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TRANSCENDING HUMAN IMAGINATION: THE EMBODIMENT OF HEROISM MANIFEST IN CHRIST

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SYNOPSIS

When people think of a superhero, they may think of classic DC and Marvel comic books or they may think of a more modern film such as *The Avengers*. Recently there has been a resurgence in the popularity of the superhero. The same story of an ostensibly ordinary man with almost-supernatural abilities saving helpless victims from some diabolical villain or evil force has been told countless times. What makes this the pattern for a hero to follow? And, perhaps more importantly, why do we harbor the idea that the character of a hero cannot change drastically from person to person? The obvious answer is that there is a thread that runs through stories about heroes whether in ancient epics or modern comic books. Heroes throughout time and across cultures all follow what is typically known as the hero's journey. This journey is ultimately inspired by the journey of Jesus Christ. Heroes throughout literary history serve as precursors, mirror images, or perversions of His heroism. The story of Jesus Himself serves as a metanarrative, an overarching or master story, for heroism. Christ has always been a true hero. Heroism founded in Christ transcends time and culture. All literary heroes will either parody or mirror the pattern set by Christ. Thus, Jesus can be established as a hub for all types of heroism. The commonality of the stories that we read and write, from *Wuthering Heights* to Virgil's *Aeneid* to the Chronicles of Narnia, points to the existence of a greater story and a higher hero—one that transcends human imagination.

Sometime around the tenth century, an Anglo-Saxon poet awakens from a deep sleep with a shuddering breath. There are tears running smoothly down his cheeks, but he feels an overwhelming sense of hope despite the tears. He sits up, closes his eyes, and clenches his fists, trying to remember what he has been dreaming. There had been a tree—no, a cross—and it had been talking to him. As he continues to remember the dream, a beautiful poem begins to take shape in his mind. He realizes that he will not soon forget this dream. He is right. He will never forget it, and many others will have the chance to experience it as well. The poem he writes is none other than “The Dream of the Rood,” an Anglo-Saxon work in which the narrator sees the cross in all its glory and hears the story of Christ’s crucifixion from its point of view. The cross describes Jesus as a hero approaching an enemy.¹ The narrator wakes with a hope and desire to one day meet his hero face-to-face.

Fast-forward more than a thousand years: a ten-year-old boy pulls the sheet over his head and turns on a flashlight. The beam of light lands on a comic book filled with stories about superheroes. Almost every night, after his parents head to bed, he turns on this flashlight and reads just one more story. Twenty minutes later, he yawns, rubs his eyes, and closes the book. As he hides the flashlight, rolls over, and closes his eyes, he hopes that tonight his dreams might be filled with images of his heroes. There seems to be a striking difference between these two ideas of heroism. But, if the hero of the poet and the heroes of the little boy can share the title of hero, then there must be some link between Christ and Superman.

SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

So who exactly is a hero? And what actions should be viewed as heroic? Katherine Blakeney suggests that a hero can be defined as “someone who sacrifices himself for the good of others.”² Peter Thorslev believes a hero should be “bigger than life.” He should be relatable and yet an idealization.³ It is possible to link all heroes of all different categories to one ultimate hero—Jesus. In fact, the Bible, specifically the person of Christ, provides a metanarrative for heroism.

The Bible, in short, provides a standard for all of literature. In her article “The Joy of Reading Great Works,” Kathleen Nielson says, “Only because God spoke words and made the universe can we human beings speak words after Him, fulfilling His image in us as we create with words.”⁴ Because our creation with words imitates God’s creation, it is evident that God’s sovereignty extends to the entire literary canon.

Author Peter Leithart says, "The Bible tells...a story that is mysteriously 'built-into' the structure of our minds and practices so that even writers who resist this story cannot help but leave traces of it—faint and distorted as they may be—on every page."⁵ If all stories reflect, in some way, the story God has written in history, it is logical that all heroes will reflect some, if not many, elements of the heroism of Christ. C. S. Lewis addresses this in "Myth Became Fact." He says, "The heart of Christianity is a myth which is also fact. The old myth of the dying god, without ceasing to be myth, comes down from the heaven of legend and imagination to the earth of history."⁶ Therefore, an exploration of select literary heroes will demonstrate what Lewis claims: all heroes embody the myth that only Christ made fact.

CHRIST AS HERO

If Christ is to be considered a metanarrative for heroism, He must first be proven a hero Himself. To believers, Jesus is Savior and, as such, an obvious hero-figure. He is not just another hero but the ultimate hero. He simultaneously defines and transcends the concept of human heroism.

Heroes who follow the traditional pattern of the hero's journey often experience favor or conflict with the gods, battles with mythical creatures, and voyages over treacherous waters. Thus, it can be said that, though Christ was Messiah, He does not qualify as a traditional hero. However, Leon J. Podles explains that of all the images used to describe Jesus, the image of hero is the most accurate.⁷ All the attributes Christ displays culminate in the title of hero. One of the divine attributes of God is immutability. His nature is unchanging; His character consistent.

This prompts the question, "How can Christ become a hero if He existed at a time when there was no apparent need for one?" God's plan was always that Christ would be sent as savior and hero for mankind. Most ancient epics begin in the heat of battle or with a conflict already in full swing. The need for a hero to appear is obvious in the opening lines. Perhaps man begins stories with an obvious need for a hero because he cannot comprehend the idea of a hero without a need for a hero. When the world was created, it was perfect. But Christ was still Christ; He was still a hero. Man cannot fathom the idea of a savior before someone is in need of saving, but God did.

Even modern heroic ideals are derived from the biblical precedent of God calling on one person to save many. Biblical precedent demonstrates a pattern of to demonstrate His power. Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt; David defeats Goliath; Esther saves the Jews from Haman's plan to destroy them. In this way, God makes it clear that He is the one providing victory. God's pattern of leading one person to save many illustrates the words of Jesus when He says, "My power is made perfect in

weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9).⁸ Heroes are typically powerful, but they also typically have one major shortcoming. God’s power being perfected in human weakness can be evidenced even in the life of the most powerful hero. For example, Samson accomplishes his greatest feat after he is stripped of his strength (Judg. 16:26–30). Although there are many examples of God calling on an individual to save His people, Christ serves as the greatest model of this heroic standard.

Jesus fits the traditional standard of heroism in which heroes follow a set journey in order to complete the task given them and become truly heroic. It is nearly impossible to separate any story from the only original story God wrote through creation. Peter Leithart explains that he really does “see Christ everywhere and in everything, as the One in whom all things, including Western literature, consist” (p. 28). If all heroism ultimately culminates in the person of Jesus Christ, it is logical that He would be able not only to fit but also have influence over all heroic standards.

Christ undergoes a journey in line with the classic hero’s journey. He displays a divine pedigree as well as a supernatural conception because He is the Son of God born of a virgin; He displays supernatural power when He performs miracles; He was tested by the Devil himself in the wilderness; and, finally, He fought a final, climactic battle on the cross. His victory took the form of resurrection. In the context of the fantastical stories of ancient epics, heroes can accomplish amazing things. But Jesus stands above the crowd because His hero’s journey is more than words on a page. It is history. It is fact. It is reality.

A TRANSCENDENT HEROISM

Next, it must be accepted that the heroism established by Christ transcends time and culture. This is not possible until it is taken into consideration that no human creativity is completely original. In his work *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl*, N. D. Wilson says that when we view all of human activity as a reflection of a biblical metanarrative, we all become characters in God’s infinite story. Wilson explains that God is the only original artist and that His canvas is forever expanding. He says that God uses even the smallest characters to piece together masterful story arcs as metanarratives for all facets of human art.⁹ If all of human art is, in essence, a reproduction of God’s story, it follows that heroic standards could never stray too far from the heroism of Christ.

Fallen man has constantly pursued capturing the perfect hero in literature. Leithart says that human art is limited insofar as we are capable only of mimicking preexisting art (30). The Bible serves as a key to other books and stories and so “all heroes may be compared to the true Hero, Jesus Christ” (24). This explains why all of

man's attempts to construct a hero better than any before him have been in vain. Jesus is the perfect hero. That storyline has already been used.

LITERARY EXAMPLES OF HEROISM DERIVED FROM CHRIST

Since Christ does provide the standard for all types of heroism, even Byronic heroes imitate some aspects of His heroism. On the surface, a Byronic hero is a rebellious, passionate, overconfident character, usually with an air of mystery regarding his past. He also displays a strong "love for life" and desire for justice.¹⁰ Thus, on examination, we find that these heroes ultimately pervert Christ's perfect ideal. Peter Thorslev says that part of the Byronic tradition involves a sense of self-analysis that uncovers the evil within human nature. It is the sin and corruption of Byronic heroes that give them credibility as tragic heroes. A Byronic hero purposefully distances himself from those he is supposed to save and, if he begins focusing on the wrong things, may become obsessed with them.

One example of a well-known Byronic hero is Heathcliff from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. Heathcliff embodies the character of a Byronic hero because he is distinctly separate from society. He purposefully isolates himself.

This isolation is not a healthy isolation, and so we can see that Heathcliff is a perversion of the heroic ideal by comparing him to Jesus. For example, Jesus often goes off by Himself to pray, and He is alone in the desert when tempted by Satan (Luke 4:1–13), but He does not allow these times of separation from society to render Him completely individualistic. While there were certainly aspects of His struggles that Christ had to deal with privately, He does not, as Byronic heroes do, lock himself away from the help those around Him can offer.

Heathcliff, in Byronic fashion, chooses to struggle more internally than any other character in the book. Toward the end of his life, he seems to be more restless than ever and, when asked to rest and to eat, he says, "I'll do both as soon as I possibly can. But you might as well bid a man struggling in the water rest within arms' length of the shore. I must reach it first, and then I'll rest."¹¹ He is able to offer little explanation for his strange behavior; indeed, he seems to be searching for answers more than anyone else.

This anxiety at the end of life parodies the grief and weight of responsibility experienced by Christ in the garden of Gethsemane. Christ does not wish to die, as Heathcliff implies, but is willing to in order to accomplish the will of the Father (Luke 22:42–44). The pattern observed in Heathcliff provides a more realistic outcome of fallen man attempting to be a hero than the traditional hero's journey of the ancients.

An idealized perception of a traditional hero can be found in Aeneas, the Trojan hero who was destined to be the founder of the Roman people. He follows a hero's journey consistent with the classic model. Aeneas is said to have been the son of the goddess Venus, and thus to have had a divine lineage.

Aeneas also goes through tests much like other heroes of antiquity. For example, when the Trojans set sail, a storm drives them to the Island of the Harpies—creatures that Virgil says are crueler than any others.¹² A prominent event in the cycle of Aeneas's hero's journey is his descent into the underworld. Aeneas enters the underworld, armed with the advice of the Sybil, to see his father once more.¹³ This is an important step in his journey because it mirrors Christ's death, burial, and resurrection. Aeneas emerges from the underworld with the ability to found Rome; Christ with the intent of establishing the rule of the kingdom of heaven.

While there are clear parallels between Jesus and traditional heroes, some heroes are purposeful symbols for Christ. One such character who shows strong symbolism as a hero is Aslan in C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Aslan clearly makes a Christlike sacrifice in the story. In fact, the book is Lewis's way of retelling the story of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection.¹⁴ Lewis himself wrote, "The whole Narnian story is about Christ. That is to say, I asked myself 'Supposing that there really was a world like Narnia and supposing it had (like our world) gone wrong and supposing Christ wanted to go into that world and save it (as He did ours), what might have happened?' The stories are my answers" (quoted in Baehr). Lewis provides obvious Christian symbolism throughout his series, but it is particularly highlighted in the character of Aslan.

A CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Christ is, therefore, a hero; His heroism transcends time and culture; and literary heroes provide both parodies and mirror images of Christ's heroism. However, some may claim that the road to heroism—a road paved by Christ—eventually can lead to defeat. This is correct. All heroes invented by men can and will be defeated. Fallen man simply cannot comprehend a hero without flaws, and an imperfect hero is one who will eventually lose a battle. Even the most courageous heroes, as Podles assures us, will fall prey to the enemy of death.

The Greeks admired heroes who achieved *kleos*¹⁵ during this life because no man can truly live forever and, by achieving glory, one might preserve his name for the ages. Jesus, on the other hand, cannot be defeated. He overcame death once and for all. As Christians, we have a hero who will live forever not only in renown but also in actuality.

Christ is a hero. His heroism is mirrored in stories throughout time and across cultures and there is no branch of heroism uninfluenced by His ultimate heroism. As Christians, we recognize that Christ is “the author and perfecter of faith” but rarely do we take time to think of Him as the author and perfecter of our art (Heb. 12:2). Envision the Greek god Atlas balancing the whole world on his shoulders. This imagery establishes Atlas as a Christ figure. In a distinct race, or even a world, of literary heroes, Christ bears the weight of all heroic endeavors upon Himself. All heroes in this globe hold onto and support each other striving all the while to become more like Christ. Even Byronic and tragic heroes, who attempt to sever the bonds of heroism, provide a platform to elevate other heroes who more closely resemble the character of Christ.

God’s sovereignty extends to all of literature. As Ephesians 1:11 says, in Christ is “the summing up of all things,” and in Acts, it is explained that even pagan poets display that it is only in Christ that “we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:38). Heroes throughout time have preached the gospel on the pages of great literature. It may start as a whisper, but when we begin to listen purposefully, it turns into a resounding declaration that Jesus is, indeed, Lord of lords and Hero of heroes.

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NOTES

- 1 “The Dream of the Rood,” trans. Richard Hamer (Oxford: University of Oxford, 1970).
- 2 Katherine Blakeney, “Perceptions of Heroes and Villains in European Literature,” *Student Pulse*, 2010.
- 3 Peter Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962).
- 4 Kathleen B. Nielson, “The Joy of Reading Great Works” (The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, n.d.).
- 5 Peter Leithart, *Heroes of the City of Man* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 1999).
- 6 C. S. Lewis, “Myth Became Fact,” in *Faith, Christianity, and the Church* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), 138–42.
- 7 Leon J. Podles, “Christ: God, Man, and Hero,” *Touchstone*, November 2001.
- 8 All Bible quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.
- 9 N. D. Wilson, *Notes from the Tilt-A-Whirl* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2009).
- 10 “Byronic Hero and Comparison with Other Heroes,” *CSCanada* 10, 6 (June 26, 2015).
- 11 Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004).
- 12 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 2006).
- 13 *The Aeneid*, VI. 126–77.
- 14 Ted Baehr, “The Deeper Truth behind the Chronicles of Narnia,” Christian Broadcasting Network, *Movieguide Magazine*, 2015; available at <http://www1.cbn.com/books/deeper-truth-behind-chronicles-narnia>.

- 15 “*Kleos* can be translated ‘glory’ or ‘fame.’ In its most basic sense, *kleos* means ‘what other people say about you,’ what is spoken aloud about you.” Elizabeth Vandiver, “Glory, Honor, and the Wrath of Achilles,” in *The Iliad* of Homer (Chantilly, VA: The Teaching Company, 1999).