and the film *Superman Returns*; he ignores the Jesus symbolism in *Superman: The Movie* in 1978. He says “the Mosaic take has the more resonant, long-term credibility” (44). Still, he admits: “On the other hand, Superman isn’t a leader like Moses, but a one-at-a-time savior like Jesus” (44). It is an odd description. Fingerroth argues that Jesus is the Son of David and son of god, while Moses was from an ordinary family and hence Superman is closer to the latter, but admits that these distinctions “may be in the realm of partisan argument” (45). Ben Saunders writes that attempts to make Superman into a Moses, Jesus, or mythical figure are often superficial, and “reveal more about the interpretive desire to claim Superman for this or that tradition ... than they do about Superman himself.” See Ben Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes*, New Directions in Religion and Literature (New

Superman disregard his Kryptonian roots, and wondered if “Siegel and Shuster’s original Man of Steel” would have been as “dismissive of his roots”—in effect, reading Superman’s dismissal of his Kryptonian enemies as anti-Judaism!²³⁶ These authors’ words are significant because they show that Jewish interpreters were protective of Superman. While these writers try to make Superman into a much more Jewish figure than he actually is, at the very least, their concerns acknowledge that Superman/Jesus parallels are foreign to the original conception of the character, as I have argued.

Still, certain basic connections *can* be drawn between Superman and Jesus, and these parallels might explain why later Superman media would want to make use of such connections.²³⁷ Larry Tye says of Superman: “Like Jesus Christ, he descended from the heavens

York: Continuum, 2011), 17. Saunders thinks that “it will always be reductive to try and explicate Superman in terms of a single belief system such as Judaism or Christianity” (32). Although these words have some truth, the makers of Superman media in recent decades have actively *exploited* comparisons with Superman and Jesus.

²³⁶ This writer implausibly linked the Kryptonian artefact the “codex” in the film to the Aleppo Codex. See Jordan Hoffman, “‘Man of Steel’ No Longer Man of Shtetl,” *Times of Israel*, June 14, 2013, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/man-of-steel-no-longer-man-of-shtetl/> (accessed July 11, 2018). In fact, Chris Roberson shows that Krypton was not fleshed out in the Superman mythos until the 1950s. In early comics, it “is presented in only the most cursory fashion, with contradictory details.” See Chris Roberson, “Jewel Mountains and Fire Falls: The Lost World of Krypton,” *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 38. Jason Cohen writes that Superman was originally powered by “profoundly Jewish teachings,” but turned into a Christ figure. Cohen was hopeful that 2018 Superman comics writer Brian Michael Bendis would make a more “Jewish” Superman because Bendis is Jewish. Cohen lamented that Superman became “a symbol of conservative Christian wholesomeness ... instead of the [Jewish?] social liberalism that can bring about real change.” See Jason Cohen, “Bendis Signals a Welcome Return to Superman’s Jewish Roots.” See also, Marcy Oster, “DC Comics’ Newest Writer is Poised to Make Superman Jewish Again”; Mark Hughes, “Exclusive: Bendis to Write Superman, Revive Jinxworld, and Oversee New Custom Imprint at DC Comics,” *Forbes*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mark-hughes/2018/02/01/exclusive-bendis-to-write-superman-revive-jinxworld-and-oversee-new-custom-imprint-at-dc-comics/#29eed695c40> (accessed June 27, 2018).

²³⁷ Tye observes that Superman’s adoptive mother was originally named “Mary,” or that Superman’s cape could be similar to an angel’s wings. He adds that while Jews could compare Superman to Moses, Aaron, or David, Christians could compare Superman to the saints. Kal-El’s baby blankets from Krypton were like Jesus’s “swaddling clothes” in the manger. Superman’s Arctic Fortress of Solitude looked similar to a cathedral. “Krypton” may be “Greek for “hidden,” just as the kingdom of Heaven is “hidden” in Matthew 13:33 and 13:44, and the name of Superman’s enemy “Lex Luthor” sounds vaguely like Lucifer. “Clark” sounds somewhat similar to the word “cleric.” Yet these are weak links. For all these connections, see Tye, *Superman*, 68. See also, Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 50, 69. There is no chance Siegel and Shuster had the word “cleric” in mind when they named Clark Kent. Regardless, Grant Morrison writes: “Superman was Christ, an unkillable champion sent down by his heavenly father (Jor-El) to redeem us by example and teach us how to solve our problems without killing one another.” See Morrison, *Supergods*, 16. Morrison claims that “the idea of Superman is every bit as real as the idea of God” (415). Much like certain fringe New Testament “scholars,” *Superman #400* imagines a future where not all scholars believe that Superman really existed, but was a “legend” or “faked news.”

to help us discover our humanity.”²³⁸ Tye compares how the people around Clark Kent did not see past his secret identity to how Jesus’s contemporaries did not recognize him as the messiah and George Aichele compares Superman keeping his secret identity in the television series *Lois & Clark* to the so-called “Messianic secret” in the Gospel of Mark (where Jesus hides his identity).²³⁹ These are superficial parallels, but nonetheless, they are present in the source material, even if a deliberate parallel was not intended. Between the arrival from Krypton and the virgin birth, “both share amazing entrance stories and a parallel stranger-citizen dynamic.”²⁴⁰ The name “Kal-El” means “Star-Child” in Krypton’s language; that can be linked to the Star of Bethlehem.²⁴¹ Greg Garrett writes that “since one of Superman’s obvious predecessors is the Jewish tradition of Messiah, it makes perfect sense that he would also reflect images of Jesus, since Christians see Jesus as the fulfillment of those legends.”²⁴² Like Jesus, in some ways,

See Elliot S. Maggin, “The Living Legends of Superman: Chapter Five,” *Superman* #400 (New York: DC Comics, 1984), 2. In an article on the historical Jesus, Adam Gopnik writes: “The view that the search for the historical Jesus is like the search for the historical Superman—that there’s nothing there but a hopeful story and a girlfriend with an alliterative name—has by now been marginalized from the seminaries to the Internet.” The “girlfriends” in question are Mary Magdalene and Lois Lane. See Adam Gopnik, “What Did Jesus Do?” *The New Yorker*, May 24, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/05/24/what-did-jesus-do> (accessed June 27, 2018). Bruce Meyer writes that “Superman is humanity’s imaginative defence against the possibility of a tragic universe,” and “offers protection against evil through action, much as Jesus offered protection against evil through thought, moral practice, and belief.” See Bruce Meyer, *Heroes: From Hercules to Superman* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2008), 225.

²³⁸ Tye, preface, *Superman*, xiii-xiv. Garrett writes: “We can find in Superman a powerful messiah figure.” See Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 7.

²³⁹ Tye, *Superman*, 68. George Aichele, “Rewriting Superman,” in *The Monstrous and the Unspeakable: The Bible as Fantastic Literature*, eds. George Aichele and Tina Pippin (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 75–101.

²⁴⁰ Felix Tallon and Jerry Walls, “Superman and *Kingdom Come*: The Surprise of Philosophical Theology,” in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way*, Popular Culture and Philosophy 13, eds. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago and Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 2005), 208.

²⁴¹ Tye, *Superman*, 68.

²⁴² Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 21. See also, Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 114; Tallon and Walls, “Superman and *Kingdom Come*,” 207–8. See also, Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 119–24. This is a stretch, but Stephen Skelton notes that Hercules and Samson were both influences on Superman’s creation, and Skelton argues that both of them *prefigure* Christ because Hercules had a divine father and did miraculous deeds, while Samson’s birth was promised by an angel and he gave his life for the people. See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 37. Some Jewish commentators see Superman as a Jewish messianic figure (without attaching him to Christianity). See Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 17.

Superman “must be equally God and man.”²⁴³ In other words, in the allegory, Superman’s “divine” side is the Kryptonian side that gives him power, but to live as Clark Kent, he has to appear to be a human being. Al Gough, co-creator of the series *Smallville*, said Superman is “a Christ-like figure ... You see him three times. You see him ... at birth. Once when he’s in his teenage years. And then when he suddenly appears at thirty. Ready to take on his mantle and save the world.”²⁴⁴ Superman’s heroic actions to save people in danger are like Jesus’s miracles or how Jesus’s death brings salvation.²⁴⁵ The point of noting all of these parallels is not to reflect on whether they are anything deeper than surface-level connections, but merely to suggest that there are parallels between Superman and Jesus in the basic source material that later authors could build on. And they did build on them.

²⁴³ Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 23–24. In J. Michael Straczynski’s series *Superman: Earth One*, Superman says of his name that “there may be something super at the start of that name, but by the time you get to the end, it’s still just a man.” See J. Michael Straczynski, *Superman: Earth One*, vol. 1, (New York: DC Comics, 2010), n.p. Since Superman is “an alien” he is a *tertium quid*, or “third thing,” rather than fully god and fully man, and this status “would disallow Jesus as a savior” because it would deny his humanity, but it “paradoxically enables Superman as one.” See A. David Lewis, “Superman Graveside: Superhero Salvation beyond Jesus,” in *Graven Images: Religion and Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, eds. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 175; Susie Paulik Babka, “Arius, Superman, and the *Tertium Quid*: When Popular Culture Meets Christology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 73, no. 1 (2008): 113–32. When Denny O’Neil wrote Superman comics in the early 1970s, even then, he thought that the character’s powers had increased so much that he had to be somewhat depowered and “the godlike stuff had to go.” Granted, O’Neil’s changes were undone—only for John Byrne to depower Superman again. See Dennis O’Neil, “The Man of Steel and Me,” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 54.

²⁴⁴ *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns. Adam Barkman writes: “each was raised incognito on Earth, each began his mission at the age of 30, each tries (at least for a while) to hide his identity,” and “each assumes self-imposed servitude.” See Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 116–17. See also, Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 49. Skelton believes that Superman fulfills all the Beatitudes (86–89). Skelton compares Superman “S” to the serpent that Moses put up in the wilderness that would save those who looked at it (Numbers 21:4–9) and notes that in John 11:35, Jesus applied that symbolism to himself (101–2).

²⁴⁵ John Wesley White compares Superman saving people at the Hoover Dam in *Superman: The Movie* to Jesus stilling the storm in Mark 4:35–41. See John Wesley White, *The Man from Krypton: The Gospel According to Superman* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1978), 60–61. White compares Superman’s X-Ray vision to how Jesus “knew all people” in John 2:24–25 (93). In *Superman: The Movie*, Superman brings Lois Lane to life by turning back time, and Arnaudo compares this to Jesus raising Lazarus. Granted, the resurrections are very different. See Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 49. Skelton compares Superman’s powers (such as flying) and heroic rescues (catching planes and helicopters) to the miracles of Jesus. See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 73–74. Edward Mehok compares Superman’s powers to the miracles of Jesus, but also those of the saints in Medieval legend, except while Clark Kent transformed into Superman in a phone booth, the saints’ transformed because of their time in a *prayer* booth. See Edward Mehok, “St. Clark of Krypton,” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 123–29. Mehok compares Superman’s X-Ray vision to Jesus’s ability to see Nathanael at the fig tree in John 1:46–50, or his knowledge of the Samaritan woman’s past husbands, or Judas Iscariot’s motivations (128).

In conclusion, this chapter has argued that Superman was not created as a Jesus figure, and that many other alleged religious or philosophical influences on the character were not there originally. Originally, Superman was best understood as a wish-fulfillment creation by Siegel and Shuster. Nonetheless, the next chapter will show why he is associated with Jesus today.

Chapter Three: The History of the Jesus Superman Across Media

Early Superman/Jesus Parallels

The idea of connecting Superman and Jesus has sometimes been controversial. This section will track the history of how Jesus/Superman parallels developed, but also show that making such parallels was controversial at times.

In 1973, a Pennsylvania pastor named John T. Galloway Jr. wrote the book *The Gospel According to Superman*, though Galloway specifies that his book was *not* written to “find the gospel in Superman,” but “find the gospel where it can best be found—in scripture and in the changed lives of Christians.”²⁴⁶ The book’s back-cover says: “Superman is the perfect man-made ‘god.’ He is available to help in a crisis, he never makes any demands, and he never intrudes into anyone’s life.”²⁴⁷ Galloway thinks that there are inherent problems with comparing Christ to other figures; he cites an old news article that drew attention to how none other than U.S. president than *Richard Nixon* was born in a farming community to a father who practiced

²⁴⁶ John T. Galloway Jr., *The Gospel According to Superman* (Philadelphia and New York: A.J. Holman Company, 1973), 9.

²⁴⁷ In the book, Galloway rhetorically asks: “Wouldn’t life be a lot simpler if we had a Superman to do for us what the Man of Steel does for Jimmy Olsen? The inner man, left to itself, will produce such a self-satisfying Superman god” (41). Superman gave Jimmy a watch with high-pitched frequency only Superman can hear, so that if Jimmy is in danger, Superman can rescue him. Galloway says that he saw a composite Jesus-Superman in public, and recalls that he thought to himself that “this younger generation seems hopelessly fouled up How can anyone confuse the powerful steel hero with the meek suffering servant?” (18).

carpentry.²⁴⁸ He thinks that, unlike Jesus, Superman is a man-made “projection,” but only Jesus can bring eternal life.²⁴⁹ In other words, Galloway thinks that Superman is a fantasy, but Jesus is a reality who is the only means to salvation. He compares Superman saving people to “foxhole Christianity”—the type of faith that only exists in a time of crisis, but does not last after or result in a consistent commitment.²⁵⁰ This book is important early evidence for the fact that some Christians were suspicious about comparing Superman and Jesus.

A few years later, John Wesley White wrote *The Man From Krypton: The Gospel According to Superman*.²⁵¹ White’s book is an alarmist take on the decline of Western culture at the hands of Satan, and he writes that the antichrist “will both compare and be in contrast to Jesus Christ,” just as “Superman can be both compared and contrasted to both!”²⁵² White does not necessarily prove these claims in his book. The book takes short anecdotes from the first theatrical Superman film—usually at the start of a chapter—as a springboard to tangentially critique modern culture with almost no further reference to Superman. For example, Chapter Nine references Superman capturing some criminals, only to spend the rest of the chapter expositing biblical passages about how God will one day judge the world.²⁵³ Compared with Galloway’s book, White is not contemptuous of Superman, but he certainly does not praise the character at length. In fact, it seems as though his book was using a relevant popular film at the time to talk about Christianity, without engaging the two in any depth. Unlike some Christians in

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 28. Galloway suggests that identifying a white Anglo-Saxon like Superman with god is typical of the American “‘God-is-on-our-side’ brand of religion” (76). He says that it is “inconceivable” Superman would support the Soviet Union, little knowing that that very idea would be explored in a graphic novel three decades later.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 96–99; 122.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 103–4.

²⁵¹ White, *The Man from Krypton*, 1978.

²⁵² Ibid., 8.

²⁵³ Ibid., 149–165. White compares Superman saving people on a bridge to Jesus making a “bridge between God and man” (171).

later decades, White does not use Superman's story itself as an explicit evangelistic tool by drawing comparisons to Jesus, but simply wrote a book that reflected the popularity of a film.

Other Christians in the 1970 reflect an ambiguous or hostile attitude to Superman/Jesus parallels. For example, in a 1979 interview, the Reverend Kenneth Reichley from a New York Lutheran church said that “the Word became flesh, not steel,” and that “Superman is magic. He manipulates fate and history Jesus is not magic. He works within history.”²⁵⁴ This quotation is noteworthy not so much for the argument itself, but as further testimony for the fact that Christians were suspicious of comparing Superman to Jesus. Reichley was not the only Christian to see things this way, although some took it much further. When the first Superman movie came out in 1978, it was intended “to have religious resonance,” and on one level, the Christian parallels could make for compelling Sunday School conversations, articles, and editorials.²⁵⁵ That appears to have been the motivation for using that symbolism. In essence, the use of Christian symbolism in the film was not organic to the Superman source material, but the film used Christian symbolism to get Superman more attention in popular culture. Having said this, some biblical literalists thought the film's parallels between Jor-El (played by Marlon Brando) and Superman with God the Father and Jesus were blasphemous, so the film's director Richard Donner even received death threats; Donner said that “studio security brought them to my attention. Some of them were just nuts, fanatics. There was talk of blood running in the streets.”²⁵⁶ The existence of these death threats demonstrates again that some Christians were

²⁵⁴ George W. Cornell, “Superman/Jesus Similarities Explained,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 24, 1979. Magic is actually one of Superman's weaknesses.

²⁵⁵ Tye, *Superman*, 204. Anton K. Kozlovic writes: “Superman was the secularisation of the Judeo-Christian mythos with American nationalism replacing Judaic ethnocentrism.” See Anton K. Kozlovic, “Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah,” *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 1, article 5 (2002): 27.

²⁵⁶ Tye, *Superman*, 203–4. See also, Richard Donner and Tom Mankiewicz, “Audio Commentary,” disc 2, *Superman: The Movie*, DVD, directed by Richard Donner (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures), 2001. Ironically, Donner approached the film itself with reverence. After reading an overly campy draft of the script, he

concerned by comparisons between Superman and Jesus (even if these threats were from a fringe group). The filmmakers nonetheless included the parallels to have resonance in popular culture.

The use of Christian symbolism in Donner's film (starring Christopher Reeve) paved the way for other Superman adaptations to do the same.²⁵⁷ Though not a Christian, *Superman: The Movie* writer Tom Mankiewicz said that the film gave "the Christian message: that we should be honest, love one another, and be for the underdog."²⁵⁸ That quote is an obvious simplification of Christianity, but it shows that the screenwriter had Christianity in mind when he wrote the film. Marco Arnaudo writes that the film gives a Christological depiction of Superman that is close to "preachiness."²⁵⁹ In other words, it is not particularly subtle. That observation is proven by the writer's own statements, as Mankiewicz said, "I tried hard to have Brando symbolize God in that long speech when he sends Clark down to Earth. 'I have sent them you, my only son.' If that's not God sending Christ to Earth, it's as close as you can get without offending the churchgoing

agreed to direct the film—with alterations—in part "to protect Superman" because he feared that the film was destroying the institution of Superman. See Tye, *Superman*, 194. After Donner cast Christopher Reeve to play Superman, he would later say, "I didn't find him," but "God sent him to me" (196). For a study of the history of behind-the-scenes documentaries in the Superman movies, see Nicola Jean Evans, "Undoing the Magic: DVD Extras and the Pleasures behind the Scenes," *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 24, no. 4 (2010): 587–600. For a study of how films can take on religious dimensions, see John C. Lyden, *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (New York: New York University Press, 2003). *Superman Returns* treated the original Donner film with reverence, and some reviewers would criticize its fidelity to the earlier film. See Tye, *Superman*, 287. Jon Bogdanove says: "Clearly Superman resonates deeply through our culture—at least the idea of him does. Yet, only a fraction of Americans read his comics. Why? It may be that the weight of being an American icon is too big a burden for the character. For most writers or artists, it may be too difficult to write or draw stories, or versions of the character, that consistently fulfill everyone's heartfelt vision. Superman means so much to so many people that it is a rare comic that can satisfy them all. There are so many expectations and so much baggage, the status quo of the classic myth is too sacred to challenge." See Eury, "Superman Roundtable Discussion," 232. Philip Skerry and Chris Lambert compare knowing the opening narration of Superman's origin in the George Reeves Superman television series to learning the Lord's Prayer as children. See Philip Skerry and Chris Lambert, "From Panel to Panavision," in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 63.

²⁵⁷ Jesus wears a Superman shirt in stage productions of *Godspell* as early as 1971. See Tye, *Superman*, 68; Michael Eury, "Dennis O'Neil Interview," in *The Krypton Companion*, ed. Michael Eury (Raleigh, NC: TwoMorrows Publishing, 2006), 119.

²⁵⁸ Quoted in White, *The Man from Krypton*, 13–14.

²⁵⁹ Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 47.

public.”²⁶⁰ Later in the film, a hologram of the deceased Jor-El tells his son, “They can be a great people Kal-El, if they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way. For this reason above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you ... my only son.”²⁶¹ This phrasing is evocative of the first chapter of the Gospel of John.²⁶² Weldon describes Jor-El’s words as “paraphrased gospel that was the last thing on Siegel and Shuster’s mind when they created their rabble-rousing costumed bruiser.”²⁶³ Weldon’s quote is significant because he recognizes, again, that this film was imposing Christian language onto the Superman source material, but that that influence is not there in the earliest versions of the character. It largely originated with this film.

In the film, as Jor-El puts his infant son in the rocket, he tells him, “You will carry me inside you. The son becomes the father and the father the son. You will see my life through your eyes as your life will be seen through mine.”²⁶⁴ Lou Anders compares Jor-El’s speech to Jesus’s

²⁶⁰ Jake Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 72, 120. Mankiewicz said that there were “obvious allusions to God sending Christ to Earth.” See Donner and Mankiewicz, “Audio Commentary,” *Superman: The Movie*. Another screenwriter who worked on the film named David Newman said: “It begins with a father who lives up in heaven, who says, ‘I will send my only son to save earth.’ The son takes on the guise of a man but is not a man. The religious overtones are so clear.” See Friedrich, “Up, Up, and Awaay!!!” The film’s producer Ilya Salkind commented on the Christological themes, saying “Brando represents the ultimate good who is sending part of himself to do good things,” and even compared Superman’s Kryptonian mother to the virgin Mary. See Salkind and Spengler, “Audio Commentary,” *Superman: The Movie*. Salkind said that casting Marlon Brando to play Superman’s father was like “getting God for Jor-El” because Brando was the world’s biggest movie star at the time. See *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns. See also, Bogaerts, “Rediscovering Nietzsche’s *Übermensch*,” 92; Anders, “A Tale of Two Orphans,” 74. See also, Leo Partible, “Superheroes in Film and Pop Culture: Silhouettes of Redemption on the Screen,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. B.J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 229—254. Clanton writes that “Christian readings” of *Superman: The Movie* emphasize the depiction of “Jor-El as ‘heavenly father;’ a sense that the parallels with Moses actually point to an identification with Christ; Kal-El (Clark) as the “only son” sent with a “divine mission” with a “hidden identity”; and most obviously, the view that Superman is a kind of “Christ figure.” See Clanton, “The Origin(s) of Superman,” 39. In a romantic scene in the film where Superman flies with Lois Lane, we also hear a poem in Lois’s internal monologue that identifies Superman as a god. See *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

²⁶¹ *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner.

²⁶² Tye, *Superman*, 68, 203–4.

²⁶³ Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 188.

²⁶⁴ *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner. In a different medium, in a flashback to Superman’s time as a baby on Krypton before he was sent to Earth, Superman’s father Jor-El says that when his son lives on Earth, “He will be *like* them, but he will not *be* one of them. He will be *among* them, but he will not be *of* them.” See Straczynski, *Superman: Earth One*, vol. 1, n.p. One line in Tom De Haven’s novel *It’s Superman!* says: “He loved

words in John 10:30 (“The Father and I are one”) and John 14:9 (“Whoever has seen me has seen the Father”).²⁶⁵ He is right to do so. Roy M. Anker writes that since Jor-El uses Trinitarian language and he and the other Kryptonians speak in language similar to the King James Bible, Marlon Brando “ends up sounding and looking an awful lot like the God envisioned by the Jewish-Christian tradition.”²⁶⁶ This may be a simplistic statement, but the more formal, stately, and archaic language used in these scenes does enhance that intertextual connection with a common perception of the King James Bible. Some observers also compare Krypton to Heaven and compare Jor-El banishing the Kryptonian criminal General Zod to the interstellar prison the Phantom Zone to the stories of Lucifer getting banished from Heaven by God.²⁶⁷ Lois Lane has

them, lived among them, but was not of them.” See De Haven, *It’s Superman!*, 413. These descriptions are somewhat reminiscent of some of the terminology in John 17.

²⁶⁵ Anders, “A Tale of Two Orphans,” 74. Clanton writes that these words echo parts of John 14–17 where Jesus talks about how his followers “abide” in him. See Clanton, “The Origin(s) of Superman,” 40.

²⁶⁶ Roy M. Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), 253–54. Anker is stretching the parallels a bit when he says Kal-El’s story on Krypton parallels Jesus’s birth, exile, and Herod’s Slaughter of the Innocents (252). For a brief examination of the Christian ideas in *Superman: The Movie*, including a reference to Superman being about his “father’s business” (Luke 2:49), see Patrick D. Anderson, “From John Wayne to E.T.: The Hero in Popular American Film,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1983): 16–31. See also, Mark D. Stucky, “The Superhero’s Mythic Journey: Death and the Heroic Cycle in Superman,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 10, no. 2 (2006): article 6, 1–11.

²⁶⁷ John Kenneth Muir, “Cult Movie Review: Superman: The Movie (1978),”; John Kenneth Muir, “Superman Week: Superman II (1981),” John Kenneth Muir’s Reflections on Movies and Classic TV, June 11, 2013, <http://reflectionsonfilmandtelevision.blogspot.com/2012/08/cult-movie-review-superman-movie-1978.html>, (accessed June 23, 2018); Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero* 47–49. Skelton thinks that the three Kryptonian criminals (Zod, Non, and Ursa) are an “Unholy Trinity” like Lucifer, the antichrist, and a false prophet, while Jor-El, Superman, and Lois are the Holy Trinity. Just as Zod threatens to kill Jor-El’s son, in Revelation 12:4–5, the dragon tries to kill the son of God. These readings are subjective (121–27). Skelton compares Lex Luthor to Lucifer and compares Luthor getting out of prison to Lucifer getting out of prison in Revelation 20 (67, 116, 154). Sarah Kozloff presents Krypton as Heaven, Superman’s Kryptonian and Earth mothers as Mary figures and Lois as Mary Magdalene, Zod as Satan, and Lex Luthor as (a little) like Judas, and implausibly compares Jor-El’s name to “Jehovah.” See Sarah R. Kozloff, “Superman as Savior: Christian Allegory in the Superman Movies,” *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9, no. 2 (1981): 78–82. Arnaudo writes that Krypton and its inhabitants are like angels, “so that Superman’s appearance on Earth later seems symbolically like a fall from Paradise.” While General Zod offers that Jor-El can join him and take power, Jor-El puts him in the Phantom Zone prison; Arnaudo compares this to God casting out Satan the fallen angel and Jesus refusing the devil’s temptations. See Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 47–48. Arnaudo adds: “Luthor lives underground like Satan, which has no counterpart in the comic” (49). However, the “underground lair” is a cliché for villains. Anton K. Kozlovic outlines how General Zod and the other Kryptonian criminals are like the Satan or the antichrist; they are banished from Krypton as Lucifer fell, but emerge to oppose Superman. See Kozlovic, “The Unholy Biblical Subtexts,” 2–14. Kozlovic argues that the filmmakers tried to present Jor-El as God through their cinematography, his plain white costume (even though most Kryptonians dressed this way), and his name; at the same time, he identified Lara as the Holy Spirit and Virgin Mary. See Anton K. Kozlovic, “The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts,” 1–11. Many of

been ascribed contradictory roles from Christian tradition (like Mary Magdalene or the Holy Spirit), but most of these interpretations seem to be eisegesis.²⁶⁸ The rocket ship that carries the infant Kal-El to Earth is shaped like a star and has thus also been compared to the Star of Bethlehem that the magi follow in Matthew's gospel.²⁶⁹ Still, the overarching Jesus/God connections are not perfect because

If this is God sending his only Son to the world, then what kind of Supreme Being is Jor-El? ... He's about to *die*. He waited too long and didn't build a rocket large enough for the whole family; yes, he leaves a hologram to give his only son moral instruction upon reaching adulthood, but it's a *hologram*, it's not a *father*, or a Father either.²⁷⁰

These words acknowledge the limitations of the allegory. While Jor-El is supposed to represent God in the film, the fact remains that he is not alive, and only speaks to his son in the form of a hologram, so he is not like God the "Father" in this regard, or even a living "father." Superman would not have been sent to Earth if his home world was not going to be destroyed. Therefore, the film's attempt to add a connection to Jesus in this part of the story does not fit neatly with the source material, where the primary motivation was simply survival.

Kozlovic's interpretations seem like random eisegesis, such as when he says: "Jor-El's starship instruction lessons referred to twenty-eight known galaxies. This fact was irrelevant to the storyline and had no filmic consequences in either S1 or S2, however, it did resonate with Jesus's claim that: "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2). Nor was Jor-El averse to exposing Kal-El to Chinese philosophy as part of his developing intellectual growth. The use of overt pagan philosophy for God's (Christian) ends was also an important pedagogic tactic used by the Apostle Paul (Acts 17:22–23, 28)."²⁶⁸ See Kozlovic, "The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts," 6. The website *Hollywood Jesus* notes Superman's Christ-like parallels (including his time "in the wilderness" on the way to his Arctic Fortress of Solitude), the parallels between Zod and Satan falling out of Heaven, but also compared Lois Lane coming back from the dead to the saints coming from their tombs in Matthew 27:52–53. That is a weak comparison because Superman does not die in the film. See David Bruce, "You'll Believe a Man Can Fly," *Hollywood Jesus*, October 1998, <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/superman.htm> (accessed June 28, 2018).

²⁶⁸ Anton K. Kozlovic compares Lois Lane to Mary Magdalene because she is connected to the main hero and her character makes a few sexualized puns around Superman (even though the canonical gospels say nothing about Mary Magdalene's sex life). Anton K. Kozlovic, "The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts," 14–22. He also compares Lois to Simon Peter and Adam (22–25). Skelton compares Lois Lane to Mary Magdalene, but also compares Lois agreeing to fly with Superman to Simon Peter stepping out of the boat when Jesus walks on water. See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero*, 109–10.

²⁶⁹ Muir, "Cult Movie Review: Superman: The Movie (1978),"; Cohen, "Bendis Signals a Welcome Return to Superman's Jewish Roots." Anton K. Kozlovic notes Superman's "divine" paternity, his name ("El"), the comparison between his ship and the Star of Bethlehem, his "mission" to save the world, and his character. Kozlovic compares Superman's flight to the Ascension of Christ in Acts 1. See Anton K. Kozlovic, "Superman as Christ-Figure," 1–33.

²⁷⁰ De Haven, *Our Hero*, 179.

Without Jor-El, the theatrical cut of the 1980 sequel *Superman II* has almost no Christian symbolism; as Jake Rossen puts it, “the Christ metaphor the screenwriter had played with during the first film had been all but erased; whether the sometimes-suffocating allegory was missed depends on the viewer.”²⁷¹ However, Richard Donner was fired and replaced by Richard Lester on *Superman II*, and some scenes Brando had already filmed for *Superman II* were cut because the producers did not want to pay Brando’s large salary—but Donner was allowed to release his own director’s cut in 2006 with the Brando scenes back in.²⁷² The Donner cut still has Trinitarian symbolism, even if it is simplified and not consistent with an orthodox understanding of the Trinity. The film links the Son and the Father, but the Spirit has no place in the allegory. In that film, Superman gives up his powers to live as a mortal with Lois Lane, but realizes he made a mistake when the Kryptonian criminal General Zod takes over Earth; the hologram Jor-El must absorb itself into Superman so he can get his power back.²⁷³ Jor-El says: “The Kryptonian

²⁷¹ Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, 130. See also, Tye, *Superman*, 233. In the theatrical cut of *Superman II*, Superman kills General Zod, and Arnaudo writes, “here, the Christian symbolism permeating the film series ... prevails over the character’s ethical and psychological continuity within the comics canon, thus obliging the script to reproduce the traditional scene of Lucifer’s banishment to Hell, without considering the fact that the killing of a defenseless victim constitutes the greatest possible distortion of Superman’s ethical profile.” See Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 94. It is more plausible that director Richard Lester did not think about that. Having said this, it is worth noting that in *Superman II*, when the evil Kryptonian General Zod has taken over the White House, he sees the symbol of the eagle on the Seal of the President of the United States in the Oval Office, and says, “I see you are practiced in worshipping things that fly.” When the president says, “Oh God,” in despair, Zod reveals his own pretensions when he corrects “God” to “Zod.” See *Superman II*, directed by Richard Lester.

²⁷² *Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut*, directed by Richard Donner (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2006).

²⁷³ *Ibid.* Regarding the theatrical cut, John Kenneth Muir compares Superman’s lonely journey back to his Arctic Fortress of Solitude to Christ in the wilderness, and Superman’s re-emergence with his powers to the Second Coming. See John Kenneth Muir, “Superman Week: Superman II (1981).” Meanwhile, Ken Schenck confusingly compares Superman temporarily giving up his powers in *Superman II* to Christ emptying himself in Philippians 2:5–11—even though Superman emptied himself because he wanted to have sex with Lois Lane. See Schenck, “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,” 40. Lex Luthor betrays Superman to the Kryptonian criminals as well, and Skelton compares this to Judas betraying Jesus. See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 126. Kozlovic even compares Lex Luthor’s female associate Miss Teschmacher to both Mary Magdalene and the whore of Babylon (Revelation 17)—because she at first appears to have been redeemed by Superman in the first film, but returns to evil in the sequel. Anton K. Kozlovic, “The Unholy Biblical Subtexts,” 16–19. Although this observation does not apply to all versions of Superman, Rosa Maria DelVecchio argues that Superman’s traditional virginity “is a large part of what makes him so godlike” when linked to “the Judeo-Christian God.” See Rosa Maria DelVecchio, “Why Is Superman Still a Virgin?” in *Superman at Fifty: The Persistence of a Legend*, eds. Dennis Dooley and Gary D. Engle (Cleveland, OH: Octavia, 1988), 173. DelVecchio notes that the

prophecy will be at last fulfilled: the son becomes the father and the father becomes the son.”²⁷⁴

Mankiewicz said that without Jor-El in the theatrical cut, “it loses all its impact The whole full circle, the arc, is him coming back to his father.”²⁷⁵ Still, Schenck writes that, unlike Jesus, the Superman of the films is not sinless; he disobeys his Kryptonian father by giving up his powers to have pre-marital sex with Lois.²⁷⁶ Schenck’s point is important because he identifies another area where the Superman/Jesus analogy breaks down. Jesus perfectly follows the will of his father, but in this film, if Jor-El represents God, Superman does not live up to that standard.

After the first two Superman films, the next important step in the public’s understanding of Superman as a Christ figure is a 1992/1993 comics storyline where Superman is killed by the raging monster Doomsday and rises from the dead like Jesus.²⁷⁷ This story started out as another cliché comic book story, but it took on a life of its own because it received far more public attention than the comic book creators ever imagined. Just as Jesus is known for his resurrection, Superman’s death and resurrection is his best-known comics storyline since his inception. From

Virgin Mary and Jesus “are not thought of in a sexual sense” (even though Jesus had siblings) (173). DelVecchio acknowledges that Superman has sex in *Superman II*, but had to give up his powers to do it (173). (DelVecchio does not mention that the screenwriters of *Superman III* somehow ignored this plot point when Superman has sex in *Superman III*—and still has powers—when a variant form of Kryptonite temporarily makes him act out of character and partly evil.)

²⁷⁴ *Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut*, directed by Richard Donner. See Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 117. Tom Mankiewicz compared this scene to “God touching the hand of Adam” as well. See Richard Donner and Tom Mankiewicz, “Audio Commentary,” *Superman: The Movie*. Weldon also notes that the visual in this scene of Jor-El reaching out is “a tableau deliberately reminiscent of the Creation of Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.” Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 200.

²⁷⁵ Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, 120. Mankiewicz called the ending of Jor-El’s storyline “dramatic and wonderful,” but said, “of course it means nothing if it’s the mother instead” (120). The hologram of Superman’s mother appears in the theatrical cut. So, while Skelton compares Lara to the Holy Spirit in the film, she was only in *Superman II* because the producers wanted an excuse not to pay Marlon Brando again and she was cheaper! See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 51.

²⁷⁶ Schenck, “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,” 39.

²⁷⁷ See Tye, *Superman*, 68; Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 123; Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 145–46. Superman was killed off in the comics because the writers wanted him to marry Lois Lane, but were told they could not until it happened in the television show *Lois & Clark*—so killing off the character for an extended period was one way to fill time. See De Haven, *Our Hero*, 6. Superman editor Mike Carlin said that the comics where Superman fought to his death originally “were the issues where we would have been getting Superman married.” See Daniels, *Superman*, 167. See also, Daniels, *DC Comics*, 218. For a study of death in Superman stories and other comics, see Michael Kobre, “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?” *Michigan Quarterly Review* 53, no. 2 (2014): 149–165.

the start, the unthinking grey monster Doomsday is depicted as a force of malice and destruction; before he fights any heroes, we see him alone as he crushes an innocent little bird with his fist just because he can, and later strangles a deer in the wild.²⁷⁸ Even the name “Doomsday” has apocalyptic connotations. Skelton thinks that Doomsday is like “the Beast” in Revelation.²⁷⁹ When Superman dies a sacrificial death defeating Doomsday, he falls into Lois Lane’s arms in a few pages of images clearly reminiscent of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, where Jesus falls into Mary’s arms.²⁸⁰ In words with Christian symbolism, Lois tells the dying Superman, “You stopped him! You saved us all!”²⁸¹ On a small scale, just like Jesus, Superman saved the people from death.

The worldwide *reaction* to Superman’s death was greater than the initial reaction to Jesus’s death in the first century! Mark Waid observes that “as luck would have it, the day that the Death of Superman comic hit the newsstands, nothing else happened in the world” and that “it was a huge, huge, gigantic cultural touchstone moment.”²⁸² Waid is using hyperbole, but the underlying point is that because the comic about Superman’s death was published on a slow news day, it received much more scrutiny than the writers of the comics dreamed of. Superman editor Mike Carlin recalled that “the real world acted the way the characters acted in the story.

²⁷⁸ Louise Simonson, “Doomsday! Part One,” *Superman: The Man of Steel* #18 (New York: DC Comics, 1992); Dan Jurgens, “Down for the Count,” *Justice League America* #69 (New York: DC Comics 1992). Doomsday’s creator Bertron thought of himself as a god, and said, “gods need not concern themselves with ambiguous notions of morality.” See Dan Jurgens, *Superman/Doomsday: Hunter Prey Book Two* (New York: DC Comics, 1994), 15.

²⁷⁹ Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 131.

²⁸⁰ Dan Jurgens, “Doomsday!” *Superman* #75 (New York: DC Comics, 1992). See Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 118. Knowles also notes that the cover of the *Death of Superman* graphic novel mimics Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, with Lois Lane in the Mary position, but he calls it “garish and tasteless.” See Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 123. Unlike most comics, to emphasize the scale of the battle, *Superman* #75 had only one panel per page. See Tye, *Superman*, 247; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 247.

²⁸¹ Jurgens, “Doomsday!” 26. Weldon criticizes the death of Superman because, “the threat to Metropolis that Doomsday may have posed never registered hard enough on readers for the Man of Steel’s sacrifice to land with the weight it deserved. Superman should die saving the universe or the world or a single human life He should *not* die saving public works projects.” See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 249. Frankly, these words do not do justice to the series, which shows Superman saving the lives of innocent people (and one particular young family) throughout to create a sense of mounting tension for millions of people in danger. Yet Weldon thinks a more intellectual villain such as Lex Luthor should have killed Superman (248–49).

²⁸² *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns.

They were shocked, and sad, and worried.”²⁸³ In other words, the real world reacted to the death of Superman almost as strongly as the people of Earth did in the DC Comics universe. In the real world, the death of Superman was headline news and almost every television news show or late-night talk show covered the story.²⁸⁴ Tye writes that

it was a distraction for a country mired in a recession and an endless presidential campaign. Having its longest-lived icon die said something about America, even if nobody could agree what. The stories made clear one more thing: Journalists, along with most of their readers and viewers, didn’t understand that heroes regularly perished in the comics, and almost never stayed dead.²⁸⁵

Likewise, Tom De Haven reflects:

There was anger, cynicism, nostalgia, grief, satisfaction, even snarkiness, and everybody, it seemed, viewed Superman’s death as a metaphor for ... something. It meant the end of wholesomeness, the end (yet again!) of our innocence. It exemplified corporate arrogance and self-regard, the primacy of profit It symbolized the annihilation (and either it was a crying shame, or about time) of the national platitude that Americans, like Superman, do the right thing because it’s the right thing, not because of any expectation of reward. It said something, something or other, about the decline of America the superpower.²⁸⁶

The issue was bought by everyone from Wall Street businessmen to artists; comedians made jokes about the story, and, just as Richard Donner had once received death threats for Superman/Jesus parallels in his movie, DC Comics staff now received death threats for killing off Superman—although a *New York Times* critic named Frank Rich claimed that the heroic,

²⁸³ Ibid. For a study that uses *Superman #75* (where Superman dies) as a starting point for discussing fictional characters with children, see Barry Gilmore, “E.J. in Focus: Superman Is Dead: How We Help Students Make Sense of Literary Characters,” *The English Journal* 102, no. 1 (2012): 27–33.

²⁸⁴ Tye, *Superman*, 245. DC had not expected the publicity. Executives from DC’s parent company Warner Brothers were angry they had not been told ahead of time—especially after Superman appeared in a Duracell batteries ad (“He runs like he’s on Duracell”) in *People* magazine with an article about Superman dying (245). As Les Daniels writes, “publicity snowballed until the news of Superman’s death was in every paper and magazine, on every news broadcast, and included as part of every comedian’s monologue.” See Daniels, *DC Comics*, 218. The death of Superman made headlines in *People* magazine, *Newsweek*, *New York Newsday*, and was referenced on *The Tonight Show* and *Saturday Night Live*. See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 245.

²⁸⁵ Tye, *Superman*, 245. Regarding Superman’s death, Gerard Jones writes that “editorial writers moaned and fretted about what this meant about America, its heroes, and its soul,” but the DC Comics people wondered how so many journalists took it seriously. See Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 335. See also, Schenck, “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,” 40–41; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 244–45. Weldon also writes that when Superman was killed off in 1992, for many people, it felt “like a curiously personal attack on something good, innocent, and fondly (if dimly) remembered” (3).

²⁸⁶ De Haven, *Our Hero*, 17–18.

hyper-masculine ideal Superman represented had long been dead.²⁸⁷ The issue sold over six million copies, was the best-selling comic book in history that was not a first issue, and would be printed in a special collector's edition, with an accompanying black Superman armband for mourning.²⁸⁸ DC editor Jenette Kahn said that the year Superman died was "our most successful year in the history of DC."²⁸⁹ Mike Carlin said: "I can't believe people went for it as hard as they did. It must have been the way Orson Welles felt when his *War of the Worlds* actually went over."²⁹⁰ Carlin also said: "Characters die every day in comics. This is old news to us. If it had been a new idea, I would have been worried about it, but this really is one of our cliché stories."²⁹¹ Yet by happenstance, it was a major step in the progression of the Jesus Superman! Carlin said it was always obvious to the writers and editors that Superman would return, since the makers of the comics wanted neither to get rid of their own jobs nor be the ones who ended Superman's battle for truth and justice!²⁹² Carlin rejects the idea that the Death of Superman was a cynical publicity stunt because DC had no idea the story would get so much public attention.²⁹³ He recalled that "the world *was* taking Superman for granted. So we literally said, 'Let's show

²⁸⁷ Tye, *Superman*, 248, Frank Rich, "Term Limit for the Man of Steel: Yes, It's Time for Him to Go," *New York Times*, November 22, 1992; "Superman's Death Issue to Go to Second Printing," *Wall Street Journal*, November 20, 1992.

²⁸⁸ Tye, *Superman*, 245–46. See also, Daniels, *DC Comics*, 218. DC printed three million copies of the issue. It was soon reprinted multiple times. See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 246. The issue was accompanied by black armbands in a way reminiscent of "the ripped black fabric modern Jews wear to show they are in mourning." Likewise, when Superman appeared to die in the animated television show *Justice League* and his fellow heroes reminisced about him, one reviewer suggested that the Justice League "is essentially sitting 'Shiva,' the Jewish mourning period." See Barry Freiman, "Long Live Superman in the 'Hereafter,'" review of *Justice League*, "Hereafter," *Superman Homepage*, <https://www.supermanhomepage.com/tv/tv.php?topic=reviews/jl2-ep20> (accessed July 14, 2018). For the *Justice League* episode, see *Justice League*, "Hereafter" S02, E19, directed by Butch Lukic, written by Dwayne McDuffie, *Cartoon Network*, November 29, 2003.

²⁸⁹ Tye, *Superman*, 251.

²⁹⁰ Daniels, *DC Comics*, 218. See also, Daniels, *Superman*, 168; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 244–45. A commentator in *First Things* did not believe Superman would come back. See Herbert London, "The Death of Superman," *First Things*, March 1993, 11–12.

²⁹¹ Daniels, *Superman*, 168; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 244–45.

²⁹² Tye, *Superman*, 245.

²⁹³ Daniels, *DC Comics*, 218. Knowles calls the Death of Superman storyline an "ill-fated marketing ploy" that "left a sour aftertaste," or a "cynical publicity stunt," but this description does not do justice to the quality of the surrounding stories at this time. See Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 7, 123.

the world what it would be like without Superman.”²⁹⁴ The Superman comics took a break for a few months after Superman’s funeral, as Carlin realized that if Superman’s death had been such a big cultural event, they had to put some care into his return.²⁹⁵

It must be emphasized that what started as just another Superman story became a key event in the perception of Superman as a Christ figure because later films and television would imitate this death of Superman, since it was so popular. Jake Rossen’s book *Superman vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon* details at length how Warner Brothers studios tried several times to adapt this comic book storyline into a feature film in the 1990s, but kept switching writers and directors. Nonetheless, as will be shown later in this chapter, the television series *Smallville* and the 2016 film *Batman v Superman* both directly used story elements derived from this series that had Christian symbolism. They used that imagery because they thought it would be more financially successful; the Doomsday storyline was part of one of the bestselling comic books in history.

Before Superman returned in the comics, in a storyline called “Reign of the Supermen,” initially there were *four* supermen who came forth, and the first three *claimed* to be the real one: a half-robot Cyborg Superman, an immature teenage Superman clone (Superboy), a personification of an ancient Kryptonian artefact called the Eradicator who shows no mercy to criminals, and lastly, a black man in a metal suit who Superman once saved (John Henry Irons, also known as “Steel”).²⁹⁶ The people of the world wonder: “*Are the new supermen the four*

²⁹⁴ *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns. Carlin had come to the conclusion that, with the character’s sales in decline, killing the character helped save him, as Carlin had thought to himself that if the world wanted “to embrace the antiheroes of the time ... and you think Superman is old-school and corny Well, how about we take him away?” See Tye, *Superman*, 246. In a 2005 comic, Batman told Superman, “*Everyone* looks up to you. They listen to you ... But they need to be *inspired*. And let’s face it, ‘*Superman*’ ... the last time you really inspired anyone—was when you were *dead*.” See Geoff Johns, *Infinite Crisis* (New York: DC Comics 2006), 38.

²⁹⁵ Tye, *Superman*, 249.

²⁹⁶ See Jerry Ordway, *The Adventures of Superman* #500 (New York: DC Comics, 1993). In his introductory issue, some people wonder if Steel is a “*walk-in spirit*” of the original Superman. Louise Simonson,

horsemen of the apocalypse?”²⁹⁷ Elements of the storyline include other examples of Christian symbolism. A subplot features a cult of robed Superman-worshippers who venerate his tomb in Metropolis, predict his return, and chant his name.²⁹⁸ A newscaster says that many “people have joined a cult which gathers daily at Superman’s tomb, awaiting his resurrection. Members of the cult ... worship the late hero as a messiah and maintain that he will rise from the grave to carry on the never-ending battle.”²⁹⁹ This cult has obvious parallels with Christian claims about Jesus. *Action Comics* #687 is titled “Born Again!” and the story makes specific reference to Superman’s coffin being “empty;” later, the Eradicator-Superman is surrounded by crowds who surround him and want him to touch and heal them.³⁰⁰ The Superman cult members predict “that judgment day is at hand.”³⁰¹ One Superman cult (wearing blue monk robes with Superman’s symbol) fights another at the site of Superman’s tomb over which of the four supermen is the real one.³⁰² None of them are. In fact, the mysterious “Cyborg Superman” is an evil imposter, in league with the alien Mongul, and destroys an entire city called Coast City!³⁰³

The “real” Superman returns in a comic called “Resurrections,” and despite not having his powers back yet, he convinces Lois he is the real Superman by sharing a “Clark Kent”

“Steel,” *Superman: The Man of Steel* #22 (New York: DC Comics, 1993). However, unlike the other three, Steel did not claim he was Superman. See Louise Simonson, “Ambush!” *Superman: The Man of Steel* #23 (New York: DC Comics, 1993). The name of the storyline (“Reign of the Supermen”) is a reference to Siegel’s original story about an evil Superman. See Tye, *Superman*, 251. Weldon refers to this storyline as “The Four Horsemen of the Supocalypse.” See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 249.

²⁹⁷ Roger Stern, “An Eye for an Eye,” *Action Comics* #688 (New York: DC Comics, 1993). The title of the issue has biblical resonances. Skelton compares the “four supermen” to the “four horsemen of the apocalypse” in Revelation 6:1–8, but this comparison does not work for all of them since Steel and Superboy are good characters (even though the latter is immature). See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 140–43.

²⁹⁸ Roger Stern, “Who’s Buried in Superman’s Tomb?” *Action Comics* #686 (New York: DC Comics, 1993); Louise Simonson, “Ghosts,” *Superman: The Man of Steel* #21 (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

²⁹⁹ Roger Stern, “Born Again!” *Action Comics* #687 (New York: DC Comics, 1993), 12.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 17, 20.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁰² Roger Stern, “Lies & Revelations,” *Action Comics* #690 (New York: DC Comics, 1993), 1–3. The Cyborg Superman has his own cult and a cult member is interviewed on TV in one issue, having patterned his look after the Cyborg. See Karl Kesel, “Assault on Engine City!” *The Adventures of Superman* #504 (New York: DC Comics, 1993), 11.

³⁰³ Dan Jurgens, “Deadly Alliance,” *Superman* #80 (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

memory: that his favourite book is *To Kill a Mockingbird*.³⁰⁴ The title “Resurrections” has intertextual associations with the story of Christ. In a later issue, there is another Jesus parallel as Superman reflects that the Cyborg is “a madman who killed *millions*. A madman using my *name!*”³⁰⁵ Since the Cyborg *pretended* to be Superman while doing evil, it is fair to compare him to the antichrist or Beast in Revelation.³⁰⁶ Hence, it is significant that the real Superman tells the Cyborg, “You killed millions ... And you did so wearing my symbol ... using *MY NAME!*”³⁰⁷ This similar to how the Beast performs blasphemous deeds in Revelation 13.

Ultimately, although the story leaned heavily into science fiction,

the very fact of his [Superman’s] rebirth affirmed writers’ and readers’ faith in humanity and, for many, divinity. The Christ-like nature of his journey could not have been clearer—from a noble death to the discovery of his empty tomb, the resurrection itself, and his making clear that he was back to redeem mankind.³⁰⁸

In short, like the 1978 film, this storyline was a key signpost in the popular association between Superman and Jesus. There are parallels between Superman and Jesus even in the nature of Superman’s resurrection. Earlier, Jonathan Kent had a heart attack, he met Clark in the afterlife, they fought off demons, and Jonathan convinced Clark to come back.³⁰⁹ Jonathan awoke in hospital, and—in biblical fashion—Superman’s tomb was empty.³¹⁰ Superman’s opposition to the demons in the afterlife before his resurrection could have parallels to the Harrowing of Hell. At the same time, the series had a science fiction explanation involving

³⁰⁴ Dan Jurgens, “Resurrections,” *Superman* #81 (New York: DC Comics, 1993), 5. Before Superman’s powers return, he uses guns, and Glen Weldon suggests that these stories parody other violent heroes. See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 252.

³⁰⁵ Kesel, “Assault on Engine City,” 2.

³⁰⁶ See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 142–43.

³⁰⁷ Dan Jurgens, “Back for Good!” *Superman* #82 (New York: DC Comics 1993), 26. It could also be read as a parallel to Christians who abuse the name of Jesus, although that is not a strong comparison.

³⁰⁸ Tye, *Superman*, 251.

³⁰⁹ Jerry Ordway, “Life After Death,” *The Adventures of Superman* #500 (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42–46.

Kryptonian technology for Superman’s return as well, but validates both the science-fiction and the “afterlife” explanations.³¹¹

Superman as Jesus in the New Millennium

Outside the comics, while the third and fourth Superman films did not use Jesus imagery, the 2001 pilot episode of the television series *Smallville* (a show about Clark Kent in high school) did.³¹² I would argue that the decision to include Christian imagery in this series was built on the foundation of the 1978 film. In any case, as part of a high school hazing ritual carried out by the football players, Clark Kent is stripped almost naked and tied to a wooden cross as that year’s “scarecrow”; he is unable to resist because one of the players unknowingly has a necklace made of Kryptonite.³¹³ The scene portrays the future Superman in a crucified Jesus pose and this image was used in promotional materials for the show.³¹⁴ Skelton compares the way Clark is mocked by his fellow high school students to how Christ was mocked on the cross.³¹⁵ *Smallville* co-creator Al Gough had not expected the show’s marketers to emphasize the Jesus image in the show’s ad campaign as much as they did; while Gough admitted that the show “heightened” the Jesus parallel, he said that “when we saw that campaign, we were shocked. We thought they were going to crucify *us* for this. But it was really compelling and people remember

³¹¹ Roger Stern, “And Who, Disguised as Clark Kent?” *Action Comics* #692 (New York: DC Comics, 1993).

³¹² *Smallville* started as a show about Clark Kent in high school and cleverly made the development of his powers a metaphor for puberty. The show would run ten years. For more on this background, see *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns.

³¹³ *Smallville*, “Pilot,” directed by David Nutter.

³¹⁴ See Tye, *Superman*, 68, 275–76; Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 60, 64–65; Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 17; *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns; Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, 255. The pose drew comparisons to the 1998 murder of the gay college student Matthew Shepard (255).

³¹⁵ Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 64.

that campaign.”³¹⁶ The reaction seems to have been much less of a problem than it was for Donner in 1978.³¹⁷ Gough’s words are notable because they testify to the fact that it was financially profitable to sell Superman as a Christ figure at this time. The Jesus parallels continued in later seasons of the show.³¹⁸ Having said this, *Smallville* producer Ken Horton said that after the first episode, the show would be more subtle in its use of religious imagery because “we also knew it was dangerous ... there’s a line you don’t cross.”³¹⁹ Horton does not define

³¹⁶ *Look, up in the Sky: The Amazing Story of Superman*, directed by Kevin Burns. This image is also on the cover of the DVD boxed set. David Nutter, the director of the episode, stated that he tried to throw in as many Jesus metaphors as possible; in addition to the “crucifixion” scene, he likened another scene where Clark speaks to his father as a “Sermon on the Mount” pose. See Alfred Gough, Miles Millar, and David Nutter, “Audio Commentary,” disc 1, “Pilot,” directed by David Nutter, *Smallville: The Complete First Season*, DVD, (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2003). For a study of Christianity and *Smallville*, and the irony of the show’s perceived anti-capitalist ethics (coupled with the capitalist aims of the network), see Gustav Peebles, “God, Communism, and the WB,” in *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop, (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 77–92. For a study of homosexuality and fan culture in *Smallville*, see Michaela D. E. Meyer, “Slashing *Smallville*: The Interplay of Text, Audience and Production on Viewer Interpretations of Homoeroticism,” *Sexuality & Culture* 17, no. 3 (2013): 476–93.

³¹⁷ In the 1990s, Jonathan Lemkin wrote an aborted script for a Superman movie that would have been called *Superman Reborn*, where Superman would have died but then his “spirit” would have entered Lois Lane and allowed him to be “reborn” from her like Jesus from the Virgin Mary. The reborn Superman would quickly grow to manhood. Lemkin would later “profess great amusement over his attempt to antagonize the religious right with his clumsy allegory.” See Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, 211–12. For a different kind of Jesus allusion, In Tom De Haven’s novel *It’s Superman!* (set in the 1930s) a young Clark Kent witnesses the death of a Black man in the American South, goes ballistic with his heat vision, and later reflects to his father in a letter, “People could hate me. They probably will. And if they can find nails that won’t break, they might just crucify me.” See De Haven, *It’s Superman!*, 193. In the last pre-Crisis Superman story, Superman is forced to kill his enemy Mr. Mxyzptlk, and because he broke his own vow never to take a life, he voluntarily takes away his own powers with gold kryptonite in his Fortress of Solitude and the world believes he has killed himself. See Alan Moore, “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? Part Two,” *Action Comics* #583 (New York: DC Comics, 1986). The text says: “They found me outside the locked *gold kryptonite chamber*, weeping. When *Superwoman* and *Captain Marvel* ripped the vault open, it was empty. He was gone” (22). The reader learns that although the world at large believes Superman was dead, instead, he did not die, but left public life and married Lois Lane under an alias (24). Greg Garrett writes: “Moore consciously echoes the Gospel stories of Easter morning to tell a story of mysterious rebirth.” See Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 25. It has a weeping woman and an “empty tomb,” but this is a story about Superman *faking* his death, so the parallels are not that strong. Lou Anders says of Superman’s “death” and return in the Batman graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* that “this is nothing short of the death and resurrection of Christ.” See Anders, “A Tale of Two Orphans,” 75; Frank Miller, “The Dark Knight Falls,” *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (New York: DC Comics, 1986). Superman is a supporting character in that story.

³¹⁸ Ironically, although the show exploits Jesus imagery for Superman, in one episode, Clark finds a message from his Kryptonian parents telling him to *conquer* Earth because he “will be a god among men.” That, of course, is a little different than what the Father told Jesus to do! See *Smallville*, “Rosetta,” S02, E17, directed by James Marshall, written by Alfred Gough and Miles Millar, *The WB*, February 25, 2003. Early episodes would also show Clark “in halos of light,” or beside a statue of an angel, with scattered references to the wise men, the Holy Grail, or the ancient Romans. See Tye, *Superman*, 276. For the reference to the Three Wise Men, see *Smallville*, “Hothead,” S01, E3, directed by Greg Beeman, written by Greg Walker, *The WB*, October 30, 2001.

³¹⁹ Tye, *Superman*, 276.

what that line was, but at the very least, there is no evidence that the *Smallville* staff ever faced death threats for using Christian imagery the way that Donner did in 1978.

There are other comparisons between Superman and Jesus in *Smallville*. In one episode, teenage Clark Kent feels guilty he could not save a friend from getting hurt, and the young Lex Luthor tells him, “Clark, you can’t save the world. All you’ll end up with is a messiah complex and a lot of enemies.”³²⁰ These words draw a deliberate connection between Superman and Jesus the messiah. Stephen Skelton draws attention to a later subplot on *Smallville* where it is revealed that when Clark’s Kryptonian blood is transferred to humans, it can cure them of diseases; this might be compared to the blood of Jesus.³²¹ Clark’s blood can save a person’s physical life—just as the blood of Christ brings eternal life in popular understandings of Christianity.

In Season 8 of the show, a character named Tess Mercer calls Kal-El “a prophesied messiah,” but discovers Doomsday, and believes that Doomsday has a Judas-like role to play to make Kal-El achieve his destiny.³²² As was referenced earlier, Doomsday was included in this show because the 1992 comics storyline where Superman died made the character a well-known

³²⁰ *Smallville*, “Kinetic,” S01, E13, directed by Robert Singer, written by Philip Levens, *The WB*, February 26, 2002. Clark is similarly said to have a “saviour complex” in another episode. See *Smallville*, “Crush,” S01, E19, directed by James Marshall, written by Philip Levens, Alfred Gough, and Miles Millar, *The WB*, May 7, 2002.

³²¹ Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 91. See *Smallville*, “Resurrection,” S03, E15, directed by Terrence O’Hara, written by Todd Slavkin and Darren Swimmer, *The WB*, February 25, 2004. In a later episode, Lex Luthor’s villainous father Lionel switches bodies with Clark for one episode, but even after Lionel is returned to his original body, he discovers that his liver was healed, and being inhabited by Clark makes him turn good for a time! See *Smallville*, “Transference,” S04, E06, directed by James Marshall, written by Todd Slavkin and Darren Swimmer, *The WB*, October 27, 2004. Skelton compares this plot twist to the power of Christ. See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 92–94. Clark also died and came back to life in the *Smallville* episode “Hidden,” and Skelton compares this to Jesus’s resurrection as well (146–48). See *Smallville*, “Hidden,” S05, E03, directed by Whitney Ransick, written by Kelly Souders and Brian Peterson, *The WB*, October 13, 2005. That symbolism is undercut by the fact that in a later episode, Jonathan Kent dies ostensibly to restore “balance” to the universe from the impact of Clark’s resurrection. See *Smallville*, “Reckoning,” S05, E12, directed by Greg Beeman, written by Kelly Souders and Brian Peterson, *The WB*, January 26, 2006. In another episode of *Smallville*, Clark is on the verge of death, but is revived by the sun. See *Smallville*, “Odyssey,” S08, E01, directed by Kevin Fair, written by Todd Slavkin, Darren Swimmer, Kelly Souders, and Brian Peterson, *The CW*, September 18, 2008. One *Smallville* storyline involves a secret society that knew he would come to Earth, and see him as a godlike figure—however, one of them believes he must “sacrifice” Clark in his church. See *Smallville*, “Quest,” S07, E19, directed by Kenneth Biller, written by Holly Harold, *The New CW*, May 8, 2008.

³²² *Smallville*, “Eternal,” S08, E18, directed by James Marshall, written by Kelly Souders and Brian Peterson, *The CW*, April 2, 2009.

Superman villain. In *Smallville*, Doomsday is a normal man named Davis Bloome by day, but turns into the monster at night, and Tess tells him: “What do you do when you find Judas in your midst? Who would Christ have been if Judas had not betrayed him? Maybe we would remember Jesus as only a teacher roaming the desert.”³²³ She adds: “Without Judas, Jesus would have never risen from the dead to come back and face his greatest challenge: saving humankind. There is a savior among us. You are here to betray him.”³²⁴ Tess believes that the “traveler” (the future Superman) “cannot become the world’s savior ... without triumphing over the world’s destroyer.”³²⁵ Reviewer Neal Bailey argued that this portrayal did not work because “Doomsday is at best one of the beasts of the apocalypse. He’s a dull, mindless killing machine Judas doesn’t beat Jesus to death, he sells him out to the Romans.”³²⁶ Bailey’s quote demonstrates that the Jesus allegory is a stretch because the show compares an unthinking alien monster that destroys things to the disciple who betrayed Jesus. Yet the show used Doomsday (and by extension the Christian connotations that came from using a character best known for killing Superman) *mainly* to exploit the massive popularity of Carlin’s Death of Superman storyline in the 1990s, because it was such a popular comic book series. The 1992 Death of Superman comic had gone far beyond the traditionally narrow audience of comic book readers, since it sold so many copies. As was the case in the marketing of the show’s pilot episode, the series used Jesus parallels because they thought such parallels would appeal more to a mass audience.

The 2006 film *Superman Returns* also used Jesus imagery and made Superman die *again*. Nonetheless, this film is more dependent on the 1978 film than the 1992 comics storyline.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Ibid. In a later episode, Clark criticizes Tess for seeing him as “an alien Jesus.” See *Smallville*, “Injustice,” S08, E21, directed by Tom Welling, written by Al Septien and Turi Meyer, *The CW*, April 2, 2009.

³²⁵ *Smallville*, “Eternal,” directed by James Marshall.

³²⁶ Neal Bailey, review of *Smallville*, “Eternal,” *Superman Homepage*, <https://www.supermanhomepage.com/tv/tv.php?topic=reviews/smallville8-ep18> (accessed July 13, 2018). To be precise, Judas betrayed Jesus to the Jewish authorities who were working with the Romans.

Marlon Brando's lines as Jor-El from *Superman: The Movie* are repurposed in *Superman Returns*, including those with Trinitarian or Christological significance (such as the lines "the son becomes the father," and "I have sent them you ... my only son").³²⁷ Early in *Superman Returns*, Superman falls into his adoptive mother Martha's arms after a return home from space, and director Bryan Singer confirmed that that shot of Superman and his mother "was very much inspired" by the *Pietà*.³²⁸ Later, when weakened by Kryptonite, Superman is brutally beaten up by Lex Luthor and his thugs in a manner recalling Christ being flogged by the Romans.³²⁹ Luthor stabs Superman with a shard of green Kryptonite, and this is meant to parallel how Jesus's body is stabbed in John 19:34.³³⁰ Jesus had to wear a scarlet or purple robe as he was beaten (Matt 27:27-31, Mark 15:16-20, John 19:2-5), and Superman's cape perhaps fills a similar visual function.³³¹ Luthor has built his own continent using Kryptonian technology and wants to use it to destroy much of the United States, so Superman throws the continent into space, but the Kryptonite weakens him, and he falls to Earth in an obvious crucifix pose, is rushed to hospital, and is close to death.³³² *Superman Returns* has an "overt messianic subtext," as when Superman

³²⁷ *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2006). For more on superheroes in film, see *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre and Globalization in Film*, eds. Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklamanidou (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2011); Liam Burke, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2015); John Kenneth Muir, *The Encyclopedia of Superheroes on Film and Television* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2004); Marc DiPaolo, *War, Politics and Superheroes: Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2004); Jennifer K. Stuller, *Ink-Stained Amazons and Cinematic Warriors: Superwomen in Modern Mythology* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

³²⁸ See Stephen Skelton, "Superman Returns (2006)," *Hollywood Jesus*, n.d., <http://www.hollywoodjesus.com/superman-returns-2006/>, (accessed June 24, 2018). This interview can also be found as Stephen Skelton, "Exclusive Interview with 'Superman Returns' Director Bryan Singer The Messiah of Metropolis," *Dove.org*, November 29, 2006, <http://www.dove.org/exclusive-interview-with-superman-returns-director-bryan-singer/> (accessed June 27, 2018). See also Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 305. Also, Weldon describes the cover of the 1985 comic *Crisis on Infinite Earths #7* as a "super-pieta," except in that case Superman is holding the dead *Supergirl* in his arms (217). See Marv Wolfman, Robert Greenberger, "Beyond the Silent Night," *Crisis on Infinite Earths #7* (New York: DC Comics, 1985). In *Infinite Crisis*, Superboy (Kon-El) dies and ends up in a Pieta-like pose in Wonder Girl's arms. See Johns, *Infinite Crisis*, 208–9.

³²⁹ See Matt 27:26, Mark 15:15, and John 19:1. See Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 21,

³³⁰ *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 305.

³³¹ *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer. In this film, the red in his costume is darker than usual.

³³² *Ibid.* Earlier, he has a brief crucifix-like pose as he descends to his Arctic Fortress of Solitude.

falls to the earth in the crucifix pose, it is “a deafeningly obvious reference to Christ’s crucifixion.”³³³ Superman is meant to be understood as a Christ figure rather than antichrist, since he is the hero of the story. In the hospital, the doctors look at his Kryptonite stab wound as his pulse flatlines; Singer compared this to Christ being taken down from the cross after his stabbing in John’s Gospel.³³⁴ Despite Superman’s “death,” he “rises,” leaving the white sheets in his hospital bed empty—just as Jesus left behind his tomb in Luke 24:2-3 and his linen in John 20:6-7.³³⁵ In *Time* magazine, Richard Corliss even titled his review of the film “The Gospel of Superman.”³³⁶ Singer told *Christianity Today* that Superman was like Jesus because “Superman is a savior.”³³⁷ In the film, Superman left the world for five years and when he was gone, a bitter Lois Lane wrote an article about how the world *did not need* Superman, but he told her, “You wrote that the world doesn’t need a savior ... but every day I hear people crying for one.”³³⁸ While this wording is superficial in some respects and only references Superman saving people in danger, the use of the word “savior” carries clear intertextual associations with Jesus.

³³³ Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, 294. See also, Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Tye,” 117; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 305; Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?*, 17. For an older study of messianic motifs, see Stanley Cohen, “Messianic Motifs, American Popular Culture, and the Judeo-Christian Tradition,” *Journal of Religious Studies* 8, no. 1 (1980): 24–34. For a different idea of the Western tradition behind Superman, see also, Wesley C. McNair, “The Secret Identity of Superman: Puritanism and the American Superhero,” *American Baptist Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1983): 4–16.

³³⁴ Mark Moring, “The ‘Savior’ Returns,” *Christianity Today*, June 26, 2006, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006june-web-only/bryansinger.html?start=2> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³³⁵ *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer. See Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 21, 116; Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 305.

³³⁶ See Richard Corliss, “The Gospel of Superman,” review of *Superman Returns* directed by Bryan Singer, *Time*, June 26, 2006. For more on the messianic symbolism but also the film’s relationship to American exceptionalism, see Jason Dittmer, “American Exceptionalism, Visual Effects, and the Post 9/11 Cinematic Superhero Boom,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 1 (2011): 114–30.

³³⁷ Mark Moring, “The ‘Savior’ Returns.” Singer said that Superman is a “Judeo-Christian” allegorical figure, “right up to the fact that he descends from the heavens.” See *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns. Larry Tye writes that *Superman Returns* tried to show that Superman “still mattered” and the film “revisited the Christ story by looking at whether society still wanted and needed a savior.” See Tye, *Superman*, 286.

³³⁸ *Superman Returns*, directed by Bryan Singer. Luthor compares himself to Prometheus, but when one of his associates tells him he is not a god, he replies: “Gods are selfish beings who fly around in little red capes and don’t share their power with mankind.” It is fitting that Superman has a *new beginning* on Earth after being gone for five years by saving a space shuttle called the “Genesis,” which has biblical resonances.

Singer said: “if you’re going to tell that story, you’ve got to tell it all the way. You’ve got scourging at the pillar, the spear of destiny, death, resurrection—it’s all there.”³³⁹ This quotation is significant because he is saying that the plot of the latter half of the film is deliberately modeled on Christ’s passion—a little like the death of Aslan in C.S. Lewis’s *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. One of the film’s screenwriters had attended Catholic school, and when he first saw the rough cut of Superman falling in the crucifix pose, he looked at Singer, and Singer remembers,

he said, “Are we ...? Are we ...? Shouldn’t he open his legs a little bit more? Are we...? Is this too on the nose?” And I said, “If we’re telling this story, we’re going to tell this story. Some parts are going to be subtle. But this one is not But if there was ever a time to hammer it home, this is it.”³⁴⁰

³³⁹ Stephen Skelton, “Superman Returns (2006)”; Skelton, “Exclusive Interview with ‘Superman Returns’ Director Bryan Singer.” Singer endorsed the idea that Lex Luthor was a Lucifer figure.

³⁴⁰ Stephen Skelton, “Superman Returns (2006)”; Skelton, “Exclusive Interview with ‘Superman Returns’ Director Bryan Singer.” Before the film was released, *Superman Returns* screenwriters Michael Dougherty and Dan Harris acknowledged that the film would look at the “messianic” and godlike dimensions of Superman and how those concepts transferred to the modern world. See Steve Younis, “Superman Returns Set Visit Report—Part 2 (of 12),” *Superman Homepage*, July 28, 2005, <https://www.supermanhomepage.com/movies/movies.php?topic=set-visit-report2> (accessed June 27, 2018). They also acknowledged the film’s use of “Christian mythology.” See Evan Jacobs, “Dan Harris & Michael Dougherty Talk about Writing Superman Returns,” *MovieWeb*, June 28, 2006, <https://movieweb.com/dan-harris-michael-dougherty-talk-about-writing-superman-returns/> (accessed June 27, 2018). Years later, Bryan Singer reflected: “I’ve always felt that the origin of Superman is the story of Moses—the child sent on a ship to fulfill a destiny. And this was a story about Christ—it’s all about sacrifice So what happens? He gets the knife in the side and later he falls to the earth in the shape of a crucifix. It was kind of nailing you on the head, but I enjoyed that, because I’ve always found the myth of Christ compelling and moving.” See Ed Gross, “SUPERMAN EXCLUSIVE: Bryan Singer Looks Back at Superman Returns,” *ComicBookMovie.com*, March 25, 2011, <https://www.comicbookmovie.com/superman/superman-exclusive-bryan-singer-looks-back-at-superman-returns-a33821> (accessed June 27, 2018). Singer also identified Superman as “part Moses, part Jesus,” and reflected on how Superman is an alien and an immigrant. See Robert David Jaffee, “‘Superman’ Director Lives Out His Dream,” June 22, 2006, *Jewish Journal*, <http://jewishjournal.com/culture/arts/13264/> (accessed June 27, 2018). Even Singer had limits with the Jesus angle though. Jim Caviezel—fresh off playing Jesus in Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of Christ*—was a rumoured candidate to play Superman in Singer’s film, and Superman comics writer Mark Millar even laid a \$1,000 bet that Caviezel would be chosen. See Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, 285. While Caviezel lobbied to play Superman, Singer “disliked the on-the-nose parallels with the actor’s previous project, which the media would surely flog to death” (285). In *Superman: The Movie*, Superman does not die, but Lex Luthor exposes him to Kryptonite and throws him into a pool to drown; Skelton thinks that Superman’s recovery is like the resurrection of Jesus. See Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 119. It is a weak parallel, because a human helps Superman out of the pool. *Superman Returns* was more deliberate about showing a death and resurrection.

These words prove that the filmmaker deliberately wanted to compare Superman and Jesus. Yet, as has been argued, that comparison was not part of the early comics source material.

That same year—unlike earlier works—Stephen Skelton’s book *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero* turned Superman into an *evangelistic tool*. While in the 1970s, Christians were suspicious of comparing Superman to Jesus, Skelton (and by extension some of his reading audience) were open to talking about Superman as a means to reach out to non-Christians. As Skelton writes:

the story of Superman bears some incredible parallels to the story of the Super Man, Jesus Christ Perhaps you have mostly thought of Christ as the suffering lamb. Why not the universal Hero? Jesus is both—as we will use Superman to illustrate . . . Because the gospel story is the crucial story by which all humankind longs to define their lives, to the extent that the Superman story corresponds to the gospel story, the superhero from Krypton offers some soul’s illumination, some heart’s preparation.³⁴¹

In an interview, Skelton recalled how a non-Christian friend saw *Superman Returns* and said: “Do you know that movie spoke more to me about Jesus than *The Passion of the Christ*?”³⁴² Skelton adds that *The Passion of the Christ* “was obviously about Jesus Christ, and so it was easily dismissed by a non-believer.”³⁴³ Skelton says of his friend’s reaction that *Superman Returns* “spoke to his heart before he realized what it was saying” and “spoke to him about the one true Savior before he could reject that he needs a one true savior.”³⁴⁴ The “one true savior” in question is Jesus. In sum, Christians like Skelton believed that by talking about a Superman movie, they could make people who were initially resistant to Christianity come to appreciate it

³⁴¹ Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero*, 22. Elsewhere, the Roman Catholic priest John Cush endorsed Superman as a Christ figure and a Catholic cleric in Texas named Bill Necessary was known for wearing a Superman shirt underneath his clerical attire, and was known at his church as “Superdeacon.” See Tye, *Superman*, 69, 267–68. Bud Collyer who played Superman on the radio in the 1940s Superman radio show (as well as various Superman cartoons), taught Sunday School, and “his Sunday School classes were populated by children eager to hear the testimony of Superman.” See Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood*, 4.

³⁴² Hannah Goodwyn, “Superman and Jesus: Superman’s Origin and Parallels to Jesus,” 2016, *CBN*, <http://www1.cbn.com/movies/superman-and-jesus-supermans-origin-and-parallels-jesus> (accessed June 28, 2018).

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

more. This is an obvious change from John Galloway Jr. or the “Christians” who sent Richard Donner death threats. It seems that by 2006, some Christians were less concerned with the possibility that Superman/Jesus parallels were blasphemous and more willing to use them to appeal to the hearts and minds of unbelievers to convert them.

The next Superman movie had equally obvious Jesus parallels. Before writing the music for the 2013 film *Man of Steel*, composer Hans Zimmer wrote music for the *History* channel miniseries *The Bible*, and when CNN asked Zimmer if there were any similarities between the two, “Zimmer laughed and said, ‘Yes. Yes is the answer. Once you see Superman, you’ll see how close you are with your question.’”³⁴⁵ When *Man of Steel* was released in theatres to reboot Superman, Warner Brothers marketers invited church leaders to free screenings of the film, and sent pastors nine pages of sermon notes titled, “Jesus: The Original Superhero”—and these notes emphasized the film’s religious undertones.³⁴⁶ The sermon notes advised pastors to show the film’s trailer during their sermons, and asked people to consider, “How might the story of Superman awaken our passion for the greatest hero who ever lived and died and rose again [Jesus]?”³⁴⁷ A Baltimore pastor named Quentin Scott said he intended to preach on the film, and said: “When I sat and listened to the movie I actually saw it was the story of Christ, and the love of God was weaved into the story.”³⁴⁸ Considering that Superman murders a Kryptonian criminal in the film by breaking his neck, not all of Superman’s actions in the movie fit into that paradigm. Regardless, Scott added: “If you give me another opportunity to talk to someone about Jesus

³⁴⁵ Jennifer Vineyard, “‘Man of Steel’: Not the Familiar Superman (Fan)fare,” *CNN*, April 5, 2013, <https://www.cnn.com/2013/04/05/showbiz/zimmer-man-of-steel> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³⁴⁶ Eric Marrapodi, “Superman: Flying to a Church near You,” *CNN Belief Blog*, June 14, 2013, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/14/superman-coming-to-a-church-near-you/> (accessed June 27, 2018). See also, “‘Man of Steel’ Marketers Target Christians by Sending Pastors Prepared Sermon Notes That Compare Superman to Jesus Christ,” *DailyMail.com*, June 17, 2013, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2343165/Man-Steel-marketers-target-Christians-sending-pastors-prepared-sermons-compare-Superman-Jesus-Christ.html> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³⁴⁷ Marrapodi, “Superman: Flying to a Church near You,” “‘Man of Steel’ Marketers Target Christians.”

³⁴⁸ Marrapodi, “Superman: Flying to a Church near You,” “‘Man of Steel’ Marketers Target Christians.”

Christ, and I can do that because of your movie, that's a win for me, because it is about spreading the Gospel."³⁴⁹ These words are significant because they further reflect the arguments made in Skelton's 2006 book. Conversely, a deacon named P.J. Wenzel from Dublin Baptist Church in Ohio said, "Any pastor who thinks using 'Man of Steel Ministry Resources' is a good Sunday morning strategy must have no concept of how high the stakes are, or very little confidence in the power of God's word and God's spirit."³⁵⁰ He added: "As they entertain their congregants with material pumped out from Hollywood's sewers, lives are kept in bondage, and people's souls are neglected."³⁵¹ Wenzel's point is that using Superman to talk about Jesus shows a lack of confidence in the power of God and Scripture itself, whereas others would argue that a discussion of Superman could be used as a bridge to talk about Jesus.

Despite the reservations of people like Wenzel, it seems that some Christians had no problem with using Superman to evangelize—and even these Christians *acknowledged* that the sermon notes amounted to a marketing ploy on the studio's part. Quentin Scott acknowledged Warner Brothers' financial motivations for sending the sermon notes (the studio had done the same thing for other films), but said: "They're using us but in fact we're using them."³⁵² Christian film reviewer Ted Baehr told CNN, "I think it's a very good thing that Hollywood is paying attention to the Christian marketplace."³⁵³ Hollywood made more of an effort to market to Christians after Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* unexpectedly made \$370 million domestically in 2003.³⁵⁴ The success of that film encouraged film studios to market films to Christians in new

³⁴⁹ Marrapodi, "Superman: Flying to a Church near You," "'Man of Steel' Marketers Target Christians."

³⁵⁰ Marrapodi, "Superman: Flying to a Church near You," "'Man of Steel' Marketers Target Christians."

³⁵¹ Marrapodi, "Superman: Flying to a Church near You."

³⁵² Ibid. The studio had done the same thing for the films *Les Misérables* and *The Blind Side*.

³⁵³ Ibid.

³⁵⁴ Sharon Waxman, "The Passion of the Marketers," *The New York Times*, July 18, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/07/18/business/media/the-passion-of-the-marketers.html> (accessed July 25, 2018).

ways. A Superman film fell in that framework. Again, while the Jesus imagery was not essential to the comic book version of Superman, the studio exploited it to appeal to a wider audience.

The Superman sermon notes were written by Craig Detweiler, who is the president of a graduate school—The Seattle School of Theology & Psychology—and Detweiler said: “All too often, religious communities have been defined by what they’re against. With a movie like ‘Man of Steel,’ this is a chance to celebrate a movie that affirms faith, sacrifice and service.”³⁵⁵

Although Detweiler was a piece of the studio’s strategy to make millions of dollars off a Superman film, he at least was not being disingenuous. He did believe in what he was doing. In the sermon notes, he wrote: “What Jesus and Superman both give us, through their ‘hero’ actions but also their ‘human’ actions—is hope.”³⁵⁶ In *Christianity Today*, Detweiler defended his decision to write sermon notes for a Hollywood Superman movie by comparing his task to Daniel interpreting Nebuchadnezzar’s dreams (in Daniel 2) or Philip interpreting the Book of Isaiah for the Ethiopian eunuch (in Acts 8).³⁵⁷ Detweiler compared modern Christians in secular America to the Jews in exile during the Babylonian Captivity (greatly overstating the plight of the former), said he wanted “to affirm” Hollywood’s “interest” in Christians, and concluded:

Hollywood is testing our faith. Thanks to thousands of responsive pastors and congregations, the studios are discovering we are as large, vibrant, diverse, and influential as we claim to be The faith, hope and love that arises along with these stories may even get us back on our feet, marching out of exile.³⁵⁸

The author of the Superman sermon notes—along with those who used them—essentially believed that Christians should take advantage of the fact that Hollywood was marketing to them, in order to bring the gospel to the surrounding society. Even so, not all Christians would

³⁵⁵ Marrapodi, “Superman: Flying to a Church near You.”

³⁵⁶ Quoted in Marrapodi, “Superman: Flying to a Church near You.”

³⁵⁷ Craig Detweiler, “Superman: Sermon Notes from Exile,” *Christianity Today*, June 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2013/june-online-only/superman-sermon-notes-from-exile.html> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

approve. Ironically, when *Superman Returns* came out in 2006, an anonymous *Christianity*

Today writer praised Warner Brothers for *not* targeting that earlier film to Christians, and wrote:

Thank you for not using the church as a money-making vehicle.

Thank you for not hijacking my church's mission to make disciples by using it to make consumers

Thank you for not trying to interfere with the ministry of preaching God's Word by offering pastors rewards for mentioning your film in a sermon.

Thank you for not telling me "Superman Returns" is the greatest outreach opportunity in the galaxy.

Thank you for not asking me to rent an entire theater so our members can invite non-Christians to see the film.

Thank you for respecting the integrity of my faith.³⁵⁹

This anonymous author was likely not amused by the studio's approach to *Man of Steel*.

Elsewhere, in *Christianity Today*, Alicia Cohn wrote that "Superman Isn't Jesus," and criticized the parallels.³⁶⁰ Such articles demonstrate that while many pastors were quite willing to use

Superman as a vehicle to talk about Jesus, not all Christians liked the concept. On that point,

Jonathan Merritt wrote that sermon notes for a Superman film made him

a little uncomfortable because it represents another step forward in the commodification of Christianity. In a land of profit and greed, these trends illustrate once again that unchecked capitalism can leverage anything—even faith, even Jesus—to turn a buck . . . Let's be clear that Warner Brothers isn't trying to spread the Christian gospel; they are trying to make a profit. And, whether we like it or not, religion in America can be a lucrative business. In this case, generating profit means transforming pastors into marketers, hocking movie tickets from their pulpits.³⁶¹

This quote presents the opposite side to the arguments of those like Quentin Scott or Craig Detweiler because it touches on a fundamental point: is it ethical for Christians to exploit a studio that is interested in profits, for the purpose of winning new converts? There is no easy

³⁵⁹ "The Second Coming of Superman: Finally, a 'Christian' Movie Not Marketed to Churches," *Christianity Today*, June 2006, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2006/june-online-only/second-coming-of-superman-finally-christian-movie-not.html> (accessed June 28, 2018).

³⁶⁰ Alicia Cohn, "Superman Isn't Jesus," *Christianity Today*, June 19 2013, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/women/2013/june/superman-isnt-jesus.html> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³⁶¹ Jonathan Merritt, "Superman Spirituality: Is Hollywood Manipulating Christians?" *Religion News Service*, June 18, 2013, <https://religionnews.com/2013/06/18/is-hollywood-manipulating-christians/> (accessed July 25, 2018).

answer. A Christian like Scott, Detweiler, or Skelton would likely argue that winning souls is more important than anything, while someone like Merritt would not want to feel like he was being taken advantage of by a multinational corporation. Either way, a comic book website said that it “comes off as a money grab” and asked if making Superman a Jesus figure broke the Ten Commandments (both by making him another god and making a graven image).³⁶² This attitude shows that the studio’s marketing aims could be looked upon with cynicism in the wider culture.

The sermon notes for the Superman film must be understood as simply one component in a larger marketing strategy by Warner Brothers. This is because *Man of Steel* partnered with 7-Eleven, Carl’s Jr./Hardee’s, Chrysler, Energizer, Gillette, IHOP, Kellogg’s, LEGO, Mattel, Nokia, Norton, Samsung, Sears, Twizzlers, Wal-Mart, and more than a hundred companies in total to promote the film, and the film itself was notable for its obvious product placements in several scenes—particularly in one fight scene in Kansas where several prominent chains appear onscreen during the battle.³⁶³ Churches were another part of that moneymaking strategy. In fact, just as certain Christians and churches thought they could use a Superman film to recruit new members, evidently, the U.S. National Guard thought the same thing, and the National Guard partnered with the filmmakers and used images from the movie with the tagline “Soldier of Steel” to attract their own batch of new recruits.³⁶⁴ In the film, Superman teams up with American soldiers to save the world, so in effect, the use of sermon notes in *Man of Steel* is similar to the studio’s mutually beneficial partnership with the National Guard. Money was the

³⁶² Matthew Meylikhov, “Jesus Christ, Superman: How Warner Bros Is Marketing Man of Steel to Pastors,” *Multiversity Comics*, June 17, 2013, <http://www.multiversitycomics.com/news/jesus-christ-superman-how-warner-bros-is-marketing-man-of-steel-to-pastors/> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³⁶³ Ryan Pumroy, “Recruiting Soldiers of Steel: The Cross-Promotion of *Man of Steel* and the National Guard,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 48, no. 4 (2015): 762–775; Asawin Suabseng, “How the National Guard Is Using ‘Man of Steel’ to Recruit You,” *Mother Jones*, June 14, 2013, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2013/06/man-of-steel-national-guard-product-placement/> (accessed June 29, 2018).

³⁶⁴ Ryan Pumroy, “Recruiting Soldiers of Steel,”; Suabseng, “How the National Guard Is Using ‘Man of Steel’ to Recruit You.”

driving force in both cases. Again, despite the fact that the studio's transparent motivation was to make money, clearly, many of the Christian speakers I have quoted believed that the larger aim of winning souls to Christ was more important.

What of the film itself? In a discussion early in *Man of Steel* with Christlike parallels, Lara tells her husband Jor-El that the people of Earth might kill their infant son, but Jor-El replies, "How? He'll be a god to them."³⁶⁵ In *Man of Steel*, all Kryptonians are born by artificial insemination, but Superman is the planet's first "natural birth" in centuries; while this is not a miraculous, virgin birth, there may be parallels nonetheless.³⁶⁶ The filmmakers could not give Superman a virgin birth without doing violence to the traditional origin story, but by giving him a birth that was unusual relative to his society, they come as close as they can. Later, Clark Kent has saved some men from dying on an exploding oil rig, but the explosion sends him underwater; once underwater, he lies with his arms stretched out in a clearly intentional Jesus pose—and even has a Jesus-like beard at this point in the film.³⁶⁷ In one of the most obvious Christological references in *Man of Steel*, Zod threatens the Earth if Kal-El will not give himself up, Clark visits a priest at a church for advice.³⁶⁸ As Clark explains his plight, a stained glass image of Jesus's agonies in the Garden of Gethsemane is clearly visible behind him—and Superman is the same age as Jesus.³⁶⁹ When Superman does turn himself in to the U.S. military so they can transfer him to Zod, Superman says to an American general, "Do what you have to do, General."³⁷⁰ This

³⁶⁵ *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2013).

³⁶⁶ Justin Craig, "'Man of Steel' Filled With Jesus, Christianity References," *Fox News*, June 14, 2013, <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2013/06/14/man-steel-filled-with-jesus-christianity-references.html> (accessed June 27, 2018); *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder. Zod calls this birth "heresy."

³⁶⁷ *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder. This genetic engineering on Krypton is done in a "Genesis chamber" in *Man of Steel*, and that name has biblical resonances. See also, McD, "Man of Steel: The Top 20 Reasons Why Superman Is Jesus." For more on Superman/Jesus parallels in the film, see "'Man of Steel' Marketers Target Christians."

³⁶⁸ *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

line echoes Jesus's words to Judas in John 13:27: "Do quickly what you are going to do." Soon after, Superman thanks Lois Lane "for believing in me."³⁷¹ Later, Superman is in outer space, and as a hologram of Jor-El tells him he can save the world, he flies back towards Earth in an obvious crucifix pose.³⁷² Like previous entries, this film intentionally mimics the Gospels.

Although the film tries to use Christian imagery, some contemporary observers did not see much depth in the portrayals. Journalist Wesley Morris wrote:

The movie is so serious about comparing Clark to the Messiah that it starts to feel like church. Yet the filmmaking and storytelling lack the essential biblicality to bring off a divine incarnation of Superman. We see him perform feats of life saving and enemy pummeling, but they're so generic that they mean far less than they should.³⁷³

Similarly, in Richard Corliss's review, he observed that the film gave Superman an all-seeing father from afar [the hologram version of Jor-El] ... the Earth parents; an important portent at age 12 (Jesus talks with the temple elders; Kal-El saves children in a bus crash); the ascetic wandering in his early maturity (40 days in the desert for Jesus; a dozen years in odd jobs for Kal-El); his public life, in which he performs a series of miracles; and then, at age 33, the ultimate test of his divinity and humanity.³⁷⁴

Nonetheless, Corliss adds: "All these New Testament allusions ... don't necessarily make *Man of Steel* any richer, except for students of comparative religion."³⁷⁵ Essentially, Morris and Corliss argue that the Jesus imagery in the film does not enhance the viewing experience because it is generic at best.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Ibid. The film has various references to God. When young Clark Kent saves some of his friends when their school bus crashes underwater, a local parent calls it "an act of god" or "Providence." Young Clark Kent seems to think his powers are almost a curse, and asks, "Did God do this to me?" A CNN writer also observed: "During a fight with his archenemy, General Zod, Superman plunges down to Earth, his arms outstretched as if he were being crucified. Of course, he rises again." See Marrapodi, "Superman: Flying to a Church near You."

³⁷³ Wesley Morris, "Jesus Christ Superman: *Man of Steel* Flies for Our Sins," *Grantland*, June 13, 2013, <http://grantland.com/features/man-steel-flies-our-sins/> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³⁷⁴ Richard Corliss, "*Man of Steel*: Super Man ... Or Human God?" *Time*, June 12, 2013, <http://entertainment.time.com/2013/06/12/man-of-steel-super-man-or-human-god/> (accessed June 28, 2018).

³⁷⁵ Ibid. Corliss compared Superman's doubts in the film to the portrayal of Jesus in Nikos Kazantzakis's controversial book *The Last Temptation of Christ* (and Martin Scorsese's film adaptation).

The reactions of such critics may be proof of the fact that because these connections are not essential to the character of Superman, but were simply used as shorthand with wide pop culture resonance. The films are aimed at a much wider audience than the comics, so they use imagery that is automatically recognized by the surrounding culture—even by those who are not Christian. Similarly, many buildings are destroyed in Metropolis in Superman’s final battle against his enemies, and Metropolis is essentially equivalent to New York. The filmmakers cannot have been unaware of the visual parallels between these battle scenes and the destruction of the World Trade Centre in 2001 because the onscreen visuals are quite similar. Yet there is no depth to the parallel. Again, it is shorthand that the audience recognizes to show that there are high stakes to the destruction that Superman’s enemies are performing. That is quite similar to how the film uses Jesus poses for Superman. As this thesis has consistently argued, Jesus parallels were never essential to understanding Superman, but they were included in cinematic adaptations to appear culturally relevant. The Jesus references in a film like *Man of Steel* theoretically are meant to give the film a deeper subtext, since otherwise it would just be a film about characters who have super powers punching each other. Whether these parallels are substantive is another matter. However, Jeff Jensen reads more into the film, and writes that

Man of Steel is subversive mythology for atheists that exalts a Superman who behaves the way they think God should but doesn’t. He is also stands [sic] for a generation of emerging Christians who are more interested in social justice, redeeming the culture and tending to the here and now, and less interested in preaching turn-or-burn rhetoric, running away from the world, and punching the clock until they can kick the bucket and go to Krypton ... *errr*, Heaven.³⁷⁶

Jensen’s argument is not grounded in any direct statements from the filmmakers, but it is theoretically possible that members of the viewing audience could interpret the film as he

³⁷⁶ Jeff Jensen, “Superman as Jesus—Christian Imagery in *Man of Steel*,” *Entertainment Weekly*, June 17, 2013, <http://ew.com/article/2013/06/17/man-of-steel-jesus/> (accessed June 29, 2018).

suggests. At the very least, his words rightfully reflect that the use of Jesus imagery in the film is not grounded in any attempt to be reverential to Jesus (unlike a C.S. Lewis novel).

One problem with making Superman a Christ figure is that the parallel might break down to keep up with the demands of a modern superhero action movie. The final fight in *Man of Steel* has a great deal of collateral damage and many buildings are destroyed. As Mark Waid describes the film's ending (with some exaggeration):

Superman and Lois land in the three-mile-wide crater that used to be a city of eight million people, and the staff of the Planet and a couple of other bystanders stagger out of the rubble to see Superman and say, "He saved us," and before you can say either "From *what?*" or "Wow, these eight are probably the only people left alive," and somehow—inexplicably, implausibly, somehow—before Superman can be bothered to take one second to surrender one ounce of concern or assistance to the millions of Metropolitans who are without question still buried under all that rubble, dead or dying, he saunters lazily over to where General Zod is kneeling and moping, and they argue, and they squabble, and they break into the Third Big Fight, the one that broke my heart.³⁷⁷

Waid's sarcastic depiction of the scene indirectly shows the limitations of making the hero of a violent action movie an allegorical Jesus figure because when Superman "saves" the world, many people are still killed. The film marketed to Christians to make money, but it also had to have action scenes because it was a comic book film. Those aims can sometimes be at odds. Hence, on a related point, Barna William Donovan wrote:

The levels of destruction in the film offended many of the target-marketed American clergy. When it came to the climactic killing of General Zod, however, the religious viewers were joined in their outrage by the comic book purists, equally offended by the film's repudiation of the no-killing maxim of the comics.³⁷⁸

In sum, a violent action movie does not always easily fit alongside a movie with Jesus parallels. A blockbuster film like this one is intended to have something for as many viewers as

³⁷⁷ Mark Waid, "Man of Steel, Since You Asked," *Thrillbent*, June 14, 2013, <http://thrillbent.com/blog/man-of-steel-since-you-asked/> (accessed July 11, 2018).

³⁷⁸ Barna William Donovan, "A Superman for Our Time: How the *Man of Steel* Tries to Make Superman Relevant Again—and Why It Succeeds," *Cinephile* 9, no. 2 (2013): 24. He was positive about the film though.

possible, but sometimes there are conflicts with those aims. A film that has to have big-budget action scenes will need to make some shifts in tone to also be an allegory of the life of Christ.

The 2016 film *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* presents Superman as a godlike or messianic figure as well.³⁷⁹ There are many examples. At one point, Lex Luthor gives a list of “gods” that includes Apollo, Horace, “Jehovah,” and Kal-El.³⁸⁰ A man from Metropolis who was paralyzed by the battle at the end of *Man of Steel* sprays graffiti on a Superman statue, labeling him a “false god.”³⁸¹ One scene shows a montage of television commentators debating Superman, and, with dubious accuracy, one of them says: “Every religion believes in some sort of messianic figure. And when this savior character actually comes to Earth we want him to abide by our rules?”³⁸² In a rare moment of humility for this film, a commentator says: “The fact is, maybe he’s not some sort of devil or Jesus character. Maybe he’s just a guy trying to do the right thing.”³⁸³ Yet Batman has a dream sequence where some soldiers worship Superman; in the real world, after Superman saves some people in Mexico, a crowd of onlookers all reach out to touch him in a way reminiscent of the hemorrhaging woman in Mark 5:21-43 who hopes she will be healed if she touches Jesus.³⁸⁴ Again, the Jesus imagery is grafted onto Superman.

Lex Luthor’s motivation in the film is to manipulate Batman and Superman into fighting each other and he describes that battle as “God versus man.”³⁸⁵ His motivation is framed in religious (albeit slightly incoherent) terms, as Luthor blames God—and by extension Superman—for his own abusive childhood, telling Superman: “No man in the sky intervened

³⁷⁹ *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, directed by Zack Snyder (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2013). Luthor speaks of “gods among men.” Batman’s butler says that the gods “hurl thunderbolts.”

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.* On the other hand, in one scene where Superman has to speak at the Capitol in Washington, people in a crowd can be seen holding signs saying “God Hates Aliens” and “You Can’t Be Christian and Pro-Alien.”

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*

³⁸² *Ibid.*

³⁸³ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

when I was a boy to deliver me from daddy’s fist and abominations. I figured out way back if God is all-powerful, He cannot be all-good. And if He is all-good, then He cannot be all-powerful.”³⁸⁶ Luthor tells Superman that people “need to see the fraud you are with their eyes” and Luthor gloats that “now God bends to my will.”³⁸⁷ These scenes do not have much depth, but again, the film compares Superman to God. Batman and Superman fight, but in a widely-mocked scene, they reconcile when Batman learns that Clark Kent’s mother’s name is “Martha” and Batman has a flashback to the night his own mother died, as she was also named Martha.³⁸⁸ Thus, Luthor uses Kryptonian technology to unleash Doomsday and describes his actions by saying, “if man won’t kill god ... the devil will do it.”³⁸⁹ Again, Superman is identified as God.

Like the comics, Superman dies a sacrificial death defeating Doomsday; he falls in a crucifix pose, and some of the surrounding wreckage is shaped like crosses.³⁹⁰ Lois Lane holds Superman’s body in a *Pietà*-like pose.³⁹¹ The film ends with a shot inside his coffin.³⁹² Director Zack Snyder also said that earlier in the film, Batman stabs Superman with a Kryptonite spear to

³⁸⁶ Ibid. Luthor’s rivalry with Superman had different explanations over time. Lex Luthor developed from a mad scientist to an evil corporate tycoon—and eventually the U.S. president. See Bob Batchelor, “Brains Versus Brawn: The Many Lives (and Minds) of Lex Luthor, the World’s Greatest Villain,” in *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop, (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 199–210. In older comics, Luthor blamed Superboy for the loss of his hair after a failed lab experiment when he was young. An issue of Grant Morrison’s *All-Star Superman* miniseries is called “The Gospel According to Lex Luthor,” and Luthor says “the Gospel of Lex” is that “there’s no deep *psychology* behind the struggle between Superman and me How would *you* feel if someone *deliberately* stood in *your* way, over and over again?” See Grant Morrison, *All-Star Superman*, vol. 1, 2007), 128. See also, Mark Millar, “How Much Can One Man Hate?” *Superman Adventures* #27 (New York: DC Comics, 1999). Luthor’s jealousy against Superman is explored in this 1999 issue where Luthor is jealous that the people of Metropolis love Superman enough to build statues in his honour (6). As a child, Luthor wanted there to be a day when he could look down on the people of Metropolis; the story ends with Luthor on the top-floor of his company’s building, but nonetheless compelled to *look up* at Superman soaring above him in the sky (21–22). Neal Bailey observes that weaker writers just made Lex jealous of Superman, but it goes deeper than that—especially when Lex resents Clark Kent for winning the hand of Lois Lane in marriage. Some stories suggest Luthor could have cured cancer without Superman. See Kurt Busiek and Geoff Johns, “Up, Up, and Away! Part VII of VIII: Up in the Sky,” *Superman* #653 (New York: DC Comics, 2006).

³⁸⁷ *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, directed by Zack Snyder. Earlier in the film, Luthor said: “Devils don’t come from Hell beneath us. No, they come from the sky.” Luthor calls Clark’s mother Martha a “witch.”

³⁸⁸ Ibid. At one point during their fight, they are in a church, and Superman falls in a Christlike pose.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

³⁹¹ Ibid. There are vigils at Superman’s tomb and “Amazing Grace” is played at his funeral.

³⁹² Ibid.

draw a parallel with the soldier piercing Jesus's side in John 19:34.³⁹³ Superman's "Christlike" death *again* exploits the popularity of the 1992 comics story. As this paper has already shown, that comics storyline attracted massive success in popular culture since it was one of the best-selling comics ever made. Like *Smallville*, this film copies "Christian" story elements from that comics storyline because the filmmakers knew they were better known even among people who do not actively read Superman comics. Once again, money and marketability mattered.

Graeme Macmillan drew attention to the fact that *Batman v. Superman* was deliberately released in theatres on *Good Friday* in 2016, because it is a film shows Superman dying for the world in a way that is supposed to be like the sacrificial death of Christ.³⁹⁴ In other words, the studio again made certain marketing decisions with Christians partly in mind—and not because these parallels were essential to the original character of Superman.

The Jesus comparisons in these Superman films can only go so far: once Superman dies and rises from the dead, what comes next? After all, film studios will want to make movies about such a popular character for a long time. Macmillan asks: "Can the allegory expand beyond where it already is, and if so, can it do so without damaging or subsuming the idea of Superman as an action hero?"³⁹⁵ These questions offer no easy answers, but Superman's "resurrection" in *Justice League* (the 2017 follow-up film) is not Christlike. Superman is brought back to life by some other superheroes using alien technology (a "Motherbox"), and when Superman wakes up,

³⁹³ Ian Cardona, "Zack Snyder Explains Why Batman Used a Kryptonite Spear in Dawn of Justice," *CBN*, April 4, 2018, <https://www.cbr.com/batman-v-superman-kryptonite-spear-explained/> (accessed June 29, 2018). Also, Revelation 6:8 says: "And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him." With reference to this verse, director Zack Snyder endorsed the view that he made riderless horses a recurring visual motif in multiple scenes in the film that showed death: including a bombing in Washington that Superman cannot prevent, Superman's own death, and the fact that Jonathan Kent told Superman story about some horses that drowned in *Smallville* to illustrate the point that one cannot always be the hero. See Grant Davis, "Batman v Superman Had Hidden Allusion to the Book of Revelation," *Heroic Hollywood*, April 2, 2018, <https://heroichollywood.com/batman-v-superman-book-revelation/> (accessed June 29, 2018).

³⁹⁴ Graeme Macmillan, "'Batman v. Superman': The Problem with Turning the Man of Steel into the Son of God," *The Hollywood Reporter*, March 25, 2016, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/batman-v-superman-ending-problem-878463> (accessed June 27, 2018).

³⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

he does not understand what is going on, goes berserk, and fights the other heroes until Lois Lane calms him down.³⁹⁶ The lack of Christ imagery in *Justice League* seems to acknowledge that once Superman has died and risen from the dead, there is less iconic Jesus imagery for the filmmakers to use without getting redundant. I will hypothesize that they will give this imagery a rest in Superman films for the foreseeable future for that very reason. Not every Superman movie can have a plot that will lend itself to sermon notes.

This chapter has shown that Jesus parallels in Superman films are not always artistically coherent and are imposed on the character often to appeal to a mass audience. However, the comic book story of The Death of Superman reached a mass audience almost by accident and later onscreen adaptations exploited its popularity. Still, I will demonstrate that comparisons between Superman and Jesus or God are usually treated more cautiously in the comics.

The Films versus the Comics

Even with the 1992 Death of Superman storyline, compared with the films, over eight decades, the comics have been less willing to connect Superman with Jesus and Christianity because they had different marketing aims. In older comics, Superman has one of his few interactions with Christianity in the 1961 story “Superman’s Greatest Feats!”³⁹⁷ In the issue, Superman’s mermaid ex-girlfriend Lori Lemaris asks him if he can use his super-speed to travel back in time to stop her home city of Atlantis from having ever fallen into the sea.³⁹⁸ When he succeeds in saving Atlantis, since Superman has some free time, he decides to do more time-

³⁹⁶ *Justice League*, directed by Zack Snyder (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Pictures, 2017). Zack Snyder is the only credited director on *Justice League*, but Joss Whedon filmed a substantial portion of the movie after the tragic death of Snyder’s daughter; Whedon’s material has a notably different tone.

³⁹⁷ Jerry Siegel, “Superman’s Greatest Feats!” *Superman* #146 (New York: DC Comics, 1961), 1–13.

³⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

traveling and right other wrongs from history.³⁹⁹ He visits “ancient Rome, on the very day when captive Christians who refused to worship the cruel Roman emperor were slaughtered by starving lions in the Colosseum!”⁴⁰⁰ The emperor is not identified. Superman traps the lions in a steel cage and moves the Christians to safety.⁴⁰¹ Superman performs similar feats, but discovers that his efforts were in a *parallel universe*, because it was not possible to change the past in *his own* universe.⁴⁰² Regardless, Jerry Siegel—a Jew—wrote a story about Superman saving Christians in antiquity. Yet it was something of a rarity for the comics to relate to Christianity.

In 1961, DC published an “imaginary” comic book story (outside the regular continuity) where Lex Luthor finally killed Superman.⁴⁰³ There are *no* Superman/Jesus connections in this portrayal, as would be typical for the era. It is just a science-fiction story where the hero dies. Superman does not even rise from the dead. It speaks volumes that the comics of this era could write a story about Superman dying without having even the smallest artistic reference to the Gospels. Compared with the films, the comics were simply not targeted at an audience where it was necessary to do this; they were aimed at children who wanted to read adventure stories.

Granted, some comics stories compare Superman to god or Jesus in a very circumspect way. In John Byrne’s 1986 reboot of Superman, before Superman is sent to Earth as a baby, Jor-El says: “In time he will become the *Supreme Being* on that planet, almost a *god*.”⁴⁰⁴ The point is not developed. In a January 2012 issue set early in Superman’s career, a news anchor named Bill McCoy wants to make a documentary film attacking Superman called *Superman in Metropolis*:

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 3–4.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 5–6.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 6–13.

⁴⁰³ The story includes mourners from a range of countries and planets. Zack Snyder would be shocked by the lack of Jesus parallels! See Jerry Siegel, “The Death of Superman!” *Superman* #149 (New York: DC Comics, 1961).

⁴⁰⁴ John Byrne, *The Man of Steel, Book One*, 6. Even in *Smallville*, he was sent to Earth to *conquer* it. See *Smallville*, “Rosetta,” directed by James Marshall. The television series *Lois & Clark* never explored the Jesus angle.

*Messiah? Or Menace?*⁴⁰⁵ However, this title is mostly a throwaway reference. Yet in contrast to *Superman: The Movie*, when Mark Waid's miniseries *Superman: Birthright* retells Superman's origin, rather than show Jor-El sending his son to Earth to *save* it in a premeditated way, his decision to send Kal-El to Earth is a last-minute decision; Jor-El finds Earth as he searches through the planets in his computer database.⁴⁰⁶ This portrayal acknowledges that Jor-El would not have sent his son to Earth if Krypton was not going to explode. Superman was sent to Earth primarily to save him from death (like Moses), but while *Superman: The Movie* acknowledges this, the film tries to have it both ways and suggest that Superman was sent to save Earth, not just sent to Earth to *be* saved. The religious allegory of the film gives Jor-El different motivations.

To further emphasize the distinction between the films and the source material, it is worth noting that in the comics, Superman sometimes rejects the label of "saviour." In Geoff Johns's telling of Superman's origin story, early in Superman's career, he tells the people of Metropolis: "I want you to stop looking for a great savior. Lex Luthor isn't it. *I'm* not it. *You* are. *All* of you are. I do what I do because I was given a *gift*, but all of you were given gifts, too. Use them to make each other's lives better. Show the world that Metropolis has a heart."⁴⁰⁷ That comic was published in 2010. Yet the point is not unique to Johns's story. In a 1976 story, Superman has just introduced himself to the world by destroying a dangerous robot, and he describes himself to

⁴⁰⁵ George Pérez, "A Cold Day in Hell," *Superman* #3 (New York: DC Comics, 2012).

⁴⁰⁶ Waid, *Superman: Birthright*, 16. However, in *Birthright*, Superman has a new power with religious connotations that lets him see the "soul" of any living thing, and this ability makes him become a vegetarian (37). The decision caused "Internet outrage." See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 289. Oddly, in Elliot S. Maggin's novel *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*, Kal-El's rocket was specifically intended to go to Albert Einstein because he was Earth's smartest person, but Einstein believed that it was better for Kal-El to be raised by the Kents. See Maggin, *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*.

⁴⁰⁷ Geoff Johns, *Superman: Secret Origin: The Deluxe Edition* (New York: DC Comics, 2010) n.p. In a comics storyline, the Kryptonian criminal General Zod comes to Earth. Zod says that Superman "should have forced these sub-Kryptonians to take their place beneath him. And make them understand, that when they look up into the sky they do not see their savior—they see their better. Ruling over them." See Geoff Johns and Richard Donner, "Last Son," *Action Comics Annual* #11 (New York: DC Comics, 2008), n.p. However, this description of Superman comes from an outsider. Still, Christopher Knowles writes that "all superheroes are essentially savior figures," even though they offer a different kind of salvation than religion. See Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 111.

the crowd as “someone who wanted you to look not to *heroes* and *false gods* for salvation ... someone who has enough faith to *know* that your salvation is *within* you ... *all of you!*”⁴⁰⁸ In a 1992 story, Superman struggles with the fact that a woman who lives in Clark Kent’s apartment will not leave her abusive husband even when Superman tries to intervene.⁴⁰⁹ Martha Kent says: “You aren’t *God*, to be aware of every bird and blade of grass. You’re a *man*.”⁴¹⁰ In one story, Batman tells Superman, “the world *needs* you,” but Superman responds “I’m *not* a *god*.”⁴¹¹ In a 2004 comics storyline, some characters think Superman is a god, but he is at pains to argue that he is not.⁴¹² In contrast, some of the films openly compare Superman and god.

Brian Azzarello’s 2004/2005 story arc *Superman: For Tomorrow* plays with messianic imagery for Superman, but also shows its limitations. Superman visits a Roman Catholic priest named Daniel Leone.⁴¹³ Superman majestically floats in Leone’s large Gothic cathedral, and there are some carefully composed juxtapositions; multiple times, the art shows Superman with a

⁴⁰⁸ Cary Bates and Elliot S! Maggin, “Superman 2001!” *Superman* #300 (New York: DC Comics, 1976), n.p. Although the story is written in 1976, it imagines a world where Superman emerges in the “future” in 2001.

⁴⁰⁹ Louise Simonson, “Hard Knocks,” *Superman: The Man of Steel* #16 (New York: DC Comics, 1992).

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 21. There is a parallel (probably coincidental) in the *Smallville* series finale, where Chloe Sullivan says, “He’s not god. He can’t be aware of every blade of grass.” See *Smallville*, “Finale, Part 1.”

⁴¹¹ Johns, *Infinite Crisis*, 37.

⁴¹² In a 2004 storyline, a woman named Lyla lived on Kandor but resented Superman, viewing him as a god who neglected the city, so she used mind control to make him temporarily forget his life on Earth and trap him inside the bottle on Kandor while she ascended to Metropolis. She enabled a villain from Kandor named Preus to escape and wreak havoc on Metropolis. Lyla thought the world outside her bottle was Heaven, and was disappointed to find that the “Promised Land” is not what she expected. Joe Kelly and Michael Turner, “Godfall, Part 3 of 6: Goddess,” *Superman* #202 (New York: DC Comics, 2004). With Superman trapped on Kandor, Lyla tells Lois Lane that “God is *dead*.” One of the residents of Kandor who helps Superman escape the bottle and sees what it is like outside says, “So this is ‘heaven.’ Always ‘spected more clouds ... an’ nekkid angles.” (It is “angles” not “angels,” to reflect the character’s speech patterns.) Joe Kelly and Michael Turner, “Godfall, Part 4 of 6: Heaven,” *Action Comics* #813 (New York: DC Comics, 2004), n.p. Lyla described her actions as pulling “God down from the sky.” See Joe Kelly and Michael Turner, “Godfall, Part 6 of 6,” n.p. Superman has to tell Lyla he is “*not god*,” but “just a *man*. A *flawed* man who *failed* you.” See Joe Kelly and Michael Turner, “Godfall, Part 5 of 6: Tempest,” *The Adventures of Superman* #626 (New York: DC Comics, 2004), n.p. Superman tells Lyla to help him stop Preus, telling her, “If there is a *god* ... if there *is* a plan ... *Free will* is at the *heart of it*.” See Kelly and Turner, “Godfall, Part 6 of 6: Divinity,” n.p. She had declined to help him because “God helps those that help themselves.” Later, Superman returns to Kandor and has to convince the people he is “definitely *not* a *god*.” See Kelly and Turner, “Godfall, Part 6 of 6,” n.p. See Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 118. In part because his home city was destroyed by the Cyborg Superman, Green Lantern tried to *remake* the entire universe, and Superman accused him of *playing* god. See Dan Jurgens, *Zero Hour* #0 (New York: DC Comics, 1994).

⁴¹³ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 1,” *Superman* #204 (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

statue of the crucified Christ in the background.⁴¹⁴ On the surface, this imagery invites comparisons between Superman and Jesus, but this story depicts a deeply flawed version of Superman. Superman wants to visit Father Leone for *confession*.⁴¹⁵ A year earlier, a million people around the world (including Lois Lane) suddenly vanished “without a trace,” and at the time, Superman says, “I was a *million* miles away ... chasing *my* Holy Trinity. *Three words* ... Superman ... save me.”⁴¹⁶ The issue ominously ends with Superman saying, “My *sin*? Was to *save the world*.”⁴¹⁷ This line points to a *difference* between Superman and Jesus because Superman’s desire to save the world causes problems in some stories. Superman’s “sin” is referenced again in his follow-up meeting with Father Leone, as Superman narrates what happened after the vanishing: he traced the vanishing to a Middle Eastern country and intervened in a war.⁴¹⁸ Then, *another* mysterious vanishing removed three hundred thousand more people—but Superman found the device responsible.⁴¹⁹

The fifth issue flirts with Jesus imagery again, as Superman spots Father Leone sitting on the shores of Metropolis and flies down to visit him, and they talk:

Leone: To be honest, I *expected* to see you. But I thought you’d come *walking* ...

Superman: That’s a *play* on your beliefs I’d *never* do to you.

Leone: Because you can?⁴²⁰

Superman brushes off the remark, but the reader is left to contemplate a comparison with Jesus walking on water. Again, the storyline invites a comparison between Superman and Jesus, but as will be seen, Superman’s flawed behavior in the story will repudiate that comparison.

⁴¹⁴ Ibid.

⁴¹⁵ Ibid.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid., n.p. To be precise, Superman was busy helping a Green Lantern in outer space.

⁴¹⁷ Ibid.

⁴¹⁸ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 2,” *Superman* #205 (New York: DC Comics, 2004). The story was likely commenting on the War in Iraq. For an analysis of Superman’s intervention, see Arnaudo, *The Myth of the Superhero*, 108–11.

⁴¹⁹ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 3,” *Superman* #206 (New York: DC Comics, 2004); Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 4,” *Superman* #207 (New York: DC Comics, 2004).

⁴²⁰ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 5,” *Superman* #208 (New York: DC Comics, 2004), n.p.

Also, the seventh issue begins with Father Leone having a vivid dream where he serves the Eucharist at his church, but then sees Superman.⁴²¹ Leone has cancer, and in the dream, Superman tells him to jump off his roof, saying, “If you want me to *cure* you ... you have to *believe* in me.”⁴²² Leone jumps, Superman catches him, but then Superman turns into a nightmare figure before Leone wakes up.⁴²³ Again, Superman is shown in a Christlike guise, but then with qualifications because the writer shows the limitations of such comparisons as well. Leone asks Superman (in real life) if he can cure cancer, and they discuss it:

Superman: I’ve never *tried*. And I *won’t*. I’m *sorry*. If I *did*, people would expect me—
Leone: To perform *miracles*? But you *already* do.⁴²⁴

Superman chooses to enter the device that caused the Vanishing; Wonder Woman fears he will be lost to the world and says there is no proof the vanished people are even alive, but Superman says, “I don’t need *proof*. I have something *stronger*. I have *faith*.”⁴²⁵ Nonetheless, that issue ends ominously. Again, Superman says, “my sin ... was trying to *save* the *world*.”⁴²⁶ The last panel shows Superman’s Arctic Fortress of Solitude lying in ruins and the shape of a crucifix is visible in the outline.⁴²⁷ Again, the reader is left to wonder if Superman is really a saviour. In fact, Superman *created* the device responsible for the vanishings and the people who have vanished live in a dreamlike heavenly utopia of his own creation.⁴²⁸ Superman says: “I created *heaven* from *hell*.”⁴²⁹ The criminals from his home planet Krypton were kept in a prison in another dimension called the Phantom Zone, but Superman used the Phantom Zone to create

⁴²¹ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 7,” *Superman* #210 (New York: DC Comics, 2004), n.p.

⁴²² *Ibid.*

⁴²³ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁵ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 8,” *Superman* #211 (New York: DC Comics, 2005), n.p.

⁴²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁸ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 9,” *Superman* #212 (New York: DC Comics, 2005), Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 10,” *Superman* #213 (New York: DC Comics, 2005).

⁴²⁹ Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part Ten,” n.p.

his utopia (called “Metropia”) to resolve a hypothetical question: what if one day Earth was going to be destroyed like Krypton?⁴³⁰ While Superman had good intentions for making the device, he admits that making his “heaven” was wrong, and he was not ready for the device to zap all those people into the utopia.⁴³¹ That is why his sin was to save the world: he tried to be like God. Moreover, the utopia *turns into* a sort of hell; despite being a utopia with everything one could want, a faction starts a war, led by Superman’s enemy General Zod, and one of Zod’s minions announces: “Metropia! We’ve come for your savior!”⁴³² As Metropia descends into war, Superman evokes Genesis 1 and 2 as he describes his creation as “made in my own image out of the *clay* of the Phantom Zone.”⁴³³ The utopia is destroyed and Superman returns most of the vanished people to Earth—but Father Leone must sacrifice himself.⁴³⁴ In an image evocative of Michelangelo’s painting *The Creation of Adam*, Superman the Creator even reaches out and tries to save Zod before the utopia dies.⁴³⁵

A key point to take away from this storyline is that Superman is not a saviour like Jesus because his ambition to save the world causes his problems. The story is ponderous and plays with deep ideas without always resolving them. Still, despite the way it juxtaposes Superman with godlike or messianic ideas, the series can be read as a *critique* on the concept because, as is reiterated throughout Superman’s messianic zeal causes his failures. Whether or not the series is a good portrayal of Superman’s character is another matter. Although this story is not universally beloved, it is significant because it provides further evidence demonstrating that the comics and films are at odds in how they represent Superman.

⁴³⁰ Ibid. Other dimensions are not be confused with parallel “Earths.”

⁴³¹ Ibid.

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 11,” *Superman* #214 (New York: DC Comics, 2005), n.p.

⁴³⁴ Brian Azzarello, “For Tomorrow, Part 12,” *Superman* #215 (New York: DC Comics, 2005).

⁴³⁵ Ibid., n.p.

Elsewhere, Mark Waid's miniseries *Kingdom Come* has a great deal of biblical resonance and allusions to Christianity. As will be seen, on the surface, it invites comparisons between Superman and Jesus, but I would argue that it nonetheless does not commit to those parallels the way some of the films do. Once again, I would argue that the comics and films present Superman's relationship to Jesus differently. To understand this portrayal, first it is necessary to understand the plot of *Kingdom Come*. The story begins by quoting Revelation 16:18, 8:7, 8:10, and 8:13, with artwork that foreshadows the final battle in the fourth book of the miniseries:

“There were voices ... and thunderings, and lightnings ... and an earthquake.
“And there followed hail and fire mingled with blood.
There fell a great star from heaven, burning as if it were a lamp ...
“and I beheld and heard an Angel ... saying with a loud voice ... woe, woe, WOE to the
inhibitors of the Earth.”⁴³⁶

The hero the Sandman is in a hospital bed and having apocalyptic visions, while being comforted by a Protestant minister named Norman McCay.⁴³⁷ The Sandman passes away, while McCay becomes the narrator of the story, reflecting, “*hope for tomorrow has become more and more precious ... Still, I tried to keep the faith ... and hew to the scriptures.*”⁴³⁸ The story is in a distant future where the traditional heroes are older and the new generation of more violent heroes is uncontrollable and destructive. The story works as a commentary on the emergence of more violent heroes in the comic book industry. As Batman says, “They wanted their ‘heroes’ *stronger and more ruthless.*”⁴³⁹ McCay has dreams about an apocalyptic future (like the Sandman did before), and a supernatural being called the Spectre appears and promises to show

⁴³⁶ Mark Waid, *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 11–13. *Kingdom Come* examines the idea of the apocalypse, frequently references Revelation, and employs religion because one of its lead characters is a minister (artist Alex Ross modeled the character off his own father). See Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 89–90, 126.

⁴³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14–15.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

McCay what is to come; the rest of the plot is told through the eyes of McCay and the Spectre as they are (usually) ghostly presences that watch the acts of the heroes, but do not participate.⁴⁴⁰

Superman is bitter, shut himself off from the world, and has lived for ten years in self-imposed isolation in a computer simulation of the farm he grew up on, in his Arctic Fortress of Solitude.⁴⁴¹ A super-powered being named Magog is part of “the *new* breed of heroes” who are more violent and rose up in Superman’s place—but when fighting a criminal, Magog causes an explosion that destroys Kansas.⁴⁴² Wonder Woman tries to convince Superman to leave his exile, but he refuses.⁴⁴³ McCay is despondent, and the text quotes Revelation 8:7 and 9:2 (“And the third part of the *trees* was burnt up ... And all *green grass* was burnt up! “And the *sun* and the *air* were *darkened!*”)⁴⁴⁴ With hope at a low ebb, Superman leaves his exile and stops some criminals before a cheering crowd.⁴⁴⁵ Nonetheless, McCay has another vision that tells him that “the threat of *armageddon* hasn’t *ended*. It’s just *begun* ...”⁴⁴⁶

The second issue begins with more of Norman’s dream visions and citations from Revelation 8:2—8:7 (“And I saw the seven angels which stood before God ... “and another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer ... “and the angel took the censer, and filled it with the fire of the altar ... “and the seven angels prepared themselves to sound”).⁴⁴⁷ Superman and some of the old guard heroes apprehend several of the more violent new “heroes,”

⁴⁴⁰ Ibid., 26–30. As Aaron Ricker Parks observes, in *Kingdom Come*, “the Spectre, the Revelation-quoting ‘spirit of God’s vengeance,’ engages in an apocalyptic cliché by taking pastor Norman McCay on a tour of Earth and Heaven.” See Aaron Ricker Parks, “The Devil’s Reading: Revenge and Revelation in American Comics,” in *Graven Images: Religion and Comic Books and Graphic Novels*, eds. A. David Lewis and Christine Hoff Kraemer (New York: Continuum, 2010), 21.

⁴⁴¹ Waid, *Kingdom Come*, 31–35.

⁴⁴² Ibid., 37–38.

⁴⁴³ Ibid., 32–39. In *Kingdom Come*, “Waid underlined the spirituality of his tale by making his narrator a minister.” See Tye, *Superman*, 262.

⁴⁴⁴ Waid, *Kingdom Come*, 49.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 51–54.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., 59.

and McCay reflects on whether they are angels—or even gods.⁴⁴⁸ Superman amasses a team of old-school heroes (without Batman), and Norman McCay references Revelation 4:3 (“and there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald”).⁴⁴⁹ The reader learns in flashback the full story behind Superman’s original exile. The Joker murdered Lois Lane, and Magog murdered the Joker; even though Lois was the love of Superman’s life, he could not condone Magog’s actions, and left the world with public opinion against him.⁴⁵⁰ In the present, Superman meets his old friend Orion, who usurped the throne of the evil Darkseid on the planet Apokolips, only to become a dictator himself.⁴⁵¹ In a bit of foreshadowing, Superman tells Orion, “You’re a *god*. You have the power to *change* your world.”⁴⁵² Orion says: “Or to *destroy* it. You would be *surprised*, I fear, at how easily *one* can lead to the *other*.”⁴⁵³ From that juxtaposition, Superman chooses to build a gigantic penal colony for all the violent superpowered beings.⁴⁵⁴

The third issue starts with more lines from Revelation that tease an apocalypse, including Revelation 10:3: “and he cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth ... “and when he had cried ... “Seven thunders uttered their voices.”⁴⁵⁵ The reader knows ominous things are coming. McCay dreams of Armageddon.⁴⁵⁶ Superman’s giant gulag begins to fill, and the reader wonders

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 64.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 96–98. Superman faces many dilemmas in the comics because of his unwillingness to kill. For a silly example, in *Superboy* #104, Superboy thought he killed a British boy named Reggie, and gives up being Superboy, but it was a trick! See Edmond Hamilton, “The Untold Story of the Phantom Zone!” *Superboy* #104 (New York: DC Comics 1963). In *Action Comics* #583 he quits being Superman and lets the world believe he is dead. See Moore, “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow? Part Two.” In *Superman* #22, Superman executes three evil Kryptonians and would struggle with the guilt for some time. See John Byrne, “The Price,” *Superman* #22 (New York: DC Comics, 1988). For the reconciliation of this guilt, see Roger Stern, “Two Destinies!” *Superman* #33 (New York: DC Comics, 1989). In *Action Comics* #719 he is put in a position where it looks as if he has to kill the Joker to save his wife Lois Lane and does not do it (though she survives anyway). See David Michelinie, “Hazard’s Choice,” *Action Comics* #719 (New York: DC Comics, 1996). Superman will not even let his enemy Darkseid die! See Jurgens, *Superman/Doomsday: Hunter Prey Book Two*.

⁴⁵¹ Waïd, *Kingdom Come*, 103.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 106–7.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 112.

if Superman is becoming a dictator or playing god.⁴⁵⁷ The teased Armageddon scenario comes when there is a revolt at the gulag.⁴⁵⁸ An epic battle begins between Superman's forces and the escaped, violent beings of the gulag, and McCay narrates that "Armageddon has *arrived*."⁴⁵⁹

Now that the reader can finally see the Armageddon scenario, the text quotes the opening citation from Revelation 16:1 again: "There were voices ... and *thunderings*, and *lightnings* ... "and an *earthquake*."⁴⁶⁰ As McCay watches the battle, the Spectre quotes from Revelation 14: 7: "Fear God, and give glory to him ... for the hour of judgment is come."⁴⁶¹ The government decides to drop a nuclear bomb on the battle site; most of the super beings die, but Captain Marvel sacrifices himself to save some of them.⁴⁶² Superman survives, visits the UN, and a man tells him, "We ... we saw you as *gods*."⁴⁶³ Superman replies, "As we saw *ourselves*. And we were *both* wrong."⁴⁶⁴ Later, Wonder Woman gives Superman a pair of "Clark Kent" glasses to remind him of his *human* side, which he lost after Lois died.⁴⁶⁵ Despite the apocalyptic scenes, the story ends with optimism and new life—like Revelation—and this optimism is exemplified by Superman and Wonder Woman having a child and asking Batman to be the godfather.⁴⁶⁶

After reading *Kingdom Come*, in some ways, it is easy to read the book as an allegory of Jesus and Revelation. When Superman makes his pitch to the next generation of superpowered beings to do things his way, one of them even says, "I feel like I was just asked to become the

⁴⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 113–19.

⁴⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 136–55.

⁴⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 159.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 165–84. He intercepts the bomb prematurely.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 200–01.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 209–12. To keep with the "biblical" tone, the artist's sketches and rough notes in the back of the collected volume are labeled "apocrypha" (213–30).

thirteenth disciple!”⁴⁶⁷ *Kingdom Come* has extensive “biblical imagery” as “prophetic eschatological dreams figure largely in the plot.”⁴⁶⁸ The title of *Kingdom Come* is derivative of the Lord’s Prayer, but it shows a return of Superman rather than Christ.⁴⁶⁹ A reporter calls Superman’s re-emergence the “*Second Coming of Superman*,” and interpreters of the book have connected this to the return of Jesus in Revelation.⁴⁷⁰ The nuclear missile at the end is framed as “God’s judgment,” the end battle is “Armageddon,” and the name of the violent character Magog is also derivative of Revelation.⁴⁷¹ In a sequel volume, Superman meets a version of Norman McCay in another universe and asks him, “couldn’t you tell me how you see my journey as fulfilling biblical prophecy? Could I be part of Revelation?”⁴⁷² Garrett writes that “*Kingdom Come* is a book about faith and belief, that there truly are reasons that things happen—even horrific things—and that all is ordained to turn out well *Kingdom Come* is one of the most religious comics ever published.”⁴⁷³ David Hatfield observes that when we see Superman as a recluse early in *Kingdom Come*,

he’s doing carpentry; he wears the long hair and beard associated with the Western iconic image of Christ; he’s carrying a heavy timber across his shoulders reminiscent of the cross beam carried by Christ; and tucked into the back pocket beneath his overalls are three very distinctive spikes.⁴⁷⁴

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid., 87.

⁴⁶⁸ Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 262.

⁴⁶⁹ Tallon and Walls, “Superman and *Kingdom Come*,” 207–20.

⁴⁷⁰ Waid, *Kingdom Come*, 68. See Tallon and Walls, “Superman and *Kingdom Come*,” 209, 220; Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 117; Ricker Parks, “The Devil’s Reading,” 21. For more, see, Thom Parham, “Superheroes in Crisis: Postmodern Deconstruction and Reconstruction in Comic Books and Graphic Novels,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. B.J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 205; Robert M. Price, “The Seven-Sealed Comic Book: The Book of Revelation in the Graphic Novel *Kingdom Come*,” *Journal of Unification Studies* 13, no. 1 (2012): 215–233.

⁴⁷¹ Ricker Parks, “The Devil’s Reading,” 21.

⁴⁷² Alex Ross, *JSA Kingdom Come Special #1* (New York: DC Comics, 2008), 16. McCay tells him not to let his life be defined by Revelation (17). See also, Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 117.

⁴⁷³ Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 90. At the end, the characters “regain their faith and sense of purpose” (91). Despite its apocalyptic scenarios, the book ends with a message of hope (91–92).

⁴⁷⁴ David Hatfield, “Superman’s Revelation: The Problem of Violence in *Kingdom Come*,” in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?*, ed. Mark D. White, Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 140.

Despite the claims of these writers, I would argue that the Jesus analogy for Superman *should not* be taken too far. In some ways, in *Kingdom Come*, Captain Marvel is more of a Christ-figure than Superman because it is Captain Marvel who dies a sacrificial death.⁴⁷⁵ Granted, in various stories like this one where Superman disappears for some time, Garrett observes that “a world without Superman is fundamentally off-center, like the notion of a world without God.”⁴⁷⁶ Knowles writes that “perhaps more than any other comic book in history” *Kingdom Come* demonstrates that superheroes are like gods to their fans.⁴⁷⁷ Despite these claims, Elliot S. Maggin rightfully emphasizes that in *Kingdom Come*, Superman and the heroes “learn that they are not gods.”⁴⁷⁸ while Grant Morrison notes that Alex Ross’s art in the book showed Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman *age*, even if it meant losing their “divinity.”⁴⁷⁹ Most important of all, *Kingdom Come* is a story where Superman *fails* because of his ambition. As Maggin alluded to, the most important part of Superman’s character arc is when he recognizes that he is not like god.⁴⁸⁰

Like *For Tomorrow*, *Kingdom Come* demonstrates that (unlike Jesus) Superman can go too far to save the world and *fail*, as he failed with his gulag.⁴⁸¹ Likewise, Mark Millar’s story (outside regular continuity) envisioning Superman as a Soviet dictator also demonstrates that

⁴⁷⁵ Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 10. David Hatfield writes that “the mythology we’ve established around Superman determines that he could not have been killed by the nuclear blast, and therefore could not have served as a sacrifice. The mythology requires a sacred death and puts Marvel on the altar It’s important to note that the mushroom cloud is even depicted in the shape of a cross.” See Hatfield, “Superman’s Revelation,” 142.

⁴⁷⁶ Garrett, *Holy Superheroes*, 111.

⁴⁷⁷ Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 210–11. Knowles says that the Revelation references “underscore the apocalyptic events” (210). The story is “an apocalyptic tract, awash in fiery Biblical wrath,” and “a fundamentally religious piece of work,” but he compares the heroes to gods in a polytheistic religion (10, 210).

⁴⁷⁸ Elliot S. Maggin, “The New Bards,” Introduction in Mark Waid, *Kingdom Come* (New York: DC Comics 1997), 7. Knowles writes that McCay “protests against the Apocalypse using the tepid language of liberal Protestantism, but regains his religious fervor ... after helping the gods of the League save humanity.” See Knowles, *Our Gods Wear Spandex*, 209.

⁴⁷⁹ Morrison, *Supergods*, 300.

⁴⁸⁰ Waid, *Kingdom Come*, 194.

⁴⁸¹ Danny Fingerroth writes that in stories like the film *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (where Superman tries to rid the world of nuclear weapons), it is evident that “when superheroes try to change society proactively, things almost always end up worse than they were at the beginning.” Fingerroth, *Superman on the Couch*, 161.

when someone like Superman extends his “godlike” power too far into earthly affairs or uses his powers to make an earthly utopia, it never ends well—even when he is trying to “save” the world.⁴⁸² There is a paradox insofar as Superman’s power does not always come from his great strength, but his salvific power comes from his ability to inspire others. Sometimes, Superman is more effective as an *example*. For instance, Weldon observes that in the story *Superman: Peace on Earth*, when Superman discovers that there are practical and political obstacles to his plan to end world hunger, Superman “relearns the lesson he learned in *Kingdom Come*: despite his amazing abilities, he does the most good as a symbol, inspiring humanity to work together.”⁴⁸³

(Granted, having Superman fail in such stories serves to draw attention to how the real world

⁴⁸² Millar imagines a parallel universe where Superman grew up in the Soviet Union. See Mark Millar, *Superman: Red Son* (New York: DC Comics, 2004). After Stalin’s death, Superman sees the starvation in the Soviet Union and decides, “I *could* take care of everyone’s problems if I *ran* this place and, to tell you the truth, there’s no good reason why I *shouldn’t*” (54). Luthor is America’s champion against the Communist Superman, and Luthor is described as “a human being who dared to challenge a god” (59). Although he started with good intentions, Superman becomes a totalitarian dictator, the world has more than six billion communists, and he controls the robot Brainiac to help him run the country—after *defeating* Brainiac (107). Brainiac is a robot that shrinks cities into small bottles to study them. Regardless, the reader is told that in Superman’s regime: “Moscow tick-tocked with the same Swiss watch precision as every other town and city in our global Soviet Union. Every adult had a job. Every child had a hobby, and the entire population enjoyed the full eight hours’ sleep which their bodies required. Crime didn’t exist. Accidents never happened. It didn’t even rain unless Brainiac was absolutely certain that everyone was carrying an umbrella. Almost six billion citizens and hardly anyone complained. Even in private” (107). Luthor is U.S. president and married to Lois Lane in this reality, but Lois is concerned about the motives for Luthor’s opposition to Superman, and says: “Superman might be a nut with a messiah complex. But don’t you think we’re in danger of just replacing one demagogue with another?” (113). Luthor convinces Superman that his totalitarian ambitions have been a failure by giving him a note that says “Why don’t you just put the whole WORLD in a BOTTLE, Superman?” (136). Luthor compared Superman’s totalitarian government to Brainiac’s methods, and Superman has a crisis of conscience; after saving the world from nuclear destruction, he disappears, with the world believing him dead (137–44). Luthor becomes dictator of the world instead, and all the communist countries join his “Global United States.” Luthor’s “American” dictatorship is as cold and sterile as Superman’s Soviet utopia, even as many diseases are eradicated by Luthor’s scientific genius. For another depiction of Superman as a world dictator, but not in his right mind, see Karl Kesel, *Superman King of the World* #1 (New York: DC Comics, 1998).

⁴⁸³ Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 271. Not everyone agrees. Lex Luthor tells Superman that the people of Earth “need someone to wake them up. They need someone to show them they can reach the stars without you flying them up there.” Luthor also says: “You leap over tall buildings. You outrun speeding bullets. You juggle locomotives. How does that inspire anyone to be a better human being?” See Johns and Donner, “Last Son,” n.p. Paul Lytle argues that stories such as *Kingdom Come* show that the true way to “destroy” Superman is to destroy his image, rather than destroy him physically. See Paul Lytle, “The Golden Shield: Image as Superman’s Greatest Power,” in *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop, (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 137–47. In an episode of *Lois & Clark*, Superman is accused of having an affair with Lois Lane (who is married to Clark Kent!), and a Roman Catholic priest appears on television as a pundit, saying, “I’m most concerned about the children . . . After all, Superman was their one undisputed moral reference point.” See *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*, “Sex, Lies, and Videotape,” S04, E13, directed by Philip J. Sgriccia, written by Andrew Dettmann, Daniel Trully, and Dan Wilcox, ABC, January 19, 1997.

must better address issues like hunger.) Batman once *reminded* Superman that he needs to set an example because everyone looks up to him.⁴⁸⁴ The films and comics are not necessarily *contradictory*, but the films portray Superman as a Jesus figure unashamedly, while, in eighty years of stories, the comics have emphasized Superman's role as an exemplar, and not portrayed him as a Jesus figure as much.⁴⁸⁵ Superman "is as close as contemporary Western culture has yet come to envisioning a champion who is the epitome of unselfishness," and different comics stories demonstrate that Superman's example can make others courageous.⁴⁸⁶

Some important Superman comics writers have demonstrated that Superman's most important characteristic is that he is a moral example for others to emulate. There are numerous examples of this. *Kingdom Come* acknowledges this point as the Spectre tells McCay about

⁴⁸⁴ Johns, *Infinite Crisis*, 37. In the 1999 film *The Iron Giant*, the metal robot in the title dies a Christ-like death saving a town from a bomb because it wants to emulate the character of Superman. See *The Iron Giant*, directed by Brad Bird (Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers, 1999). The symbol of Superman can be exploited by others. Superman artist Alex Ross made a painting of Barack Obama tearing his shirt in a Superman-like pose to support the candidate for the 2008 American election. See Anita K. McDaniel, "Obama-Man: The Fan-Boy Ideograph for 'Hope and Change,'" *International Journal of Comic Art* 15, no. 1 (2013): 338–53. At a fundraising dinner, Obama joked that "contrary to the rumours you have heard, I was not born in a manger," but instead, "I was actually born on Krypton and sent here by my father, Jor-El, to save the planet Earth." See "US elections: Barack Obama Jokes He Is Superman," *The Telegraph*, October 17, 2008, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/3213768/US-elections-Barack-Obama-jokes-he-is-Superman.html> (accessed June 29, 2018).

⁴⁸⁵ Superman actor Brandon Routh described the character as "someone that people can aspire to be." See *Look, up in the Sky*, directed by Kevin Burns. Even though *Superman Returns* director Bryan Singer used Christian symbolism freely, he may have been closer to the heart of the character, when he said, "And when there is so much bad happening, it's very, very important to be able to look at a character, even if he is in tights ... and say, 'Hey maybe I can be a good guy like that.'" See Stephen Skelton, "Superman Returns (2006)." Unfortunately, Superman's example was not enough to stop Singer from allegedly sexually assaulting a teenage boy in 2003.

⁴⁸⁶ See Mark Waid, "The Real Truth about Superman: And the Rest of Us, Too," in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way*, Popular Culture and Philosophy 13, eds. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago and Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 2005), 3. Regarding how Superman makes other courageous, in a 1996 comic story that Waid co-authored, the evil robot Brainiac makes Superman switch bodies with a psychiatric patient named Chas who had convinced himself that he was Superman to cope with an abusive childhood. See Tom Peyer and Mark Waid, "Identity Crisis I: Cages," *The Adventures of Superman* #536 (New York: DC Comics, 1996); Tom Peyer and Mark Waid, "Identity Crisis II: Keys," *Action Comics* #723 (New York: DC Comics, 1996); Tom Peyer and Mark Waid, "Identity Crisis III: Snares," *Superman: The Man of Steel* #58 (New York: DC Comics, 1996); Tom Peyer and Mark Waid, "Identity Crisis IV: Worldwide Web," *Superman* #114 (New York: DC Comics, 1996). Superman reflects to the boy, "given all you had to endure ... you needed to be made—of steel." See Peyer and Waid, "Identity Crisis IV: Worldwide Web," 16. The side of Chas's psyche that believes he is Superman shares Superman's body with Brainiac's consciousness, and is even able to restrain Brainiac from killing the real Superman in Chas's body (12–13). Chas heroically saves Superman from Brainiac, and almost sacrifices his own life in the process (19–20). Superman's example made Chas a hero. Likewise, in *Superman* #108, a fragile alien named Mope sacrifices himself for Superman because Superman taught him what a hero was. See Dan Jurgens, "No Escape!" *Superman* #108 (New York: DC Comics, 1996).

“those who ... felt the *crush* of *Superman’s greatest* and most *necessary failing* ... his *inability* to perceive himself as the inspiration he *is*. The *shock* of seeing Superman suddenly *abandon* his *never-ending battle* took an *immeasurable toll* on his *contemporaries*, his *peers*.”⁴⁸⁷ One sees a concrete example of this aspect of Superman’s character in Grant Morrison’s *All-Star Superman* miniseries; a teenage girl is thinking about committing suicide by jumping from a building, but Superman flies to her and says, “You’re much stronger than you think you are.”⁴⁸⁸ They embrace.⁴⁸⁹ Waid reflected that when Superman says those words,

they become the most moving words we have ever read in a Superman story. And they are perfect because they reveal, in one sentence, the fundamental secret of Superman and why we love him so: Gods achieve their power by encouraging us to believe in them. Superman achieves his power by believing in us.⁴⁹⁰

Although Waid wrote *Kingdom Come*, which might be “the most spiritual Superman story ever,” or at least one of them, Waid says that “Superman is not a story about faith, it’s about inspiration. It’s a story about trying to move us into emulating, into being, into doing.”⁴⁹¹ That applies in the real world as well.⁴⁹² For all his violent excesses, Siegel and Shuster’s original “champion of the oppressed” Superman had this dimension too; in a 1939 story, he saves

⁴⁸⁷ Waid, *Kingdom Come*, 40.

⁴⁸⁸ Grant Morrison, *All-Star Superman*, vol. 2, (New York: DC Comics, 2009), 96.

⁴⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹⁰ Mark Waid, “Introduction,” in Grant Morrison, *All-Star Superman*, vol. 2, (New York: DC Comics, 2009), 8. In one comics story, Superman is dying and Lois Lane reflects, “Superman told me when we last spoke, that he has faith in me. Faith in the world to solve its greatest problems. Faith in humanity to build a better future. I don’t know if we’re always worthy of that faith ... but if we were ever up to the challenge in the past ... today we must meet that challenge as never before.” Scott McCloud, “The War Within,” *Superman Adventures* #11 (New York: DC Comics, 1997), 21.

⁴⁹¹ Tye, *Superman*, 70.

⁴⁹² When attending Western Washington University, a student named Chris Clow told Larry Tye, “Superman continues to inspire me not because I can relate to him, but because I aspire to act as he does. He, and by extension the storytellers that have given him life, have taught me how to live well. Not financially, but socially. Spiritually. Morally. And I am better for it.” See Tye, *Superman*, 263. A man named Emilio Ramos Jr., who grew up in a poor area of Massachusetts, told Larry Tye: “I’ve never had alcohol, never smoked, never done a drug in my life. People are surprised with that because of the environment I was exposed to growing up. People are even more surprised when they asked how I turned out the way I am and I just say one word: ‘Superman.’” See Tye, *Superman*, 71. Ramos adds that Superman played a role in his decision to pursue a career in law enforcement (71).

a down-on-his-luck boxer from suicide and helps turn his life around.⁴⁹³ Superman actor Christopher Reeve once said that he could not “be silly about Superman” because he

had seen firsthand how he actually transforms people’s lives. I have seen children dying of brain tumors who wanted as their last request to talk to me, and have gone to their graves with a peace brought on by knowing that their belief in this kind of character is intact ... It’s not Superman the tongue-in-cheek cartoon character they’re connecting with; they’re connecting with something very basic: the ability to overcome obstacles, the ability to persevere, the ability to understand difficulty and to turn your back on it.⁴⁹⁴

Waid wrote that what makes Superman unique is

not his powers, it’s not his costume, it’s not his heritage. It’s that ... he has more faith in us than we have in ourselves, and ALL-STAR SUPERMAN is the story of how transcendentally that faith elevates and redeems the human race. Everyone Superman encounters ... inherits some of Superman’s values just by being in contact with him.⁴⁹⁵

Morrison recalls that when he wrote *All-Star Superman*, “the attempt to be true to the underlying spirit of Superman ... had brought out the best in all of us. Like a monk contemplating the deeds of a saint, I was elevated by the time I spent imagining how Superman might feel.”⁴⁹⁶ Likewise, in another comic written by Greg Rucka, Lois Lane says, “It’s not *invulnerability* or *flight* or *super speed* that makes him the World’s Greatest Hero. It’s that Superman *refuses to despair*. He is a *testament* to the *opposite* in fact.”⁴⁹⁷ Former Superman

⁴⁹³ See Jerry Siegel, “The Redemption of Larry Trent,” *Superman* #2 (New York: DC Comics, 1939).

⁴⁹⁴ Friedrich, “Up, Up, and Awaay!!!” For a study of Superman actor Christopher Reeve’s identity after his paralysis, see Larry Kriegel, “Superman’s Shoulders: On the Healing Power of Illusion,” *Southwest Review* 91, no. 2 (2006): 258–267. See also, Sarah Zettel, “You Will Believe a Man Can Walk: Christopher Reeve’s Part in the Superman Myth,” *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, ed. Glenn Yeffeth, Smart Pop (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2005), 23–31. When Reeve was paralyzed in 1995, he received letters from all over the world from people who identified him with Superman and cited him as a major influence in their lives. See Dana Reeve, *Care Packages: Letters to Christopher Reeve from Strangers and Other Friends* (New York: Random House, 1999).

⁴⁹⁵ Waid, “Introduction,” in *All-Star Superman*, 7.

⁴⁹⁶ Morrison, *Supergods*, 411. Morrison says of his miniseries that “All-Star Superman was a divine Everyman, Platonic man sweating out the drama of ordinary life on an extraordinary canvas” (411). Morrison presented “Superman as the Enlightenment ideal paragon of human physical, intellectual, and moral development that Siegel and Shuster had originally imagined” (410).

⁴⁹⁷ Greg Rucka, “The Road to Ruin, Conclusion.” *The Adventures of Superman* #640 (New York: DC Comics, 2005), n.p. In *The Adventures of Superman* #646, Mr. Mxyzptlk marvels at Superman’s faith in people, thinking, “Even when he’s been proven *wrong* again and *again* ... he still *keeps his faith*.” See Greg Rucka, “Rack and Ruin: Part 1,” *The Adventures of Superman* #646 (New York: DC Comics, 2006), n.p. In *Action Comics* #1000, we read that Superman helped a former criminal turn his life around and find a job after getting out of jail, and the criminal later spoke at an event honouring Superman. See Dan Jurgens, “From the City That Has Everything,”

writer Jeph Loeb wrote: “Superman shows me ... humankind is capable of greatness. He explains to me the best we can be as parents and children He is, quite simply, an inspiration.”⁴⁹⁸ All of these quotes are important because they point to the fact that Superman does not need to be understood as a Jesus figure to be an inspiration. Therefore, when the films compare Superman to Jesus, they are using imagery that is not intrinsic to what the character represents; it is inorganic. Superman *does not* need to be made into a Jesus figure to be understood as an exemplar or inspiration, but that Jesus imagery keeps getting applied to the films (which are seen by a wider audience), and to a *lesser extent* the comics. That is because the films are marketed to a mass audience and the filmmakers find it advantageous to use these parallels.

Now, in a review of a comic that compares Superman to angels, reviewer Neal Bailey wrote that as an atheist, he did not

see or desire the continuing need to place Superman in religious situations in order to show how he and religion complement each other the fundamental issue I dispute, is why in hell Superman can't simply do right for the simple sake that it's the right thing to do? *Why is he constantly seen as a messiah, an angel, a reflective figure of the disillusioned consciences of a people who see evil all about and want some kind of answer to it, in the form of a God or Gods?* (emphasis mine). Doesn't that hurt Superman's inherent intent as a figure for all?⁴⁹⁹

Action Comics #1000 (New York: DC Comics, 2018). The films *Man of Steel* and *Batman v Superman* acknowledge the idea of Superman as a symbol of hope, but the plots of the films do not convey that as well as they could.

⁴⁹⁸ Jeph Loeb, Foreword to Scott Beatty, *Superman: The Ultimate Guide to the Man of Steel* (New York: Dorling Kindersley, 2002), 6. In an article he co-authored with Tom Morris, Loeb says that, by nature, superheroes are defined by the fact they inherently need to *make sacrifices* because they use their powers for others. See Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris, “Heroes and Superheroes,” in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice and the Socratic Way*, Popular Culture and Philosophy 13, eds. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago and Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 2005), 15. Loeb also said that while Batman intimidates people, Superman tries to show that “there are good people.” See Tye, *Superman*, 263.

⁴⁹⁹ Neal Bailey, review of *Superman* #659 by Kurt Busiek, *Superman Homepage*, <https://www.supermanhomepage.com/comics/2007-post-crisis-reviews/c-review-2007.php?topic=sup659> (accessed June 11, 2018). Bailey himself is the author of comic-book biographies of Sarah Palin, Hillary Clinton, and Michelle Obama. Alternatively, in an interview with Larry Tye, a man named Tom Maguire said that “Superman was an escape for me from those who asked me to believe in their god. Superman protected the oppressed and downtrodden and the poor, regardless of their religion or race I’m agnostic today, in part because of Superman.” See Tye, *Superman*, 71–72.

Kurt Busiek, the author of the issue in question, is not a Christian—nor are Bryan Singer (the Jewish director of *Superman Returns*), nor David S. Goyer (the screenwriter of *Man of Steel*). The films use this religious imagery more because they have to reach a broader audience.

In the graphic novel *Superman: Peace on Earth*, Superman tries to combat world hunger by transporting excess food to poorer regions all over the world; in one striking image, Superman is carrying a large load of food above his head to Brazil, and is juxtaposed beside the statue of Christ the Redeemer in Rio, even holding a slightly similar pose (except Superman's arms are bent upwards from the elbows on).⁵⁰⁰ Adam Barkman writes that this is “perhaps the right balance between seeing Superman as a Christ-type that enables, rather than a god-tyrant that stifles,” because “the book makes it clear that Superman's mission is not to usurp Christ but to be a Christ-like inspiration to people”.⁵⁰¹ Barkman's reading is insightful and accurate.

Superman's Own Religion

When evaluating the Jesus/Superman parallels, a few words might be said about Superman's *own* religious beliefs and relationship to God in the comics.⁵⁰² These points are

⁵⁰⁰ Alex Ross and Paul Dini, *Superman: Peace on Earth* (New York: DC Comics, 1998).

⁵⁰¹ Barkman, “Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type,” 118.

⁵⁰² Does God exist in Superman's universe? In a 1987 issue, Superman encounters a race of supernatural, magical beings called “The Circle,” led by a female leader, and the reader learns that the Circle was created before humankind, but cannot use their powers “against God's *second* creation.” See Marv Wolfman and Jerry Ordway, “The Circle Turns,” *The Adventures of Superman* #435 (New York: DC Comics, 1987), 9. Superman later thinks, “She said the circle was formed before man ... God's first experiment, I guess” (22). That may not be orthodox theology. After Superman's death, a friend of Superman named Bibbo Bibbowski prays to God, saying, “been a while since we talked. I know my pal Superman is with ya now ... so I guess he don't really need my prayers ... But the rest o' use sure do.” He prays a Hail Mary, and then finishes, “God? I gotta ask ya ... *why?* Why should Superman die ... when a washed-up ol' roughneck like me goes on livin'? It ain't right God ... it just ain't right.” Of course, Superman eventually returns, so perhaps “God” was at work. See Roger Stern, “Re: Actions,” *Action Comics* #685 (New York: DC Comics, 1993), 22. In the miniseries *Infinite Crisis*, a character wonders if God exists or what humans did to make him angry. See Johns, *Infinite Crisis*, 123. The story does have a happy ending, though there are losses. Later in the story, a Catholic Church has a Mass for those with capes (139–42).

important to consider because the way Superman sees himself has a direct bearing on whether he should be understood as a messianic figure. On that point, comics writers Elliot S. Maggin and Mark Millar have independently identified Clark Kent's family background as Methodist.⁵⁰³ In most continuities, Superman grew up in the farmlands of Kansas in Middle America, and thus grew up in a mostly Christian culture.⁵⁰⁴ The script of *Superman: The Movie* says that when Martha and Jonathan find the infant Kal-El's rocket, they are wearing their "Sunday best" clothes, and the script describes them as "Christian folk whose morals are as basic as the soil they till."⁵⁰⁵ If Superman is a Christian, he cannot be the messiah. In a 1993 comic, after Superman has died, Lois Lane says to Martha Kent, "I guess if my *faith* were stronger, I'd believe I could join Clark in an afterlife, Martha ... but *not* before it was *my time* to pass on."⁵⁰⁶ Martha replies, "Our faith believes in *Heaven*, and Clark was *raised* with those beliefs."⁵⁰⁷ Alternatively, according to John Byrne's Superman reboot, Superman at least *knows* "the name

⁵⁰³ Mark Millar, "Is It a Bird? Is It a Plane? No, It's Superman, But Not as We Know Him," *The Sunday Times*, April 27, 2003. See Bruce Bachand, "Interview: Elliot S. Maggin." In one of Maggin's novels, we read that Clark's mother made him read the Bible from an early age. See Maggin, *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*, 73. We also read: "Superman could only hope that someday God would have mercy on Lex Luthor's tortured soul" (148). Note that Maggin is Jewish and Millar is Roman Catholic. In an episode of the children's animated TV series *Justice League*, Superman has been captured and is taunted by an alien named Draaga but does not respond in kind; later, he references Jesus in Matthew 5:39 and says, "It's called 'turning the other cheek.'" *Justice League*, "War World, Part I" S01, E10, directed by Butch Lukic, written by Stan Berkowitz, *Cartoon Network*, February 24, 2002. See Barkman, "Superman: From Anti-Christ to Christ-Type," 115; Ken Schenck, "Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah," 34. In Tom De Haven's novel *It's Superman!*, the reader is told that when his wife Martha is sick, Clark Kent's adoptive father Jonathan Kent "is not a believer in the way that his wife is, but still he finds it hard not to pray for a miracle, even when he knows it's—what? Hopeless? Hopeless." See De Haven, *It's Superman*, 31. Contrary to most versions of the character, although Martha Kent is buried at the local Methodist church, in this book the reader learns that Jonathan has a contentious relationship with that church, because he believed in bits and pieces of Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Hinduism, and Spiritualism (67–68). Clark Kent does not believe in god in this story either, though his mother taught him some things, and he reflects on his "Methodist guilt" (111, 185, 239).

⁵⁰⁴ Tye, *Superman*, 68. His hometown is not identified in the earliest stories. Ironically, in Elliot S. Maggin's novel *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*, Jonathan Kent dreams that Superboy is "being worshipped as a messiah," and a Bantu tribe considered Superman to be their "messiah." See Maggin, *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*, 8, 74.

⁵⁰⁵ Mario Puzo, David Newman, Leslie Newman, Robert Benton, Tom Mankiewicz, *Superman: The Movie Shooting Script*, https://www.supermanhomepage.com/movies/superman_I_shoot.txt (accessed June 23, 2018). In the film, Martha Kent wears a cross at Jonathan Kent's funeral. See *Superman: The Movie*, directed by Richard Donner. Larry Tye also observes that they are portrayed as devout Christians. See Tye, *Superman*, 204.

⁵⁰⁶ Jerry Ordway, "Life After Death," *The Adventures of Superman* #500 (New York: DC Comics, 1993), 22.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

of Krypton's god, and all the *prayers* that praised his name," and some stories use Krypton's god Rao, even if Superman does not worship Rao.⁵⁰⁸

Superman interacts with God in the afterlife in a novel by Elliot S. Maggin; late in the novel, Superman is in a dreamy state, close to death, and then he is directly "introduced to God."⁵⁰⁹ Superman says: "There is a tradition ... in every religious culture I have ever encountered, which holds that anyone who looks upon the face of God will certainly die" (as in Exodus 33:20).⁵¹⁰ He hears an answer: "We have all seen the face of God, as well as that of His Adversary whom He created. We are born with both in our hearts because they live in our souls forever."⁵¹¹ The text adds:

It seemed probable to Superman that this particular event was at least as significant as stories of visions and prophesies [sic] and such as they were recorded in sacred writings of the various religions. He often wondered if the people in those stories were as forthright and no-nonsense ... as the writings made them out to be In the Bible ... nobody messed around. If somebody wanted to say something, he said it If somebody disagreed, there was a big fight But here Superman was, on the threshold of Eternity, with enough questions to fill up most of that time in the asking.⁵¹²

⁵⁰⁸ John Byrne, *The Man of Steel, Book Six*, (New York: DC Comics, 1986), 21. "Rao" is the name of Krypton's sun, and is often the subject of proverbial expressions in Superman comics ("Great Rao!"), but is also the name of Krypton's god. Allegedly, the first direct identifications of "Rao" as Krypton's god were in E. Nelson Bridwell, "The Demons from the Green Hell," *The Super Friends* #47 (New York: DC Comics, 1982) and Steve Gerber, *Phantom Zone*, vols. 1–4 (New York: DC Comics, 1982). In *Superman Adventures* #31, Superman ends up in a parallel universe where Krypton was not destroyed, but when his adoptive father sends him back to his own reality, he says, "May Rao always be there to guide you." See Mark Millar, "Family Reunion: Part Two," *Superman Adventures* #31 (New York: DC Comics, 1999), 20. In *Action Comics* #887, a Kryptonian criminal "creates" a beastly version of Rao that begins a destructive path on Earth, and a number of superheroes struggle to stop it. Greg Rucka, "Truth to Power," *Action Comics* #887 (New York: DC Comics, 2010); Greg Rucka, "Truth to Power, Part Two" *Action Comics* #888 (New York: DC Comics, 2010); Greg Rucka, "Truth to Power, Part Three" *Action Comics* #889 (New York: DC Comics, 2010). One of the Kryptonians trying to stop "Rao" calls the creation "a mockery of my people's faith." See Rucka, "Truth to Power, Part Two." A storyline in *Smallville* involved the Kryptonian Bible "the Book of Rao." See *Smallville*, "Kandor," S09, E07, directed by Jeannot Szwarc, written by Turi Meyer and Al Septien, *The CW*, November 6, 2009; *Smallville*, "Upgrade," S09, E17, directed by Michael Rohl, written by Drew Landis and Julia Swift, *The CW*, April 16, 2010, and other episodes throughout the season.

⁵⁰⁹ Maggin, *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*, 175.

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, 179.

Superman has a choice: he can die and go to Heaven, or he can be sent back to life to stop the villain “the Master” from destroying the universe.⁵¹³ God says: “You are as a wild card in the scheme of Creation ... there have been few I have sent to your Galaxy whose power of destiny was as great as your own.”⁵¹⁴ Superman chooses to live and saves the day, as was prophesied.⁵¹⁵ He gets a visit from God thanking him for saving the universe.⁵¹⁶ Superman is a messianic figure in this novel, but not a divine Jesus. He is *not* identified with God, but he *encounters* God. Again, this is an important distinction because it demonstrates—once again—that when the films compare Superman to Jesus or God, they are presenting a different understanding of the character. Although this example comes from a novel rather than a comic, it was nonetheless written by an influential Superman comics writer.

Sometimes, Superman wrestles with religious questions.⁵¹⁷ In Jeph Loeb’s miniseries *Superman For All Seasons*, when Clark Kent is a young man, a twister hits his hometown of Smallville, and Clark is concerned he did not do enough, so he talks to the pastor of his local church.⁵¹⁸ Clark asks: “Pastor. What if one man—just one man—could’ve stopped all this destruction? And he didn’t.”⁵¹⁹ The pastor replies, “We each do what we’re able to, Clark. Some less, some more. But when the Almighty sets a course, there’s nothing—any man—can do about it.”⁵²⁰ Clark asks, “But, what if there *was* one?”⁵²¹ But the pastor walks away.⁵²² The fact that

⁵¹³ Ibid., 180. Similarly, in *All-Star Superman*, Superman finds himself in a sort of Kryptonian afterlife, but chooses to go back to go back to his weakened earthly body to face evil one last time. See Morrison, *All-Star Superman*, vol. 2, 133–39.

⁵¹⁴ Maggin, *Superman: The Last Son of Krypton*, 180.

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 181–226. In the book, Superman the “Star Child” was foretold by an ancient alien prophet and moral teacher named Sonnabend, but the prophecy foretells his death as well. Lex Luthor resuscitates him!

⁵¹⁶ Ibid., 226. Glen Weldon writes that Maggin’s novel had “a puzzling religiosity.” See Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, 180.

⁵¹⁷ In the Doomsday story, Superman seems to “pray” that he can save a family from Doomsday in time, and he does. See Jerry Ordway, “Under Fire,” *The Adventures of Superman* #497 (New York: DC Comics, 1992).

⁵¹⁸ Jeph Loeb, *Superman for All Seasons* (New York: DC Comics, 1999), 40–41.

⁵¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Ibid.

Superman wrestles with these kinds of questions is evidence that he is not to be understood like God or Jesus in the comics.

In a 2007 story, a super-powered Evangelical Christian calling himself “Redemption” flies to a war-torn fictional country called Nyasir that is hostile to his church (First Church of the Redemption); missionaries from the church have evangelized to locals, and Redemption is trying to protect them from the country’s anti-Christian militia.⁵²³ As will be seen, this storyline is notable because in this story, Superman’s views on religion are more ambivalent than they in some portrayals—but he definitely does not fulfill the role of Jesus in the story. This story provides further examples from the comics that do not directly link Superman and Jesus—even in a story about Christianity.

In the story, Redemption’s powers are unpredictable, and when the local soldiers open fire, he cannot control himself and vaporizes everyone.⁵²⁴ Superman traces Redemption (a young man named Jarod Dale) back to the United States and finds the young man praying to God for forgiveness at home and lamenting his inability to control his gifts.⁵²⁵ Clark Kent meets Rev. Hightower (the pastor at Dale’s church).⁵²⁶ Later, missionaries in Nyasir are murdered by the government, and Superman finds that Redemption is fighting the local authorities with zeal.⁵²⁷ Superman takes Redemption away from the city.⁵²⁸ As Superman had recently been out of

⁵²² Ibid.

⁵²³ Fabian Nicieza, “Redemption (Part I of II)—If You Believe a Man Can Fly,” *Action Comics* #848 (New York: DC Comics, 2007), n.p.

⁵²⁴ Ibid.

⁵²⁵ Ibid.

⁵²⁶ Ibid.

⁵²⁷ Ibid.

⁵²⁸ Fabian Nicieza, “Redemption (Part II of II)—In Good Faith,” *Action Comics* #849 (New York: DC Comics, 2007), n.p.

action, Redemption tells him, “It’s God’s will to have you back ... But it’s also his will to serve my church.”⁵²⁹ As Superman and Redemption fight, Superman thinks:

I would **really** rather not turn this into me vs. God This is about a good—if misguided—young man who needs to **control** his actions ... I have no problem with religion. I have a problem with abusing one’s power in the name of **anything** The **missionary family** was **converting** a small tribe called the **Sakira**. They were killed after ignoring repeated warnings by the military government to stop their proselytizing. Their murder was an unconscionable act ... but in looking to spread the faith, is the Church of First Redemption **creating** the problem?⁵³⁰

That quotation is significant because the story is treating the church’s evangelistic efforts as a problem. Then, in the comic, Superman meets his friend Barbara Johnson at a community Outreach Center and asks for advice, as Superman says that his perspective on religion has been affected by visiting alien worlds with different gods, or meeting Ares and Zeus (Ares is one of Wonder Woman’s adversaries), and the following dialogue ensues:

Barbara: The only thing that matters is what *you* believe in. Faith is meant to sustain you, so you can help others.

Superman: But what if in trying to help others—by sharing your faith with them—you’re causing more harm than good?

Barbara: Someone of *true* faith—an’ by that I mean true to their *own* faith—can be *Jesus* or *Mohammed* or even your *X’Hal* lady [the God of the planet Tamaran]—they know in their heart the simple difference between helpin’ others ... or just helpin’ themselves.⁵³¹

This discussion provides a view of religion that Evangelical Christians would likely not agree with because they would find it too synchronistic. In any event, Superman discovers that Redemption does not have powers, but his abilities are *derived from* Rev. Hightower—and that during the Second World War, the pastor once lost control and killed 2300 men in one day.⁵³² Dale confronts Rev. Hightower, and Hightower gets angry and uses his powers, forcing

⁵²⁹ Ibid.

⁵³⁰ Ibid.

⁵³¹ Ibid.

⁵³² Ibid.

Superman to intervene.⁵³³ Earlier, Rev. Hightower pointed to the housing and medical clinics his church brought to foreign countries, but Clark said, “Reverend, all of those good works come with *strings* attached—and often an intrusion into the culture or laws of other lands.”⁵³⁴ As church members criticize Rev. Hightower, Superman asks him if he put the lives of his church members at risk for his faith or because of a “guilty conscience.”⁵³⁵

It is a problematic story that makes Superman the mouthpiece for an anti-missionary viewpoint. This story addresses Christianity but clearly does not make Superman any kind of allegorical Jesus figure. In that respect, it shows the difference between the films and the comics.

Reviewer Neal Bailey agreed with Superman’s viewpoints in the issue, but asked:

why do the people with the power to control Superman and his aspirations ABUSE that power by putting a particular moral viewpoint on Superman, even if I agree with it? Now people who attend church regularly are estranged, people who believe a congregation the route to salvation, suddenly they have to assume, what, Superman doesn’t do the same thing I do? Am I wrong? Is he wrong? ... Superman should never make you have to ask these questions. He’s simply a hero for everyone.⁵³⁶

To build on Bailey’s analysis, it is unlikely that a Superman feature film would present churches and Christianity so negatively. That is also because the films are targeted to have mass market appeal. Still, the issue ends with a notable depiction of Clark Kent’s religious beliefs.

Lois Lane asks Clark why he stopped going to church when he was younger, and he tells her,

It was ... when all my different powers started kicking in for the first time—X-ray vision, super-hearing ... I knew too much about their *lives*—their problems ... their *lies* ... I thought I was going to lose my faith ... in *people*. So I did some ... soul-searching ... and eventually I decided to put my faith in the *best* that humanity has to offer.⁵³⁷

⁵³³ Ibid.

⁵³⁴ Ibid.

⁵³⁵ Ibid. The members of the church desert Rev. Hightower.

⁵³⁶ Neal Bailey, review of *Action Comics* #849 by Fabian Nicieza, *Superman Homepage*, <https://www.supermanhomepage.com/comics/2007-post-crisis-reviews/c-review-2007.php?topic=action849>, (accessed June 11, 2018).

⁵³⁷ Nicieza, “Redemption (Part II of II)—In Good Faith,” n.p.

Apparently, Superman would lose his faith in people by going to church, and prefers to be optimistic about humanity. Yet is a church worse than other settings Superman encounters? Overall, the story is important because it deals with Christianity in some detail without ever explicitly relating Superman to Jesus. The films are different in this regard.

Superman and religion were explored again in James Robinson's 2018 storyline "The Last Days"—written in Trump's America.⁵³⁸ By then, Superman and Lois had a young superpowered son named Jonathan, and Superman and his son visit an alien world that is going to explode (like Superman's home planet Krypton exploded).⁵³⁹ The aliens will not let Superman save them because it goes against their apocalyptic religious beliefs.⁵⁴⁰ A priest says: "We are a race of deep and abiding faith in our *Lord God Dhermet*, the *Creator* of all things. If it is *his* will that this orb and *we* its people perish ... we do not wish to be saved."⁵⁴¹ The priest thinks Superman is a heretic, and says: "Leave us to die by the light of his *divine* grace."⁵⁴² They chant their god's name, and the priest says: "You were *foretold* of by our seers—'the *monster* who will come and try to *change* us. '*Rule* us. '*Deny* us our faith."⁵⁴³ Like the antichrist? The aliens try to kill Superman, but he and his son escape and find the one scientist on the planet who agrees with them.⁵⁴⁴ The scientist (who is named Klain) parallels Superman's own father on Krypton. The scientist says, "Perhaps it's the same on your world—how *those* who claim to be *saintly* are often the most *savage*," and Superman replies, "that seems a universal truth."⁵⁴⁵ The story may be an allegory on the American Religious Right's disregard of global warming and science.

⁵³⁸ James Robinson, "The Last Days: Part One," *Superman* #40, (New York: DC Comics, 2018); James Robinson, "The Last Days: Part Two," *Superman* #41, (New York: DC Comics, 2018).

⁵³⁹ Robinson, "The Last Days: Part One," n.p.

⁵⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.* The "faith" of the aliens has magical properties that weaken Superman's powers.

The allegory deepens. Klain says: “This is a planet of religious zealots, all willing to die along with it ... I am a man of *science*. One of the *few* who survived the purge.”⁵⁴⁶ Superman asks: “They killed all the scientists?”⁵⁴⁷ Klain replies, “They’d rather believe in *myths* and *whimsy*,” and laments that his own people think he is “the embodiment of *evil*. They think me not just an unbeliever, but one who would rip apart their credo.”⁵⁴⁸ The mob of “religious” people attacks Klain, and as he lies dying, he tells Superman he can at least see his wife again.⁵⁴⁹ Superman is surprised that Klain believes in God, but Klain says, “I believe in *God*. And *Science*. And *truth*. They can *all* go together if one chooses to let them.”⁵⁵⁰ After Klain dies, again, Superman pleads to the priest and the populace to save themselves, but the planet explodes, leaving Superman and his son Jonathan alone in outer space, where they talk:

Jonathan: All of this was about *God*. A whole planet chose to die.

Superman: *Their* God. That’s their right.

Jonathan: Should I believe in God? Rao or whoever? Dad ... do *you* believe in God?

Superman: Honestly, Jon, I’ve seen too much not to believe in “*something*.” But this is the *important* part ... “something” *isn’t* everything.⁵⁵¹

Superman’s beliefs are ambiguous here, but the story shows that Superman comics can explore religion. In this example, like others in this section, Superman does not see *himself* as a god or a messiah.

This thesis has shown that Superman became a Jesus figure because multiple *later* writers grafted those parallels on—sometimes *inorganically*, and onscreen more than in the comics. For *Man of Steel* and *Smallville*, Jesus parallels were a marketing tool. The attention generated by Superman’s death in the comics was accidental and unexpected—but it inspired other mediums

⁵⁴⁶ Robinson, “The Last Days: Part Two,” n.p.

⁵⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid.

to try to cash in and use Jesus symbolism for his death and battle with Doomsday. Nonetheless, even when analyzing some of the comics storylines that use Christianity the most, it is clear that the comics do not present Superman as a Jesus figure as wholeheartedly as the films do.

Conclusions: Superman and Jesus

In a book on Superman, Tom De Haven writes: “I couldn’t not mention Superman’s religious, or parareligious, trappings: savior from the sky, messiah from heaven, *looks* human but *isn’t*. The Christian symbolism. *And* the Jewish. Moses in the reeds, all of that.”⁵⁵² Yet while later writers have exploited Superman’s religious significance, it is evident that originally, some of these resonances were unintentional, or at the very least implicit; as Les Daniels writes,

Siegel seems to have touched upon a mythic theme of universal significance. Superman recalled Moses, set adrift to become his people’s savior, and also Jesus, sent from above to redeem the world . . . what is significant is that Siegel, working in the generally patronized medium of the comics, had created a secular American messiah. Nothing of the kind was consciously on his mind apparently: his explanation for dropping Superman down from the sky was that “it just happened that way.” And Shuster echoed him: “We just thought it was a good idea.”⁵⁵³

This quote makes it clear that the later relationship between Superman and Jesus was not intended by the character’s creator. What started out as Siegel’s wish-fulfillment for his awkwardness with girls (and perhaps his dead father) turned into something bigger. Siegel’s rough and tumble Superman turned into a Jesus figure over time, but that has more to do with the films than the comics. Later writers and directors tried to make Superman relevant in popular culture by transplanting Jesus imagery onto him, but this imagery did not always fit naturally onto the character. His death in the comics was unexpectedly a moneymaking sensation and

⁵⁵² De Haven, *Our Hero*, 6.

⁵⁵³ Daniels, *Superman*, 19. Gerard Jones notes that there are chronological inconsistencies in Siegel’s accounts of his creation of Superman. See Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, 109–10.

films and television tried to exploit that. The promoters of *Smallville* and *Man of Steel* exploited Jesus imagery for financial gain. Some Christians were suspicious, while others *used* Superman for evangelism. Superman does not *need* to be a Jesus figure; it is enough for him to be an inspiring symbol. Still, sometimes there are financial benefits to using Jesus parallels.

Earlier in this study, I referenced Thomas Andrae’s study “From Menace to Messiah: The Prehistory of the Superman in Science Fiction Literature.”⁵⁵⁴ One of the key contentions of my thesis—that Superman did not start as a Jesus figure—builds on the progression charted in Andrae’s article (and observed by others), as Andrae effectively demonstrated how Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s original radical version of Superman was turned into something else over time. Having said this, Andrae’s article was first published in 1980. In nearly four decades since, my study shows how the association between Superman and Jesus became further entrenched in the public consciousness in subsequent adaptations. It also shows the importance of distinguishing the films and the comics, because the former appropriated Christian imagery much more frequently. My study used the theoretical frameworks of allusion and intertextuality to evaluate the connections between Superman stories and Jesus. Although there have been other books that observed the parallels between Superman and Jesus in different media, not enough attention has been paid to tracking the progression over time and why it came about. Also, although many of the parallels between Superman and Judaism that this study covers have been written about before (and I follow Martin Lund by rejecting many of those interpretations), the specific correlation between Superman’s adoptive parents and all of the childless couples in the Hebrew Scriptures has not been tracked in the scholarly literature in depth before.

Finally, my study also makes a contribution to the subject matter by showing the interplay between Christians, churches, and film studios with this particular character. The

⁵⁵⁴ Andrae, “From Menace to Messiah,” 84–112.

ethical and theological implications of using popular media in sermons in the ways discussed in this paper pose a comparatively new set of issues in Christian history. It is one thing for a pastor to talk about popular culture to illustrate a point about Jesus in a sermon, but it is quite another to do so at the behest of a multinational corporation that wants the pastor to promote a movie at the same time. While Christian authors since Clement or Origen could compare Christians using Greek knowledge to the Israelites taking the spoils of Egypt,⁵⁵⁵ metaphorically speaking, they were not being asked to help sell Egyptian products while doing so. If Hollywood marketers continue to target Christians in this way, it remains to be seen if Christian pastors will continue to cooperate.

⁵⁵⁵ See Thomas Guarino, “‘Spoils from Egypt’: Contemporary Theology and Non-Foundationalist Thought,” *Laval théologique et philosophique* 51, no. 3 (1995): 573–87.

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