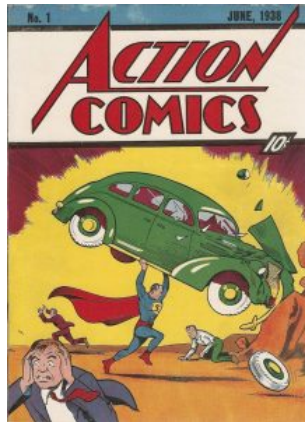




## **Biblical Interpretation in the Age of Superheroes**

**By Nicholas Pumphrey**

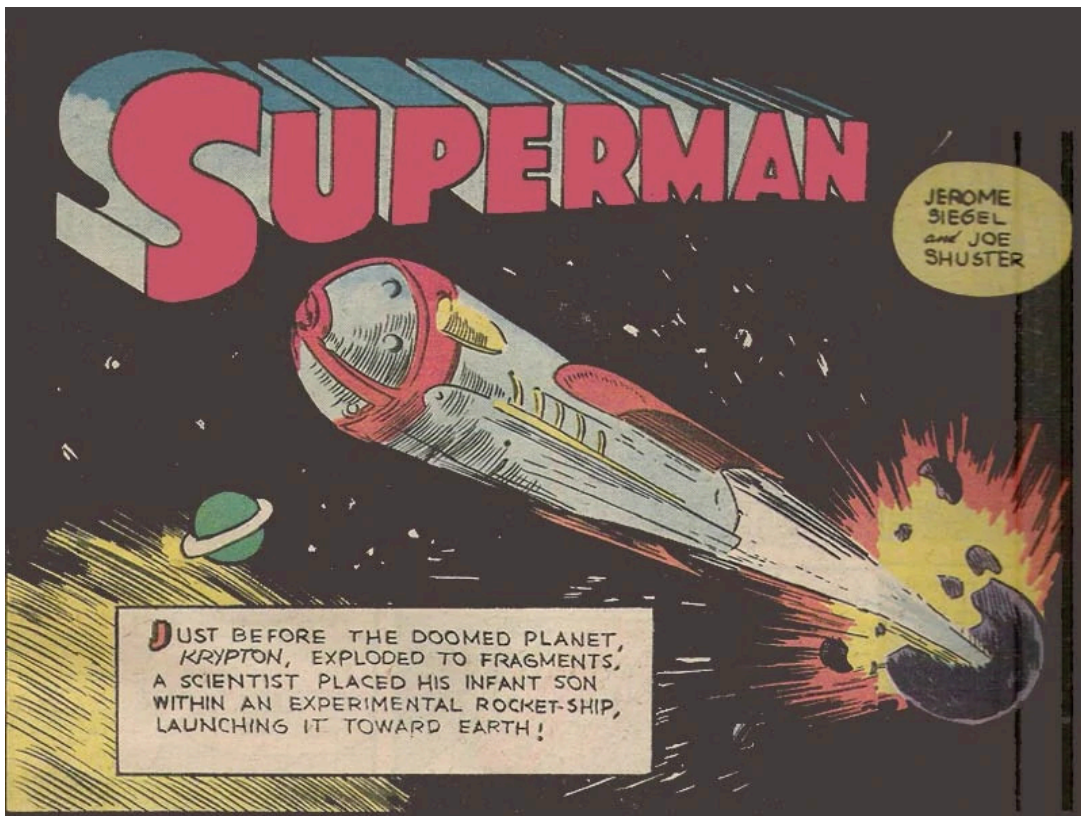
In 1938 Superman literally jumped off the pages of a comic book and into American culture. The world's strongest and soon to be most famous superhero was created within the context of a nation suffering from the Great Depression and on the verge of entering a global war. How does this super-being impact American culture and does he influence how we read the Bible?



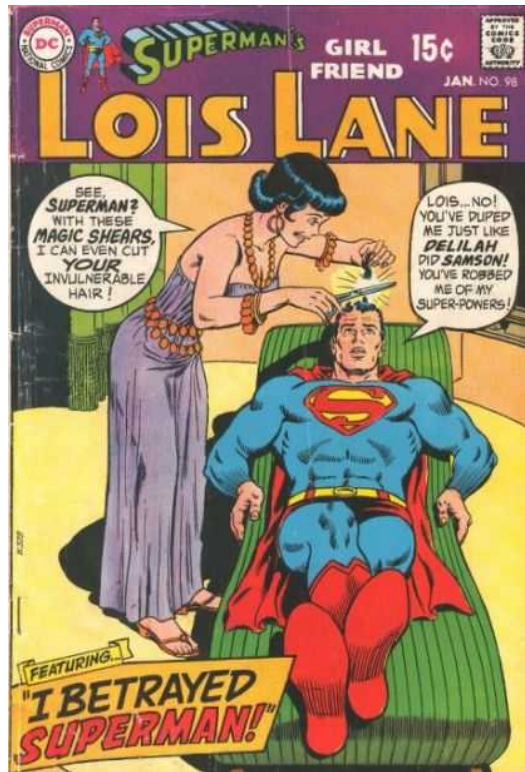
[Action Comics No. 1, 1938.](#)

Within five years, over 70 million people would be reading comic books about Superman or related to him. Superman's debut in *Action Comics* #1 was followed by his appearance on radio, in cartoons, and eventually in movies and on television. While comic books have had ups and downs in sales, the superhero related medium has had an undeniable influence on Americans, child and adult alike. The concept of hero has shifted from a larger-than-life, flawed demi-god to a sci-fi, costumed character that can do no wrong. But biblical undertones remain inescapable.

Scholars often point to his creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, and their Jewish background as a sign that the Bible directly influenced Superman's creation, and then influenced the readers. Superman's origin narrative depicts parents of a dying civilization sending their child in a spaceship (a futuristic reed basket) only to grow up and become a savior of another world. The child is also uniquely strong and only stoppable by a single weakness. Siegel himself noted that Samson and other biblical figures played a prominent role in Superman's development. There are even Superman comics with Lois Lane cutting his hair like Delilah, or depictions of Superman as Samson.



Superman on his way to Earth, Superman No. 1, 1939.



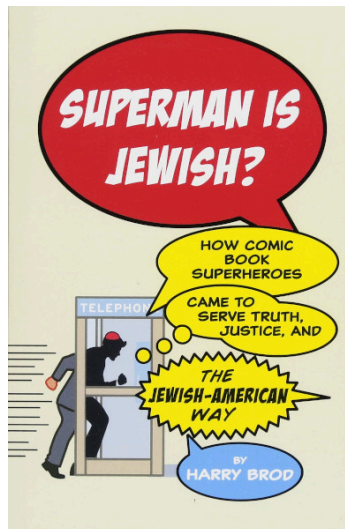
Lois Lane, January 1970.

In the 1970s, Superman increasingly was associated with Jesus Christ, and film director Richard Donner received death threats from Christians after his *Superman: The Movie* was released in 1978. Many see the culmination of this association with the “Death of Superman” in the 1990s comics, where he dies and is resurrected. This storyline is also depicted in Zack Snyder’s 2016 *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* that contained other Christ-like allusions. Based on Superman texts and films, it is apparent that both creators and readers/viewers truly want to make these connections. Both read superheroes as biblical heroes and vice versa. In a type of para-social interaction, Superman became Jesus for many readers and Jesus became Superman for others.



Superman death scene, Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice, 2016.

For authors like Arie Kaplan, Simcha Weinstein, and the late Harry Brod, Superman is the epitome of how Jewish culture and religion is engrained in America. Nothing says America like Superman, and it is powerful for many Jewish fans, like Jon Stewart, Howard Stern, and Jerry Seinfeld, to know he is a Jewish hero. Many readers recognize that Superman's Kryptonian name, Kal-El, is Hebrew, thus proving Siegel and Shuster's attempt of making Superman a Jewish hero. Although this is a common theory, the name Kal-El was added later, as well as the deadly green material called Kryptonite, which was introduced on the radio show only in 1943. Readers naturally want to claim superheroes as part of their identity and project their identity back onto those characters.



[How Jewish is Superman? How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way.](#)

Superman narratives continue to captivate us in many ways. Heroic narratives typically symbolize hope and justice over wrongdoing. Often these texts function as a form of escapism from current realities. As a result, hero narratives continue and persist. Superman, along with other superheroes who originated in pre-World War II comics, has had more than an 80 year cultural lifespan, over which he has changed in relation to society, including its religious and specifically biblical orientations. When fans explain Superman, they are merely voicing a contextual “memory” of their particular consumption of Superman based media and typically do not consider the entire canon.

When classic mythological or biblical heroes are depicted in films, comic books, and other media, some historians declare that these depictions are “poor” adaptations of the primary text or that they are “not accurate.” For example, Marvel will release the film *Eternals* in 2021 that depicts Gilgamesh as a partially immortal humanoid created by aliens in their attempt to help humans evolve on earth. The film will then spawn a myriad of articles, blogs, and podcasts from critics attempting to explain who the “real” Gilgamesh is or was. And this is precisely the point of my work.

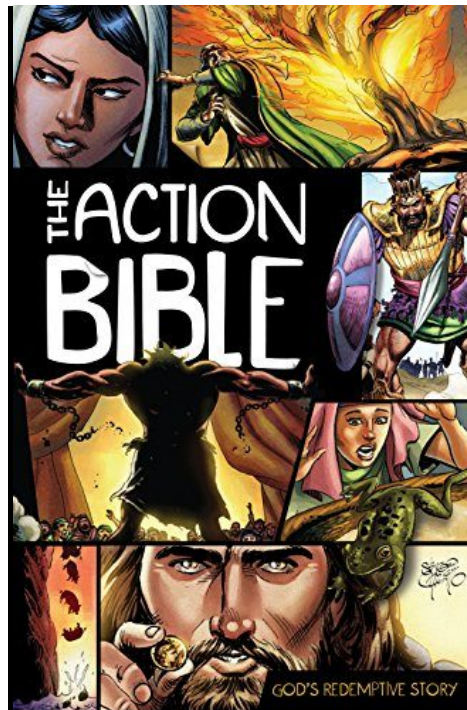


[Eternals, Marvel Studios, 2021.](#)

My book *Superman and the Bible: How the Idea of Superheroes Affects the Reading of Scripture* discusses how narratives influence other stories as they constantly shift over time. Gilgamesh and Hercules find themselves being (re)interpreted and (re)imagined in a variety of ways throughout our culture. This should be no surprise to scholars who believe in the oral level of Bible or have studied the complete Mesopotamian canon of Gilgamesh stories. Much like Superman, Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight and die in some narratives, live in others, and occasionally their continuity does not match. Oral texts are more fluid and the audience

has the option to choose which version is the most authentic for them. The adaptations of ancient texts or characters into films and comics are similar to these oral texts. They will continually adapt and evolve with newer audiences. The canon is never truly fixed.

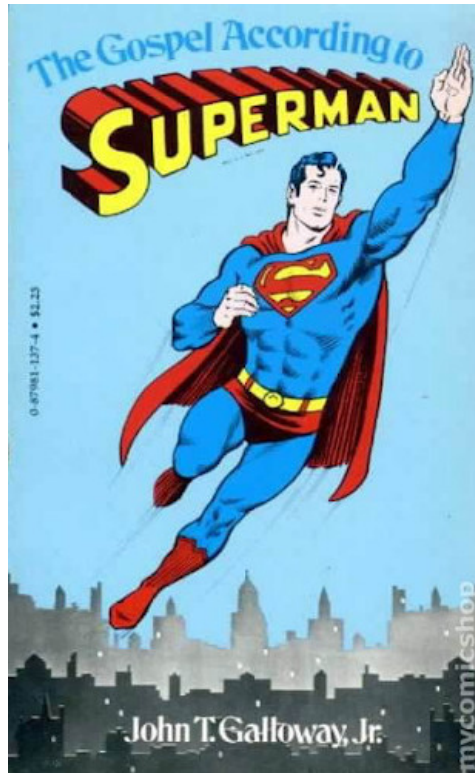
For many readers of Superman and other comic book characters, there are no sources of heroes to associate with these characters, except for the Bible. Given that fans typically “prove” that Superman is Christian or Jewish, Moses or Jesus, the association easily “works.” Theories of intertextuality state that readers can only understand a text based on a mosaic of texts that they have read previously. All of the previous texts shape our interpretation of newer texts. We often assume that individual texts are “read” and “misread” and that there is only one true or possible interpretation. However, we can only understand our world from the environment and the texts around us. The intertextuality of Superman leads to the question of whether or not we can indeed trace his influences regarding the biblical text.



The Action Bible, 2010.

What can we learn by analyzing individual texts and interpretations that are so pervasive they become culturally normative? Superman is one of those texts. A key finding is that we interpret the concept of heroes through the lens of contemporary superheroes. Like in the ancient world, Greeks understood heroes generally in the context of literary figures such as Achilles, Perseus, and Heracles. We now understand heroes through Superman, Wonder Woman, Captain America, and many more. Examining biblical commentaries on Judges, it is

easy to find examples of Samson being described explicitly as a superhero. However, we do not simply view our current heroes this way, but we understand all heroes from ancient literature and religious texts through what we have (re)created as the modern American archetype. This is portrayed in theological works describing the Bible through heroic terms, such as the *Action Bible*, or even using Superman to understand the Gospels.



The Gospel According to Superman, 1973.

Should we interpret the Bible through superheroes? I do not think it can be prevented. Once a particular context has shifted culture to the point that the definition of hero changes, there is no going back until we forget that watershed event, probably by reaching another. With the amount of superhero media present in our culture today, it does not appear that we will forget Superman any time soon. Biblical readers will continue to associate their heroes as superheroes, and some comic book fans will still argue whether Superman is a messiah.



Superman resurrection scene, Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice, 2016.

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