

Review: JAR2364

MAN OF STEEL MEETS SON OF GOD

a review of

Man of Steel

Directed by Zack Snyder

(Warner Bros., 2013)

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He is not of this world, yet he willingly sacrifices himself for it. Raised by earthly parents who know he is special, the boy grows to become a man of justice, humility, and impeccable moral character. Who is he? The description can apply to Christ as well as to the fictional character Superman.

Originally created for comic books in the 1930s, Superman once again soars to the big screen in the blockbuster film *Man of Steel*, directed by Zack Snyder, director of films such as *300* and *Watchmen*,¹ and starring Henry Cavill as Superman (Kal-El) and Amy Adams as intrepid reporter Lois Lane. Although Hollywood often treats Christianity marginally, often even negatively, *Man of Steel* contains some significant and worthwhile Christian elements.

Storytelling Superpowers. Before addressing those points, however, a brief look at the relevance of storytelling in relation to Christianity will help us to grasp better the concept of why we, as Christians, should even bother with seeking to understand and evaluate popular culture. Although postmodernism commonly gets quite a lot wrong about reality, including its views of truth, one important point it does get right is the power of story. In short, storytelling has the capacity to capture our attention quickly and to convey deep ideas meaningfully and memorably. This, no doubt, is at least one reason why Christ chose to tell parables. Interesting characters in unique situations who face moral challenges, placed within the context of fiction, can indeed resonate strongly with us as human beings.

In addition, many who would rarely if ever pick up an overt work of Christian apologetics or theology, and carefully read it through, are more than willing to sit through a film. By tapping into the human imagination via film, even subtle Christian themes and messages can serve as launching points for fruitful discussion. As I've argued elsewhere, film and television are the "new literature" of our age. Consequently,

it is to our advantage as apologists and representatives of the Christian worldview to do our best to understand these mediums, wisely engaging these aspects of popular culture.

Redemptive Analogies and the Christian Story. Another point relating to stories is worth noting. Is it possible that God has implanted not only in the cultures of the world throughout history, but also within every human being, a sense of God's overarching story and plan for human redemption? Some would say yes. Don Richardson, for instance, makes the case for what he calls "redemptive analogies" that he believes are present in different people groups the world over.² These analogies help everyone better understand the story of Christianity and resonate with its key aspects on a deep level.

In any event, even if one does not completely agree with the concept of redemptive analogies, the fact remains that films such as *Man of Steel* can tap into collective human awareness of what is arguably the greatest story ever told—namely, the coming of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, God incarnate, in order willingly to carry out God's plan to offer redemption to fallen human beings.

Superman As Christ Figure? *Man of Steel* includes both subtle and not-so-subtle indications that demonstrate it is in tune with the story of Christianity, presenting Superman as a Christ figure. In one instance, Superman saves a number of people from certain death during a storm at sea, then plunges into the ocean, clearly weakened as a result of his efforts. The camera shows him slowly sinking, arms outstretched like Christ on the cross. On another occasion, Superman is faced with a difficult decision and, as a result, visits a church. As he is speaking with a priest, we see Superman on one side of the screen and on the other is a stained-glass image of Christ. This overt imagery underscores the theme of Superman as Christ figure.

There are also other indicators. Prior to arriving on Earth, Superman is born to loving parents living on a dying world. Faced with the inevitable death of their planet, and a daring military coup, they decide to take a significant risk and send their only son—another Christian reference?—to Earth. Because of differences in the planet and the sun it orbits, Superman's father, Jor-El (Russell Crowe), knows his son will be different from humans. He'll have special powers, such as the ability to fly, increased strength, X-ray vision, and more. Knowing this, Superman's father says, "He'll be a god to them." Obviously, from the Christian perspective, Christ came into the world as God in human flesh, the Son of God—the second person of the Holy Trinity.

On Earth Superman is taught by his human father, played by Kevin Costner, to set aside his extraordinary powers willingly. This is suggestive of Christ as we find in Philippians 2:5–8: "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (ESV).

Called the *kenosis* of Christ (derived from the Greek word translated as “emptied”), this theological concept refers to Christ’s “emptying” of Himself in the form of the Incarnation, which involved willingly setting aside prerogatives of His divine nature. In other words, Christ had powers that He undoubtedly could call upon, but the Gospels record instances where He chose, instead, to obey His Father rather than deviate from the Father’s purpose. We can infer this, for example, from the story of Christ’s temptation by the Devil (Luke 4:1–14). We see aspects of this in *Man of Steel*, such as when the child Superman, named Clark by his human parents, is bullied by other children. Instead of using his great powers to defeat the aggressor, Clark willingly obeys his father and restrains his formidable powers.

Possibly another deliberate parallel to the story of Christ has to do with age. *Man of Steel* makes a point of stating Superman’s age is thirty-three. This coincides with Christ, as Luke 3:23 affirms that Jesus “was about thirty years of age” (ESV) at the start of his public ministry. This would have made him about thirty-three at the time of his sacrificial death and resurrection—the same age in *Man of Steel* when Superman makes his decision essentially to save humanity.

This leads to another similarity to Christianity in *Man of Steel*—a great sacrifice. Superman makes an important decision to risk his own life for the sake of saving humanity—what Christ did literally via what theologians term the atonement, accomplished by Christ’s sacrificial death on the cross. Superman does this willingly and humbly, to the point of giving himself to the government who will turn him over to the enemy, the nefarious General Zod (Michael Shannon) and his entourage of villains bent on wiping out human life. Again there are parallels to Christ willingly being taken captive by the authorities of His day, even though He had done no wrong. As Scripture puts it, “Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before a shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth” (Acts 8:32 ESV, referencing Isa. 53:7–8).

At one point it is also said that Superman would serve as a bridge between the people of his home planet Krypton and the people of Earth. Christ, too, serves as a bridge, but between God and man. As the *Theanthropos*, the God man, He is the ultimate mediator: “For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5 ESV).

Differences and Dangers. To be sure, there are differences between the story of Superman as told in *Man of Steel* and the story of Christ as found in the pages of the New Testament. Whereas Christ did no violence to others, Superman at one point is faced with either allowing innocent people to die or killing someone (he chooses the latter option). Superman has a love interest in Lois Lane, while the Gospels record no such instances in the life of Christ, outrageous fictional accounts such as *The DaVinci Code* notwithstanding. Moreover, Superman is like a god to the people of Earth, but not truly God the Son. Neither does Superman always obey his father when it comes to issues of *kenosis*, while Christ always obeys the Father.

Finally, should Christians be offended by the fact that a comic book character is being depicted in similar ways to Jesus? Not in this case. *Man of Steel*’s allusions to

Christianity are positive, not negative. But are we reading too much of Christianity into *Man of Steel*? This is always a danger, and, as such, we want to seek fairly to exegete (interpret) the medium of film. We want to be careful not to overreach what we see in films, offering reasonable supporting evidence for our conclusions whenever possible. In the case of *Man of Steel*, however, the director himself has indicated Christ-figure parallels “in the mythology” of the Superman story—such as a miraculous birth—that were deliberately included in the film.³

Although *Man of Steel* has its share of Hollywood violence and over-the-top special effects, it does provide Christians with an opportunity to point out similarities with the story of Christianity, with the notable difference that the story of Jesus really happened. It is, as C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien would say, myth becoming fact—the very real presence of God in the flesh walking among us for the purposes of our redemption. That is a message worth sharing.

—Robert Velarde

Robert Velarde has authored several books, including *The Wisdom of Pixar* (InterVarsity Press, 2010) and *A Visual Defense* (Kregel, 2013), and contributed to *Don't Stop Believin': Pop Culture and Religion from Ben-Hur to Zombies* (Westminster John Knox, 2012). He received his M.A. from Southern Evangelical Seminary.

NOTES

- 1 See Robert Velarde, “The Clockwork Despair of Watchmen,” *Christian Research Journal* 32, 2 (2009): 44–45. Available at: <http://www.equip.org/articles/the-clockwork-despair-of-the-watchmen/>.
- 2 See Don Richardson, *Peace Child* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2005, 4th ed.) and *Eternity in Their Hearts* (Regal, 2006).
- 3 See, e.g., “*Man of Steel* director Zack Snyder on Superman’s Christ-like parallels.” Available at <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/14/showbiz/zack-snyder-man-of-steel>.