

SUPERHEROES:

Western Yearnings in a Post-Messianic Age

ELF 2011 Mark Meynell

WHY WE LOVE MEN IN TIGHTS! SUPERHEROES as Western Yearnings in a Post-Messianic Age

Every summer seems to bring with it the latest blockbuster comic adaptation. Their popularity does not seem to be on the wane – and this cannot simply be dismissed as the product of saturation marketing and ever more impressive special effects. Ever since their emergence on to American newsstands in the 1930s, superheroes (such as Superman, Batman, the X-Men and more recently, Heroes) have been a source of fascination as well as aspiration for each successive generation. This presumably explains why the most popular like Superman & Batman find themselves revived every decade or so on the small and big screens.

Such popularity is revealing, however. For in their different ways, each character depicts varying diagnoses and solutions to the state of the world. While there is a wide variety of storyline and characterisation, there are commonalities. Each superhero is faced with his or her own nemesis or Herculean challenge: these illustrate human helplessness. In and of ourselves, the human race is no match for the irrationality of evil or the power of natural catastrophe. But the whole point is that superheroes are able to overcome them for us, through us or despite us.

This has crucial theological resonances for those who believe the good news of Jesus Christ, especially in the areas of Christology and soteriology. This session will consider the bridges offered by the mythical world of the superhero to those who want to communicate the wonders of the *true* hero of all heroes.

Rev Mark Meynell is Senior Associate Minister at All Souls Church, Langham Place, London in England. He also works part-time as the European Coordinator for Langham Preaching (an arm of Langham Partnership International), which seeks to develop biblical preaching programmes across several countries. He was previously on the faculty and Acting Principal of the Kampala Evangelical School of Theology (in Kampala, Uganda), where he also led the Uganda Langham Preaching seminar, ministering to pastors and lay preachers throughout Uganda. He is the author of Cross-examined (IVP), The New Testament & Slavery (Latimer Trust) and the Good Book Guide to Colossians (Good Book Co). He lives in central London with his wife Rachel and two children, Joshua & Zanna.



1. THE "EPIPHANY" OF THE SUPERHERO!

- The depersonalisation of the American City - Gotham
- The threats from overwhelming forces
 - 1930s-80s fascism, communism (cf. McCarthyism)
 - 1990s-2000s terrorism & environmental catastrophe;
 - Always: organised crime!
- Searching for a vocabulary of evil in a secular century?
 - cf. The Joker & Two-Face - The Dark Knight - anarchy and chance/probability
 - Megalomania (cf. James Bond baddies) - Green Goblin Spiderman; Sylar in Heroes;
 - Crime: driven by the ones who get away with it - Batman; Superman

2. SUPERHERO FAMILIES

(i) Superheroes "From Below"

By chance

- Spiderman - the Insect bite of responsibility
- Heroes & The X Men - Born Like It: genetic mutation
- The Incredibles - just there! Against the threat of Syndrome (who is not born a superhero but uses technology to become one)... hence...

By choice

- Batman - the Millionaire Vigilante (training, finance, resources)
- Bionic Man/Woman; Robocop - The Genius of Government Medicine

What they reveal:

- It takes a human being to understand what a human being needs
- Supra-human beings - the arrogance of humanity - Modernist humanism lurking in another guise?

(ii) Superheroes "From Above"

- Superman - the Incarnational Alien

What they reveal:

- Humanity is truly helpless
- A deep longing for what is beyond us.

3. THE ONE **TRUE** SUPERHERO

(i) Rumours of Humanity

- Finite / Infinite, Temporal / Eternal
- Potential for Great Good
- Potential for Great Evil

(ii) Rumours of Christology

- He's one of us: Christology from below (Daniel 7:13-18 & The Synoptic Gospels) – The Son of Man
- He's sent to us: Christology from above (John 1:1-18; Colossians 1:15-20; Hebrews 1:1-4) – The Word Tabernacled

(iii) Rumours of Redemption

- Overwhelming Cosmic evil requires Almighty Cosmic Good
- The people's champion: The Exodus King & David vs Goliath
- The good judge: We need someone to bring justice
- Utopia: the freedom of service NOT the freedom from service

4. Taking it further

Selected Reading:

Faith, Film & Philosophy	Geivett & Spiegel (Ed)	IVP (USA)	2007
FOCUS: The Art & Soul of Cinema	Tony Watkins	Authentic (UK)	2007
Hollywood Worldviews	Brian Godawa	IVP (USA)	2002
True Heroism in a world of Celebrity Counterfeits	Dick Keyes	NavPress	1995

Useful websites:

Internet Movie Database for cast lists, production information, trivia etc	http://www.imdb.com/
Damaris full of useful stuff – check out their Culture Watch especially	http://www.damaris.org/cw/
Journal of Religion And Film tons of stuff, inevitably of mixed value – but has useful index for digging around for articles on particular films	http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/
Empire Online web home for the UK's best movie magazine – brilliant for reviews, news and interviews.	http://www.empireonline.com/
Transparency one former journalist's website full of articles and movie insights	http://www.transparencynow.com/