

Son of Man (of Steel): Messianic Imagery in Zach Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013)

Superman, also called Kal-El or Clark Kent, is a comic book superhero that emerged in the first issue of *Action Comics* in June 1938 (Siegel, 2013). Director Zack Snyder's film *Man of Steel* (2013), which is titled after one of Superman's most common nicknames, is a testament to how the character has adapted to remain relevant in American culture. The film not only rebooted the Superman franchise but also added an explicitly religious context to the story. Superman is heavily associated with Jesus Christ in the film, which may seem surprising to some viewers. However, as Peter Malone argues, "It is not fanciful to link films, even commercial Hollywood movies, to Christology" (21). Although it is a secular film, *Man of Steel* presents Superman as a cinematic savior for audiences just as a biblical film might offer Jesus Christ to its viewers. Superman's messianic nature did not initiate in *Man of Steel*, though, and it will likely continue to be explored beyond this particular film. From his roots in Judaism and eugenics as shown in *Action Comics #1* to his parallels with Jesus Christ in *Man of Steel*, Superman's distinct otherness has contributed to the character's messianic roles and lasting endurance in America.

Jewish Messianic Origins

Because of the time period when he was created and the ethnic identities of his creators, Superman began in *Action Comics #1* as a eugenically perfect American. According to Chris Gavalier in "The Well-Born Hero," eugenics, Latin for "well born," became a popular subject for research and literature starting in the 1880s. He also claims that Friedrich Nietzsche's eugenic concept of "Übermensch," or Supermen, "found its ultimate expression in Nazism" (Gavalier). It follows that the concept of perfected humanity would quickly go awry. Nazi Germany emphasized certain traits and denounced others because Adolf Hitler wanted a race of Aryan Supermen to emerge. The Jewish people did not fit into his ideal of perfection, and Hitler persecuted Jews across Europe during the Holocaust. Perhaps in defiance to Nazism, two Jewish Americans created a comic book Superman of eugenic perfection to stand opposed to people like Hitler. Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Jewish "children of immigrants from Eastern Europe," created Kal-El, an alien Superman raised with American values, for *Action Comics #1* (Jacobson 169). In an *Index On Censorship* piece, Howard Jacobson quotes Superman's adoptive father, who instructs him to "become a powerful force for good" "in co-operation with the law" and fight the "evil men in this world" (169). Because of this, Superman does not fight for the propagation of a race of Supermen as the Nazis did, but he stands for justice, law, and order. Siegel and Shuster subverted the Supermen concept to make a fictional superhuman messiah for Americans in a world on the brink of the Second World War.

Since Siegel and Shuster were Jewish, they likely drew on the biblical story of Moses to make Superman a Jewish messiah figure. Jacobson claims that comparison between Superman and Moses is unavoidable. He points out that the baby Moses avoiding the death edict for all Hebrew boys through secret adoption by Pharaoh's daughter is similar to the baby Kal-El escaping from the dying planet of Krypton to be adopted by the Kents in Smallville (Jacobson

168). Both Moses and Superman have secret origins and adoptive parents that enable them to live to become saviors for their peoples, so comparisons should clearly be drawn. *Action Comics #1* gives even more explicit evidence of their interconnection. In the very first panel of the comic, the narrator claims Kal-El was placed in “a hastily devised space-ship” to escape his dying planet (Shuster 3). This is likely a reference to the bulrush basket Moses was hidden in to escape the Pharaoh’s edict of death for Hebrew boys. Both children miraculously live through disasters by riding them out in hastily made craft. Even Kal-El’s name implies his Jewishness. “El” is Hebrew “ultimately for God,” so Judaism is undeniably a part of Superman’s mythos (Jacobson 169). Moses’s identity is hidden initially but he is empowered when he becomes the messenger for the God of Abraham, and, symbolically, Superman is likewise strengthened because of this. Superman’s creators therefore likely made him to be the Jewish victor over the anti-Semitic, eugenics-minded Nazis.

The superhero did not remain in this symbolic role for long, though. Although Superman originated as a Jewish hero, he eventually became a more Christian messiah figure. Superman’s likely unintended similarity to Jesus is perhaps more striking than his implicit ties to Moses. Moses, however empowered by God, is still only a man. Both Jesus and Superman, despite their human forms, are superhuman in some capacity. Jesus is the Son of God, and Superman is the last son of Krypton. Of course, the analogy only works to a point, for Jesus is not understood to be fictitious by those who follow Him and Superman is not deified, at least not literally, by those who follow his comic book exploits. However, comparing the two offers many possible parallels and subtexts. Perhaps because of this, Zack Snyder makes the similarities explicit in his 2013 Superman film, *Man of Steel*.

Jesus Christ and Superman

Since he is juxtaposed with Jesus Christ in *Man of Steel*, Superman is a Christ-figure in it. One of Malachi Martin’s definitions of a Christ-figure is “any representation of someone who resembles Jesus, significantly and substantially,” although such a figure does “not have to be Christian” or “interpreted by a Christian artist” (Malone 19-20). Snyder’s Superman (Henry Cavill) is clearly a Christ-figure because of the visual and contextual clues given in *Man of Steel*. Luke 3.23 says, “Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work,” and Kal-El tells American soldiers in the film that he has “been [on Earth] for thirty-three years” when he becomes Superman. The similarity in age cannot be ignored. When Superman shares his age, he is surrendering to humanity so that they can hand him over to the villainous General Zod (Michael Shannon) in exchange for humankind’s survival. This exchange is strongly analogous to Jesus sacrificing Himself on the cross only a few years after beginning His ministry. Perhaps the strongest image in Snyder’s film that links Jesus and Superman comes when Jor-El (Russell Crowe), Superman’s Kryptonian father, helps him escape from Zod’s spaceship. As Superman drifts into space to return to Earth, Jor-El says, “You can save all of them.” Superman extends his arms from his sides in a crucifix before going to save humanity from destruction. It is here that Superman is pictorially and symbolically the most like Jesus. Superman is a savior with his

arms extended outward, forfeiting his life for the betterment of humankind. Granted, Jesus dies without a fight then rises from the dead in the Bible while Superman fights and kills Zod in *Man of Steel*, but the two are clearly linked in said contexts.

In addition to being a Christ-figure, Snyder's Superman also fits the tropes of Jesus Christ portrayals in film. According to Blaine Charette, "It would not be an exaggeration to describe the history of Jesus in film as a story of filmmaker fascination and engagement with the interplay of the divine and human in the person of Jesus" (358). Snyder's interplay with Kal-El's human-superhuman identity duality easily fits into this treatment of Jesus in film. Even though he is a superhero, Superman struggles throughout *Man of Steel* with human problems like being a social outcast and choosing one's own path. Despite being an alien with superhuman abilities, he struggles with these very human issues all the same. In perhaps Superman's greatest moment of uncertainty, when the treacherous Zod calls for him to surrender in exchange for peace with Earth, Superman seeks guidance from a local pastor in a rural church. This moment shows that Superman is vulnerable emotionally and needs support in times of crises as all humans do. The scene bears strong similarity to Jesus' time in Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion. In Matthew 26.37-38, Jesus is "deeply grieved" about his coming self-sacrifice, so he asks three of his disciples to "remain...and stay awake with [Him]." One would not think that the Son of God would need human companionship, but that is exactly what Jesus seeks in the calm before his greatest trial. In the same way, this is what Superman seeks before his own coming hardship.

However, neither Jesus nor Superman is a mere mortal with an ordinary purpose in his respective medium. In the Bible, Jesus Christ is a faultless messiah who dies on a cross "like a lamb without defect or blemish" to redeem those who believe in Him (1 Peter 1.19). For followers of Jesus, this offers the hope of Heaven and an eternity with God after death. Being that Snyder's Superman is a Christ-figure, he offers a similar albeit less spiritual salvation to audiences by being the bold protector that Americans desire to have. Betsy Cummings claims that after 9/11, Americans began "looking for a positive force in life," which came in the form of *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002) and the many other superhero films that followed it. According to Jennifer James, superhero films' sudden popularity after 9/11 continues partly because of America's persisting anxiety about "the chaos of rapid change, loss of faith in leaders...and globalization" (Cummings). *Man of Steel* offers Superman as a salve to these issues, for he can transcend humanity and end problems that are beyond Earth's reach to solve. General Zod, at times a metaphor for Satan in Snyder's film, embodies the real world's sudden and unpredictable threat of terror. He does not heed humanity nor listen to their reasoning, and he cannot be stopped by any of Earth's militaries, even that of the United States of America. Unlike in the real world, though, Superman is a physical messiah in *Man of Steel* who can defeat this terror. Superman also supersedes unproductive government in the film, for he is outside of and beyond bureaucracy. In this time when the worry of invasive government surveillance is a key issue on the public conscience, Superman offers vicarious escape from all the overwhelming intrusion. When Superman finds that the U.S. government is searching for his hideout with a drone, he promptly destroys the drone, saying, "I'm here to help, but it has to be on my own terms." Thwarting the government seems like an odd move for such a patriotic superhero, but it makes sense given that he is its figurative alternative—an unstoppable and impeccable force of good.

Superman is not against America; the opposite is true. As Clark Kent, he was raised in Kansas, and, in his own words from the film, he is “about as American as it gets.” Also, although he could live anywhere on the globe, he decides to live and work in the American Midwest. This symbolically soothes fears that America is no longer special in the global market. If Superman chooses to reside in it, America must still be important and special in some way.

Superman has endured from 1938 to today because he has offered symbolic salvation to those in need of it from his inception until *Man of Steel*. As long as he continues to be a messiah figure while not losing his human element, he will likely continue to be a popular character. As Judaism looks to Moses and Christianity to Jesus, Americans can look to Superman as a beacon of hope. In *Man of Steel*, Jor-El says, “The symbol of the House of El means ‘hope,’” making the insignia on Superman’s costume a key element within the film. As Moses offers hope to those in oppression and Jesus offers hope to those in sin, Snyder’s Superman offers hope to those who want America to thrive again. The character’s adaptability to fit the needs of the times will likely preserve him long after *Man of Steel* until he adapts again to be the messiah that Americans need him to be.

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