

The Entertainment Ministry

PRESENTS

THE GOSPEL OF  
SUPERMAN

HOW THE SUPERHERO WAS BASED ON THE SAVIOR

BY

STEPHEN SKELTON



TO:

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FROM:

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# THE GOSPEL OF SUPERMAN

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## Who is this Super Man?



Like many pals of the Man of Steel, for years I had heard rumors of superficial parallels between Superman and the Super Man, Jesus Christ. Although I'm inclined to find spiritual truth in worldly stories, for a long time I considered this an intriguing idea but one which was merely the opinion of those who chose to read that meaning into the story.

Then, a few years ago, I read a review of *Superman: The Movie* online at hollywoodjesus.com. The article, written by David Bruce, the creator of the Web site, began with the idea that people respond to Superman because he is a Christ figure—but then went on to outline incredible examples of how the gospel story was used as a template for the Superman story. By the time I had finished reading the review, this intriguing idea had graduated to an interesting argument.

### Parallels on Purpose?

Bruce's review spurred me to research which uncovered startling revelations. For instance, I discovered that...

- \* Superman and his father share the last name of “El”—the Hebrew word for “God.” Thus, in the Superman story, when “El” the father sends “El” the son down to earth, “God” the Father sends “God” the Son down to earth.
- \* Superman's earthly parents, Martha and Jonathan, were modeled after the parents of Jesus, Mary and Joseph—and in fact, “Mary” and “Joseph” were the original names of Superman's earthly parents.
- \* Superman's main enemy is a villain called Lex Luthor, a name suspiciously like Lucifer. (Of course, the foe of a Christ figure must be a Devil figure.) And both Lucifer and Luthor are fueled by the same all-consuming, all-corrupting, hunger for power and glory.

I found these to be just the tip of a Kryptonian iceberg.

### Superman Storytellers

However, within my early research, I was also challenged by counterarguments. The foremost objection is that the parallels of Superman to Christ are coincidental at best and forced at worst because the creators of Superman were Jewish.

Jerry Siegel, the writer, and Joe Shuster, the illustrator, undeniably deserve their “created by” credit. Yet I also found that the Superman story as it's popularly known comes from a collection of works that is referred to as the Superman “canon” (a word loaded with religious symbolism)—and it was not told by only one person or even two.

For example, while Superman's full origin story came together over several years from multiple sources, the first time Siegel and Shuster told the tale in a newspaper comic strip, it was only a handful of panels before their version had progressed from Krypton to Earth and the super-child had grown to a Superman, ready for his first super adventure.

Further on, the scripters of the *Adventures of Superman* television show were first to reveal that Superman's costume was created by Ma Kent from the blue, yellow and red blankets in his spaceship.

In the early '40s, the Fleisher Studio produced a series of animated short films that added an essential scene, showing for the first time Clark Kent changing into Superman in a phone booth.

The *Superman* radio show takes credit for the legendary motto “Faster than a speeding bullet! More powerful than a locomotive! Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound! Look, up in the sky! It's a bird! It's a plane! It's Superman!” Again, the radio scribes created the integral characters of *Daily Planet* editor Perry White and cub reporter Jimmy Olsen. Momentously, it was the writers of the radio show that gave Superman his ability to fly—until that time, in the newspapers and comic books, he merely jumped from place to place.

More relevant to our purpose in this book, I discovered that some of the storytellers in the Superman canon deliberately worked to infuse the narrative with their religious, even Christic intentions.

### The Greatest Story Ever Told—Again

As we follow the Superman story, we will see how it unfolds in many ways like the gospel story. Indeed, the progression of the Christ story will provide the direction of this book. Concerning the superhero creators, we will talk about the Superman storytellers who deliberately worked from the Christ story. Those admissions aside, we will see that the Superman story on its own exhibits instances of gospel borrowing too numerous to discount.

It is interesting to note how successive generations of Superman storytellers gleaned from the gospel story in chronological order. So that we begin around 1940 with a generation of Superman storytellers who reveal “El” the father sending “El” the son. And over the next sixty years and three generations of writers, our superhero will be raised by “Mary” and “Joseph,”

journey into the “wilderness” to prepare himself, begin his mission for “truth” and “justice” at “age 30,” demonstrate “miraculous powers” including “raising the dead to life” and even experience his own “death, burial and resurrection.” Until finally, in the new century with the fourth generation of storytellers, we arrive at Superman’s “second coming.”

It is as if each ensuing generation of writers was appointed a time to take the next step in telling the gospel story through the Superman story. And each time, the biblical imagery spoke so strongly to the world those passages became permanent parts of the commonly known Superman story.

### **Superman and the Son of Man**

While Superman is not Jesus Christ, he is a Christ figure, a figure resembling Christ—as we all should be. Perhaps, you have mostly thought of Christ as the suffering lamb. Why not the universal hero? Jesus is both—as we will use Superman to illustrate. Perhaps you’ve been looking for a better means to talk with people who are attracted to Superman but who don’t know their true Savior is the Super Man, Jesus Christ. Or perhaps you’ve been looking for a path in your own spiritual life. Here you may realize whose story you have actually been responding to and may accept him more fully into your life. All those possibilities you will find in this book.

Think of this book, then, as a collection of the facts that prove the parallels between Superman and the Son of Man. Because the gospel story is the crucial story by which all humankind longs to define their lives, to the extent that the Superman story corresponds to the gospel story, the superhero from Krypton offers some souls illumination, some hearts preparation. This is what I wish to communicate to you in the *Gospel of Superman*, which is, I hope, at once a dim shadow and a bright reflection of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## The House of El



*“He gave his one and only Son ...”*

JOHN 3:16

In the beginning, the first dramatic scenes of the Superman origin story are ripe with biblical imagery.

The home planet Krypton, doomed for cataclysmic destruction by fire, recalls the home planet Earth, doomed for cataclysmic destruction by flood. In the 1938 newspaper serial, Krypton is destroyed as earthquakes shatter the surface and the core explodes outward. In ancient times, the Earth is decimated by flood as God opens both “the springs of the great deep” and “the floodgates of the heavens” (Gen 7:11-23). As if to confirm the comparison, the escape pod carrying the Last Son of Krypton is called an “Ark of Space,” recalling the Ark of Noah and his family—both bearing the only survivors of their civilizations.

### **From Moses to Jesus**

Yet, another Old Testament parallel can be seen in the image of an infant set adrift in a small boat who would one day become a leader among his people. According to Scott Beatty, writing in *Superman, The Ultimate Guide to the Man of Steel*:

The clear allusions to the biblical story of Moses were not lost on Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. They decided that, like the good son of Pharaoh, Superman would emerge from these humble beginnings to lead his people, from the townfolk of Smallville to the millions of Metropolis and beyond to a better world.

On this point, we should mark that Moses is seen by many as a pre-Christ figure. The imagery of Jesus as the new Moses is a central theme of the Gospel of Matthew. The story of Moses can be found in Exodus and Numbers. Both Moses and Jesus were born under a Pharaoh that ordered the death of Israelite children. Both were raised by adoptive parents after being separated from their original families. Both were audibly called by the Lord to their ministry. Both performed miracles in God’s name. Both were the bearer of the law. Both saw the glory of the Lord. Both had enemies that strove to enslave their people. Both were destined to be a savior to those people.

The link between Moses and Jesus presents yet another reason that, as the mythology of Superman evolved, the symbolism of the Superman story pointed to that of the Christ story. In fact, under storytellers that came after Siegel and Shuster, some of the most Christic parallels within the Superman story began to be found just before the infant leaves Krypton.

### **A Hidden Heaven**

“Krypton” (or its derivative forms) is a Greek word used in the New Testament to describe the kingdom of heaven as “hidden” (Mt 13:44). It was fitting then when Tom Mankiewicz, screenwriter for *Superman: The Movie* (1978)—which features a defining presentation of the planet—revealed his “hidden” inspiration: “On Krypton, I was intending it to be almost semi-biblical.”

To establish the setting as presented in the movie, critic Anton Kozlovic notes that the color scheme for the ice planet is white, “the iconic signature color of the Divine...which is biblically used to symbolize ‘holiness and righteousness.’” In addition, through a transfixing visual effect, the Kryptonians wear clothes that glow brightly, recalling the description of clothes worn by angels, “clothes that gleamed like lightning” (Lk 24:4).

### **Trinity as Family**

Beyond the “semi-biblical” planet, the people we meet—a father, a mother and a son—offer an even more striking example of scriptural imagery. In the early comics, the father was named “Jor-L” and the son was named “Kal-L.” However, in 1942, author George Lowther wrote the first Superman novel, the *Adventures of Superman*, in which he translated the family name from “L” to “El,” which was adopted by the comics and became canon.

As one reviewer noticed, this was “curiously Hebraic-sounding alien.” Profoundly, “El” is the Hebrew word for “God.” This can be seen in names such as “El-Shaddai” meaning “God Almighty” for the Father (Gen 35:11); and “Immanuel” meaning “With us (is) God” for the Son (Mt 1:23). So in the Superman story, El the father and El the son became God the Father and God the Son—in the truest linguistic sense.

Completing the imagery of the Trinity, mother Lara—a “vessel for Kryptonian wisdom, knowledge and other sagely advice” according to Kozlovic—is the de facto stand in for the Holy Spirit as “the spirit of truth” that can guide one “into all truth” (Jn 16:13). The sorrow felt by Lara must echo on some level the sorrow felt by the Trinity in sending Christ to die for the sins of mankind. From *Superman: The Movie*: “He won’t be one of them,” she protests; “He will be odd, different,” she laments with the infant in her arms; “Isolated. Alone.”

### **All-God, All-Man**

Just as Jesus was all-God and all-Man, the Superman imagery defines him as the same. Although from another world, Superman is not an “alien” as that term is commonly used in science fiction.

In fact, the very first newspaper strip states that “Krypton ... bears a civilization of Supermen—beings which represent the *human race* at its ultimate peak of perfect development!” (italics mine). Intriguingly, this imagery resonates with the delivered saints in their perfect bodies in heaven: “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phi 3:20-21).

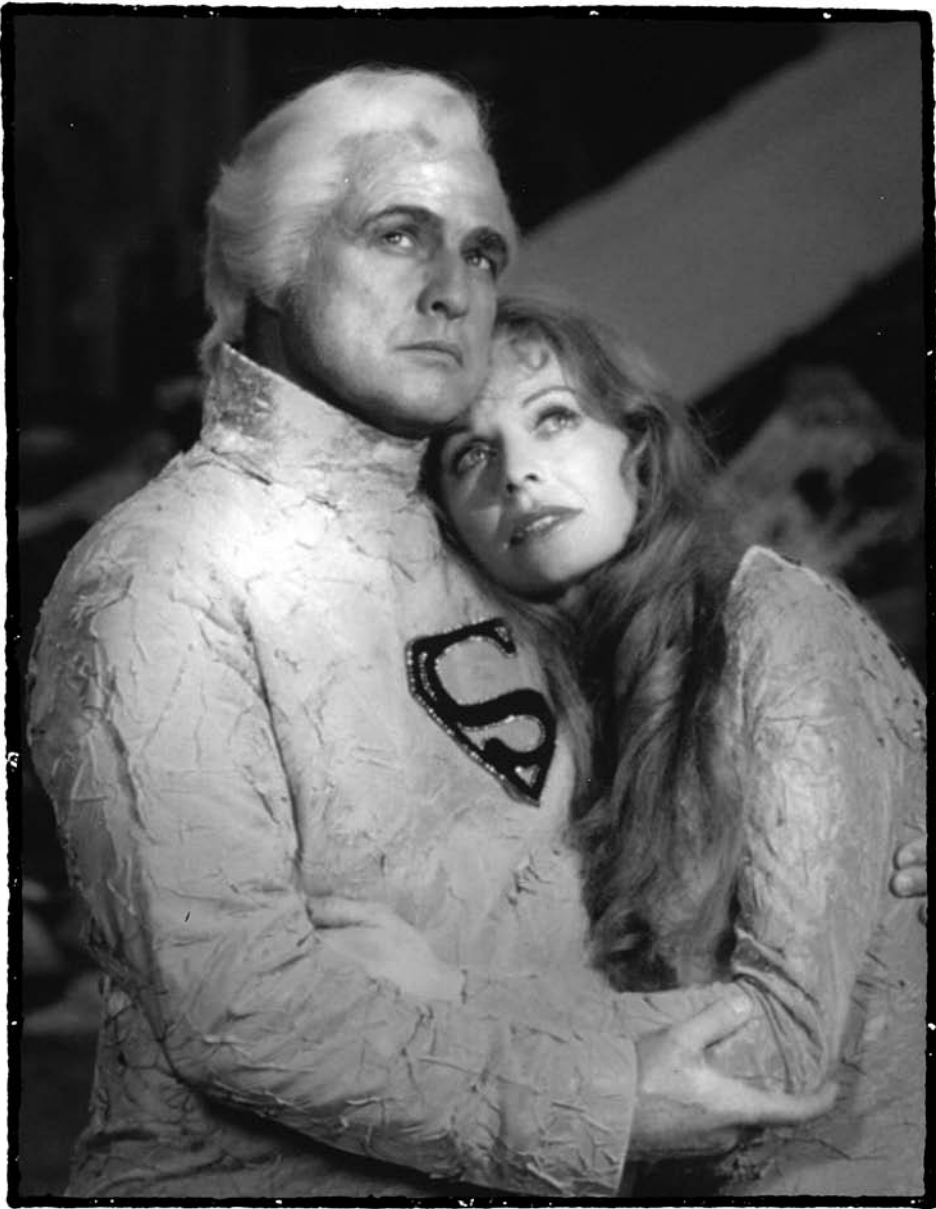
Later, the humanity of Superman was again established in the first issue of his own comic book. In *Superman #1* (1939), on a page given to a “scientific explanation of Superman’s amazing strength,” the piece concludes: “It is not too far fetched to predict that some day our very own planet may be peopled entirely by Supermen!” Indeed, this would explain his first nickname “The Man of Tomorrow.” But even his more famous title tells us he is human: the son is not destined to become known as “Super-alien,” but rather “Super-man.”

### **A Father Sends His Only Son**

During an “alien nativity scene,” Kozlovic continues commenting on *Superman: The Movie*, “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.’” He is now ready for 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,’ ‘an unearthly manger,’ or a ‘little star-of-Bethlehem spaceship.’”

It is within such a Kryptonian scene that the father Jor-El (played by Marlon Brando)—who is so much a God figure, even his hair is white—delivers to the son Kal-El a farewell speech that for many followers stands as a milestone in the revelation of the story of Superman as a mirror to the story of Jesus Christ.

Through the years, under different Superman writers, the farewell words that the father speaks to his infant son saw many revisions, additions and refinements. Earlier versions had focused on the well-being of the child or the survival of his people through him. However *Superman: The Movie* would feature the following benediction, which made nearly explicit



**Marlon Brando and Susannah York in *Superman: The Movie*.**

The family trinity as Holy Trinity. “I wrote this long speech for Brando when he puts Superman in the capsule, and there are obvious allusions to God sending Christ to Earth: ‘I sent them my only son.’”

(Tom Mankiewicz, writer of *Superman: The Movie*).

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much of the biblical imagery merely hinted at previously in the origin story of Superman.

You will travel far, my little Kal-El, but we will never leave you, even in the face of our deaths. The richness of our lives shall be yours. All that I have, all that I’ve earned, everything I feel, all this and more I bequeath you, my son. You will carry me inside you all the days of your life. You will make my strength your own, see my life through your eyes, as your life will be seen through mine. The son becomes the father and the father the son.

As screenwriter Mankiewicz observes, “The metaphor was clearly there when Jor-El sends Superman to Earth with God sending Christ to save humanity.” Next, Superman would meet two people who would play an equally important role in his life—his earthly parents “Mary” and “Joseph.”