



# The Christian Inquirer

Seeking wisdom in an Age of  
Information

"... with Christ Jesus himself as the chief  
cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20)  
"Test everything ..." (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

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## **Superman according to the Gospel** by Mike L Anderson

### **Superman's legacy**

It was perhaps my most ridiculous attempt at adventure. There I was just past adolescence, at the edge of a cliff-face in the Magaliesberg Mountains, expecting a piece of string with a 10kg breaking-strain to hold me up. My flying attempt was inadvertent, having forgotten to transfer a crucial piece of equipment to my harness. The stunt would have been better described as nose-diving than as abseiling. I had bent my legs to spring off when a fellow-climber spotted the error. If he was a second or two late, death would have been inevitable. I waited until that night to relive the incident and pursue the implications. It brought on a cold sweat. Trying to be something I was not had very nearly cost me my life. I was forced to admit my predilection for dreaming - dwelling on things other than the physical task at hand. This makes me a potential candidate for the Darwin Awards. The award commemorates "those individuals who ensure the long-term survival of our species by removing themselves from the gene pool in a sublimely idiotic fashion." Nowadays, to avoid nomination, I try to relegate adrenalin rushes to extreme sports of the PC-game variety.

What got me up the mountain in the first place? Perhaps I was trying to undo past sporting failure. (I was finally kicked off a school rugby team after tackling a guy on my own team - and he didn't even have the ball!). Perhaps a childhood staple of Superman comics fostered the notion that the ideal man is defined by his physical prowess?

Superman has certainly had a tremendous influence on popular culture. He is considered to be a universal icon.<sup>1</sup> Need one have any beef with Superman as escapist fun? However, he does have a serious side. Religious education classes in the United Kingdom have even used Superman as a way of introducing people to Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Superman stories may indeed illustrate spiritual truths – all truth is God’s truth - but how does the Ideal Man, Jesus, compare with Superman.

### **Superman according to Jesus**

To be sure there are many parallels between the life of Jesus and the Superhero. It has been remarked, for instance, that "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."<sup>3</sup> There is nothing theologically significant here. The entertainment industry has business savvy. Deliberately weaving in Christian subtexts ensures the inflow of Christian dollars. How ironic that religious education classes use the Superman story to introduce Jesus when the entertainment industry uses the Jesus story to bolster Superman profits!

One author is so besotted with the parallels that he thinks some are inspired by God! He grabs at resemblances between Jesus and Superman as if it they have deep import. In his book entitled *The Gospel according to the World's Greatest Superhero* he ventures that the "S" on Superman's costume echoes the bronze serpent of the Old Testament (the bronze serpent foreshadowed Jesus Christ).<sup>4</sup> An alternative explanation is that the "S" merely stands for "Superman" and that the perceived parallelism merely reveals the over enthusiasm of a devotee.

To be fair, Superman is upstanding, even respectable and battles crime and other social ills. Is it not churlish to nitpick his deficiencies when young people need all the good role models they can get? Nevertheless, the contrasts are very revealing. For all his superior physical abilities, his moral code is not impressive. Semiotics Professor Umberto Eco notes that for Superman “evil assumes only an offense against private property, good is represented only as charity.”<sup>5</sup> This is hardly surprising since he is a corporate product. In contrast, Jesus located evil “from within, out of men’s hearts.”<sup>6</sup> Superman’s value system merely parrots current and local moral fashion. According to Lauren Karp in a recent thesis, whenever Superman's popularity slumps he is given a character

makeover to boost sales.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, Jesus vigorously reacted against conventional wisdom saying, for instance, "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."<sup>8</sup>

Their feats are also different. Superman flies through suns at the speed of light, pushes planets into space, and travels through time.<sup>9</sup> Jesus did not even fly from Galilee to Jerusalem<sup>10</sup> and did nothing to stop the tower of Siloam falling on the eighteen unfortunates.<sup>11</sup> Superman gets his energy needs from photosynthesis; Jesus needed to eat and drink. Why the difference?

It is epitomised by their attire. The entertainment industry makes superheroes wear dazzling costumes to accentuate their distance from humanity; it is preoccupied with spectacular achievement however much it alienates superheroes from people. On the other hand, the plain-clothed Son of Man was preoccupied with close relationship. It is preposterous to imagine Jesus taking the cross and giving his tormentors a hiding with it. Instead he prays in keeping with his ministry of reconciliation, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." When the bumbling Clark Kent talks to humans, it is an act - Superman is an alien pretending to be human. When Jesus expresses God's love on the cross, it is as a real human in real pain. For Superman the really important stuff happens when he is wearing his cape. For Jesus the really important stuff happened when he was naked on a cross. He did not wear a uniform because he expects us to continue his work with him, invisible, in our hearts.



When Superman "takes care" of a carload of villains with the twirl of one hand it is to merely remove them from his presence and from society; when Jesus takes care of villains it is to restore the ear of one and the souls of many to himself and the community. Superman theatrically treats symptoms; Jesus treats underlying spiritual causes. Jesus' first reaction to the paralytic is to unvillify him – he forgives him.

When he heals him it is to show that he has the authority to do just that.<sup>12</sup> Superman is into, in the words of Umberto Eco, “parochial performance” whereas Jesus is into interminable impact. When Superman works, people merely watch. When Jesus works it first for then in and through us. He forgives then sends the forgiven to proclaim God’s message of forgiveness.

### **Superman according to Creation**

It is not only the Jesus that puts superheroes in their place, but God's creation too. My children loved the story I told of the animals hankering after each other abilities. Mr. Lion felt that his drab coat was unbecoming his status as a king; he wanted to be pink like the flamingos. Mrs. Porcupine was fed up with trying to hug Mr. Porcupine; she wanted the fluffy coat of the rabbits. So it was with many animals. They wanted what the others had. Only the warthog was content to be himself. The animals got together and demanded from God that he change them. God acquiesced. Before long Mr. Lion was exhausted and hungry from all the unsuccessful attempts at hunting. His prey could see him coming from miles away. Mr. and Mrs. Porcupine were equally exhausted and hungry because they had no time to eat. They had to keep running away from all the animals that saw them as an easy meal. Only the unchanged warthog was content. The animals cried out to God to forgive them for their ingratitude and return them to their original state. God did. So it is with his economy. Every strength or ability in one department brings with it a cost in another.

Biologists have discovered the principle playing itself out in remarkable intricacy and scale. Have you ever berated yourself for forgetting that telephone number after closing the directory? It turns out that chimpanzees in some ways have a better short-term memory than we do! It seems that our ancestors replaced this ability with language acquisition.<sup>13</sup> Which would you rather have? How would you like to be able to reassemble yourself after an injury? The humble sponge can do this with ease even after being passed through a sieve! But it comes at great cost – they have no eyes, nose or brain. How would you like to never grow old? Bacteria have this benefit, but at the great cost of being little more than automatons. So it is with real creatures.

Hollywood creatures are superheroes or supervillains. Lassie is a phenomenal emergency worker; real collies are wonderful as companions but disappointing as rescuers.<sup>14</sup> Hollywood sharks are not

only efficient swimmers, but tactical thinkers too - remember the movie *Jaws*? Whereas Superman is equally at home in space or underground, the so-called King of the Jungle becomes Subject of a Dinner when in deep water with a crocodile! God has created no Superanimals.

### **Humans in tight-fitting costumes**

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld said, "Spider-Man, Superman, Batman . . . men don't see these as fantasies, they see them as career opportunities."<sup>15</sup> It is ridiculous so over-stated, but do we not hanker after the abilities of others? Is the fixation on superheroes not a reflection of our frustration with our limits? How often do entrepreneurs try to be plumbers, sportsmen try to be poets and relatives try to be medical advisors? Force of circumstances may lead us beyond our natural abilities – a mother has to be a father too or an elder sibling a mother. But this is less than an ideal arrangement.

Charles Darwin perhaps tried to don a tight-fitting costume. For instance, he wrote to his friend Joseph Hooker, "Your conclusion that all speculation about preordination is idle waste of time is the only wise one; but how difficult it is not to speculate! My theology is a simple muddle; I cannot look at the universe as the result of blind chance, yet I can see no evidence of beneficent design or indeed of design of any kind, in the details."<sup>16</sup> Darwin's gardener thought the great naturalist was wasting his time studying flowers!<sup>17</sup> Perhaps theology is less a waste of time for theologians, as biology is to biologists and gardening to gardeners! At least Darwin admitted his confusion. Richard Dawkins wears the dazzling costume with a great deal more enthusiasm. He actually believes that he has a "statistical demonstration that God almost certainly does not exist!"<sup>18</sup>

It has often been noted that extraordinary genius in one department brings with it extraordinary costs in others. For instance Van Gogh's artistic genius came with depression and some sort of mental illness<sup>19</sup>. The literary accomplishments of C.S. Lewis came with "extreme manual clumsiness" from a congenital defect. Indeed, Lewis admits that because of it he could do nothing but writing.<sup>20</sup> The biological accomplishments of Charles Darwin came with a self-confessed loss of taste for poetry, music and pictures.<sup>21</sup> Even the greats among us have their handicaps. God has not created any Superhumans.

## Superman according to the Gospel

Should we not let God's Creation and especially Jesus on the cross orientate our thinking about Superman ... and ourselves?

Fundamentally the problem with humans is not so much sins, but sin. We want to have no limitations so that we can be independent of God. The Ideal Man did not have this problem.

As Patrick McCormick puts it, "...Satan tempts Jesus with the superpowers that will allow him to escape human frailty and rule over others, but Christ chooses to embrace human suffering and to take up the cross ...."<sup>22</sup>

The Suffering Servant did not yearn after the Father's powers while he was dying on the tree. Instead, he accepted the divine division of labour. He left the sovereign foreordaining of his death to his Father.<sup>23</sup> The Father left the actual dying to his Son. Jesus did not look like a superhero during his greatest act on earth; he looked like a humiliating failure. The cross informs us of the best kind of heroism. It is the kind that sacrificially gives of oneself and is not super but ordinary.

Christopher Reeve, the actor who played Superman, came to be this kind of hero after his horse-riding accident and subsequent quadriplegia. "When the first Superman movie came out I was frequently asked 'What is a hero?' I remember the glib response I repeated so many times. My answer was that a hero is someone who commits a courageous action without considering the consequences--a soldier who crawls out of a foxhole to drag an injured buddy to safety. And I also meant individuals who are slightly larger than life: Houdini and Lindbergh, John Wayne, JFK, and Joe DiMaggio. Now my definition is completely different. I think a hero is an ordinary individual who finds strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles."<sup>24</sup> Reeve's life as a quadriplegic demonstrated this ordinary heroism. What Superman did not do, Reeve did, making many support telephone calls to people with spinal cord injuries.<sup>25</sup> From the perspective of the cross, these modest acts were greater than anything his movie character ever did.

From a gospel point of view, we do not have to be anything like Superman to play a role in God's kingdom. We can have a stutter,

quadriplegia, HIV, mental illness, deformity or be retarded and be used by God. Indeed the Lord says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."<sup>26</sup> Even Almighty God needed weakness to reach out to us and so came to earth as a babe (when he comes in power he tends to frighten us away<sup>27</sup>). God used the powerlessness of his Son's death to draw people towards himself. As Jesus said, "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."<sup>28</sup> And this is why he still needs weakness, even our weakness, to reach out to the world. Our limitations are not a liability but an opportunity for God. People who know this and know God is what the world needs - not Superman.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kozlovic, A.K. (2002) Superman as Christ-Figure: The American Pop Culture Movie Messiah. *Journal of Religion and Film* Vol 6(1)

[www.unomaha.edu/jrf/superman.htm](http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/superman.htm)

<sup>2</sup> Lightfoot, L. (2006) Is it a bird, is it an RE Teacher? Superman called on to help in the classroom. *Telegraph.co.uk* 04 Feb 2006

<sup>3</sup> Kozlovic, A.K. (2002) *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, W. (undated) The Gospel According to the World's Greatest Superhero. Christianbookpreviews.

<http://www.christianbookpreviews.com/christian-book-detail.php?isbn=0736918124>

<sup>5</sup> Eco, U. (1979) The myth of superman. *The role of the reader: explorations in the semiotics of texts*. Indiana University Press, Bloomington pp.123-124.

<sup>6</sup> Mark 7:21.

<sup>7</sup> Karp, L. N. (2009) Truth, Justice and the American Way: What Superman teaches us about the American Dream and changing values within the United States. Master of Arts thesis.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 5: 43-45.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Karp, L.N. *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> It may be that Jesus teleported the disciples, a boat and himself to the lakeshore (see John 6:21). However, he did not do this before the public, but to get away from them (see John 6:15 and John 6:22-24).

<sup>11</sup> Luke 13:4-5.

<sup>12</sup> Mark 2:1-12.

<sup>13</sup> Inoue, S and T Matsuzawa (2007) Working memory of numerals in chimpanzees *Current biology* 17(23)1004-1005.

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- <sup>14</sup> Researchers from the University of Ontario faked emergency situations and discovered that dogs, including collies, failed to help their owners. This does not mean, of course, that dogs have never saved lives, just that it is unwise to rely on them alone. Boese, A. (2007) *Elephants on Acid and other Bizarre Experiments*. Harcourt Books, Orlando, Florida. pp. 123-126.
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted by Fleming, J.A. (2006) Does the World Need a Savior? Sermon preached before St. Paul United Methodist Church  
<http://www.stpaulumclr.org/sermons/070206.html>
- <sup>16</sup> Charles Darwin, letter to Joseph Hooker, 12 July 1870  
<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2739/old/1mlcd10.txt>
- <sup>17</sup> Christian, J.L. (2009) *Philosophy: An Introduction to the Art of Wondering* Wadsworth Cengage Learning, Belmont, Canada p.415.
- <sup>18</sup> Dawkins, R. (2006) *The God Delusion* Bantam Press, London, p. 113.
- <sup>19</sup> Blumer, D. (2002) The Illness of Vincent van Gogh. *American Journal of Psychiatry* 159:519-526.
- <sup>20</sup> Castriota-Scanderbeg, A and B. Dallapiccola (2005) *Abnormal Skeletal Phenotypes*. Springer-Verlag, Berlin. p. 405.
- <sup>21</sup> Darwin, C. (2005) *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin*. Adamant Media Corporation, p.81.
- <sup>22</sup> McCormick, P. (2003) Who will save the day? In the pantheon of superheroes and superpowers, Jesus offers us a different model.  
<http://www.thefreelibrary.com/Who+will+save+the+day%3f+In+the+pantheon+of+superheroes+and...-a0102452967>
- <sup>23</sup> Acts 2:23.
- <sup>24</sup> [www.chrisreevehomepage.com/stillme.html](http://www.chrisreevehomepage.com/stillme.html)
- <sup>25</sup> Hall, F. (2005) *Christopher Reeve*. UU World: The Magazine of the Unitarian Universalist Association, Jan/Feb,  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa4071/is\\_200501/ai\\_n9465752/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa4071/is_200501/ai_n9465752/)
- <sup>26</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9.
- <sup>27</sup> Even God the Son had this problem - see Mark 4: 35-41, Mark 9:2-6, Luke 8:34-37.
- <sup>28</sup> John 12:32.