

The Seven-Sealed Comic Book: The Book of Revelation in the Graphic Novel Kingdom Come

Robert M. Price

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Kingdom Come by Alex Ross, plotter and artist, and writer Mark Waid, appeared first as a comic book mini-series of four issues in 1996. It was soon published in a single volume format as a graphic novel.[1] The action is frequently captioned by quotes from the Book of Revelation (sometimes slightly altered from the King James Version), and it appears that the story of battling superheroes culminating in a nuclear Armageddon must be an adaptation of the biblical Apocalypse. But it turns out that Revelation, though it provides a subtext[2] in the sense of a sounding board to lend gravity and depth to the adventure, is more of a superstructure than a substructure. Writer Mark Waid recalls: “I was desperately looking for a hook... and I just stumbled across the Bible.”[3]

Waid[4] says the Book of Revelation

...is whatever you want to make of it. It's the most broadly interpretive book in literature. And as I read it, I would come across a verse here, a verse there that reflected the stuff that we were going to put in the story. The rule was that the story came first and any highlights or elucidations Revelation could give us were a bonus. If there was something in the Bible that I could crib and voucher for, well, so much the better.

Artist and co-plotter Ross[5] confesses that Waid

didn't use the entire Book of Revelation; he just used some imagery to basically make you think of the story in larger terms than it really has. Somebody came up to me at a convention and told me he was very surprised by how I—or we, or Mark—had followed Revelation so closely up until this certain point at the end[6] and then went off and skewed it a different way. And I thought, “We actually followed it that far? You gotta be kidding me!” We didn't know what the @#\$\$ we were doing.

Yet the use of scripture turns out to be far from merely ornamental. In what follows I hope to perform a “superstructural” analysis on the graphic novel. Richard Harland defines superstructuralism as “a vision that inverts our ordinary base-and-superstructure models and sees what we used to think of as superstructural as having priority over what we used to think of as basic.”[7]

Insofar as the passages from Revelation did seem to fit in after the fact, we also have a striking and spontaneous parallel with the ancient apocalyptic method of peshet (“puzzle solution”) interpretation, whereby proof-texts were sought from ancient scriptures and ripped out of context as if to document and to justify, via prophecy, certain events in the life of the sect, whether early Christianity or the Dead Sea Scrolls community.[8]

Son of Man and Superman

The text of Kingdom Come makes explicit that it is a depiction of the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse of John, starring super-heroes in the roles of the various angels and demons. The premise is a clever, even brilliant, one. In effect, Ross and Waid have adopted the fundamentalist manner of interpret-ing the text that is so well known from Hal Lindsey[9] and his less successful paperback prophet colleagues, namely that Armageddon will play itself out with helicopter gunships and nuclear missiles, and that the ancient seer, obviously unfamiliar with modern technology, represented these strange realities in the forms, intelligible to him albeit still fantastic, of hydras, chimaeras, and dragons. Only in DC's Kingdom Come, what the Seer of Patmos witnessed must have been flying superheroes and villains, throwing buildings and cars at each other and surging through sea and air in a manner impossible for mere mortals.

The main personae of the cosmic drama are clear. But keep in mind: for the sake of narrative intrigue, Waid and Ross have split some major actantial roles[10] between several characters. The reader must combine them together to see who, in the graphic novel, corresponds to what, in the Bible.

First, it is clear that Superman is the returning Christ. It is well-known that the initial depiction of Superman hoisting the boards on his holodeck farm presents him as Christ carrying the cross.[11] Superman has been gone from the earthly scene for ten years, having left in despair and disgust when the earthlings turned away from him and his Christlike way of peace. But as things get worse and the apocalyptic clouds gather, he parts the sky and returns with his heavenly hosts: Power Woman, Wonder Woman, the Ray, Red Robin, Green Lantern, Flash, and Hawkman. (Flash is called a “guardian angel” on page 41, Hawkman “a savior” on page 42.)



The advent of this new Justice League turns out to have been predicted in Revelation 8:2-3: “And I saw the seven angels which stand before God... and another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer... and the angel took the censer, and filled it with fire of the altar... and the seven angels prepared themselves to sound” (p. 59). The eighth is Red Robin, the grown-up version of Dick Grayson, Batman’s first Robin apprentice. Lacking super powers he does not descend from the sky with the others, but simultaneously infiltrates the control room of the villains and disables them. The Justice League goes on to apprehend and to confine the many nihilistic super-beings who are victimizing humanity.

Waid and Ross nicely deconstruct the New Testament Apocalypse by splitting the Christ role into two characters, Superman and Captain Marvel. They are essentially the same character, certainly the same actant, anyway. Captain Marvel embodies the hypostatic union of divine and human natures, like Jesus does. Superman points this out during a momentary respite in their battle when he admits that, as an alien, he is neither properly a god nor a man, but that Billy Batson is both (p. 182). And in this case the first coming happens after the second (“Second Coming of Superman,” p. 68), since Captain Marvel gives his life to save the others only during Armageddon itself. Here we have a close parallel to the Jewish doctrine of two messiahs. Some believed that Messiah ben-Joseph, a warrior from the northern tribes, must die in battle to atone for Israel’s sins and to pave the way for the ultimate victory of Messiah ben-David, the scion of the house of Judah. Captain Marvel would be the Messiah ben-Joseph, while Superman would be the victorious Messiah ben-David.

Hawkman, taking the form of the “Hawk God” Horus, hence the Egyptian costume he sports from a previous graphic novel *Zero Hour* (1994),[12] corresponds to the mighty eagle flying through the heavens in Revelation 8:13, “Then I looked, and I heard an eagle flying in midheaven, saying with a loud voice, ‘Woe, woe, woe to those who dwell on the earth.’”

Wonder Woman, it seems to me, takes the role of Michael the Angel Prince, who leads the battle against the Satanic Dragon and his angelic hosts in Revelation 12:7. It is she, not the reluctant, pacifistic Superman, who leads the final battle against the rampaging hellions escaping from Superman’s Gulag (see below).

In all apocalypses (Daniel, Revelation, 1, 2, and 3 Enoch, 4 Ezra, etc.) we find a seer who is supposed to be the recipient of these visions, though in every case it is a fiction. Each apocalypse, like *Kingdom Come*, is not, as it purports to be, a simple record of visions. Rather, an apocalypse is a complex literary tapestry drawing upon previous sacred texts. So the seer is not so much the author as the narrator, the latter being a character on the edge of the narrative or perhaps even the protagonist of it. In Revelation, the seer is John, a prophet and evangelist, perhaps to be identified with John the son of Zebedee. His counterpart in *Kingdom Come* is twofold. First the seer role is taken by Wesley Dodds, the aging, retired superhero, the Sandman. Not only did the Sandman put people to sleep with his gas gun, he also (in the later issues created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby)[13] sent premonitory dreams of doom to trouble the sleep of the guilty whom he would soon be pursuing. What sense, therefore, it makes for old Wesley Dodds to be having wracking deathbed visions of the end of the world, soon on its way!

But, like the disciples of Jesus who stubbornly refused to accept the news of his resurrection, old Wesley’s pastor, Reverend McCay, will have none of it. Yes, the ancients may have dreamed dreams and seen visions, but who can take such things seriously in the modern day? He is like the oh-so-sophisticated pastor in Carl Theodor Dreyer’s *Ordet* (*The Word*), who is quick with an eloquent word of comfort but shorthanded when it comes to daring to believe God for miracles.[14] But Pastor McCay, leader of an

urban Evangelical Covenant congregation, starts to take what seemed Wesley's senile dementia seriously once the burden of prophecy passes over to him in the wake of Wesley's death.

Every seer in an apocalypse, ancient or modern, is guided by an "interpreting angel" who knows every inch of the unseen world like the back of his hand. In 4 Ezra, the scribe is accompanied by the revealing angel Uriel (Oriël). John of Patmos is guided by various angelic commentators. The Shepherd, or angel of Repentance, is Hermas' guide in *The Shepherd of Hermas*. In Dante's *Divine Comedy* this role is taken by Virgil. Again, Ebenezer Scrooge is the seer and is guided by three interpreting angels during his visionary journey. George Bailey has the interpreting angel Clarence to show the way and to make sense of the odd things he witnesses. The seer sees something important but does not quite know what to make of the marvels he is seeing. The angel explains things to him, often rather impatiently, as if the mortal should have been able to understand things quite well by himself. In *Kingdom Come* it will come as no surprise to learn that the ghostly superhero the Spectre plays this role. Pastor McCay and the Spectre also play the role of the Two Witnesses of Revelation 11: "And I will give power unto my two witnesses..." "We must both witness the events that will lead to Armageddon" (p. 15).

Building the Perfect Beast

What would an apocalypse be without an antichrist or two? Revelation has a pair of them: the Beast and the False Prophet. *Kingdom Come* has at least three. "Yugoslavian"[15] dictator Von Bach wears a cross tattooed on his chest—actually the cross is unadorned flesh with the rest of him tattooed in black around it—and heads up a terror organization called "the Götterdämmerung Reich" (Empire of the Twilight of the Gods). Von Bach is like the Beast from the abyss, the ancient Leviathan, who rules over the earth in Revelation 13:1-10.

The Goth "hero" called 666 obviously embodies the Mark of the Beast (Rev. 13:17), the number of his name, for which Revelation had Emperor Nero in mind: Neron Kaiser works out to 666.

The ram-horned Magog is reminiscent of Revelation 13:11's second Beast, Behemoth the Land Leviathan,[16] who also functions as the False Prophet. Magog is a name mentioned in Revelation 20:7-8:

When the thousand years are completed, Satan will be released from his prison, and will emerge to deceive the nations which are in the four corners of the earth, Gog and Magog, to gather them together for the war; the number of them is like sand on the seashore.

Revelation here borrows lore from Ezekiel 38:2, "Son of man, set your face toward Gog, of the land of Magog, the chief prince of Meshech and Tubal, and say, 'Thus says the Lord Yahve, "Behold, I am your enemy, O Gog, chief prince of Meshech and Tubal. I will turn you about and put hooks into your jaws,"'" etc. "Gog" is the same name as that of Gyges,[17] king of Lydia, also the name of one of the monstrous hundred-handed giant offspring of Uranos in Hesiod's *Theogony*,[18] whom he imprisoned underground, the prototype for the fallen angels of the Bible. Gog is depicted in Ezekiel as a sea dragon, whom God hooks like a fish (cf. his similar treatment of mighty Leviathan in Job 41:1-2ff.). Like Isaiah, who compares Egypt with the primordial sea monster Rahab (Isaiah 30:7; 51:9-11), Ezekiel uses the metaphor of the ancient monster-foe of Yahve to describe a looming foe of his people, in his case, the barbarian Scythians or Cimmerians. "Magog" just means "Land of Gog," though Ezekiel almost treats it as a personal name in its own right. Revelation certainly does.

In later centuries Gog and Magog were imagined as twin abominations, and it was believed that Alexander the Great had imprisoned them both. In *Kingdom Come*, only Magog appears. Each of the *Kingdom Come* creators eventually authored (Ross with Geoff Johns) his own sequel to *Kingdom Come*. Each featured the other shoe dropping, providing a Gog character.

For Waid, Gog is Minister William, a man who had once founded a Church of Superman but then turned against him once his embarrassed idol confessed it was his departure from the scene that allowed the nuclear destruction of Kansas to happen in the first place. William was then given powers, as well as a seven-sealed scroll (Rev. 5:1ff)[19] detailing the story of the Kansas holocaust, by a council of godlike beings who planned to send him back in time to prevent the Kansas tragedy, but instead he uses these abilities to take vengeance on Superman.[20] He looks almost exactly like Magog from *Kingdom Come* and seems almost like an attempt to bring that character back. (This is a particularly clear case of two characters participating in the same actantial role.)

Ross's[21] Gog, on the other hand, is twofold. At first, a super-powered man, William Matthews, calling himself Gog—again, looking almost identical to the armored Magog of *Kingdom Come*—appears, killing other characters, mostly villains themselves, who claim to be gods or demigods. In this he seeks to eliminate would-be rivals of his own god, an alien being surviving from an earlier dynasty of gods, apparently co-eval with the Olympians and Asgardians, whose relics he has discovered in a buried tomb in Africa. Matthews is roughly equivalent to Mark Waid's Minister William, the former having been in

Africa as a missionary, but the back story is much different, and he does not embark on the same anti-Superman vendetta; this because this Matthews is located on a parallel earth (Part Two, p. 98).

At any rate, his deity, a purple-skinned giant clad in golden body armor and a purple tunic and wearing a helmet with horns circling his face like a crescent moon, eventually emerges and destroys Matthews, explaining to the Justice Society and the Kingdom Come Superman, who is visiting this earth(!), that Matthews was overwhelmed by the knowledge and power imparted to him—much as Waid’s Minister William had been—and had become a loose cannon. He had taken the name of his god, who is now revealed as the real Gog. Despite initial blessings, Gog eventually demands obsequious worship, which the Justice Society heroes refuse to give, whereupon they manage to defeat and exile him. This provides a striking parable of Humanistic post-religiosity, though at least one of the heroes, Doctor Midnite, is a devout Roman Catholic and another, Hawkman, worships the Egyptian gods.

That Kingdom Come’s Magog is supposed to be the Antichrist to Superman’s Christ is evident from the facts that they are depicted with the same face—Ross used the same model, Frank Kasy, for both—and that the two are rivals for the role of protector of Metropolis. Thus, Magog killed the Joker when Superman would have brought the villain to trial for the umpteenth time, and the people approved, having had their fill of the Joker and his crimes. The fan rumor that Magog is supposed to be the grown-up clone of Superman, Kon-el,[22] makes the identification of Magog as the Antichrist all the more striking. (Kon-el was introduced in *The Reign of the Supermen* (also called *The Return of Superman*),[23] the sequel to *The Death of Superman*,[24] when scientists sought to replace the fallen hero with a cloned duplicate. He emerged from the cloning chamber early and became the new Superboy.)

Armageddon

There are two climactic events in Kingdom Come. The first is the destruction of Kansas in the wake of Magog’s ill-advised assault on the aging and out-of-gas super-villain the Parasite, who is able to absorb energy from anyone he touches, duplicating their super-powers. As Captain Atom seized him, the Parasite turned the hero’s power against him, penetrating the latter’s containment suit, whereupon he exploded. This disaster is like one of the end-time plagues that strafe the earth in Revelation. Scripture had foretold it, albeit not in so many words:

And there followed hail and fire mingled with blood... and the third part of the trees was burnt up... and all green grass was burnt up! [Rev. 8:7] And he opened the bottomless pit... and the sun and the air were darkened! [Rev. 9:2] Fear God—and give glory to him—for the hour of his judgment is come! [Rev. 14:7]. (p. 26)

A television commentator informs us of the truly apocalyptic scope of the disaster:

Early reports indicate immediate casualties numbering close to a million as the dying [Captain] Atom’s radioactive energy swept hundreds of kilometers... rendering the entire state of Kansas—as well as parts of Nebraska, Iowa and Missouri—an irradiated wasteland. Though Magog’s comrades have since prevented further spread of the nuclear blight, the total loss of America’s breadbasket—the sterilization of its agrarian culture—has thrown world economy into near-collapse in the face of global famine.” (p. 38)

The same Revelation passage is quoted again with explicit reference to Kansas. Then: “The destruction of Kansas was truly the beginning of the end” (p. 49). And the end finally arrives some months later after Superman, Wonder Woman and the Justice League imprison thousands of the nihilistic hero/villains in a gigantic prison, the Gulag, on the devastated plains of Kansas.

The second climax is the very Battle of Armageddon. This one issues in an atomic holocaust too, only it is imposed from outside by the United Nations. Lex Luthor sends the brainwashed Captain Marvel to breach the walls of the Gulag: “Babylon falls, [Rev. 14:8; 18:2], Norman!” freeing its already rioting prisoners: “And it was given unto him to make war with the saints!” [Rev. 13:7] (p. 14). Meanwhile, the Secretary General of the UN, a man named Wyrwood, fearing that the violence of the super hero factions will soon spill over to destroy the earth and the human race, dispatches a super nuclear weapon against them. “There fell a great star from heaven, burning as if it were a lamp... [Rev. 8:11] And I heard an Angel... saying with a loud voice... woe, woe, WOE to the inhabitants of the Earth” [Rev. 8:13] (pp. 12-13).

The Justice League descends from Green Lantern’s orbiting Emerald City: “And there was a rainbow round about the throne, in sight like unto an emerald” [Rev. 4:3] (p. 88) to battle the escapees, and soon Batman’s own league of younger superheroes, children or grandchildren of the original heroes of the Justice League, joins the fray, apparently fighting both the escapees and the Justice League.

Captain Marvel and Superman face off, trading earth-shaking punches until Captain Marvel hits upon the expedient of uttering “Shazam!” again and again (six times), each time invoking the magic lightning bolt

that transforms Billy Batson into Earth's Mightiest Mortal and back. Superman, who is vulnerable to magic, is staggered by the thunderstrikes but finally manages to clasp Batson's mouth and to hold it shut during the tiny interval before he can say the magic word and regain his godlike powers. Superman reasons with him and gets his old ally to come to his senses. He urges him not to interfere as Superman attempts to deflect the descending nuke. He releases Batson, who then transforms but yanks Superman aside and launches himself into the sky instead. With a last triple-shout of "Shazam!" he ignites the bomb in the upper atmosphere, sacrificing himself for Superman and the rest. But only a few of the combatants survive.

All this took place that the scripture might be fulfilled which says: "and he cried with a loud voice, as when a lion roareth... and when he had cried... seven thunders uttered their voices." [Rev. 10:3] (p. 111).

Interim Ethics

The central point of Kingdom Come is the moral dilemma it frames. How can the righteous defeat the wicked without becoming the wicked? Superman refuses to use deadly force against the amoral hellion heroes, while Wonder Woman despises him as a weakling for these scruples. What other way is there to deal with these maniacs? Unless you want to keep your hands clean and pure—and let the wicked win! What is the solution? It is a nuclear strike from without, aimed at them by the mere humans. After that everything resolves, though there is a tricky moment or two.

What we have here is the logic of apocalyptic pacifism, namely that the righteous can afford to keep their hands pure from evil precisely because they can expect that God will intervene from without to destroy the wicked. Of course, as long as the righteous stick to their non-guns, they can count on becoming martyrs, which is what they expect anyway, since God has this nasty habit of not intervening when you need him to. But it's six of one, half a dozen of the other: if you get your deliverance in heaven instead of on earth, who's complaining?

So Superman is the Christ who will not kill. Magog is the Antichrist because he will kill. But it is not that simple. Let me appeal to an old Henry Kuttner story, "A Cross of Centuries." [25] In it the White Christ, ruler of a millennial paradise in the far future, is about to renew his youth with a swim in something like the Lazarus Pit familiar from Batman comics. He has lived and reigned so long he can barely remember the details of the great struggle in which he once overcame the Red Christ, the Antichrist, to establish universal peace. But as he steps into the life-renewing waters and they begin to work their wonder, he suddenly for a moment remembers something he had forgotten for many centuries: he himself had been the Red Christ! Such are the ironies and the realities of history, communicated by mythology.

What we are seeing in the ethics of Superman, which seem to be the intended ethics of Kingdom Come, is a case study of what Albert Schweitzer [26] called interim ethics. Schweitzer sought to explain and to justify the radical, even seemingly fanatical admonitions of Jesus to give all one's possessions to the poor, to turn the other cheek, to not resist the bully and the thief.

None of that behavior makes any sense in the workaday world, where the social and personal consequences (e.g., providing for and protecting one's family) make it reprehensible and irresponsible. But all of it is seen to be eminently wise in light of the soon-coming end of the age. To refuse to defend oneself from violence and theft make sense as martyrdom if one thereby gains a place in an eschatological paradise that is about to appear. To give away property and savings makes sense if there is to be no worldly future for which, like the industrious ant of Aesop, to provide. What good is money on the eve of the end? It is of value only to provide for the abject poor whom one may prevent from starving in the brief interval before the end. It is not only a time when one can afford to be absolutely and perfectly righteous, but also a time in which one is well advised to repent and to show the fruits thereof by performing as many good deeds as one can in the time remaining! During the heyday of the Cargo Cults in Melanesia, prophets summoned believers in the imminent advent of Christ (or the ancestors, etc.) to slaughter all their pigs in a great "messianic banquet," since only those without faith would hold resources back as an ace in the hole. [27]

Such an ethic partakes of the liminality defined by Victor W. Turner. [28] The transitional rites of growth and maturation in traditional societies allowed for what would ordinarily be shunned as aberrant behavior, particularly sexually. During the interval of the puberty rite, for instance, homosexual contact may be practiced, where it would be within the parameters of defined social status and role—either adolescence or maturity on either side of the liminal window—be outlawed. [29] This is how tomorrow's groom may get away with attending a bachelor party with prostitutes and strippers tonight: it is liminal behavior. On Schweitzer's reading, Jesus' radical demands were occasioned and made reasonable by the interim period in and for which they were stipulated. They suspended mundane moral standards not in the direction of licentiousness but rather in that of super-morality. Jesus would never have enjoined such deeds if he thought the world would continue on indefinitely.

Many today reject Schweitzer's apocalyptic reading of Jesus, preferring the picture of Jesus as a rootless, possessions-renouncing Cynic sage.[30] Cynics, too, urged their hearers to slough off money, employment, family ties, and the right to fight back. All these, they said, represented burdens—some, arbitrary inventions of human society which only complicate life and hinder virtue. Whatever may have been the case with the historical Jesus, it seems the sayings enshrining this ethos were preserved and propagated by a select clique of “itinerant radicals,” apostles, prophets, charismatics and missionaries[31] who were often confused with non-Christian Cynics. These daring people perforce existed on the margins of society,[32] as they had completely opted out of the prevalent codes of honor and shame.[33] Turning the other cheek, not responding in kind to affronts to one's honor, meant seeking the approval of God at the cost of the approval of one's puzzled peers. This is another variety of liminality, only it involves social marginality, living on the edge of society, rather than on the cusp of the millennial kingdom, which was a temporal liminality.

Well, Revelation obviously displays the rudiments of an apocalyptic ethical liminality: the faithful are threatened with eternal torture (Rev. 14:9-11) if they receive the commerce stamp of the Beast (Rev. 13:16-18). There is no room for compromise. One will pay the price of beheading by the Beast if one refuses (Rev. 20:4) or of eternal fire from God if one gives in. It is a matter of absolute purity, of total non-cooperation with the Powers of Evil.

Much the same decision was made by Judas the Gaulonite/Galilean and his followers, who refused to take the mark of the Beast by paying Roman taxes. They thought doing so meant affirming Caesar as Lord, and this they would not do. They loved not their lives unto the death, and when, decades later, their successors were besieged by Roman troops at Masada, they chose to make an immediate exit to the kingdom of heaven. The need for total purity meant they could no longer live on this earth. Theirs was an apocalyptic ethic.

Other Jews and Christians took a position that allowed for life in the midst of a fallen age. “I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with immoral men; not at all meaning the immoral of this world, or the greedy and robbers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world” (1 Cor. 5:9-10). Interim ethics zealots felt compelled to go out of the world to avoid contamination by sin. But had not Elisha given the Syrian general Naaman permission to accompany his master into Rimmon's heathen temple, as he must if he were to retain his position (2 Kgs. 5:18)? Had not Uriel told Ezra how the world could not be purified of sinners till the end of the world lest the righteous perish with them, so entangled are they in this world (4 Ezra 7:62-70)? And did not Matthew make the same point in his parable of the Wheat and the Tares (Matt. 13:24-30)? And does not Mark 12:13-17 take an accommodationist position over against that of the Zealot refuseniks, by reasoning that, if “unclean” pagan coins cannot be rendered to God in the temple, no compromise can be entailed in rendering them to Caesar who minted them? This is the wisdom of those who want to safeguard righteousness while living in a world inevitably shared with sinners.

The Rabbis[34] understood that pacifism and “bleeding heart” mercy toward criminals was not appropriate while this fallen age endured. As long as the evil impulse led people to sin, which it would till the Kingdom came, then the righteous dare not be in too much of a hurry to eradicate the evil tendency in themselves. For that, too, they must wait for the advent of the Kingdom of God. Until then, the evil impulse is a necessary evil. It is cruel to condemn criminals to death, even to jail, but if we are too “pure” for that, too full of the milk of human kindness, we will be the ones to blame when the felons steal or kill again. If we are too pure to respond to invaders with force, it is we who will be to blame for the slaughter of our innocents. If everyone embraced the celibacy of the angels now, and became free of animal lust, there would be no future generations. Of course, the celibate Encratites of the first few centuries did welcome the soon-coming end and, quite consistently, foreswore procreation.

This wisdom is what Ross and Waid's Superman refuses to understand. Superman and the Justice League have no business being the martyrs who “love not their lives to the death” (Rev. 12:11) and are thus “led like sheep to the slaughter” (Psalm 44:22). No, they are the angels of God who must square off with Satan and his demons (Rev. 12:7). Wonder Woman understands that. “Divine” intervention does indeed fall from the sky, in the form of the Bomb, but it does not rescue the righteous; it makes their fate one with the wicked. Satan wins Armageddon if Michael and his hosts refuse to fight. The interim ethic is not for Superman, though he stubbornly clings to it.

Twilight of the Übermensch

As Alex Ross originally planned Kingdom Come, it was to have been called “The End of the Heroic Age,” and that theme still dominates the work despite the title change. After the United Nations bombs all the superhumans, drawing no distinction between the heroes who are trying to protect common humanity and the villains who endanger and threaten them, Pastor McCay convinces a wrathful Superman, who thinks he is the only survivor, not to collapse the UN building on his betrayers. Instead he ought to renounce the elevated position of a superhero and live among his mortal charges as one of them, a domesticated workhorse at their behest. Later (in The Kingdom) we see him in civilian clothes working

with laborers in bridge construction. The superheroes are finally forbidden even to wear their costumes, these at last abandoned to the status of nostalgia schlock in a theme restaurant, “Planet Krypton”. Some buffoon of a waiter wears Green Lantern’s costume, while the godlike Green Lantern himself now sits as one more ineffective politician among fellow windbags in the do-nothing United Nations. This is indeed the end of the heroic age. Does Alex Ross imagine this to be a good thing? On one level, this denouement comports well with the last scene in the Book of Revelation: the New Jerusalem, equivalent to the Justice League headquarters on Green Lantern’s space-borne city New Oa, comes down out of the sky, and henceforth “the dwelling of God is with men” (Rev. 21:3, though this passage is not explicitly quoted). Waid has anticipated the same thing with an early quotation of a Gospel beatitude: “According to the word of God, the meek would someday inherit the earth” (Matt. 5:5).

How are we to understand this conclusion? It invites a Nietzschean reading. After all, the tigers have been defanged and the dragons made lapdogs for their inferiors. The cringing slave-horde of Lilliputians has finally worn them down. And we can tell they have worn them down, because the superhumans themselves have internalized the slave creed. They seem to think it better that they serve the common herd as beasts of burden in whatever tasks the mortals find non-threatening. Greatness always makes the weak, the slaves, the mediocre (“the meek”) feel threatened, whereupon they proceed to enslave the great, provided the latter allow them to do it. What we are seeing may be interpreted as a Politically Correct opposition to the very notion of heroism, a renunciation of heroic greatness so as to lower standards, to cancel the possibility of superior achievement so that no one feels like a failure even if one is a failure. Kingdom Come in the end seems to consider heroism as elitism and a threat to the quotidian of mediocrity. It advocates a kind of Socialistic “redistribution of virtue” in which everyone gets an equal but equally thin slice of the shrinking pie.

This stance comports with the graphic novel’s liberal ethos, discussed just above, and with its apparent opposition to capital punishment. This creed promotes and embodies the confusion of Commissioner Gordon,[35] who thinks that to kill the Joker is to make Batman no different from the Joker. To kill Saddam Hussein is no better than Saddam’s own killings. Nietzsche would say such a leveling of standards functions to absolve everyone of responsibility. I won’t blame you if you don’t blame me.

The animated Justice League episode “A Better World”[36] would seem outrageously silly if we were not already so thoroughly imbued with the dogmatic liberalism of DC Comics, where mass murderers like the Joker have no trouble escaping or being released from Arkham Asylum or Belle Reve Prison every few issues. The whole premise of the cartoon is that all it takes is Superman deciding the world (another world parallel to ours) has had enough of Lex Luthor—and hadn’t it?—and executing him. But what happens? That world is plunged into a totalitarian regime run by the former heroes. But that is a natural progression only in the tear-clouded eyes of those who see no difference between the state’s right to exercise force on the one hand and fascism on the other. And how revealingly ironic it is that at the close of the very same episode Luthor (in our world), now pardoned by the government, inaugurates a plotline whereby he will become President of the United States! Shouldn’t Superman have eliminated him when he had the chance? If you could go back in time and eliminate Hitler before he came to power...?

The End of the End

The alteration of Alex Ross’s proposed title for his eschatological epic from “The End of the Heroic Age” to Kingdom Come offers a ray of hope that perhaps the reign of the superheroes is not over. The original title signaled a terminus; the new one denotes the beginning of something new. In the original graphic novel that new order, as we have seen, was one of lowest common denominator democratism, a leveling of the field to make the world safe for mediocrity. But in both the sequels, one each by Mark Waid and Alex Ross, the superheroes return. In Waid’s *The Kingdom*, the now-civilian Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman suit up again once the infant son of Superman and Wonder Woman (and Batman’s Godson) is snatched away by Gog, Waid’s successor to Magog.

In Ross’s sequel, a Justice Society of America story arc collected as *Thy Kingdom Come*, Superman and the rest remain out of uniform for good, but Superman continues to live incognito for another thousand years, aging very slowly, and the story ends with him looking “up in the sky!” where he beholds the Legion of Super-Heroes (a DC Comics future-era super-group created by Otto Binder and Al Plastino in 1958) flying like a flock of super-powered geese through the skies of a Metropolis that now fits Fritz Lang’s description. Among their brilliantly costumed forms are Superboy (presumably the clone Kon-el) and Supergirl, both of whom had departed a dreary twenty-first century to time-travel into this brighter future. A brief anticipation of this scene, without the aged Superman watching the skies, appeared already in *Kingdom Come* as an example of how various heroes had abandoned twenty-first century earth to its misery and sought refuge elsewhere and elsewhere. But the scene inevitably raised the question whether the (positive) outcome of *Thy Kingdom Come* was not fixed in advance. How could Armageddon be a real threat if the world would still be standing in the thirtieth century? Was Ross already hinting that eventually a new heroic age would dawn? May we be so fortunate.

Notes

[1] Mark Waid and Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come* (NY: DC Comics, 1997). Page numbers are cited from the single-volume collection. All italics stood thus in the original.

[2] Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth. Parallax: Re-visions of Culture and Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990). “[T]here is an unconscious of the text that works like the human unconscious. This unconscious of the text is represented by the symbolism of the subtext and by the intertext this symbolism mobilizes” (p. xvii).

[3] Quoted in Brian Saner Lamken, ed., *The Kingdom Come Companion. Comicology Volume One.* (Ardmore, PA: Harbor Press, 1998) p. 10.

[4] *Ibid*, p. 128.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] Presumably the end of the novel, not the end of Revelation.

[7] Richard Harland, *Superstructuralism: The Philosophy of Structuralism and Post-Structuralism.* New Accents (NY and London: Routledge, 1988), p. 9.

[8] Richard N. Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 38-45.

[9] Hal Lindsey with C.C. Carlson, *The Late Great Planet Earth* (NY: Bantam Books, 1976), e.g., Chapter 12, “World War III,” pp. 135-157.

[10] Ronald Schleifer, A.J. Greimas and the Nature of Meaning: Linguistics, Semiotics and Discourse Theory. *Critics of the Twentieth Century* (London & Sydney: Croom Helm, 1987), pp. 87-118. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale.* Trans. Laurence Scott. American Folklore Society Bibliographical and Special Series, Volume 9 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2nd ed, 1990): “one may say that the number of [narrative] functions is extremely small, whereas the number of personages is extremely large. This explains the two-fold quality of a tale: its amazing multiformity, picturesqueness, and color, and on the other hand, its no less striking uniformity, its repetition” (pp. 20-21).

[11] *Kingdom Come Companion*, p. 19.

[12] Dan Jurgens, Jerry Ordway, Frank Fosco, Ken Branch, *Zero Hour* (NY: DC Comics, 1994).

[13] Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Sandman* (NY: DC Comics, 2009).

[14] “Since seminary, I have been more philosopher than priest.” *Kingdom Come*, p. 121.

[15] Probably a Croatian, given Croatian Nazi sympathies in World War Two.

[16] Michael Moorcock, *The Land Leviathan* (NY: DAW Books, 1982).

[17] “Gyges may be related to Ogyges, a mythical Attic king... The name Ogyges became synonymous with ‘primaeval’; the ‘primal water’ of Styx ([Theogony] 805) is ‘hydor ogygion,’” Richard S. Caldwell (translator and commentator), *Hesiod’s Theogony.* Focus Classical Library (Newburyport: Focus Information Group, 1987), p. 37. Here one is reminded of Yahve’s battle with Yamm, the personified primordial waters, and in light of Ezekiel 38:2, one must wonder if “hydor ogygion” came to mean “primordial hydra or sea dragon.”

[18] Hesiod, *Theogony*, pp. 149-153.

[19] Mark Waid, Jerry Ordway, Ariel Olivetti, Brian Aporp, Matt Haley, Mark Pajarillo, Frank Quitely, Barry Kitson, and Mike Zeck, *The Kingdom* (NY: DC Comics, 1999), p. 20. The seals bear the insignia of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Green Lantern, the Grim Reaper (the Spectre?), a cross, and something else hard to make out.

[20] At one point, when the time-traveling Gog kidnaps the infant son of Superman and Wonder Woman, he declares, “As I am Gog... so shall you be my Magog” (p. 66, appropriately!). Thus, it is implied, the Magog of *Kingdom Come* would have turned out to be the very son of Superman and Wonder Woman! This is brilliant, but Waid seems to have forgotten all about it by the end of *The Kingdom* when he reveals the baby to have grown up to be some sort of superhero like his parents.

[21] Based on Ross's plot outline, the story of Gog appears in Geoff Johns, Alex Ross, Dale Eaglesham, Fernando Pasarin, *Thy Kingdom Come. Part One* (NY: DC Comics, 2008), Geoff Johns, Alex Ross, Dale Eaglesham, Fernando Pasarin, and Jerry Ordway, *Thy Kingdom Come. Part Two* (NY: DC Comics, 2008); Geoff Johns, Alex Ross, Dale Eaglesham, Nathan Massengill, Jerry Ordway, and Bob Wiacek, *Thy Kingdom Come. Part Three* (NY: DC Comics, 2008).

[22] "Mark Waid Interview." *Kingdom Come Companion*, p. 226.

[23] The original story arc extending through *Action Comics* #s 687-691, *Superman: The Man of Steel* #s 22-26, *Superman* #s 78-82, and *Adventures of Superman* #s 500-505 was collectively dubbed "The Reign of the Supermen," while the one-volume collection was *The Return of Superman* by Dan Jurgens, Karl Kesel, Louise Simonson, Roger Stern, John Bogdanove, Tom Grummett, Jackson Guice, Brett Breeding, Doug Hazlewood, Dennis Janke, Denis Rodier, Gerard Jones, M.D. Bright, and Romeo Tanghal (NY: DC Comics, 1993).

[24] Dan Jurgens, Jerry Ordway, Louise Simonson, Roger Stern, Jon Bogdanove, Tom Grummett, Jackson Guice, Brett Breeding, Rick Burchett, Doug Hazlewood, Dennis Janke, and Denis Rodier, *The Death of Superman* (NY: DC Comics, 1993).

[25] Henry Kuttner, "A Cross of Centuries." *Star Science Fiction Stories*, #4 (November 1958).

[26] Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God: The Secret of Jesus' Messiahship and Passion*, trans. Walter Lowrie (NY: Schocken Books, 1964), pp. 96-99, 103.

[27] Peter Worsley, *The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia* (NY: Schocken Books, 2nd ed., 1968), pp. 52-53, 84, 95, 103, 107, 111, 115, 116-117, 135, 139, 151, 155, 214

[28] Victor W. Turner, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in Rites de Passage." William A. Lessa and Evon Z. Vogt, eds., *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach* (NY: Harper & Row, 3rd ed., 1972), pp. 338-347.

[29] vArnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. Trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960) catalogues various instances of ritual "sin": including homosexuality, pederasty, bestiality, and incest (pp. 169-174), but he does not yet explain them in terms of liminality.

[30] Francis Gerald Downing, *Cynics and Christian Origins* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000); Burton L. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994); John Dominic Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* (San Francisco: Harper One, 1990).

[31] Gerd Theissen, "The Wandering Radicals: Light Shed by the Sociology of Literature on the Early Transmission of Jesus Sayings" in Theissen, *Social Reality of the Early Christians: Theology, Ethics and the World of the New Testament*. Trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), pp. 33-59; Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. Trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), Chapter II, "The Role of the Wandering Charismatics," pp. 8-16.

[32] Stevan L. Davies, *The Revolt of the Widows: The Social World of the Apocryphal Acts* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980), p. 36: "However asocial, the apostle is moral in the sense of disapproving such deeds as theft, murder, adultery, and revenge. He does not oppose moral order but social structure. Implicitly, the more continent, enduring, and free from social obligations an individual is, the more moral he will be."

[33] Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), Chapter 2, "Honor and Shame: Pivotal Values of the First-Century Mediterranean World," pp. 25-50.

[34] Solomon Schechter, *Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (NY: Macmillan, 1910), pp. 266-267, 290.

[35] Joseph Loeb and Jim Lee, *Hush* (NY: DC Comics, 2002-2003; one-volume compilation 2009), no pagination.

[36] "A Better World," *Justice League Season Two* (Burbank: Warner Home Video, 226), Episode 11, "A Better World Part 1;" Episode 12, "A Better World Part 2."