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## Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah

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# Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah

## **Abstract**

Holy subtexts abound within the popular cinema. *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and *Superman II* (1981) were examined as a protracted secular analogue of the Jesus story. The literature was reviewed and twenty Superman-Jesus parallels plus eight Christic personalistic traits were explicated. It was concluded that Superman is not only a legitimate Christ-figure, but the American pop culture movie Messiah.

## Introduction

Superman is considered "a universal icon,"<sup>1</sup> "the apocalyptic hero par excellence,"<sup>2</sup> and "the most omnipotent hero ever invented."<sup>3</sup> Scriptwriter Mario Puzo originally constructed *Superman: The Movie* (aka *Superman*, hereafter *S1*)<sup>4</sup> as a mythologic story based on "a Greek tragedy."<sup>5</sup> Later, other writers were hired and the script reshaped at director Richard Donner's insistence.<sup>6</sup> Donner initially disowned *Superman's* religious origins. Presumably because of duress: "I had life threats, because people accused me of approaching Brando as God and his son was Jesus...we had Scotland Yard, the FBI, and the LAPD looking in to them. I literally had people saying that my blood would run in the streets for doing that."<sup>7</sup>

However, many years later, Donner gladly admitted to the Christic subtext: "It's a motif I had done at the beginning when Brando sent Chris [Reeve] to Earth and said, 'I send them my only son.' It was God sending Christ to Earth."<sup>8</sup> It was a dramaturgical decision that made good sense, for just as Superman was literally a super-man, Jesus was "the ultimate Super Jew of his day,"<sup>9</sup> the "Christian super-hero,"<sup>10</sup> the pop culture "God with us" (Matt. 1:23).<sup>11</sup> Indeed, many Jesus-Superman parallels exist within *S1* and *S2* because both films were planned, scripted and partially shot back-to-back.

## Twenty Superman - Jesus Parallels

The filmmakers were able to build into their production(s) many parallels that incorporated direct character transpositions, sacred symbolism, verbal identifiers, Christic signifiers, divine colouring, biblical phraseology and scriptural allusions. For example:

### **1.0 Divine Paternity**

David Bruce considered the infant Kal-El (Lee Quigley) to be the only begotten son of Jor-El (Marlon Brando), thus forming the second member of the Holy trinity (Matt. 28:19).<sup>12</sup> Kal-El was the son of Jor-El just as Jesus was "the Son of God" (Mark 1:1; Heb. 10:29; 1 John 4:15). Indeed, in *Superman II* (hereafter S2), Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman) described Superman (Christopher Reeve) as "the son of Jor El" thereby mimicking the biblical form. To further establish the paternity of the Jor-El/Kal-El, God/Jesus, Father/Son relationship, the holographic Jor-El in the newly constructed Fortress of Solitude specifically referred to Kal-El as "my son" and to himself as "your father." Their indissoluble genetic link was further indicated by their respective hairstyles. The stately Jor-El, the teenage Clark Kent (Jeff East) and the adult Superman (but not the adult Clark Kent) had cute forelocks dangling upon their foreheads. This biological fact resonated with Jesus's identity claim that: "if ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also" (John 14:7).

## **2.0 Divine Diaspora**

Superman was an alien immigrant, and like a diaspora Jew, he was forced to leave his starry home (a threatened Krypton) to find a new life amongst strangers in a strange land (Earth). Later, he would again leave his home (Smallville) to live in the Arctic wilderness (ensconced inside the Fortress of Solitude). And then for a third time he would leave his Arctic home to live in a bustling urban city (Metropolis) going about his heavenly Father's (Jor-El's) work. Likewise, Jesus left his celestial home in the heavens to come to the Earth realm. Later, he left his rural home Nazareth (an ancient Smallville) to wander through desert wildernesses, followed by missionary work throughout the Roman-dominated world while doing his heavenly Father's (Yahweh's) work.

## **3.0 Earthly Existence**

Theologically speaking, the corporeal nature of Jesus is itself a sacred sign. The need for a deliverer "is expressed in the biblical messianic hope that God would send his Messiah in the form of a single human being, a person just like us, who could speak to us and show us, through human words and deeds, the way to the truth and the life."<sup>13</sup> Superman was the fictional, secular equivalent of that sacred hope. As E. G. Marshall (playing the US President in *S2*) confessed: "Eventually, one day, we'll make contact with that [extraterrestrial] life, and I think that's part of

the attraction of Superman...the chance--the hope, even--that there is a superbeing, a form of superman, that there is an intelligence greater than our own."<sup>14</sup> Christians call this intelligence God.

#### 4.0 Divine Signature Signs

After his starship crash-landed in a field, baby Kal-El (Aaron Sholinski) emerged totally naked (symbolic of birth) from its womb-like cave within a rural setting (analogous to Jesus's humble stable manger). His small arms were outstretched in a cruciform posture, the unmistakable signature sign of Jesus Christ. To confirm his alien nature, the extraterrestrial baby physically lifted the back of the disabled truck belonging to his astonished, and soon-to-be foster parents.

Interestingly, Christopher Reeve had bright blue eyes. This is part of a long tradition of celluloid saviours having blue eyes. For example, Jeffrey Hunter in *King of Kings* had "dreamy blue eyes,"<sup>15</sup> Jurgen Prochnow in *The Seventh Sign* had "piercing blue eyes,"<sup>16</sup> while Father Peter Malone complained that Robert Powell's eyes in *Jesus of Nazareth* "were too blue."<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the *Superman* filmmakers were faithful to the sacred cinema conventions of Jesus. However, biblically speaking, there is no physical description of Jesus, let alone his eye-colour, but being a Jew of Jewish parentage and environment, one images that Semitic brown eyes would be the norm.

## 5.0 Costume Symbolism and the Significance of Blue

Superman's gaudy tricot costume consisted of a blue-suit, red-cape and yellow-accessories. However, Lex Luthor facetiously referred to Superman as "the blue boy" in *S2*, while a newspaper article referred to the Man of Steel as a "blue bomb" in *S1*. Indeed, on his first day on the job, Clark Kent wore a dark blue, three-piece suit, a dark blue hat, a light blue shirt, and a blue-stripped necktie! Why ignore his other signature colours? Biblically speaking, blue is the symbolic colour of "the heavenly origins of Christ (as the sky is blue)."<sup>18</sup> Blue is also "the color of the divine, of truth, and of fidelity (in the sense of clinging to truth, as well as with reference to the fixed firmament of heaven)...blue is also a purity symbol."<sup>19</sup> These are attributes of both Jesus and Superman, and it may help explain the frequent deployment of blue-eyed cinematic saviours.

## 6.0 Divine Naming

In "the comic books 'Kal-El' is Kryptonian for 'Star Child' - which ties into the Child of the Christmas Star."<sup>20</sup> This child is Jesus (Matt. 1:25), the divine child from the stars whose other name was "Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us" (Matt. 1:23). Superman miraculously arrived, preordained, on terra firma as a star-child inside a spaceship that physically looked like a Christmas star. When Lois Lane (Margot Kidder) was flying with Superman in *S1* she thought of him as

"a friend from another star," just like Jesus being referred to as the "bright and morning star" (Rev. 22:16).

The Lord once claimed that: "I am Alpha and Omega" (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13), and so it is significant that in *S2*, Luthor could only track Superman using his alpha wave detector. The earthly name Clark Kent instead of his Kryptonian name Kal-El (or Earth variant) was given him by his earthly parents and adopted by Superman for his day-to-day human persona. This naming choice resonated with the difference between the earthly name of "Jesus" (Matt. 1:25) given him by his foster father Joseph, and "Emmanuel" (Mat. 1:23), the name given him by the Angel of the Lord. The title-cum-name "Superman" was also equivalent to Jesus's title-cum-name "Christ."

To subtly reinforce his Christic nature, in *S1*, a car driver who was interrupted by Superman's street drilling spontaneously cried out "Gee!" (aka "Jee!"). This is a euphemistic corruption of "either "Jesus!" or "God"...the origins of this word are known to few of its users."<sup>21</sup> Further slang religious associations occurred when the train driver discovered the collapsed railway tracks and spontaneously cried out "Holy Mackerel!" This mock religious oath implied the summoning a sacred being, and lo and behold, Superman came to their timely rescue.

The Jewish influence of Superman's name and occupation can also be detected "in the suffix - man, a suffix common to many contemporary Jewish names (e.g., Silverman, Freedman, etc)."<sup>22</sup> After Superman rescued the fallen child at Niagara Falls in *S2*, a soft, unidentified voice from the crowd answered an unasked question with: "Of course he's Jewish." Interestingly, the Hebrew origin of Super is Sopher which means scribe. "One has only to recall that Superman's alter ego, Clark Kent, was in daily life a mild-mannered reporter - a modern scribe - for the *Daily Planet*."<sup>23</sup>

## 7.0 Superman-Jesus-Star Associations

During the alien nativity scene in *S1*, Kal-El "is wrapped in swaddling clothes in a space-age manger which, with its sunburst arrangement of crystals surrounding it, very much resembles the way Christ is often portrayed in pictures and statues."<sup>24</sup> He is then launched into space on his voyage of rebirth inside the heart of a crystalline rocket that looked like a Christmas nativity star. This interstellar vehicle was variously described as "a blend of crib and Magi star,"<sup>25</sup> "an unearthly manger,"<sup>26</sup> or a "little star-of-Bethlehem spaceship."<sup>27</sup> Millions of miles later, the starship finally streaked through Earth's atmosphere with an unnatural arc. It initially entered in a West-to-East direction and then abruptly changed course to an East-to-West direction before crash-landing in a rural field and allowing baby Kal-El to emerge.

Similarly, Jesus's earthly birth was announced by "his star in the east" (Matt. 2:2) that acted unnaturally "where the young child was" (Matt. 2:9). The Star of Bethlehem as a signpost of baby Jesus's location is forever linked together in Christian folklore. The star motif was also filmically prefigured with "the most interesting and justifiably famous title sequence in the recent history of film: a series of crystalline streaks coalesce into the words comprising the titles."<sup>28</sup> Both Jesus and Superman were blazing examples of moral and spiritual light upon a darkened planet, and both became popular "stars" in their day.

### **8.0 The Mystical Age**

Thirty years of age is when Jesus started his messianic mission (Luke 3:23) having "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52). Clark Kent walked into the Fortress of Solitude as a physically fit but troubled eighteen-year-old teenager. Twelve years later, at age thirty, Superman flew out with "a clear idea of his messianic mission to battle evil and save Earth from its own foolishness."<sup>29</sup> Superman's age was not specifically mentioned in *SI*, in fact, it was deliberately avoided to protect his identity. One had to calculate it ( $18+12=30$ ), but in the various screen tests attached to the special edition of *SI*, Superman clearly stated that he was thirty-years-old, thus leaving no numerical doubt of his Christic nature.

## 9.0 Shared Life Biographies

Both Superman and Jesus had earthly family ties, both had heavenly origins, both heroes were raised incognito on Earth, both were of "royal" blood, both righted wrongs, both acted as saviours, both displayed incredible powers, and both performed miracles. In fact, when Superman rescued Lois and the crashing helicopter, an anonymous TV commentator called it a "miraculous saving." These two terms resonated with the concept of the "miraculous," a Christic quality with Jesus being considered a miracle worker, and "saving," a Christian right of passage-cum-state of grace.

Both protagonists had normal lives and day jobs in addition to their miraculous deeds-cum-missions. Superman was a rural high school student-cum-shy, bespectacled reporter for the *Daily Planet*, while Jesus was a rural boy-cum-carpenter (Mat. 13:55; Mark 6:3), then wandering Rabbi-preacher. Just as Clark Kent rubbed shoulders with his journalist peers who reported upon the activities of Superman, Jesus kept company with Mathew and John, the Gospel writers who reported upon the activities of the Messiah. Both alter-egos had fully developed personalities and private lives, indeed, Clark Kent was Superman's alter-ego, not the other way around, just as the Christ was the primary personality living a Jesus life.

Just as major details about Jesus's earthly life prior to his adult mission are missing in the Bible, major details about Superman's earthly life prior to his adult mission are missing in the films. When such details are briefly glimpsed, it demonstrated wondrous abilities. For example, young Jesus lectured to the doctors in the Jerusalem Temple and astonished them (Luke 2:42-51), whereas baby Clark lifted up a truck and astonished Johnathan (Glenn Ford) and Martha Kent (Phyllis Thaxter). Likewise, the teenage Clark could kick a football an incredible distance, and outrun both a train and a school friend's car. Indeed, Pa Kent gently counselled Clark for "showing off" claiming that: "You are here for a reason," just like Jesus was sent to Earth for a sacred reason. Both protagonists, despite difficulties, doubts and anxieties eventually accepted, and fulfilled, their respective earthly missions.

### **10.0 Divine Calling**

The eighteen-year-old Clark Kent is "tormented by a mysterious inner call from the north... [and] he tells his mother he must be about his father's business."<sup>30</sup> As Superman explained to Lois in *S2*, the Kryptonian green crystal "called to me." So, he left his idyllic idealic rural home for an Arctic wilderness, just like Jesus did when "the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness" (Mark 1:12).

### **11.0 Divine Guidance and Training**

Jesus had angels ministering to him (Matt. 4:11; Mark 1:13), which also resonated with Jesus's claim that: "I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me" (John 8:16). Likewise, during his Kryptonian training in the Fortress of Solitude, Superman was ministered to by his Father Jor-El (along with Lara (Susannah York), and the bald, male Krypton Elder (John Hollis) in *S2* - the product of an unresolved contractual dispute with Marlo Brando). The holographic Jor-El was a "bard among the bergs"<sup>31</sup> that some interpreted as "Jor-El's spirit"<sup>32</sup> or just "the enduring spirit."<sup>33</sup> The spectacularly illuminated ghostly apparition of Jor-El resonated with the account of Jesus's communication with the ghosts of Elias and Moses (Matt. 17:2-3; Mark 9:2-4), and with God coming to Moses like "a thick cloud" (Exod. 19:9). Some critics even labelled Kal-El's training as "a twelve-year spiritual retreat."<sup>34</sup>

These divine training sessions also resonated with Jesus' claim of the many things "my Father hath taught me" (John 8:28). Jor-El's cosmic discourse resulted in further pseudo-biblical rhetoric in which he "spells out the messianic mission."<sup>35</sup> In fact, he is "quite explicit in its use of Johannine language about the relationship between Father and Son."<sup>36</sup> Namely: "They only need the light to show them the way. For this reason, and this reason only, I have sent you, my only son."<sup>37</sup> Thus paraphrasing John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son." Jor-El claimed that Superman was "the light to show them [humanity] the

way." This resonated with the description of Jesus as "the light of the world" (John 8:12) who came to show humanity the way from sin and suffering (Luke 4:18).

### **12.0 Divine Mission**

Superman came from the planet Krypton, which in Greek means "hidden, secret,"<sup>38</sup> just like the mythic location of Heaven. It also "sounds like "Tikkum olam" a Hebrew concept of restoring [correcting] the world's wrongs."<sup>39</sup> This theme was reinforced by Jor-El in the Arctic Fortress of Solitude when he told Kal-El that his destiny and duty was to help right the wrongs of a troubled Earth. Similarly, Jesus was an off-world visitor of unspecified location who came to Earth to right cosmic wrongs with a God-inspired message of love. He left the planet with an expectation of a Second Coming, and a religio-political agenda that advocated God above Rome using the coin of love. Within *S2*, this Messianic "return" expectation was partially fulfilled near the end of the film when Superman apologised to the US President for being away so long. Thus implying "that Jesus has never been indifferent to our sorrows but that urgent reasons of his own have kept him away."<sup>40</sup>

Superman is the invincible crusader devoted to "truth, justice, and the American way." Not for his own self-glorification, but acting like Jesus who claimed: "I seek not mine own glory" (John 8:50). Indeed, Superman was the guardian of Earth, its tireless servant who resisted many temptations and was

therefore loved and adored by the people because of it. This resonated with the Apostle Paul's claim of Christ's humility who "took upon him the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7), and generated millions of followers worldwide as a consequence of his self-imposed servitude.

### **13.0 An Inverted Baptism**

Superman experienced an inverted baptism in *S2*. He willingly entered the Fortress's crystal chamber and was decommissioned via "a mystical baptism of light that saps his superpowers."<sup>41</sup> This event is antithetical to the experience of Jesus Christ who was baptised in water by John the Baptist and the Holy Spirit, thus earning divine approval from God for his mission (Matt. 3:16-17).

### **14.0 Evil Tempting Good**

Like the biblical Satan did to Jesus (Matt. 4:8-9), Luthor in *S1* tempted Superman with an indirect offer of a worldly kingdom. This was refused, just as Jesus refused the Devil's offer (Matt. 4:10). It also mirrored Jor-El's refusal when General Zod offered him greatness (second only to Zod), if he joined their rebel band prior to his imminent banishment into the Phantom Zone. In *S2*, Luthor attempted another partnership with Superman in the Fortress of Solitude during, and after, the defeat of the evil triumvirate, but again without success. Christopher Reeve claimed: "What makes Superman a hero is not that he has power, but that he

has the wisdom and the maturity to use that power wisely. From an acting point of view, that's how I approach the part."<sup>42</sup> Jesus acted in a similar responsible fashion.

### **15.0 The Truthful Preacher**

Jesus preached to both the good and the bad. Likewise, Superman preached to both the good and the bad. For example, he used theological concepts when he said to police officer Mooney (George Harris II), while handing over his cat burglar prisoner (David Baxt): "They say confession is good for the soul." Superman was also amenable to being questioned, as demonstrated by his sit-down interview with Lois Lane where he was able to skillfully deflect tricky personal questions, such as revealing his age. He also engaged in his own wickedly coy game of answering Lois's double entendre questions. Likewise, Jesus was able to deflect tricky questions (Matt. 22:16-22). Indeed, Superman claimed to Lois that he never lied, which was reinforced by Lex Luthor in *S2* when he said that Superman "always told the truth." This resonated strongly with Jesus's claim: "I tell you the truth" (John 8:45).

### **16.0 The Non-Author**

Perry White (Jackie Cooper) considered Clark Kent to be the fastest typist he had seen in forty years in the journalism business, and claimed that Clark had a "snappy, punchy prose style." Yet, we never see any actual professional writing

from reporter Clark, let alone Superman. This resonated with the fact that Jesus never left behind any writings directly authored by him (as opposed to many reports about him, and the sayings attributable to him).

### **17.0 The Miracle Man**

Superman saved Lois Lane by flying very fast above the Earth's atmosphere and reversing the planet's axial spin. Consequently, Lois's crushing death was corrected when "time is turned back and Lois resurrected."<sup>43</sup> Superman had demonstrated control over the physical world just like Jesus who could calm wild winds (Matt. 8:26; 14:32), quell sea tempests (Matt. 8:23-27), and walk on water (Matt. 14:25, 28-31). Symbolically speaking, Superman had to go beyond Earth to the heavens to achieve his most miraculous effect. When he resurrected Lois, he acted like Jesus who brought back from the dead, the ruler's daughter (Matt. 9:23-35), the only son of the widowed mother (Luke 7:11-15), and Lazarus (John 11:41-44). Less spectacularly but still significant, Superman could not be held up by crowds, as evidenced prior to his drilling entry through the main street into Luthor's underground lair. Likewise, Jesus could pass through crowds easily (Luke 4:29-30).

As to the truth of his powers, the fundamental question was posed by a TV reporter at Superman's first public appearance in *SI*: "Your guess is good as

anybody's. True or false? Miracle or fraud? The answer is up to you. Man or myth" [my emphasis]. The same questions are asked about Jesus Christ, but if the answer can be taken from the first word order pattern, then there can be only one conclusion, he was a True Miracle Man.

### **18.0 Divine Death, Destruction and Symbolism**

Christians today usually wear crosses around their necks, a stylised symbol of the Roman instrument of Jesus's slow and agonising death. Likewise, Superman was slowly being put to death by Lex Luthor when he exposed him to lethal green Kryptonite. A chain with an attached piece of it was placed around his neck as both the cause and sign of Superman's slow, agonising death. Following Jesus's crucifixion, he was placed in a burial tomb/sepulchre (John 19:41-42). Superman's intended resting-place was a water-filled cavernous swimming pool-cum-tomb which Luthor pushed Superman into. Why this watery death? Presumably because water baptism is also a symbol of Christ's death and burial (Rom. 6:4).

At Jesus's death, earthquakes occurred (Matt. 27:54). While Superman is slowly dying and near death, Lex Luthor left him to monitor the two nuclear missiles he had launched to create devastating earthquakes in California and New Jersey. Just as Jesus experienced a resurrection from his grave site (John 20), Superman was resurrected from his grave site. Consequently, "Superman emerges

from the water and, in another symbolic rebirth, regains his powers and saves New Jersey from Luthor's missile."<sup>44</sup> The missile that Superman could not stop in time hit the San Andreas fault causing massive destruction, and the subsequent death of Lois Lane when her car is sucked into the fault-line crevice caused by the detonation shock wave.

According to Matthew 27:52-53, these Jesus-related earthquakes caused graves to be opened, and miraculously, many bodies of the saints that slept arose and went into the holy city and appeared unto many. Likewise, the dead Lois Lane trapped in her earthquake-caused car-tomb is subsequently saved by Superman's time reversal trick, and so she returns to all her friends in the wilderness and eventually back to work in Metropolis. At one point, Superman had dived into the molten magma to repair the earthquake missile damage. It was an act that resonated with the "Apostle's Creed [which] states Jesus descended into Hades following the cross."<sup>45</sup>

### **19.0 The Despised Jesus**

After Superman escaped from the unholy triumvirate and disappeared in S2, the people quickly became angry and disillusioned about his fleeing absence. Some claiming he had "chickened out" and was therefore a "phoney." Jesus experienced similar crowd disapproval over his life, work, death and yet-to-be-realised Second

Coming (Acts 1:11). The faithful quickly dissolved away from both Jesus and Superman at these times of adversity and failed saviour expectations.

### **20.0 The Ascended Jesus, the Risen Christ, the Flying Superman**

The triumphantly ascended Jesus left his earthly disciples "gazing up into heaven" (Acts 1:11). He was to benevolently watch over us all, assured in the knowledge that his mission as the undisputed "Savior of the world" (John 4:42) was a success. Similarly, in *S1*, Superman triumphantly left his earthly "disciples" and second earthly family, Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen (Marc McClure), gazing at him as he flew upwards to glory among the stars. He benevolently watched over the planet Earth assured in the knowledge that the world (particularly America) was safe now that its greatest guardian was on the job again. He did the same thing at the end of *S2*.

Just as Superman was left suspended in the air with an unsure expectation of things to come at films end, the audience is similarly left in suspense about what is to come. However, hints of his assured second cinematic coming were given in the rolling credits advertising *S2*'s existence. This was just like the Apostles who were unsure about what was to happen after Jesus's ascension, but with a certain promise of Jesus's Second Coming (Acts 1:11). Indeed, some critics saw the infant Kal-El's departure from Krypton as a proto-ascension that mystically bookend the

divine narrative: "As his parents gaze solemnly on, he is raised up, like a priest elevating the host of the consecration or like Christ himself being raised to the heavens in the ascension...like the Christian savior, he will work for truth, justice, and, in this case, the 'American way'."<sup>46</sup> Nor do these sacred-secular parallels stop here, for there are also many Jesus-Superman personalistic traits worthy of explication.

### **Eight Personalistic Christic Traits of Superman**

The filmmakers were also able to build into the Superman character a number of prescriptive and proscriptive behaviours indicative of the biblical Jesus Christ. For example:

#### **1.0 Humbleness**

Jesus was a humble rabbi, "meek and lowly" (Matt. 11:29). In *S1*, Perry White complained that Clark Kent had "bags of humility" (and implied this was a fault). In fact, Christopher Reeve deliberately portrayed his character as a gentle soul: "The Superman I wanted to play - the only one I could play - was a low-key one. Very warm, very friendly, very accessible and not at all impressed with himself."<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the cat-rescue scene in *S1* was deliberately "designed to demonstrate Superman's humility and humanity."<sup>48</sup>

## 2.0 Gentleness

Jesus could be gentle, and had once commanded: "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Matt. 5:39). This behavioural prescription was dramatically enacted (albeit reversed) when Clark Kent and Lois Lane were being robbed in the Metropolis side alley. Clark was exceptionally mild-mannered and very accommodating to the robber's evil demands. He prominently displayed his left cheek to the robber many times, and then he vigorously turned and prominently displayed the other cheek straight after capturing the accidentally fired bullet. Some critics considered that his behaviour bordered "on the imbecilic."<sup>49</sup> However, this Christic personalistic trait was to be repeatedly confirmed elsewhere. For example, in *S2*, General Zod referred to Superman as an "imbecile," Ursa called him a "sentimental idiot," Lois Lane counseling Clark to be "more aggressive" (as did Perry White in *S1*), and even Clark self-depreciatingly argued that he was "supposed to be the shy one."

For other critics, these behaviours confirmed that Superman was "unabashedly Christian down to the incarnational form of 'mild-mannered reporter, Clark Kent'."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, when Clark demonstrated restraint, and faster-than-a-speeding-bullet catching behaviour against the armed robber, he had imitated miraculous caution. Superman could have used his super-powers against the robber

at any time, just like Jesus who claimed: "Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Matt. 26:53). However, both Jesus and Superman had different agendas than demonstrating their fantastic brute power.

### **3.0 Friendliness**

Christopher Reeve deliberately accentuated the friendship trait: "When Lois Lane asks, 'Who are you?' Superman simply responds, 'A friend.' I felt that was the key to the part: I tried to downplay being a hero and emphasize being a friend."<sup>51</sup> It was a dramaturgical decision that enhanced the Christomorphic resonance of Superman, especially as it recalled all those Christian hymns that proclaimed: "We have a friend in Jesus." It also provided a behavioural link with his father Jor-El who sincerely used the endearment "friend" to address one of his unsupportive fellow Kryptonian council members. The Jor-El usage of "friend" here also resonated with the legal nicety of calling one's opponent a friend.

### **4.0 Goodness**

Not only was Superman an idealised Christian friend, but Christopher Reeve deliberately played him with a goodness streak: "I want Superman to be somebody that, you know, you can invite home for dinner...someone you can introduce your parents to."<sup>52</sup> Indeed, we "see in Superman the perfect, upright, nice

guy, no pretensions bogging him down, no sir, it's off to fight the bad guys and that's it."<sup>53</sup> In fact, he is repeatedly "shown as a man that honours his parents, treats his coworkers with respect, is sexually chaste as far as romance is concerned, and genuinely cares about the welfare and safety of others...it is refreshing to spend time in a world where sin has consequences, evildoers are punished, good is rewarded, and traditional moral values are seen as good and honorable."<sup>54</sup> Clark Kent also reflected this goodness trait with Lois Lane in *S2* claiming: "Isn't he a nice guy," especially when he acted as her personal servant!

An unidentified woman observer at Niagara Falls in *S2* similarly said of Superman after he rescued the fallen boy: "What a nice man." Indeed, Superman symbolised goodness and acted as a benevolent big brother throughout both films. Even Miss Teschmacher (Valerie Perrine) indirectly confirmed it by saying: "Why can't I ever get it on with the good guys?" Clark's goodness is also indicated when he sent his silver-haired mother half of his regular pay when he started work at the Daily Planet. Not surprisingly, Superman was variously tagged as: (a) an "overgrown boy scout" by Lex Luthor, and Otis (Ned Beatty) in *S2*; (b) "Peter Pan" by Lois relaying Clark's assessment of Superman; (c) the "blue boy" and "Mr. Wonderful" by Luthor; (d) "Mr. Wonderful" by Lois after her Niagara Falls swim in *S2*; and (e) a "super man" by Lois Lane. This latter event was the catalyst for irrevocably labeling him as the eponymous "Superman."

## 5.0 A Caring and Upright Man

Lois Lane told Jimmy Olsen that: "Superman cares for everybody Jimmy," just like Jesus. Although both Miss Teschmacher and Lois were sexually available to Superman, he did not capitalise upon it. Indeed, Superman saw himself as a practical force for social good. After delivering Luthor and Otis to prison, he told the warden (Roy Stevens) that they were both on the "same team," thus fulfilling Jor-El's original desire for his son to "serve collective humanity." Just like Jesus did in his saviour, redeemer and cosmic law-enforcer roles, and who also claimed: "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God' (Matt. 5:9). In *S2*, both General Zod and Ursa are amazed that Superman actually "cares for humanity" and speculated that it was some sort of pet relationship.

## 6.0 An Outsider

Both Superman and Jesus were outsiders. They were both in the world but not of the world. Superman was totally an extraterrestrial (albeit Earth socialised), while Jesus could be seen as a human-alien hybrid, the fusion of an Earth woman, the Virgin Mary and "the Holy Ghost" (Matt. 1:18,20), presumably a non-human entity. Like "Clark, Jesus does not 'fit' well into the human world; he is alien,"<sup>55</sup> and who once firmly claimed: "I am from above...I am not of this world" (John 8:23). Superman's outsider status was filmically indicated in numerous ways.

For example: (a) on Krypton, Jor-El said of Kal-El: "He will look like them" and Lara quickly retorted: "He won't be one of them;" (b) when Pa Kent said to Ma Kent that baby Kal-El's family was "not around here;" (c) when his football player rival (Brad Flock) called the adolescent Clark an "oddball;" (d) when Jor-El said of Kal-El at their first holographic meeting in the Fortress of Solitude: "Even though you have been raised as a human being, you are not one of them;" (e) when Clark is asked by Lois: "Any more like you?" and he truthfully responded: "Not really, no;" and (f) after Superman had saved Lois and the crashing helicopter, Lex Luthor emphatically claimed: "He's not from this world!" Christians make similar claims about Jesus Christ.

### **7.0 A Dual Identity**

Both Superman and Jesus had double identities, and both kept vital secrets from the world for years. As gentle Jesus was the powerful messianic Christ, so mild-mannered Clark Kent was the quasi-omnipotent Man of Steel. As Clark was the mask of the Man of Steel, Jesus was the mask of God. Clark needed to protect his true identity as Superman, just like Jesus who tasked his disciples not to reveal his true identity as the Christ (Mark 8:30). Why? Because Superman's crime-fighting ability would be severely impaired if his secret identity was known and loved ones threatened (e.g., the still surviving Ma Kent and Daily Planet coworkers). Conversely, according "to scholars, a similar "messianic secret" lies at

the heart of the Gospel of Mark."<sup>56</sup> One imagines Jesus's earthly mission being in peril from both Romans and Jews before he was ready to reveal himself to a hostile world.

### **8.0 Divine Testiness: The Darker Side of Light**

Gentle Jesus could turn into a holy vandal and violently drive out money-changers from God's house (John 2:15). He also used holy invectives like: "O generation of vipers" (Matt. 3:7; 12:34; Luke 3:7), "ye serpents, ye generation of vipers" (Matt. 23:33), and "hypocrites!" (Matt. 23:13,14,15,23,25,27,29). Similarly, Clark Kent could turn into Superman and battle all manner of evil with as much brutish force as needed. For example, he disrespectfully grabbed the greedy Lex Luthor and violently threw him around his subterranean lair. He also called him a "warped brain," a "sick twisted dreamer," and a "diseased maniac." This invective trend continued in *S2* when Superman called the treacherous Luthor a "poisonous snake" and a "lying weasle."

After Superman's Kryptonian revivification in *S2*, Clark deliberately picked a fight with the bullying trucker Rocky (Pepper Martin) in Don's Diner by calling him "garbage," and then subsequently kicked "the kryptonite out of him."<sup>57</sup> However, after Clark's pugilistic satisfaction, he promptly paid for the damages which was certainly more Christian of him than the scriptural Jesus demonstrated

towards the ancient Temple managers. Ironically, in a previous scene, the nasty Rocky was referred to as "Mr. Wonderful" by the diner waitress (Pamela Mandell). Similarly, Lex Luthor called Superman "Mr. Wonderful" as did Lois Lane in *S2*. This complex verbal-visual association implied little difference between a brutal human and a Kryptonian powerhouse intent on payback.

### **The Value of Holy Subtexts and Cinematic Theology**

Seeing biblical resonances in secular films may seem a theological heresy, but it is a legitimate activity. As Paul Leggett argued:

Some have seen the Superman image as a substitute, pop image messiah. Yet the value of Superman is that he is a messianic symbol, as valid for our time as Charlemagne or Sir Galahad were in the medieval period. The symbol doesn't substitute as an alternate reality, but points to a greater reality, albeit one it never fully expresses.<sup>58</sup>

Although Prof. Harold Brown expressed disquiet about using popular films in the classroom, he was not adverse to their moral development application: "Superman should encourage us to try to exhibit not unreal virtues, but real ones. We may be greeted with derision - but inevitably also with imitation."<sup>59</sup> Indeed, as Prof. Margaret Miles argued: "Contemporary movies can be seen as part of a long tradition in which images have been used to produce emotion, to strengthen attachment, and to encourage imitation."<sup>60</sup> So, we should be capitalising upon this reality in our religious work. In fact:

Jesus' parting words were to go into all the world (Matthew 28:19). That means not only India and China, but also New York and Los Angeles. God is calling "pop culture missionaries," as well as people committed to praying for those working in arts and entertainment. The only requirement is love for Christ and a willingness to be real and honest with unchurched people.<sup>61</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The SF Superman cannot be viewed in quite the same light ever again. No wonder he was considered "a sexy, humanized, and Americanized Jesus."<sup>62</sup> Superman was the secularisation of the Judeo-Christian mythos with American nationalism replacing Judaic ethnocentrism. Tapping into this monomyth substructure is a big part of the secret of the films enduring success. As committed Christian writer Barbara Nicolosi put it: "everybody who works here [Hollywood] knows that the real power in movies is the subtext."<sup>63</sup> Indeed, there are many hidden religious figurations within popular films,<sup>64</sup> and many more still wait to be discovered, but this is inevitable for as Revd. Robert Ellis argued: "we shall sometimes stumble across the gospel traveling incognito in some celebrated box office hit. Such a joyful discovery is reason enough to take seriously this powerful and popular medium."<sup>65</sup> One can only agree with him.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniels, 1998, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Cohen, 1980, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Pringle, 1987, p. 441.

<sup>4</sup> *S1* is the default film when discussing narrative episodes if not identified. *S2* will be mentioned specifically as appropriate. The various TV, video, special edition, and DVD versions of *S1* and *S2* vary considerably and will not be discussed herein.

<sup>5</sup> Daniels, 1998, p. 140.

<sup>6</sup> Petrou, 1978, p. 51.

<sup>7</sup> Plume, 2001, p. 2.

<sup>8</sup> Harrington & Kavitsky, 2000, p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce, 2001, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Scott, 1987, p. 143.

<sup>11</sup> All scriptural quotes refer to the Authorised King James Version of the Bible.

<sup>12</sup> Bruce, 2001, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Short, 1983, p. 42.

<sup>14</sup> Petrou, 1978, p. 105.

<sup>15</sup> Medved & Medved, 1980, p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Pardi, 1988, p. 421.

<sup>17</sup> Malone, 1989, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> Owen, Grist & Dowling, 1992, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Matthews, 1990, p. 25.

<sup>20</sup> Bruce, 2001, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Spears, 1982, p. 168.

<sup>22</sup> Brower, 1979, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Brower, 1979, p. 23.

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, 1983, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Malone, 1988, p. 62.

<sup>26</sup> Short, 1983, p. 40.

<sup>27</sup> Kozloff, 1981, p. 79.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson, 1985, p. 201.

<sup>29</sup> Menville, Reginald & Burgess, 1985, p. 56.

<sup>30</sup> Menville, Reginald & Burgess, 1985, p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> Blake, 1979, p. 15.

<sup>32</sup> Bookbinder, 1982, p. 233.

<sup>33</sup> Petrou, 1978, p. 72.

<sup>34</sup> Bookbinder, 1982, p. 233.

<sup>35</sup> MacDonald, 1991, p. 122.

<sup>36</sup> Malone, 1997, p. 80.

<sup>37</sup> Short, 1983, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> Danker, 2000, p. 570.

<sup>39</sup> Bruce, 2001, p. 1

<sup>40</sup> Kozloff, 1981, p. 81.

<sup>41</sup> Nash & Ross, 1987, p. 3222.

<sup>42</sup> Petrou, 1978, p. 83.

<sup>43</sup> Combs, 1979, p. 34.

<sup>44</sup> Lederman, 1979, p. 243.

<sup>45</sup> Bruce, 2001, p. 6.

<sup>46</sup> Anderson, 1983, p. 25.

<sup>47</sup> Hunter, 1987, p. 147.

<sup>48</sup> Petrou, 1978, p. 121.

<sup>49</sup> Craven, 1979, p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> Leggett, 1980, p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Reeve, 1998, p. 197.

<sup>52</sup> Petrou, 1978, p. 85.

<sup>53</sup> Anderson, 1985, p. 200.

<sup>54</sup> Heyn, 2001, p. 2.

<sup>55</sup> Aichele, 1997, p. 96.

<sup>56</sup> Cohen, 1980, p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> Step, 1983, npn.

<sup>58</sup> Leggett, 1980, p. 33.

<sup>59</sup> Brown, 1979, p. 27.

<sup>60</sup> Miles, 2001, p. 70.

<sup>61</sup> Nasfell, 2000, p. 35.

<sup>62</sup> Kozloff, 1981, p. 82.

<sup>63</sup> Nicolosi, 2001, p. 73.

<sup>64</sup> Kozlovic, 2000, 2001a, 2001b.

<sup>65</sup> Ellis, 2001, p. 308.

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