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Watchmen

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Watchmen

Abstract

This is a review of *Watchmen* (2009).

Watchmen, a movie based on the best-selling graphic novel of the same name, is set in a dystopic 1985 America. Richard Nixon is in his 5th-term as President, the US won the Vietnamese war and is now at the brink of a nuclear holocaust with the USSR.

In New York City live a group of “masked avengers” named “Watchmen.” They are considered superheroes, although none of them have powers besides Dr. Manhattan. They have all been forced into retirement due to a law passed in 1977 banning costumed vigilantes. All of them have gone down different routes: Nite Owl feigns contentment; Silk Spectre is relieved; Ozymandias has profited off his success and Rorschach has refused the law and occasionally still dons his costume to fight crime. They are brought back together by a murder of one of their own: The Comedian.

Overshadowing them is the aforementioned Dr. Manhattan. A freak accident caused him to turn into a blue colored super-human that allows him (besides his limitless physical bounds) to teleport himself and others anywhere in the universe and to see in the future. He has been working for the American government since his accident in 1959. He is the embodiment of the human *ubermensch*, a concept invented by Friedrich Nietzsche who thinks that because God is dead, the *ubermensch*, a physically and mentally superior human who has yet to exist but is the goal of humanity, will come into being at some point and

create new human values. Dr. Manhattan is the one expected by all to prevent the impending nuclear disaster because only he has the capability. He is seen as God to some because he has more powers than the average superhero, although he does not believe in God because of humanity's suffering. And yet, he still has human feelings, such as the desire for intimacy and the feeling of shame.

Speaking of Friedrich Nietzsche, the famed German philosopher's influence features prominently in this film. The movie presents a nihilistic, doomsday world with an impending cosmological destruction. It also somewhat touches on the dilemma, probably more so in the book, about the necessity and merit of comic-book themed vigilantes. In particular, Rorschach's violent handling of several of his cases brings to mind the Nietzsche quote that is also found in the novel: "Battle not with monsters, lest ye become a monster, and if you gaze into the abyss, the abyss gazes also into you."

There are also numerous Judeo-Christian themes in *Watchmen*. The idea of superheroes is similar to the nephilim, referred to as "heroes of old, men of renown" in Genesis 6:4. They were the early protectors of Israel and the sight of them would cause people to fall. The "Watchmen" are also reminiscent of the judges from the Book of Judges, who pre-dated the Jewish kings as the guardians of God's people. Rorschach having his mask removed against his will is very similar to Delilah cutting Samson's hair. Samson loses the power God gave him, while Rorschach

loses his ability to intimidate others with the release of his secret identity. He actually cries out for the police officers who remove his mask to give him his “face” back.

It is easy to label any self-sacrificing character in movies/books/stories as Christological. However, Dr. Manhattan is, at the end of the film, very much a Christological figure. He allows himself to take the fall for the destruction of several major cities by the power of devices he created, even though it was Ozymandias who planted them without his knowledge. This was done to scapegoat Dr. Manhattan, who Ozymandias had framed for the explosions in the cities so the two superpowers could generate their angst off of each other and towards him. Doing this prevented a nuclear holocaust. Dr. Manhattan then “ascends,” by going to another galaxy, never to be seen again. There is even an element of the creation of a new world religion as Nite-Owl says at the end that at least the people will think that Dr. Manhattan will be watching over them.

Overall, *Watchmen* is an interesting study into the heroes that guard us and their moral dilemmas. Seeing the Hebrew Scripture parallels to super-human guardians, one has to wonder what God would think of masked vigilantes today. The movie does not answer that question, but it does give the viewer ample evidence for debate. Combining these elements with the intense violence that

permeates the movie and one has an unusual hybrid of a thinking person's-movie wrapped in an action/adventure-movie.