

## CHAPTER ONE

# The Origin(s) of Superman

### *Reimagining Religion in the Man of Steel*

DAN W. CLANTON JR.

Superman is possibly the most ubiquitous symbol of American popular culture there is. He is found in comic books, newspaper strips, graphic novels, radio and movie serials, television series, feature films, and a whole host of tchotchkes and other examples of “material culture.” But in the beginning, he was just an idea cooked up by two Jewish teenagers from Cleveland: Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. They had a difficult time getting anyone to publish it, but when Superman saw the light of day in a new art form called the “comic book” in June 1938, he was an immediate success.

From the beginning Superman stories have contained potentially religious or scriptural references or echoes, leading interpreters to suggest that there are religious/scriptural meanings or subtexts within “Superman.”<sup>1</sup> Surprisingly some of these interpreters see these subtexts as obviously Jewish, while others understand them as clearly Christian. In what follows, I will show that cultural artifacts like “Superman” can be *religiously multivalent*, that is, different interpreters find various kinds of symbols and themes when examining the same aesthetic product. To do so, I will examine some possibly religious elements within the 1978 Richard Donner film *Superman: The Movie* in order to demonstrate how some readers/viewers can see Superman as another

in a long line of Jewish heroes, while others see him as an obvious Christ figure.

Why can people read the same stories or watch the same film and come away with very different interpretations? Where does meaning exist—is it solely in a text, or does the viewer/reader/hearer play a role in determining what something means? If they do, can texts mean anything the reader wants them to, or does the text somehow constrain or limit its potential meanings?<sup>2</sup> I argue that meaning emerges in the complex interaction between interpreter and text, so that meaning is negotiated between certain clues in and information about a text, and the experiences and interpretive expertise of the interpreter. Neither the text nor the reader/hearer/viewer is totally responsible for what a given story means.

One constant in the history of Superman is a preoccupation with his origin. Starting soon after his introduction in print, Superman's origin story was told and retold in different formats by different writers and artists with different details included or omitted. The significance of this is that many of these later additions can be interpreted as carrying theological significance. Below, I will briefly describe the first origin story for Superman and note how three subsequent key retellings of that story add particulars to flesh out the Man of Steel's background. Given space constraints, I will then focus mainly on *Superman: The Movie* and simply note plot components therein which could hold potentially religious and/or scriptural significance. I will also discuss several Jewish and Christian readings of this film, noting particular themes and common threads among these readings. Finally, I will assess the significance of our project for understanding popular culture and religion.

In June 1938, comic readers met a new character in the pages of *Action Comics #1*: a brightly attired alien who, remarkably, looked just like a human. This first origin story for Superman is brief and direct, consisting of only seven panels on only one page, without any of the verbosity and pomposity one finds in later iterations.<sup>3</sup> First, we are shown “a distant planet” that “was destroyed by old age,” but not before a “scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space-ship, launching it

toward Earth!” The narrator informs us that the child arrives safely on Earth, a “passing motorist” finds the craft, and the “sleeping babe within” is promptly deposited in an orphanage, where the child develops wondrous powers. The final panels tell the reader how Superman as an identity was formulated when “Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind.” The result of this decision is the creation of “Superman,” who is a “champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!”

In the context of discussing the religious symbolism both of and in Superman’s origin(s), we are forced to admit that there is precious little explicit evidence in *Action Comics* #1. That is, there are no specific scriptural citations or allusions and no obvious thematic parallels with religious or theological traditions to which Siegel and Shuster would have been exposed. All we can say confidently about the religious content of the original origin is that we see an alien being with great power make a conscious decision to use that power for the betterment, not the domination, of a people not his own. And while there are examples and paradigms within various religious traditions of powerful beings using their power compassionately and altruistically, any attempt to draw specific parallels with individual beings would result in only limited analytic usefulness. Put differently, we will have to wait for specific sacred resonances until we examine later versions of Superman’s origin(s).

No one could have predicted the immense popularity of Superman.<sup>4</sup> Capitalizing on this, their publishers gave Siegel and Shuster what they had always dreamed of: a daily newspaper comic strip.<sup>5</sup> In the first twelve daily strips (published in January 1939), readers learned much more about Superman’s home planet Krypton, including information about his birth parents and why they had made the decision to send him away.<sup>6</sup> In Strip #1 we are introduced to Jor-L and Lora, told that the former is “Krypton’s foremost scientist,” and shown the birth of their son, Kal-L. Suddenly, a terrifically powerful earthquake “commences to topple” the family’s home. Luckily, the family survives, but Jor-L subsequently announces

that “due to an internal cataclysm, Krypton will explode to fragments!” Strip #6 is an especially moving section, as both parents bemoan what the looming destruction of the planet means for their infant son. Lora’s wistful desire that they “could be up there [among the stars], safe to pursue our life as we please!” gives Jor-L the “solution” to their predicament: “I’ll build a ship . . . An Ark of space! We’ll transport our planet’s entire populace to another world!” The governing Council of Krypton refuses to believe Jor-L’s diagnosis and prescription, but he secretly has built a “model space-flier” that he hopes will succeed as a test flight to “the only nearby planet capable of supporting life”: Earth. Before long, we witness the beginning of the final conflagration that will destroy the planet. Both Jor-L and Lara decide that Kal-L should be placed in the “flier” and sent to Earth. Strip #10 details the “self-sacrificing gesture” of the boy’s parents and the explosion of Krypton. Kal-L lands safely on Earth, and a “passing motorist” plucks the child from the burning ship and takes him to “an orphan asylum.”

Obviously, the language used by Jor-L to describe the craft he wants to build to ferry the inhabitants of Krypton to safety is key for our purposes: he calls it “an Ark of space.” Given the context—an impending cataclysm initially known to and later only believed in by one man and his family that will prove fatal to all living creatures on a planet—and the specific use of the term “Ark,” it becomes difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is an explicit reference to two stories from the Torah. First is the obvious connection with the story of Noah in Genesis 6–9, in which Noah is commanded by God to construct an “ark” (in Hebrew, *tevah*) in 6.14 in order to save a segment of the life forms on the planet, while leaving the remainder to drown (6.6). This story clearly parallels Jor-L’s desire to rescue the “entire populace” of Krypton and relocate them to Earth prior to the destruction of the planet.<sup>7</sup> The second connection is perhaps not as obvious, since it depends on knowledge of biblical Hebrew and an awareness of a specific term whose meaning is often obscured in English. In Exodus 1, Pharaoh orders that all male Hebrew children be killed, because he is concerned about the increas-

ing numbers and power of the Hebrews who have settled in Egypt. At the outset of Exodus 2, we are told that a Levite woman has a baby boy, whom she hides for three months. In 2.3 the narrator tells us that, no longer able to conceal the boy, she got a basket (*tevat*) put him in it, and sent him down the river, where he would eventually be found by Pharaoh's daughter and named Moses. The significance of this detail lies in (a) the fact that the Hebrew word *tevat* is only used twice in the Torah: once in the story of Noah, and once here; and (b) in the story of Moses, the word designates the vessel used by a parent in order to secure a safe future for her son in an alien culture to which he will have to acculturate to survive.<sup>8</sup> These echoes of Noah and Moses sounded by both the general context of strips ##1–12 and the more specific use of the term “Ark” by Jor-L signal the earliest explicit religious reference in Superman's origin(s), and as such provide us with our first important piece of data in determining how different interpreters can interpret Superman's story as resonating with different religious traditions.

With Superman's debut in newspapers, he became even more popular.<sup>9</sup> Nothing like this had been experienced before in the fledgling genre of comic books. In 1939, not only was a Sunday newspaper comic strip introduced, but the publishers decided to try something new: a comic book bearing his name and containing only Superman stories. The result was *Superman* #1, in which Siegel and Shuster introduced the Kents, Superman's parents here on Earth, who advise him both to use his powers to help others and to hide his alien identity and gifts from humanity.<sup>10</sup> Gone, though, is all the narrative elaboration regarding Krypton found in the newspaper dailies from earlier in 1939. Instead, we are simply shown an “experimental rocket-ship” speeding away from an exploding planet with no familial biographical information or cultural context provided. Next, we see the ship sitting on Earth and “an elderly couple” standing next to it in place of the “passing motorist” of the previous two origins. This couple, named the Kents, take the “poor” child to an orphanage, but at this point, a new wrinkle is introduced: the Kents later return to the orphanage and ask if they can adopt the child. The

reader is soon shown the impact of the addition of the Kents to the origin: they provide “love and guidance” for the boy, which will help in “shaping his future.” Pa Kent (no first name is provided here) advises him to “hide [‘this great strength of yours’] from people or they’ll be scared of you!” His adoptive mother, Mary, exhorts, “But when the proper time comes, you must use it to assist humanity.” Including the Kents and expounding on their influence on how Clark (his name is finally provided) grows to understand his identity and decides on the altruistic use of his gifts allows for the assigning of a motive for helping humanity. The insertion of the Kents allows the reader to see and hear why Clark decides to use his powers for good, namely, because that is the way he was raised. Of the remaining content in this origin, only one panel presents new information to the reader absent from the 1938 origin: an image of Clark standing over the Kents’ graves, with the narration that even though their deaths “greatly grieved” him, “it strengthened a determination that had been growing in his mind.” That “determination” is to become Superman, and therefore put his Earth parents’ admonitions into practice by using his strength to help humanity.

In sum, the introduction of the Kents is significant for two main reasons. First, their advice to Clark introduces an ethical theme into Superman’s story that had previously been absent. Up to this point, we readers have been unsure as to why he does what he does. By providing the ethical exhortation of his mother, readers now know that the decision to behave morally was due to exposure to some—at this point seemingly generic—system of ethical thought. Later writers and scholars would spill a lot of ink trying to specify the origin and content of that ethical system for an obvious reason: if Superman acts in such and such a way, then it becomes easier to draw a parallel between that moral action and the ethical thought of a specific religious tradition. Once that parallel is drawn, Superman can be “claimed” as a symbol and/or outgrowth of that religious tradition, lending credence to its influence within American popular culture, as well as providing a powerful tool for proselytizing purposes. Moreover, the fact that Clark’s adoptive

mother is named “Mary” might be seen as reinforcing the larger theme that emerges with the introduction of ethics—namely, a parallel between Superman and the Christ of the New Testament. Simplifying the Gospels, one might come away with an image of the Christ as one who descends from the heavens as an alien yet has both a human presence and appearance, who wishes to help humanity via his superhuman powers . . . and who has a human mother named Mary. Even so, at this point we should not make too much of these parallels; there are far too many details and plot points missing for a substantive link.

To be sure, there are other retellings of Superman’s origin between 1939 and the 1978 blockbuster *Superman: The Movie*. However, this film is possibly the best known and most accessible example of adding prospective religious aspects to Superman’s origin story. *Superman: The Movie* makes four narrative additions to the by then standard origin story found in the comic books and newspaper strips mentioned above, all revolving around two speeches by Superman’s biological father Jor-El, which could be read as allusions to biblical texts and/or religious experiences generally.

As we try to understand the relationship(s) between *Superman: The Movie* and various Jewish and Christian interpretations of it, two key questions arise. What features of the story might signify a specific religious tradition over and against another? And, in what ways have readers/interpreters/scholars understood Superman religiously? In Jewish readings of the film, there are three themes which represent the building blocks of the argument for Superman’s Jewishness: the “godlike” nature of Superman’s family name; the theme of immigration for the sake of survival, including adopting a “dual identity”; and the parallels with Old Testament and/or Jewish heroes, most often Moses.<sup>11</sup> The Christian readings likewise emphasize four aspects of the aforementioned additions, including Jor-El as “heavenly father”; a sense that the parallels with Moses actually point to an identification with Christ; Kal-El (Clark) as the “only son” sent with a “divine mission” with a “hidden identity”; and most obviously and thoroughly, the view that Superman is a kind of “Christ figure.”<sup>12</sup>

*First*, in Jor-El's farewell speech to Kal-El on Krypton, he notes, "The son becomes the father, and the father the son."<sup>13</sup> This language echoes the complicated theme of "residing in" one finds in Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" in the Gospel of John, chapters 14–17.<sup>14</sup> Here Jesus helps his disciples understand the intricate and intimate relationship between him, God, and the Holy Spirit (called the Paraclete in 14.26), and also reassures them that when he ascends to return to the Father, the Paraclete will remain with them as a substitute divine presence. To demonstrate this web of relations, Jesus employs seemingly confusing language, such as when he tells his disciples that after he departs they will know that "I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you" (14.20). By doing so, Jesus provides a blueprint for readers to understand how to become disciples themselves.

In this scene, Jor-El is obviously "the father," which by extension makes him a godlike figure. Some Jewish interpreters pick up on this characterization and link it to the familial name "El." For example, Rabbi Simcha Weinstein discusses the significance of the name "El," which "is one of the ancient names for God used throughout the Bible." Similarly, Weinstein claims, the proper name Kal "is the root of several Hebrew words meaning 'with lightness,' 'swiftness,' 'vessel,' and 'voice.'"<sup>15</sup> Christian readers, too, understand Jor-El as a kind of divine father. Anton Karl Kozlovic, a specialist in religion and film, lists twelve examples of the overlap between Jor-El and God, including the name El; the cinematography of the film; and Jor-El's association with "the colour white," commonly thought to be the "iconic signature colour of the Divine."<sup>16</sup>

*Second*, after Clark enters the Fortress of Solitude and encounters the electronic version of his dead Kryptonian father, they embark upon a twelve-year tutelage. At its conclusion, Jor-El exhorts him to "rejoin your new world and serve its collective humanity. Live as one of them, Kal-El, and discover where your strength and power are needed. But always hold in your heart the pride of your special heritage." There is a literary form/genre in the Hebrew Bible in which persons are singled out and commissioned for a specific task by God, that scholars creatively call "commis-

sion narratives.” Most of them are in the prophetic books, such as Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1, but other examples include Exodus 3 (Moses) and Judges 6 (Gideon). In the New Testament, Paul has this role in Galatians 2 and Acts 9, 22, and 26. If we analyze Jor-El’s speech as a commission narrative, we see both overlaps with and departures from the classic biblical model. Superman experiences most of the six observable components of the classic commissioning narrative.<sup>17</sup> Clark is *confronted* with the divine or the sacred when he discovers the green crystal, sets out on his journey, and witnesses the creation of the Fortress. There is an *introductory word* when Jor-El introduces himself before they embark on Clark’s education. After this twelve-year period ends, Jor-El *commissions* his son using imperative or commanding verbs to indicate what he wishes him to do as a result of their encounter. Unlike many of those commissioned in the Bible, Clark/Kal-El offers no *objection* to the task Jor-El sets before him.<sup>18</sup> Since Kal-El offers no objection to the commission, strictly speaking a *reassurance* and *sign* are not necessary, but it seems that he still receives them in the form of his uniform and heightened powers, on the one hand, and the remainder of Jor-El’s speech, on the other.

For Jewish readers, the language here regarding the “new world” coupled with the exhortation always to remember “your special heritage” brings to mind the theme of immigration. Arie Kaplan, author of *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, notes the significance of Superman’s identity as a “refugee”: “Superman, though an alien, can pass as one of us, even though he is an immigrant—in fact, the ultimate immigrant, the supreme stranger in the strangest land, and thus the supreme metaphor for the Jewish experience.”<sup>19</sup> The sociologist Harry Brod is especially interested in the choice to give Kal-El a secret human identity. Like Kaplan, he posits that the significance of Superman’s secret identity is connected to a gender-based stereotype of Jewish men. Siegel and Shuster’s story only works psychologically, he says, if we know that people in it see Clark as “a timid, socially inept, physically weak, clumsy, sexually ineffectual quasi intellectual”: “In other words, the classic Jewish nebbish.”<sup>20</sup> But, continues Brod, “It is the combination of Superman’s

invincibility and the nebbish-like characterization of Clark Kent that makes Superman such a Jewish character.”<sup>21</sup> That is, the stereotypically Jewish Clark is emblematic of an “old world” sensibility and (anti-) masculinity, whereas Superman’s physical virility and courage represents a new context, a new home in America for Jews.<sup>22</sup>

*Third*, in Jor-El’s final speech, he states: “They can be a great people, Kal-El, they wish to be. They only lack the light to show the way.” Within biblical literature, light is a multivalent symbol. The light mentioned in Genesis 1.3 as being created on the first day is clearly not sunlight, since this is not created until Day Four (1.14–19). Jewish interpreters generally see this light as reflective of “the splendor of the divine presence.”<sup>23</sup> They often point to Psalm 104.2, which describes God as being clothed in majesty, “wrapped in light as with a garment.”<sup>24</sup> Christians, on the other hand, tend to read the light imagery in Genesis 1.3 in tandem with the characterization of Jesus as “the light of the world” in John 8.12 and in the prologue to John, where the narrator says: “The life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1.4–5). This light imagery in Jor-El’s speech could be heard as indicating that his son will be the agent of moral change among humans via his servant leadership. In other words, Jor-El intends Kal-El to “shine his light” so as to move others to live morally and fulfill their desire to be a “great” people.<sup>25</sup>

This charge to be a heroic moral exemplar, along with the film’s emphasis on sending the child away to protect him from harm, is addressed by Jewish interpreters in the context of discussing the parallels between Moses and Superman. Weinstein lists a number of overlaps between Moses’ story in Exodus 1–15 and Superman. For example, the fate of the Kryptonians resembles that of the firstborn male Jews in Egypt; just like Kal-El’s parents, Moses’ mother sends him away to protect him from this fate; both Moses and Superman are “raised in foreign cultures”; both are commissioned to help people; and both hide their true identities.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in his section on Superman and Moses, Brod first notes the tradition of “Jews making illustrated books” in con-

nection with the *Haggadah*, the text, often illustrated and child-friendly, used by Jews during the religiously didactic holiday of Passover.<sup>27</sup> As Brod puts it, this text tells the story of

Moses, sent off in a small vessel by his parents to save him from the death and destruction facing his people. He is then raised among people to whom he really is an alien, but who do not suspect his secret identity, and he grows up to become a liberator and champion of the oppressed, with the aid of miraculous superpowers displayed in some truly memorable action scenes. Sound at all familiar?<sup>28</sup>

It certainly sounds familiar to Christian interpreters like Ken Schenck, who acknowledges the parallels with Moses that Weinstein and Brod point out. However, he, like other Christian readers who see Moses as a prototype of Jesus, adapts/appropriates those parallels to reinforce the analogy between Superman and Jesus.<sup>29</sup> Schenck writes that Superman's

story also resembles the early life of Moses, whose parents sent him off in a basket down the Nile in order to save him from Pharaoh, who ordered that newly born male sons of the Israelite slaves be killed. However, even this similarity echoes the early life of Jesus, whose parents flee to Egypt with the infant, escaping King Herod's edict to kill all male infants in Bethlehem. In the New Testament the early followers of Jesus believed him to be the long, awaited redeemer of God's people, just like Moses. In fact, Jesus was considered the "New Moses."<sup>30</sup>

The Christian educator Stephen Skelton also mentions the Moses imagery prevalent in both the comics and the films, noting that among the "pre-Christ figures" he examines, "Moses is the preeminent one, more so than Samson and Hercules combined."<sup>31</sup>

*Finally*, Jor-El ends his speech by saying, "For this reason, above all, their capacity for good, I have sent them you, my only son." The characterization of Kal-El as "my only son" in concert with the above three additions reinforces the possibility of reading the film messianically, that is, interpreting Superman as a kind of Christ figure.<sup>32</sup> Christian readings of the film's fourth and final addition focus intently on Superman as a

metaphor for Christ. Roy M. Anker discusses Jor-El's farewell speech and how it engages "in sophisticated terms the mysterious notion at the heart of the Christian conception of God: the Holy Trinity."<sup>33</sup> Anker connects this speech with John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that he sent his only begotten son . . ."), writing: "The language of light, redemption, spiritual aspiration, and, most of all, of biblical messiahship . . . fastens clearly and tightly to the Christ story."<sup>34</sup>

For Anker, it is Jor-El's intention—the "commission" noted above—that demonstrates "[h]ow intentionally the filmmakers constructed the theme of the Incarnation."<sup>35</sup> This "one drastic departure from the story told in the original . . . comic-book *Superman* series" allows the film not only to echo texts like John 1, but also to illustrate "Jor-El's steadfast resolve . . . to send Kal-El to a place where he might do much good with his extraordinary powers."<sup>36</sup> To be sure, other Christian interpreters examine the parallels the film seems to establish between Superman and Christ. For example, Rev. Edward Mehok writes, "Both Christ and Superman represent the fulfillment—one religious and the other secular—of basic human hopes for a messiah. Both are savior figures that people of all ages and religions have dreamed about and longed for."<sup>37</sup> This claim is also found in Skelton's book-length Christian interpretation of Superman: "Superman is not Jesus Christ. But he is a Christ figure, a figure resembling Christ—as we all should be. That said, the story of Superman bears some incredible parallels to the story of the Super Man, Jesus Christ."<sup>38</sup> However, Anker delves deeper than both Schenck and Skelton, focusing on the "christomorphic" character of the plot, that is, how the film weaves a narrative that thematically emulates or "transfigures" the story of Jesus, ultimately becoming what Anker terms a parable that engenders hope.<sup>39</sup> He continues:

In the case of the first two *Superman* films . . . Superman as a Christ figure is not a random allusion or image simply pasted over the top of displays of special effects or old-style heroism. Rather, in what is a rare accomplishment in Hollywood, the whole of the film serves to elucidate and impart the surprise, wonder, and delight of the fantastic possibility of an incarna-

tion of divine love itself. And that characterization is no simple miracle-working trickster in a cape or spider webs but a notion of God that features an extravagantly loving servant who comes out of nowhere, be it Krypton or Kansas, to suffer and triumph for bedraggled human creatures.<sup>40</sup>

Anker's focus on love and servanthood clearly reinforces the claim by Christian interpreters that Superman is a "Christ figure," carrying out a commission from his heavenly father to bring light to humanity through his moral example. Of course, as we have seen, Jewish viewers could just as easily claim that this divine commission to improve humankind morally hearkens back to stories about Moses in the Torah.

We have examined four key additions *Superman: The Movie* makes to Superman's generally accepted origin story that make potentially religious and/or scriptural imagery or allusions, which were seized upon by later interpreters as data to argue that Superman has either a Jewish or Christian subtext or identity. The purpose of doing so was to demonstrate the religious multivalency of "Superman" as an aesthetic discourse. But what does this tell us about the study of religion and popular culture?

This examination of Superman reveals four issues in the discussion of religion and popular culture. *First*, it demonstrates the difficulty of the subject by displaying the interdisciplinary demands inherent in such an enterprise. This work requires scholars not only to have training in the academic study of religion, but also expertise and/or experience in other fields as well; in our case, in literary theory and comic studies.

*Second*, these disparate understandings of the same texts illustrate the variety of possible interpretations of any popular cultural text. This variety is a consequence of viewing meaning as being negotiated in the encounter between text and reader. Put differently, if both I—a straight, white, Southern-born, male Jew with a PhD. in Religious and Theological Studies—and someone with a different sociocultural background, religious beliefs, and educational experiences read the same text, we will filter its meaning through different experiential/environmental perceptive grids and understand it differently, noticing different

aspects of it or allusions within the text and/or what we can know about the world behind the text.

*Third*, this study shows how important it is for interpreters to pursue knowledge of the history of how a given discourse develops. We would not have been able to comment on the way(s) in which *Superman: The Movie* alters or revises previous origin stories without knowledge of those previous stories. To understand any (popular) cultural product it is useful to understand the history of interpretive conversations about the creation(s). Of course, one does not have to be aware of all of the examples we delve into above to find pleasure in reading a Superman comic or watching a Superman cartoon. However, a viewer who knows the genealogy of the character and has some knowledge of the major story arcs in earlier comics can appreciate the artistic choices and narrative sophistication in later examples. This allows the reader or viewer to engage in a more active, holistic reading or viewing experience, whether engaging a discourse like Superman or biblical literature. Background knowledge allows the reader to notice when details are added, omitted, or referenced, and to place what one is reading or viewing within the spectrum of other aesthetic products within that discourse.

*Finally*, what I hope I have demonstrated is that all interpretations—not just of Superman, but all encounters with texts—are open to analysis and critique because of their perspectival nature. As I mentioned at the outset, meaning is created in the interaction between texts and readers and negotiated after considering signs within and contextual data behind the text utilizing the particular viewpoint and experience of the reader. There is no one, correct reading of Superman. Different interpreters understand the different texts we have surveyed differently because they all have different experiences, training, and backgrounds. All of the analyses in this book are open to critique as well from your own individual perspective, using your own unique voice. Just don't forget your cape.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Clanton identifies the authors of earliest versions of Superman as Jews. How does their religious identity, and their experience as immigrants, shape the stories they tell about Superman? What was going on in the world at the time that might have drawn Jews to tales about a superhero?
2. What are other examples of popular culture that contain allusions to more than one religious tradition?
3. Do you agree that meaning is not found exclusively in a text or in the reader, but, rather, is constructed in the interaction between text and reader? Why or why not? And what is at stake either way? Why does this question matter?
4. Organize a classroom debate between groups arguing that Superman is best understood as an expression of Judaism in popular culture and those who argue that the Man of Steel is best understood as an expression of Christianity in popular culture. What evidence would you cite to support your case?

NOTES

1. This process of infusing traditionally non-sacred media with sacred images, ideas, and texts is called the “sacralization of the secular” by Conrad Ostwalt in his *Secular Steeples: Popular Culture and the Religious Imagination* (2nd ed.; London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 28–29 and 48–51.

2. I have addressed these and other questions in my “Pop Culture and the Bible,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Steven L. McKenzie (2 vols.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 2: 114–23, esp. 115–17.

3. This issue is now collected in Jerry Siegel (scripts) and Joe Shuster (artwork), *The Superman Chronicles, Volume One*, ed. Anton Kawasaki (New York: DC Comics, 2006), 3–16. The origin I discuss is found on p. 4 of this collection, and all quotes in this section are taken from that page.

4. See Larry Tye, *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* (New York: Random House, 2012; Kindle Book), loc. 718.

5. *Ibid.*, loc. 820–22.

6. These strips are collected in Siegel and Shuster, *Superman: The Dailies: Strips 1–966, 1939–1942* (3 vols.; New York: Sterling, 2006), 1: 12–18.

7. Noachic imagery generally fades early on in Superman continuity in favor of the Mosaic parallels. Even so, the Space Ark returns in the classic story line “Superman’s Return to Krypton,” found in the daily strips ##6759–6836, published from 15 August to 12 November 1960 (esp. ##6812 and 6815–16). This story arc was adapted from *Superman* #141 (November 1960) and can be found in Jerry Siegel (scripts) and Curt Swan, Stan Kaye, and Wayne Boring (artwork), *Superman: The Silver Age Dailies, Volume One, 1959–1961* (Library of American Comics Series; San Diego: IDW Publishing & DC Comics, 2013), 155–180.

8. See Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 9. See also his *Exploring Exodus: The Origins of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 28, for more on the thematic importance of the overlap between Noah’s Ark and Moses’ basket.

9. See Tye, *Superman*, loc. 572.

10. *Superman* #1 is now collected in Siegel and Shuster, *Superman Chronicles, Volume One, 194–204*. This third origin is found on 195–96. The Kents also figure prominently in another retelling of the origin in the Sunday comic strips published from November 25 to December 16, 1945. These strips have been collected in Jerry Siegel & DC Comics (scripts); Wayne Boring & Jack Burnley (artwork), *Superman: The Golden Age Sundays, 1943–1946* (Library of American Comics Series; San Diego: IDW Publishing & DC Comics, 2013), 142–45 (Sunday Strips ##317–20).

11. Obviously, the latter two themes are clear enough from the comic and newspaper origins discussed. Some scholars also compare Superman to the Golem; see, e.g., Arie Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2008), 14.

12. Again, several of these themes are also potentially present in the 1938–39 origin stories.

13. See Jake Rossen, *Superman vs. Hollywood: How Fiendish Producers, Devious Directors, and Warring Writers Grounded an American Icon* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 72.

14. For a deeper analysis of this section, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel according to John* (2 vols., AB 29 & 29A; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966, 1970), 2: 617–782; and Robert Kysar, *John’s Story of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 68–76.

15. Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oj Vey! How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Baltimore: Leviathan Press, 2006), 27.

16. Anton Karl Kozlovic, "The Holy, Non-Christic Biblical Subtexts in *Superman: The Movie* (1978) and *Superman II* (1981)," *Journal of Religion and Film* 6, no. 2 (2002), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/supergood.htm>, pars. 3, 4, and 10.

17. Norman C. Habel, "The Form and Significance of the Call Narratives," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 77 (1965): 297–323. The six components are: the Divine Confrontation; the Introductory Word; the Commission; the Objection; the Reassurance; and the Sign.

18. To be fair, not all those commissioned by God offer an objection (e.g., Abram in Genesis 12), and in these cases the obedience and even heroism of those called is highlighted by later interpreters.

19. Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton*, 14.

20. Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012; Kindle Book), loc. 435.

21. *Ibid.*, loc. 490.

22. See also Thomas Andrae, "Funnyman, Jewish Masculinity, and the Decline of the Superhero," in *Siegel and Shuster's Funnyman: The First Jewish Superhero*, ed. Thomas Andrae and Mel Gordon (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2010), 55–75.

23. This is the view of Genesis Rabbah; see Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 7.

24. See Sarna, *Genesis*, 7.

25. As in Matt. 5.14–16.

26. Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!* 26–27.

27. Brod, *Superman is Jewish?* loc. 394.

28. *Ibid.*, loc. 402. For a more critical Jewish view on the parallels between Moses and Superman, see Danny Fingerroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 44–45.

29. A typological interpretation of a character or event seeks to understand that character or event by comparing it to a prior character or event. Richard B. Hays calls it an "act of imaginative correlation" (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989], 100). For example, Paul sees his Corinthian congregation in light of the generations Moses led in the wilderness, and based on their actions exhorts the Corinthians not to act as they did: "These things occurred as examples for us, so that we may not desire evil as they did" (1 Cor. 10.6). That is, Paul asks the Corinthians not to adhere to the "type" of the rebellious wilderness generation, but rather to see that behavior as discordant. As Hays notes, Paul does not thereby denigrate the wilderness generation, so that this typological reading is not supersessionist like the

typological argument in Hebrews 8. See *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, 95–102.

30. Ken Schenck, “Superman: A Popular Culture Messiah,” in *The Gospel According to Superheroes: Religion and Popular Culture*, ed. B.J. Oropeza (New York: Peter Lang, 2005), 33.

31. Stephen Skelton, *The Gospel According to the World’s Greatest Superhero* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2006), 46. Skelton had previously mentioned the influence of Samson on Siegel, but claimed specifically that both Samson and Hercules—another early influence—“prefigure the person of Christ” (37).

32. Different writers mean different things when they claim a character in a film is a Christ figure. See, e.g., Lloyd Baugh, *Imagining the Divine: Jesus and Christ-Figures in Film* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1997), esp. 109–12; and William R. Telford, “Through a Lens Darkly: Critical Approaches to Theology and Film,” in *Cinéma Divinité: Religion, Theology and the Bible in Film*, ed. Eric S. Christianson, Peter Francis, and W.R. Telford (London: SCM Press, 2005), 15–43.

33. Roy M. Anker, *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 254.

34. *Ibid.*, 254.

35. *Ibid.*, 255.

36. *Ibid.*, 255–56. The first ellipsis elides Anker’s shocking error in identifying the first appearance of Superman as being in a “Marvel” comic. One can only hope that my fellow comic fans can overlook this heinous transgression.

37. Edward Mehok, “St. Clark of Krypton,” in *Superman at Fifty! The Persistence of a Legend*, ed. Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle (New York: Collier Books, 1987), 128.

38. Skelton, *Gospel*, 22.

39. See Anker, *Catching Light*, 250–51. He borrows the term “christomorphic” from Neil Hurley (250n3).

40. Anker, *Catching Light*, 251.