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# THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARVEL

by John McAteer

## SYNOPSIS

Over the past decade, there has been a revival of interest in comic book superheroes, driven in large part by the Disney-owned Marvel Comics brand, publishers of such characters as Spider-Man, the X-Men, the Avengers, and more. Every culture has had its own heroes, from Hercules to King Arthur to the Lone Ranger, but the phenomenal popularity of Marvel superheroes in recent years suggests that Marvel's unique approach to envisioning heroism is, for better or worse, feeding some sort of spiritual hunger in American culture. In the 1960s, Marvel transformed the entire comic book industry by introducing heroes who were ordinary people that found themselves with unique abilities and struggled to overcome personal weaknesses to use those abilities for the benefit of those in need. Marvel's attempt to ground their heroes in a more realistic world than other superheroes led to at least two questionable results. First, the Marvel universe tends to avoid genuinely supernatural phenomena, instead explaining unusual events in science fiction terms. Second, as popular culture has coarsened in the decades since the 1960s, Marvel's flawed heroes have had to become more violent to maintain their apparent psychological realism. This means that comic books are now less appropriate for children than they were in the past. On the other hand, the positive result of Marvel's emphasis on ordinary, realistic people is that readers can identify with their flawed characters more easily than they could identify with the idealized heroes of yesteryear. This means that Marvel fans can imagine themselves as potential

superheroes and learn to cultivate heroism in their own lives. Moreover, comic book stories give us a clear sense of good and evil and the human need for a Savior who is more than human, themes that Christian apologists can use to draw out the innate existential longing for Christ hidden in the heart of all people.

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Superheroes are big business these days. Beyond the obvious comic books, TV series, movies, video games, and toys, superheroes now adorn everything from pajamas and lunchboxes to cell phone covers and ice cube trays. Superheroes are not just for kids anymore, either. Adults can find neckties, shot glasses, and kitchen aprons. Pretty much anything you can imagine can be found with superheroes printed on it. Scholars have long traced a tradition of mythological heroes that runs from Hercules and Odysseus to Robin Hood and King Arthur to the Lone Ranger and Luke Skywalker. On this view, costumed crime fighters are only the most recent expression of a need for heroes found in every culture.[1] Superheroes, for better or worse, are clearly feeding some sort of spiritual hunger in American culture.

Riding highest on the current superhero wave we find Marvel Comics. For example, the 2012 movie *Marvel's The Avengers* is at present the third highest-grossing film of all time and holds the box-office record for the biggest opening weekend of all time, no doubt in part due to Marvel's acquisition by the Walt Disney Company in 2009, which put the world's greatest marketing and merchandising machine behind the Marvel brand.

Marvel Comics is one of the two biggest comic book publishers, along with its rival DC Comics. While DC is home of some of the most enduring and iconic superheroes—such as Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman—Marvel Comics owns the hottest characters in popular culture right now, including Spider-Man, the Incredible Hulk, Captain America, Iron Man, The Fantastic Four, and the X-Men. To understand the theological significance of Marvel's ascendance, we must first understand what distinguishes Marvel from DC.

### MARVEL'S "ORIGIN STORY"

The Marvel Comics brand as we know it came into its own in 1961 with the publication of *The Fantastic Four*, created by writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby. As a product of the '60s, Marvel is a "Silver Age" phenomenon. Historians typically divide the history of comics into three or more time periods.[2] The Golden Age of comic books began in

1938 with the first appearance of Superman. There had been costumed crime fighters in pop culture before, but Superman was the first comic book hero possessed of truly superhuman powers, and his extraordinary popularity sparked an industry of imitators. The fashionability of superheroes gradually declined throughout the '40s and '50s until DC revived the genre with the character of The Flash in 1956, which most historians mark as the start of the Silver Age of comics. But it wasn't until 1961 that the comics world turned toward something truly new.

With characters such as The Fantastic Four and Spider-Man, Lee and Kirby, along with their other colleagues at Marvel such as Steve Ditko, began taking a more realistic approach to superheroes than ever before. They tried to create complex characters who grew and changed over time in ongoing stories. And they set their stories in the real world—most often in New York City—rather than in fictional cities such as Gotham and Metropolis. By the time Jack Kirby left Marvel in 1970 to work for DC and Stan Lee was promoted from editor to publisher of Marvel in 1972, the two men had changed comics forever. They had created a whole new kind of superhero.

## MARVEL VS. DC: TWO VIEWS OF HEROISM

The biggest difference between Marvel and DC is that Marvel heroes are ordinary people disguised as superheroes. Whereas DC's Superman is really an alien (Kal-El) disguised as an average guy (Clark Kent), Marvel's Spider-Man is just an ordinary teenager named Peter Parker dressed up in red Spandex. Even DC's Batman is using the persona of millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne to distract from his true identity as a vigilante hero. Bruce Wayne's drinking and womanizing is all an act. Contrast Marvel's Iron Man whose true identity is Tony Stark, a millionaire playboy who really is as obnoxious as Brue Wayne pretends to be.

Marvel heroes are complex characters with all the imperfections of real-life human beings. They're not all that "heroic" in comparison to a Golden Age DC character such as Superman, who came to embody a kind of idealized moral perfection. The original DC heroes are mostly aliens (such as Superman and Wonder Woman) or self-made men (such as Batman). Marvel's heroes, on the other hand, are flawed ordinary people who gain unusual powers. They have extraordinary abilities thrust upon them whether they like it or not, usually through accidental exposure to "radiation" of some sort or another.

Furthermore, Marvel heroes always have other real-life problems to deal with in addition to fighting crime. For example, The Fantastic Four often argue among themselves like a dysfunctional family. Some Marvel characters—notably Fantastic Four member The Thing and the Incredible Hulk—are closer to monsters than typical heroes

and consider their power a curse. The Hulk was explicitly modeled on Frankenstein's monster, and like that poor creature, Marvel heroes are usually misunderstood by society. They're outcasts, often wrongly hunted as criminals. Spider-Man worries about paying the bills and dealing with his Aunt May's health problems. In fact, many of the Marvel heroes have health problems of their own and other bodily frailties it would be hard to imagine DC heroes having. The X-Men's Professor Xavier is a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair; Iron Man's Tony Stark has a heart condition; Daredevil is blind; the original Silver Age version of Thor was the alter ego of a crippled human medical doctor who walked with a cane.

In short, the Marvel idea of heroism is *an ordinary person who finds him- or herself with unique abilities and struggles to overcome personal weaknesses to use those abilities to be better than they thought they could be*. According to Marvel, a hero is someone who shares Spider-Man's motto: "With great power comes great responsibility." Deep down, they may not feel all that heroic, and they may feel like their power is more a curse than a gift, but they're doing the best they can to use their power for good. This is not far off from the Bible's vision of heroism. One need not be a billionaire or a super-human being from another planet to be a hero. God works through the foolish and the weak, not only the noble-born and powerful (1 Cor. 1:26–31).


## MYTHS AND FANTASY

Comic books function as *myths*—stories that interpret reality and our place in the world.[3] In fact, this is part of their appeal to artists. As comic book writer (and Marvel's executive vice president in charge of television production) Jeph Loeb explains, writing with the help of Christian philosopher Tom Morris, "The stories of these characters embody our deepest hopes and fears, as well as our highest aspirations, and...they can help us deal with our worst nightmares."[4]

But whereas DC comics function primarily as wish fulfillment (e.g., we want to transcend human limitations like Superman[5]), Marvel's flawed and realistic heroes enable us to see the potential in ourselves actually to be heroic in real life. They show us how an ordinary geeky teenager can take responsibility for his gifts and use them to fight for justice. As writer David Zimmerman puts it, comic books can "open our eyes as witnesses to the heroism of God," allowing us to "see the capacity for heroic action that He extends to us, and we realize that in spite of all we have suffered and all we have done, by the grace of God we could be heroes."[6]

In this way, superhero stories help us see the real world in a new way, just as Christian writer J. R. R. Tolkien said fairy tales do. For Tolkien, fantasy stories are not just entertainment for children. Fantasy serves the important purpose of "recovery" of

the real world—the "return and renewal of health," a "regaining of a clear view" of reality.[7] By taking an imaginative holiday to a world that is obviously quite different than our own, we are able to see our own ordinary world afresh. Fantasy allows us to "be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity" and to see "things as we are (or were) meant to see them." In short, fantasy redeems our vision, and allows us to "escape" from the "prison" in which our fallen imagination has locked itself.[8] Imaginative fiction, whether fairy tales or superhero comic books, teaches us to see "beyond the walls of the world" as it is now[9] and to imagine and desire a better world redeemed by Christ (Rom. 8:18–24).

Superhero stories in particular help us see our own role in helping to bring about that better world. Having experienced Marvel's universe where ordinary people gain powers that bring with them responsibility to do good, we may be awoken to the fact that, in the real world, each of us has our own kind of power and therefore our own responsibility (1 Pet. 4:10). Most of us are not wealthy or politically influential, but everyone has power over something, even if it is only his or her own choices. And our calling in Christ is to use what power we have to bring God's love to the suffering (Eph. 2:10) so that they will glorify God (Matt. 5:16).

Moreover, superhero stories help us understand ourselves as strangers and exiles (1 Pet. 2:11) who are in the world but not of it (John 17:14–15). Superheroes look normal but have a secret that would cause people to hate them. They want to be ordinary Americans but feel like outsiders—much like the Jewish immigrants who created these characters.[10] Christians can appropriate this idea. We, too, look normal to the world but have a secret identity in Christ (Col. 3:3), and we are part of what Christian philosopher Dallas Willard called God's "Divine Conspiracy" to save the world (2 Cor. 5:18–20).

## THE MODERN AGE OF COMICS

I don't mean to give the impression that comic books are entirely positive. These days, comic books are more appropriate for adults than for children. Over the years, comics— like all of American popular culture—have gotten more violent and more sexually risqué. In fact, this could be interpreted as an unintended consequence of Marvel's emphasis on moral complexity and psychological realism. As cultural attitudes change for the worse, fictional characters must change for the worse to maintain their claim to realism.

Historians trace the start of the Modern Age of Comics to 1986, kicked off by two graphic novels, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*, which were darker in tone and focused more on adult themes than earlier comics. These stories assumed a familiarity with the superhero genre and were aimed at adults who

had grown up with comics. During this current historical period, mainstream comics have been dominated by antiheroes, characters motivated by revenge and vigilantes willing to kill in the name of justice. In the Marvel universe, this includes some of the most popular characters of the past thirty years such as Wolverine, The Punisher, Ghost Rider, Deadpool, and so on. Marvel has always been about moral complexity, but these new heroes don't even try to avoid violence.

For the most part, however, there is still the sense that a line exists between heroes and villains, though antiheroes blur that line and occasionally cross it. Over time, characters in the Marvel universe change sides. A hero can become a villain or vice versa. Characters such as Hawkeye and Black Widow began as villains and later joined the Avengers as heroes. Conversely Jean Grey from the X-Men became a villain named the Dark Phoenix. Theologian Russ Dalton argues that this moral complexity allows Marvel to avoid the typical Manichaeism of comics. He defines Manichaeism as "seeing good and evil as two equal and competing forces struggling for control of the universe," and explains that this is incompatible with Christianity. "Christians know that all have sinned and that no human is totally good. Likewise they know that everyone is redeemable and no one is totally evil."[11]

## NATURALIZED SUPERNATURALISM

Another downside of Marvel's attempt to be more realistic than other comic book universes is that Marvel tends to downplay the supernatural. While Marvel comics purport to take place in our world (New York, not "Gotham City"), Marvel's vision is not entirely a Christian interpretation of our world. Instead, Marvel imagines a mostly naturalistic world. There are "gods" in the Marvel universe such as Thor, but these beings are ultimately explained as aliens from other planets. There is also talk of sorcery and black magic, but sorcerers are usually also scientists (e.g., Dr. Doom and Dr. Strange), so the sorcery could be interpreted as science connecting to other dimensions.

This is explicit in Marvel's films such as *Thor*, *The Avengers*, and *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige says, "In the Marvel Cinematic Universe version of the supernatural, that involves everything from quantum mechanics to string theory." In other words, there are no real supernatural beings, and what we call supernatural is simply natural phenomena that science doesn't understand yet.

Presumably this will be true even of the upcoming movie about the superhero Dr. Strange, a former neuroscientist who turned to magic to battle evil spirits. Feige says, "The idea of this film is to open up a whole new corner of the cinematic universe. We want to enter, through Strange, the world of parallel dimensions."[12] Again, the idea seems to be that the "demons" Dr. Strange battles will be interpreted as natural beings

from other dimensions, rather than genuinely supernatural beings beyond the ability of science to explain. On the other hand, the film is being directed by Christian filmmaker Scott Derrickson who has made two films (*The Exorcism of Emily Rose* and *Deliver Us From Evil*) inspired by true stories of demonic possession, so it remains to be seen whether Derrickson will push for a genuinely supernatural interpretation of Dr. Strange's world.

In any case, while the Marvel universe seems to be committed to philosophical naturalism, it does not idolize science. Created in the context of 1960s anxieties about the atomic age, Marvel's scientist characters are just as likely to cause problems as to solve them. This is a truth Christians can embrace. We know that only God is worthy to control the world (Gen. 11:4–9). Human sin should make us suspicious of any attempt to gain unconstrained power, whether through politics, technology, or superhuman abilities. Unlike DC, which (at least in the Golden Age) tends to see power as unproblematic, Marvel makes sure we realize that power not only can be abused but it can also wreak unintended consequences, since the world is ultimately beyond human ability to control. For Marvel, a radiation accident is just as likely to turn you into a monstrous Thing as into a Human Torch, just as likely to make you a Hulk of uncontrollable rage as to give you the proportionate strength of a spider.

## ALTARS TO THE UNKNOWN HERO

H. Michael Brewer argues that our longing for superheroes points toward a need for a hero that can only be fulfilled in Christ: "The spiritual hunger for heroes is woven into the fabric of the human creature. Our Maker built us with a persistent longing for a rescuer who will save us from injustice and suffering."[13] B. J. Oropeza develops this idea further. He argues that the standard superhero myth follows the contours of the biblical narrative of creation-fall- redemption-restoration. Oropeza points out that the "origin story" of most superheroes involves a tragic loss (often the death of the hero's parents) that transforms them into a kind of messianic savior who must ultimately face the forces of evil in an "apocalyptic battle," which frequently climaxes in the hero's rebirth from an apparent death.[14]

According to Oropeza,

*Most superheroes suffer tragic loss: Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Robin, and Toro all lose their parents, the Hulk loses his sanity, and Spawn his life. Yet despite their losses, or sometimes because of them, they gain a sense of great commission, forever trying to mend something that has been torn apart. Their stories present a subtle parable to humanity: We have lost our true*

*identity and need to recover what has been taken from us. Apparently somewhere deep within our psyche, we understand our status as fallen creatures.*[15]

This is essentially the same approach Paul took toward the false gods of Greek mythology (Acts 17:16–33). He saw both similarities and differences and argued that the Greek myths pointed toward the true God and hence were fulfilled in Christ. As C. S. Lewis said, the old myths had become true in Christ.[16] Paul saw that the Greeks were really looking for God all along (Acts 17:27) and that his job as an apologist was to name Christ as the One in whom our deepest longings are fulfilled.

The same strategy should apply to today's myths: comic book superheroes. Our culture has a sense that something is wrong with the world and that, despite our own failings, we have a responsibility to do something about it. We also know, if we are honest with ourselves, that we have no power in ourselves to help ourselves (2 Cor. 3:5). Christianity gives the best diagnosis of the problem and offers the only hope for salvation. Only with the True Hero living in our hearts can we have the power to overcome the forces of sin and death (Rom. 8:31–39).

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**NOTES**

1  Greg Garrett, *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels and Film*, rev. ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 9–16.
2  A good brief history of comic books can be found in B. J. Oropeza's "Superhero Myth and the Restoration of Paradise," in *The Gospel according to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. B. J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 10–18.
3  Russell W. Dalton, *Marvelous Myths: Marvel Superheroes and Everyday Faith* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2011), 1.
4  Jeph Loeb and Tom Morris, "Heroes and Superheroes," in *Superheroes and Philosophy*, ed. Tom Morris and Matt Morris (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 11.
5  Ben Saunders, *Do the Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 3.
6  David A. Zimmerman, *Comic Book Character: Unleashing the Hero in Us All* (Downers Grove:

InterVarsity Press, 2004), 142.

7   J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1966), 57.

8   Ibid., 60.

9   Ibid., 68.

10  Many of the most important comic book creators of the Golden and Silver Age were Jewish. These include Joe Shuster and Jerome Siegel (creators of Superman), Bob Kane and Bill Finger (creators of Batman), and Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (creators of the Fantastic Four, the Avengers, and many others).

11  Dalton, 3.

12  http://marvel.com/news/movies/23542/marvels_doctor_strange_conjures_up_a_november_2016_release_date#ixzz3R5dvejDU.

13  H. Michael Brewer, *Who Needs a Superhero? Finding Virtue, Vice, and What's Holy in the Comics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 10.

14  Oropeza, 6–10.

15  Ibid., 6.

16  C. S. Lewis, "Myth Became Fact," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 54–60.