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BIG HEROES IN TIGHT SPACES

A review of Greg Garrett, *Holy Superheroes! Exploring the Sacred in Comics, Graphic Novels, and Film – Revised and Expanded Edition*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008. xiv + 140 pp. \$16.95. ISBN: 0664231918.

There are three reasons why modern audiences make superhero films into blockbuster box office successes, claims Baylor University English Professor and *The Gospel According to Hollywood* writer Greg Garrett: The genre delivers much-needed heroes, much-needed hope, and, in spite of the mind-blowing special effects, much-needed shows of restraint. The late-twentieth and early-twenty-first century has placed these qualities at a premium during a time when the specters of apocalypticism, apathy, and addiction have loom heavily over the American consciousness. Some turn to communities of faith at these times, and some turn to worlds of stories; Garrett aims to display their easy overlap. Moreover, as it has in many other times of national malaise, mainstream entertainment again shoulders the additional responsibility of not just providing its viewers with escapism but also with inspiration.

The corollary of comic book legend Stan Lee's famous phrase is pertinent here: With great responsibility came great power. The superhero industry currently exhibits incredible muscle across America. Yet even before Christopher Reeves' 1978 *Superman* became both a cinematic icon and industry smash, the influence of superheroes was already reflecting and steering American moralities. Garrett's earlier edition of *Holy Superheroes!*, published in 2005, centered more on the stapled exploits of these fantastic characters than the celluloid. With the continuing Hollywood boom of spandex crusaders since that time, a new publisher and a further examples could take Garrett's message further. Spirituality, humanity, and belief are vital to our existence, and they can be found among the congregation or within the comics – just so long as they are, indeed, found.

This new edition begins with Garrett welcoming all to his scholarly fascination and life-long appreciation of the superhero. The enthusiasm in his authorial voice remains constant even as he shifts to the most pertinent matter at hand: Why religion and comics? Because, he suggests, they are already interacting, engaged in a discussion that began as far back as Superman's arrival in 1938. A speedy recount of the medium's humble origins moves the discussion rapidly to the concept of heroism. For this, he leans on John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett's *Myth of the American Superhero* and "its ongoing retelling of the Judeo-Christian story of redemption" as the foundation for the comic book and film genre's spiritual roots (7). He widens and further emphasizes this association with an outline of Joseph Campbell's global monomyth as presented in comics'

natural, serial format. The superhero's call to action seems a never-ending battle, unlikely to result in a return home or the permanence of death so long as new issues are needed on the store shelf or additional sequels fill the theaters. The superhero is *always* redeeming.

This brand of hero is ever-sacrificing, too, as Garrett continues with the examples of Spider-Man, Captain America, and Batman. As figures of human perfection (and even super-human ability), they have power that could be easily abused, perhaps all the more tempting due to the losses each has suffered in his past. Instead, they follow the dictates of the book of Micah, explains Garrett, and the principles of Catholic writer Thomas Merton: one should use their gifts to attain balance, not domination. During the genre's earliest years, this was as simple as maintaining the status quo and thwarting the obviously bad guys. Eventually, though, matters grayed, and superheroes had to evolve, looking past the direct Akedah-like trust in authority to a New Testament acceptance of sinners and defiance of sin.

The spandex vigilante became answerable to himself and, in effect, to others. Each, suggests Garrett's subsequent chapters, has as much a Beast within him that must be tamed as a villain to defeat. Modern characters like the X-Men's popular Wolverine or Punisher serve as easy daimonic examples, while their prototype, Batman, remains the exemplar. Garrett references the Dark Knight Detective's own time of crisis, when his ally, the Green Lantern, succumbed to a personal darkness and became the villainous Parallax. Particularly fitting for an era of defrocked priests and suicide bombers, it is a loss of faith in an ally that unsettles the hero. Only Green Lantern's second transformation, from Parallax into the avenging Spectre, restores Batman's spirit:

"You were the best, the brightest, among us. When you fell - it...rattled me. [...] But I see now - that one of the reasons you were reborn as the Spectre - was to give us all hope." (82)

The Spectre, God's authorized spirit of vengeance, sharpens this manner of scene from a generic Campbellian monomyth to much more of a Christ-like descent into Hell before the resurrection. And, closer to Garrett's point, it echoes the devotion we can find in each other, no matter how apparently lost, thereby maintaining faith in a Grand Plan.

The final portion of the book highlights the apocalyptic anxiety underscoring the genre, implicitly calling readers to maintain their principles and even to transcend fatalism. Sounding like *A Sense of an Ending's* Frank Kermode, Garrett explains, "The end of the world is everywhere in superhero comics, because the end of the world *is* everywhere. Our fear of the end - and our hope - is part of the food we eat, the air we breathe" (84-85). He finds an admirable quality in *Watchmen's* masked sociopath Rorschach who will never compromise in his ethics, even at the possible end of the world. "There is good and there is evil, and evil must be punished. Even in the face of Armageddon I shall not compromise in this" (89).

More impressive is *Kingdom Come*, where disaster is still met with outright faith in reunification. This message operates as the underpinning to many post-September 11th works. America can come together again if, instead of violence, restraint akin to that shown by Jesus on the cross is exercised. "Superhuman restraint," (113) Garrett calls it, demonstrated as much by the Man of Steel or the energy-blasting X-Man Cyclops as by a kosher family or a celibate clergyman. A new Akedah, a binding of one's force rather than one's culpability, is employed. These comics and movies are not, ultimately, about shows of power; they are about *minimal* shows of power. Besides the obvious special effects of these films, "We go because we believe - in some way we may not even consciously acknowledge - in the moral and dramatic fitness of the stories" (116), the shared mission "to diminish the suffering and injustice we see all around us" (119).

Garrett's overall point is vigorous and passionate, yet in that fervor, it becomes unfocused. I wonder how much of the Akedah metaphor he employs informs the creation of the book, especially this revision. This revised edition of *Holy Superheroes!* reads more as if it were bound to a demographic and corpus of works than necessarily to its topic. Graphic novels - usually non-serial and conclusive by their end - offer a wealth of publications with overt religious content (e.g. *MAUS*, *Persepolis*, *Blankets*, *Chosen*, *King David*, *Marked!*, etc.). However, only those superheroes with direct ties to cinema are featured and stretched to fit Garrett's concerns. While several non-superhero titles are slipped in (e.g. *Road to Perdition*, *From Hell*), this again is due to their big screen treatments. If released from this movie confinement, I feel that Garrett's argument would gain greater traction.

Of course, revising his book to target a film-going audience opens it to a larger readership, and exorcizing motion pictures from the discussion would not release the book from its minor quirks. One group not welcomed as warmly as others are academes themselves; after all, this "isn't a scholarly tome you'd need to be Lex Luthor of Dr. Strange to decipher" (ix), where intellect is curiously villainous. Garrett is not shy from evoking big thinkers, but, perhaps again in the name of marketability, he does avoid a number of theological tangles. The closest he gets to the issue of divinity is a comparison, aptly, of Superman being both alien and American to the determination of Jesus' duality at the Council of Nicea. Otherwise, almost anything of potential offense to a Judeo-Christian readership is evaded - whereas the omission of Islam or Hinduism may be the most offensive choice of all, particularly for a revised edition.

I am not suggesting that this is an artificial or manufactured, because Garrett's voice is unavoidable. His affection for Lawrence and Jewett's work overrides some of their finer details, such as the altogether salient observation that, instead of Campbell, the American monomyth originates in a discharge from Eden. Further, they more readily credit extra-national sources for this American envisioning; he reasonably dubs comics, not jazz, the "most American of art forms" (ix), yet leaves the British origin of creators Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Eddie Campbell, and others conveniently unaddressed. His politics shine

brightly in casually demonizing *Watchmen's* Henry Kissinger and Richard Nixon *in toto*, verbally bleeding for a terrorized Manhattan, and awkwardly likening the X-Men nemesis Magneto, ruler of an island haven for fellow mutants, to Israeli Holocaust survivors. None of these are wrong, *per se*, but they are strong interpretations that sometimes belie the goal of his otherwise embracing, impassioned book.

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